



HORIZONTAL MOBILITY WITHOUT PROGRESSION

Structural Barriers to Career
Progression for Young
Migrant Workers in Denmark,
Finland and Lithuania



AALBORG INSTITUTE
FOR DEVELOPMENT



Nordplus



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As the first research publication of the Aalborg Institute for Development, we hope this report marks the beginning of continued international collaboration and evidence-based research addressing the social and economic challenges facing our societies.

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Executive Summary

Career Compass project examines the structural barriers that prevent young migrant workers (aged 16-30) in the Nordic-Baltic region from transitioning into stable and skilled employment. While labour mobility within Europe enables rapid access to jobs, it often channels young migrants into low-skilled positions with limited prospects for advancement. Over time, this leads to persistent cycles of precarious employment, even as labour markets across the region face increasing shortages in skilled sectors.

This report focuses on Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania, three countries connected through regional labour mobility yet characterised by distinct labour market structures and policy approaches. The analysis is based on interviews with migrant workers and stakeholder consultations with representatives from institutions involved in labour market integration and vocational education. Stakeholders include NGOs supporting migrant workers, vocational education institutions, labour organisations, public integration services, and other actors involved in migrant support systems. The report provides a comparative understanding of shared challenges and identifies practical, evidence-based policy responses with relevance across the Nordic-Baltic region.

Key Findings

The findings indicate that the challenges young migrants face are driven primarily by structural conditions within labour markets and education systems rather than by individual choice or motivation. Although many migrant workers are strongly motivated to improve their qualifications, access to education and advancement is systematically constrained by inflexible institutional structures, demanding working conditions, as well as insufficient support mechanisms. A central finding of the research is that these barriers are interconnected and cumulative. Entry into low-skilled employment restricts access to language learning and further training; fragmented information, weak recognition of prior qualifications, and employer gatekeeping further narrow available pathways.

Over time, these compounding challenges contribute to labour market stagnation, financial insecurity, psychosocial strain, and declining confidence. This research identifies six principal barriers to migrant workers' career development, which together constitute the *Career Compass Structural Barrier Model*.

Language as a Structural Barrier

represents one of the most significant complications limiting migrant workers' access to vocational education and career mobility across Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania. Training systems frequently require a high level of national language proficiency as a precondition for enrolment to vocational and further training pathways, while workers have limited time and opportunity to develop language skills due to full-time, often physically demanding employment. Initial integration and preparatory language courses typically begin at beginner levels, but access to publicly funded language training can involve long waiting times and progression with language skills can take considerable time. Workplace expectations further reinforce this barrier, as higher language proficiency is typically required for advancement beyond entry-level roles. Policy recommendations in this area prioritise the integration of language learning directly into employment and training programmes. Sector-specific language training linked to workplace tasks and vocational career pathways, combined with mentoring, apprenticeships is another effective approach.

Time Poverty and Inflexible Education Systems.

Vocational education and training programmes are frequently organised around daytime schedules that are incompatible with shift work and temporary employment patterns. Many workers are unable to reduce working hours or request educational leave due to income insecurity, probationary employment conditions, or financial responsibilities that may include supporting family members abroad. Addressing time poverty requires making vocational education more flexible through modular and stackable programmes offered in part-time, blended, evening formats. Expanding work-based learning opportunities, including paid apprenticeships in sectors facing labour shortages, is also identified as a priority.

Recognition of Prior Learning and Foreign Qualifications

constitutes a major structural barrier limiting migrant workers' access to education and career advancement. Recognition procedures are frequently complex and documentation-heavy which creates administrative burdens that are difficult to navigate without institutional support. Existing systems tend to prioritise formal diplomas while overlooking practical skills and work experience acquired outside formal education. As a result, many migrant workers remain in entry-level positions despite possessing relevant qualifications and significant professional experience, contributing to widespread skills underutilisation and constrained career progression. Recommendations include simplifying and standardising recognition procedures, developing bridging programmes for regulated and high-demand professions, and expanding the use of alternative recognition tools such as portfolio-based assessments and the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees. Improving transparency and communication around recognition processes, together with promoting mentorships and internships opportunities are further recommended to facilitate labour market integration and skills utilisation. An important dimension of this issue concerns the dual nature of qualification recognition. While foreign qualifications may be formally recognised by government authorities, this recognition does not always translate into acceptance at the employer level. Employers and workplaces may remain hesitant to fully acknowledge qualifications obtained abroad, even when these have been officially validated by competent authorities. As a result, migrants often continue to face barriers in accessing employment that genuinely corresponds to their skills and experience, even after successfully navigating formal recognition procedures. Greater efforts are therefore needed to raise employers' awareness of recognition procedures and to strengthen their confidence in the validity and relevance of foreign credentials.

Fragmented Access to Information and Guidance. Access to information about education, training recognition is frequently fragmented and difficult for migrant workers to navigate. Relevant information is typically distributed across multiple institutions and digital platforms, presented commonly in the national language, and designed with traditional students rather than working adults in mind. As a result, many migrant workers rely on informal networks and personal contacts to learn about training opportunities and available support services. This lack of accessible and coordinated guidance creates uncertainty and eventually discourages engagement with further education or career progress. Policy recommendations in this area focus on strengthening integrated service centres that provide coordinated access to employment and education across multiple languages. Improving coordination and referral pathways between institutions, integrating mentoring into service delivery models, and piloting locally coordinated initiatives prior to regional or national scaling.

Employer Practices and Gatekeeping. Employers play a decisive role in shaping migrant workers' access to training and career advancement. In many sectors, employers prioritise immediate productivity and operational continuity over long-term workforce development, which limits support for education and upskilling. Migrant workers may additionally face reluctance to request training or educational leave out of concern that doing so could negatively affect their employment prospects. Employer practices therefore frequently reinforce existing barriers, contributing to the concentration of migrant workers in low-skilled and entry-level roles despite strong professional motivation. Policy recommendations focus on introducing targeted incentives to encourage employer investment in training and mentoring.

Psychosocial Strain and Declining Engagement. Prolonged insecurity in employment and career progression generates significant psychosocial strain for young migrant workers. Repeated difficulties in accessing training or securing qualification recognition may result in stress, burnout, declining motivation, and erosion of professional confidence. Financial pressure and uncertain career prospects further reduce workers' willingness to take risks associated with pursuing further education or changing employment pathways. Over time, these experiences discourage engagement with education and training, reinforcing the cycle of low-skilled employment and limited labour mobility that the research seeks to address.

Introduction and Purpose of the Report

Background of the Issue

Labour mobility has become a defining feature of the European labour market. Freedom of movement allows EU citizens to work in another Member State without requiring a work permit. In 2024, approximately 10 million working-age EU citizens were living and working in a Member State other than their country of citizenship. Many move abroad primarily for economic reasons, seeking higher wages and improved employment opportunities in stronger labour markets. While this mobility often enables rapid entry into employment, young migrants are frequently concentrated in segments of the labour market where opportunities for career progression remain limited (European Commission, 2026; EURES, 2026).

EU labour market data consistently shows that migrant workers are overrepresented in low-paid and low-skilled sectors. Across the EU, migrants account for approximately 30% of workers in elementary occupations. OECD evidence also shows that immigrants are frequently concentrated in lower-paying sectors, and occupations when they enter the host-country labour market. This concentration contributes substantially to the earnings gap between immigrants and native-born workers. Furthermore, OECD analysis found that migrants may move towards higher paying sectors during their first years in a host-country labour market, but then they do not consistently move into higher-paying occupations at the same rate as comparable native-born workers (OECD and European Commission, 2023; OECD, 2025).

This distinction between access to employment and access to progression was also reinforced through Stakeholder validation activities conducted across Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania. Participants described situations in which they moved across cities or countries while still remaining concentrated in similar occupations (see Annexes).

At the same time, skills shortages are widely reported across European labour markets. The European Labour Authority has identified persistent shortages in healthcare, construction, hospitality, transport, and technical occupations. The same analysis shows that language barriers and difficulties with the recognition of qualifications can obstruct employment of available non-native workers (European Labour Authority, 2025). Stakeholder validation activities have also highlighted the importance of professional networks, mentorship, and social capital in shaping access to career opportunities, suggesting that labour market progression depends not only on skills and qualifications but also on access to supportive professional environments.

However, migrant workers remain disproportionately concentrated in low-skilled occupations with limited opportunities for advancement. This creates a structural paradox: while European economies face growing demand for skilled labour, a significant share of migrant workers remains employed in roles that offer few pathways for skill development and upward mobility.

Existing research on the labour mobility distinguishes between horizontal and vertical mobility (DiPrete, 1987). Horizontal mobility refers to movement between jobs, employers, sectors, or geographical locations without a significant change in occupational status, while vertical mobility involves advancement to positions with greater responsibility and skill requirements. Although horizontal mobility may provide access to employment and new experiences, it does not necessarily lead to career progression or improved occupational outcomes.

Why Young Migrant Workers Are at Risk

Within the European Union, freedom of movement enables young people to enter labour markets across the region, often at an early stage of their working lives. For many, migration represents a rational economic decision, as even low-paid jobs in higher-income countries may offer better earnings than available opportunities in their countries of origin.

However, findings from the Career Compass survey on work and education experiences highlight that young migrant workers aged 16-30 are particularly vulnerable to long-term career stagnation. Early entry into the labour market without completing education or vocational training can significantly limit long-term career opportunities. As the Career Compass survey shows, once individuals become established in full-time employment, returning to education becomes increasingly difficult. Long working hours, financial obligations can make further education appear impractical or unattainable. Over time, this dynamic can lock workers into low-skilled employment, reducing their ability to transition into skilled professions. In many cases, the consequences of early labour market entry only become visible later in workers' careers. By their early thirties, some migrant workers recognise that their employment trajectory has become structurally constrained. Stakeholder validation activities also highlighted the psychosocial consequences of prolonged career stagnation. Participants across all three countries described experiences of frustration, exhaustion, declining confidence, and uncertainty about future career prospects. These effects can further reduce participation in education and training opportunities, reinforcing existing structural barriers. Understanding how and why these career trajectories emerge is central to the analysis presented in this report.

Multiple Pathways Into Labour Market Stagnation

While many migrant workers enter low-skilled employment through early labour migration, a second pathway leading to similar labour market outcomes has become increasingly evident. International students move to the European Union to pursue higher education, often with the expectation that completing a university degree will lead to skilled employment. However, after graduation, international graduates frequently encounter barriers when attempting to enter skilled labour markets. A recent OECD review found that international graduates often begin their careers with lower employment rates or salaries than domestic graduates. Proficiency in the local language requirements, professional networks, and employer preferences for domestic work experience can substantially improve the transition into the labour market. As a result, some graduates accept jobs for which they are overqualified as a temporary solution while attempting to transition into professional roles and remain in the host country (OECD, 2026). Although the backgrounds of these groups differ significantly, one entering the labour market early and the other arriving through higher education, their long-term labour market outcomes can be similar. Validation activities confirmed that similar patterns emerge across diverse migrant groups, including labour migrants, international graduates, and workers with prior professional experience, suggesting that labour market stagnation cannot be explained solely by educational background or migration pathway.

Purpose of the Report

The Career Compass project was developed in response to structural barriers that limit career progression among young migrant workers. Its central objective is to analyse, and validate the factors that restrict access to sustainable career pathways in the Nordic-Baltic region.

This report focuses on Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania, three countries connected through regional labour mobility and shared economic links. By comparing how labour markets, education systems, along with integration policies function across these countries, the report identifies the structural factors that shape career opportunities for migrant workers. The findings presented in this report were subsequently tested through stakeholder validation activities involving migrant workers, employers, education providers, NGOs, labour organisations, and public authorities across the three participating countries.

Rather than focusing solely on labour market participation, the report addresses the broader issue of career progression. It examines why migrant workers remain concentrated in low-skilled employment even as labour markets increasingly demand skilled workers.

Building on this analysis, the report provides practical policy recommendations for policymakers, education providers, labour organisations, and civil society actors. These recommendations aim to support policies that enable migrant workers not only to access employment, but also to progress into stable and sustainable careers.

Why a Nordic-Baltic Perspective Is Needed

The Nordic-Baltic region provides a relevant context for examining these challenges. Labour mobility between countries such as Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania has increased in recent years, supported by EU free movement and regional economic integration. Young workers frequently move across these countries in search of employment opportunities, creating interconnected migration flows within the region.

At the same time, the three countries present important differences. Their education systems, labour market policies, and integration frameworks vary significantly, shaping how migrant workers access training, employment, and career progression. These differences provide an opportunity to compare national policy approaches and identify both shared challenges and effective practices.

Stakeholder validation activities conducted in Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania revealed a remarkable degree of consistency in how migrant workers experience barriers to career progression. Despite differences in labour market structures, education systems, and migration patterns, stakeholders across all three countries repeatedly validated the same structural barriers. This suggests that many of the challenges identified in this report are not isolated national issues but reflect broader Nordic-Baltic labour market dynamics. This comparative perspective enables the identification of transferable policy solutions that can support improved career mobility for migrant workers across the wider Nordic-Baltic region.

Methodology

The research focuses on three countries in the Nordic-Baltic region: Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania. These countries were selected as interconnected labour markets shaped by increasing cross-border mobility within the European Union. At the same time, they reflect important differences in vocational education systems, labour market structures, and integration policies. The target group of this research consists of young migrant workers aged 16-30 who have entered the labour market through low-skilled or entry-level employment. A mixed-methods approach has been used to examine the barriers affecting young migrant workers' access to education, training, and career progression. The research combines desk research with quantitative and qualitative data collection. The findings then reviewed and refined through stakeholder consultations, and a public hearing. By combining these different sources of evidence, the report aims to provide a comparative and grounded understanding of the structural barriers limiting young migrant workers' opportunities for skills development and career mobility.

Data Sources and Collection Methods

The analysis draws on multiple complementary sources of evidence. *Quantitative data* were collected through an online survey targeting migrant workers employed primarily in low-skilled or entry-level sectors (see Annex). The survey collected information on employment conditions, access to education and training opportunities, language barriers, recognition of qualifications, and awareness of support programmes. The survey was available in multiple languages (English, Finnish, Ukrainian, Swedish, Romanian, Polish, Lithuanian, Russian, Bengali, Nepali and Arabic) and was distributed through partner networks, NGOs, migrant community organisations, labour-related networks, and social media channels.

The survey remained open online for a period of one month. Participation was voluntary, responses were anonymised, and the data was analysed in aggregated form. In total, 182 valid responses were collected. The survey follows a descriptive and exploratory design based on convenience sampling rather than a representative sampling framework.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with migrant workers across the participating countries. These interviews provided in-depth insight into the lived experiences underlying the survey findings, including migration pathways, career aspirations, attempts to access education or training, and perceptions of institutional barriers. In total, 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted across Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania. The interviews typically lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and covered participants' migration trajectories, employment experiences, access to education and training, and everyday barriers. Interviews were documented through detailed note-taking, translated into English where necessary, and anonymised before analysis. The material was then analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns across the three countries.

Finally, the research incorporates stakeholder consultations with representatives from institutions involved in labour market integration and vocational education. Stakeholders include NGOs supporting migrant workers, vocational education institutions, labour organisations, public integration services, and other actors involved in migrant support systems. These consultations were used to validate and contextualise findings emerging from the primary data collection.

Following the completion of the draft policy report, a *stakeholder validation* phase was conducted to assess whether the identified barriers, interpretations, and recommendations reflected stakeholders' experiences and practical realities. The purpose of this phase was not to generate a separate set of primary findings, but to review, contextualise, and refine the results of the research.

The validation was conducted through five activities:

- a national Stakeholder Policy Lab in Copenhagen, Denmark;
- a national Stakeholder Policy Lab in Vaasa, Finland;
- a national Stakeholder Policy Lab in Vilnius, Lithuania;
- an international online validation workshops;
- a public hearing that remained open for approximately one month and collected 68 responses. (See Annex)

Discussions focused on assessing the relevance of the six identified barriers, identifying any missing dimensions, evaluating the feasibility of the proposed policy recommendations, and highlighting potential implementation challenges. Feedback was analysed thematically and used to revise the final report. Findings were considered particularly robust when supported by multiple forms of evidence, including survey responses, qualitative interviews, stakeholder consultations, validation workshops, and public hearing contributions. This approach enabled the identification of recurring structural barriers affecting migrant workers across Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania while also highlighting differences in national institutional arrangements and labour market dynamics.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this report.

First, the survey is based on a convenience sample and does not represent the full population of migrant workers in the three countries.

The results should therefore be interpreted as indicative patterns rather than statistically representative outcomes.

However, the consistency of findings across multiple evidence sources and subsequent validation activities increases confidence in the broader relevance of the identified barriers. Similar patterns emerged across survey responses, interviews, stakeholder consultations, national validation workshops, and the public hearing process. Second, the number of qualitative interviews and stakeholder consultations is limited, and employer perspectives are less represented than intended in some national contexts. As a result, the qualitative findings should be understood as illustrative evidence and strong indicative signals rather than a comprehensive representation of all labour market actors.

Third, the geographic scope of the research is limited to Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania. While these countries provide a relevant comparative perspective within the Nordic–Baltic region, the findings cannot be directly generalised to all European labour markets, where institutional structures and migration patterns may differ.

Finally, the research focuses primarily on young migrant workers aged 16-30 who have entered low-skilled employment. Although some contextual evidence from participants outside this age range was retained, the analysis concentrates on the experiences and barriers affecting younger migrant workers at the early stages of their careers.

Participation in the survey and interviews was voluntary, and all responses were anonymised. Data collection and handling followed the project's ethical and privacy protocols, including procedures designed to ensure confidentiality and compliance with data protection requirements.

Profile of Young Migrant Workers in the Nordic–Baltic Region

Migration patterns in the Nordic-Baltic region

The European Union's principle of free movement, combined with deepening economic integration, has intensified labour mobility across member states over the past two decades. In 2024, working-age EU movers reached approximately 10.1 million, a 1.8% increase on the previous year (European Commission, 2026). Young people constitute one of the most mobile segments within this flow: 53% of incoming working-age movers are between 20 and 34 years old (European Commission, 2026).

Wage differentials are the primary driver. Even relatively low-paid jobs in higher-income countries may offer substantially better earnings than comparable work in countries of origin (Overgård et al., 2023). Entry into foreign labour markets is facilitated through temporary employment opportunities, recruitment agencies, and informal social networks (Spanger & Hvalkof, 2021). International students from outside the EU represent a growing sub-group: while they enter regional labour markets during or after their studies, the transition is not seamless. A recent investigative report found that third-party recruiters had misled foreign students in Finland through incomplete information about programmes and employment prospects (YLE News, 2024).

These dynamics produce increasingly interconnected labour markets. Denmark and Finland attract workers through strong demand and relatively high wages, though Finland also faces elevated unemployment, reaching 10.1% in early 2026 (European Commission, 2026). Lithuania, meanwhile, functions as both a sending and a receiving country, with young workers continuing to migrate outward while the domestic economy draws foreign labour to fill specific shortages.

Employment Sectors and Labour Market Context

Young migrant workers concentrate heavily in hospitality, construction, cleaning, logistics, agriculture, and care work. These sectors are characterised by persistent labour shortages and low formal entry requirements. Data from Denmark's Nationalbank (2022) illustrate the scale of this dependence in the Danish context. In agriculture and forestry, work-oriented foreign workers accounted for almost the entire net change in employment between January 2020 and December 2021. In construction, manufacturing, and trade and transport, their contributions represented 30.3%, 29.4%, and 27.2% of each industry's total employment growth respectively over the same period, a pattern that holds equally across the period of 2018-2019, suggesting this is a structural feature (Borgensgaard, 2022). While these industries are economically significant, their employment structures create conditions that constrain workers over time.

Contracts in these sectors tend to be temporary or seasonal, and work schedules are frequently irregular or shift-based. Career Compass findings confirm that these patterns are among the most commonly cited barriers to accessing training: workers cannot easily step out of shifts to attend programmes. Physical demands are high and wage ceilings relatively low. Stakeholder validation conducted across the three participating countries reinforced the observation that entering employment and progressing within the labour market represent two distinct challenges. While many migrants successfully secure work shortly after arrival, opportunities for advancement, training, and skills utilisation often remain limited.

A further structural feature is occupational downgrading. Which happens when workers accept roles that fall below their qualification level because of language requirements, the non-recognition of foreign credentials, or an absence of professional networks in the destination country.

The sectors that offer the quickest entry into a new labour market are therefore also the ones least likely to provide a route out of it. Many workers remain in similar roles for extended periods, not due to a lack of aspiration, but because the structural pathways to higher-skilled work are poorly visible or inaccessible from where they stand.

Validation activities further indicated that workplace practices and organisational cultures may reinforce this pattern. Stakeholders frequently reported that employers prioritise immediate productivity needs over long-term workforce development, limiting opportunities for training and internal progression.

Characteristics of Young Migrant Workers

The primary target group for this report is young migrants aged 16-30 who have moved within the Nordic-Baltic region for employment. This is a heterogeneous population. Many enter the labour market directly after secondary school or before completing higher education. Others arrive with university degrees and find that their qualifications do not translate easily into skilled employment in a new country. Both groups frequently begin in the entry-level sectors described in section 4.2, though for different reasons and with different long-term trajectories. Employment conditions in those sectors generate what researchers describe as "time poverty" (Rodgers, 2024): the combination of long hours, irregular schedules, and financial pressure leaves little capacity for training or career planning. Additionally, the crossnational stakeholder validation highlighted the emotional and psychological consequences of prolonged uncertainty.

Participants frequently described feelings of frustration, exhaustion, declining confidence, and fear of becoming permanently trapped in low-skilled employment.

These experiences suggest that career stagnation should be understood not only as an economic issue but also as a factor affecting wellbeing and future aspirations. Despite these pressures, the motivational picture is strong. Interviews and stakeholder consultations consistently identify financial stability, the ability to support family members, and the desire to build international experience as the leading reasons for migration.

The challenge is not a lack of motivation but rather a structural environment, including language barriers, limited information about available programmes, and the practical difficulty of attending training while working variable hours, that makes acting on that motivation difficult.

Cross-Country Comparison

Across Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania, the experiences of young migrant workers share similarities. Firstly, they enter the job market through low-threshold sectors. Secondly, their motivation is wage-led. Finally, they face structural barriers to upward mobility. Stakeholder validation conducted in Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania revealed that across all three countries, participants repeatedly identified language barriers, time constraints, fragmented support systems, qualification recognition challenges, employer gatekeeping, and psychosocial strain as common obstacles. This suggests that despite national differences, many of the underlying mechanisms limiting career progression are shared across the region. Yet the national labour markets have the following differences in how those shared conditions play out.

In Denmark, strong labour demand in sectors such as services and construction creates employment opportunities for migrant workers, although these roles do not always provide clear pathways toward higher-skilled occupations. Finland has developed a range of integration and education programmes aimed at supporting migrant participation in vocational training and employment. However, language requirements and administrative procedures may still limit access to these opportunities. In particular, requirements for proficiency in Finnish or Swedish can delay access to both education and skilled employment. Lithuania represents a distinct case, functioning both as a country of origin and a destination for labour migration within the European Union. Many young Lithuanian workers migrate abroad in search of employment opportunities, while Lithuania itself increasingly attracts foreign workers in sectors experiencing labour shortages. The comparative view clarifies that policy responses cannot be uniform. Shared structural challenges, such as sectoral concentration, qualification barriers, training access, call for shared regional frameworks, but the national differences in labour demand, language requirements, and existing integration infrastructure mean that implementation must be tailored to local conditions.



Key Barriers to Education and Career Progression

Overview of Barriers

Research conducted across Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania identified a set of structural barriers that limit young migrant workers' access to education and career advancement. As discussed in Chapter 2, labour mobility within the Nordic–Baltic region has increased significantly in recent years, yet many migrant workers remain concentrated in low-skilled sectors with limited opportunities for career progression. Evidence from the literature review, survey responses, interviews with migrant workers, and stakeholder consultations conducted within the Career Compass project indicates that these outcomes are not primarily the result of individual choices, but of structural conditions embedded within labour markets and education systems. Research on migrant labour markets consistently shows that migrant workers are frequently employed in sectors such as hospitality, logistics, cleaning, construction, and manufacturing, where opportunities for formal training and advancement are limited. Despite strong motivation among many workers to improve their skills and qualifications, access to education pathways remains constrained by institutional design, labour market conditions, and limited system flexibility. Importantly, the barriers identified through the project rarely operate in isolation. Instead, they interact and reinforce one another, creating a pattern that makes it difficult for migrant workers to move from entry-level employment into vocational education or more stable career pathways. Interviews conducted during the research illustrate that many workers initially plan to pursue further training after entering the labour market, but these plans are frequently postponed or abandoned as structural obstacles accumulate over time.

Together, these barriers form the analytical framework used in the following sections to explain why many young migrant workers remain trapped in low-skilled employment despite the formal existence of education and training opportunities.

The analysis identifies six key barriers shaping these outcomes:

1 Language as a structural gatekeeper

2 Time poverty and incompatibility between work and learning

3 Fragmented information and limited navigational support

4 Non-recognition of prior learning and qualifications

5 Employer gatekeeping within labour markets

6 Psychosocial strain linked to prolonged insecurity

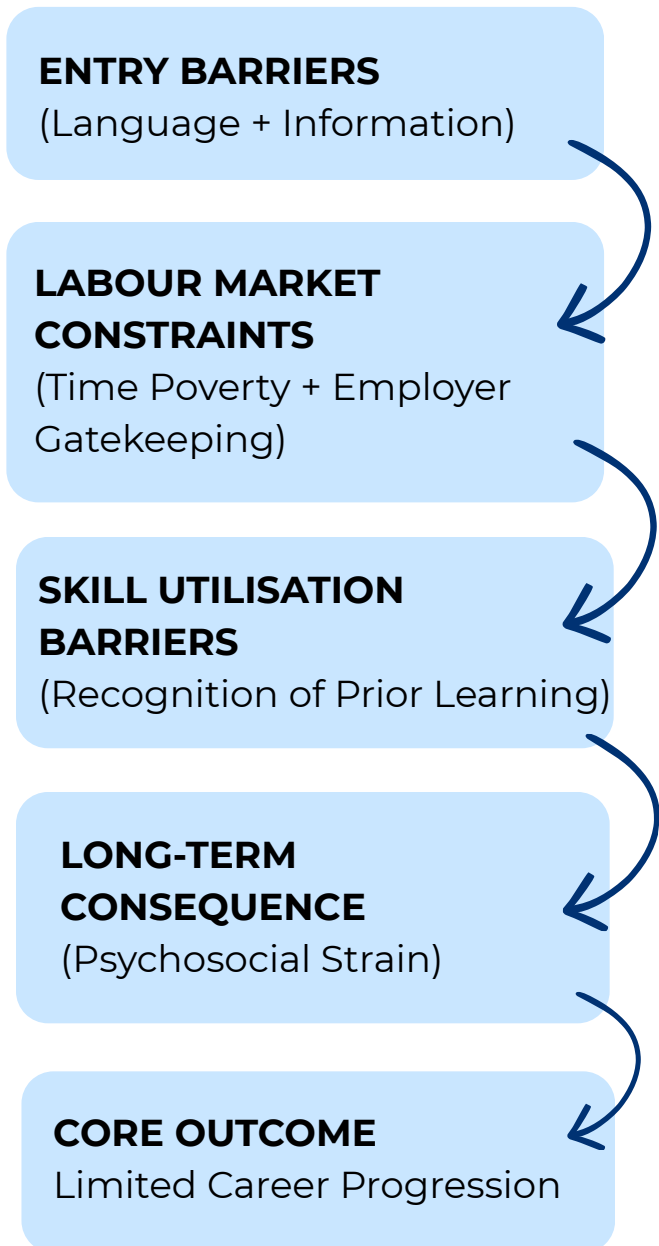
The Career Compass Structural Barrier Model

The findings of this report can be understood through a cumulative structural model that captures how barriers build over time. The Career Compass Structural Barrier Model illustrates how young migrant workers may move from initial labour market entry into cycles of constrained mobility, shaped by interconnected barriers related to language, time, information, recognition, workplace structures, and insecurity.

Rather than functioning as separate obstacles, these barriers reinforce one another. Early entry into low-skilled employment limits time for language learning and training. Limited language proficiency and fragmented information reduce access to education pathways. Weak recognition of prior learning and employer gatekeeping further restrict opportunities to move into more qualified roles. Over time, these conditions contribute not only to labour market stagnation, but also to frustration, fatigue, and declining confidence between migrants.

This model provides a framework for understanding not only the presence of barriers, but also the way they interact to produce persistent outcomes. It also provides the basis for the policy analysis and recommendations developed in later chapters.

Career Compass Structural Barrier Model



Language as a Structural Gatekeeper

Language requirements emerged as one of the most significant barriers affecting young migrant workers' access to education and career mobility across Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania. Evidence from the Career Compass research demonstrates that language functions not only as a neutral skill requirement, but as a structural gatekeeper shaping access to both employment and vocational education pathways. In the research survey, language was the most frequently identified barrier to accessing education or training, with approximately one-third of respondents identifying language thresholds as the primary obstacle. Interview data reinforces this pattern, with participants describing language as a constraint affecting job access, workplace communication, participation in training, or confidence in professional settings.

Within vocational education and training systems, access into programmes typically requires a relatively high level of proficiency in the national language before individuals can enrol or complete certification requirements. While language acquisition is widely recognised as essential for labour market integration, many training systems require migrants to reach this level before entering education, rather than supporting language development alongside vocational training (Jørgensen, Hautz, & Li, 2021).

Language expectations within workplaces play a central role in shaping career progression for migrant workers. While many migrants are able to perform operational tasks using basic language skills or through collaboration in multilingual teams, access to administrative or technical roles typically requires a significantly higher level of fluency in the national language. These requirements create a structural challenge for upward mobility.

Stakeholder consultations indicate that this can result in a continuous escalation of language expectations, where workers must meet progressively higher thresholds in order to access training opportunities or more qualified positions. At the same time, limited time and resources for structured language learning further constrain progression. Many migrant workers combine full-time employment in physically demanding sectors with attempts to learn the language, making sustained progression difficult. Interview findings support these dynamics, as participants described actively engaging in language learning through courses and informal practice. However, they also noted that the level required for vocational training or career advancement often remained difficult to achieve while working full-time.

“ Even when you improve your language, it still feels like it is never enough to move forward. ”

Time Poverty and Work-Learning Incompatibility

Employment conditions represent a significant barrier to young migrant workers' access to education and training. Many migrants enter the labour market shortly after arrival in order to secure income. These conditions reduce workers' control over their time and limit their ability to participate in education or training alongside employment.

Survey data from the Career Compass project shows that a majority of respondents report that working hours prevent participation in education or training, highlighting widespread time constraints. In this context, time poverty refers to the lack of predictable and available time needed to engage in learning while maintaining full-time employment. For workers in insecure or temporary employment, taking time away from work may result in income loss or reduced job security, particularly where financial responsibilities are present. Interview data further illustrates these dynamics, as many participants reported difficulties combining work and education due to long hours or financial constraints. Many described initial intentions to pursue further training after entering employment, but these plans were often postponed as work responsibilities increased.

“ You take the first job to survive, and then it becomes very hard to move out of it. ”

Fragmented Information and Navigational Barriers

Access to information about education and training opportunities represents a significant structural barrier affecting the career progression of migrant workers. Vocational education programmes and qualification recognition procedures formally exist across Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania. However, information about these opportunities is frequently dispersed across multiple institutions and digital platforms, difficult to locate, interpret, and act upon, even when it is technically available. As researchers have noted, the volume of available information may be considerable, however, quantity does not equate to quality, and much of what is accessible lacks the clarity and relevance required to support informed decision-making (Arnold et al., 2023).

Stakeholder consultations conducted during the Career Compass project consistently indicated that the core challenge is not an absence of information but rather a problem of navigation and system complexity. Recurring concerns identified across consultations included fragmented institutional responsibilities, complex administrative language, heavy reliance on informal networks, the circulation of misinformation through social media, and a persistent lack of multilingual resources. Participants across stakeholder groups converged on a reframing of the issue: the principal barrier is not that information does not exist, but that the systems through which it is organised and communicated are poorly accessible to those who most need them. This complexity is reinforced by how information is typically presented. Institutional websites and government platforms frequently assume prior familiarity with national education systems, and detailed guidance about training opportunities is often fragmented and migrants have no awareness about it.

Survey results indicate that only a small amount reported being aware of support programmes, while the overwhelming majority were not aware. This suggests a significant gap between existing support structures and migrants' ability to access them. These systemic barriers have measurable consequences for decision-making. In the absence of clear and accessible guidance, migrant workers routinely turn to informal networks when seeking advice about education and career development. Interview evidence collected during the project demonstrated that limited awareness of formal support programmes was a near-universal finding: participants frequently reported that they had encountered education opportunities through personal contacts rather than through institutional channels. As one participant described:

“ I didn't know where to look. You only find things if someone tells you ”

Interview data further revealed that a number of participants were unaware of vocational programmes relevant to their occupational sector and had no clear sense of where to seek advice regarding the recognition of prior qualifications. The same results came from surveys. Information is primarily accessed through informal or semi-formal channels, with the most common sources being social media, employers, and government websites, while fewer respondents relied on structured institutions such as NGOs or friends/community networks. This points to a decentralised and fragmented information environment. Over time, the cumulative effect of fragmented and inaccessible information contributes to the sustained concentration of migrant workers in entry-level roles. When workers cannot readily identify accessible training pathways, uncertainty about available options functions as a disincentive to pursue further education or vocational development. Fragmented information systems therefore operate not as a minor administrative inconvenience but as a structural constraint, limiting the transition from entry-level employment into vocational training and more stable long-term career trajectories.

Recognition of Prior Learning

Recognition of prior learning and foreign qualifications represents a significant barrier affecting migrant workers' ability to access appropriate employment and pursue career advancement. As discussed in Chapter 2, migration trajectories within the target group are varied: some young migrants enter the labour market directly after leaving education, while others arrive with completed vocational training, higher education qualifications, or substantial professional experience acquired in their countries of origin. For the latter group, the transferability of existing qualifications into the host country's labour market constitutes an obstacle.

Stakeholder consultations conducted across all three countries confirmed that recognition barriers continue to trap skilled migrants in roles below their qualification level. Particular concern was expressed regarding workers in regulated professions, particularly healthcare and skilled trades, as well as refugees and international graduates, for whom recognition pathways are frequently the most uncertain. Critically, participants drew an analytical distinction between two forms of recognition that function as independent barriers: formal recognition by competent authorities, which determines the regulatory status of a qualification, and practical acceptance by employers, which determines whether that qualification is treated as credible within the labour market. Both dimensions must be understood separately, as progress in one does not necessarily produce progress in the other.

Formal recognition procedures assess foreign qualifications against national education system frameworks and involve documentation requirements, institutional assessments, and administrative processes that are often complex and unfamiliar to migrants. Although the structure of recognition systems varies across Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania, migrants in all three countries commonly encounter time-consuming processes whose outcomes remain difficult to predict.

Survey and interview data collected during the Career Compass project indicate that full recognition of foreign qualifications is less common than partial recognition or no recognition at all, suggesting that a substantial proportion of migrant workers face significant difficulties in converting their prior education and experience into recognised credentials within the host country. Only third part of the survey respondents reported full recognition of their qualifications, while others have reported partial recognition and some reported no recognition at all. This means that over half of respondents experience limited or no recognition of prior learning. A further structural limitation lies in the design of recognition mechanisms themselves. Existing validation systems tend to prioritise formal diplomas and certificates, while practical skills and competencies developed through work experience or non-formal learning pathways are considerably more difficult to validate. Stakeholders consulted during the project noted that informal learning and occupationally relevant technical knowledge frequently fall outside the scope of current assessment frameworks. Consequently, workers who possess substantive professional competencies may nonetheless enter or remain in entry-level employment because those competencies cannot be formally verified through existing procedures. These limitations carry direct consequences for labour market positioning. When qualifications and prior experience remain unrecognised, migrant workers are regularly channelled into entry-level roles irrespective of their actual skill level. Stakeholders involved in labour market integration further observed that employers are frequently uncertain about how to evaluate qualifications obtained abroad and, as a result, tend to prioritise locally acquired credentials or work experience gained within the host country. As a result, migrant workers are frequently employed in roles that do not reflect their actual skills and experience, a pattern widely observed across European labour markets.

The European Commission has even characterised this phenomenon as “*brain waste*” (European Commission, 2023, p.4), noting that it not only represents a significant loss of human capital but also undermines the EU's broader attractiveness as a destination for skilled workers. The personal consequences of these structural failures are evident in interview data collected during the project. Several participants reported that professional experience accumulated prior to migration carried little or no value in the host country. As one participant described:

“ Back home I worked as a technician, but here nobody recognises it, so I started again in basic work. ”

Over time, the absence of effective recognition pathways reinforces labour market segmentation. Workers who have completed education or vocational training prior to migration remain concentrated in entry-level roles, while their existing knowledge and professional competencies are largely unutilised. Recognition barriers are structural constraints that directly correlate to the pattern of limited career progression identified across the Career Compass research.

Employer Gatekeeping

Employers play a significant role in shaping the career opportunities available to migrant workers. Their decisions can either enable or limit access to training and advancement. Research increasingly highlights the role of firms in shaping migrants' labour-market outcomes, including their concentration in lower-paying firms, sectors, and occupations and their ability to progress towards better employment opportunities (OECD, 2025). In sectors where migrant workers are commonly employed, employers often prioritise operational stability and immediate productivity over long-term workforce development. From an employer perspective, supporting workers to pursue education or training may involve financial costs, administrative effort, and the risk that trained employees will leave for better opportunities elsewhere. OECD research identifies concerns about employee turnover, organisational costs, and reduced flexibility as factors that may discourage enterprises from providing certain forms of training (OECD, 2021).

Stakeholder consultations conducted during the Career Compass project indicate that these considerations influence how employers approach workforce development. In some cases, employers prefer to retain migrant workers in stable operational roles rather than encourage them to pursue training or career progression. Stakeholders also noted that employers often have limited information about the qualifications and professional experience migrant workers bring with them. This can lead to systematic underestimation of their potential within the workplace.

These dynamics affect career mobility directly. When employers do not support training or skills development, workers may struggle to access education opportunities that require employer approval, flexible scheduling, or workplace-based learning. Survey responses collected during the project show that the lack of time due to work is one of the most frequently reported barriers to participating in education and training.

Interviews conducted during the project also show how employer practices affect access to training opportunities. Some participants reported hesitating to request time for education because they feared it could negatively affect their employment prospects. Others explained that while some employers supported training initiatives, this support often depended on individual managers rather than organisational policies.

As a result, opportunities for upskilling often vary between workplaces, even within the same sector. When employer support is limited, migrant workers remain concentrated in operational roles despite strong motivation to develop new skills or progress professionally.

Employer gatekeeping also interacts with other barriers identified in this chapter, particularly time constraints and language requirements, further limiting workers' ability to pursue education and career advancement. This indicates that workplace practices are not merely part of the context in which barriers operate, but an active mechanism shaping career outcomes.

Psychosocial Strain from Prolonged Insecurity

In addition to structural and institutional barriers, the research also highlights the psychosocial consequences of prolonged uncertainty in employment and career prospects. Young migrant workers often experience repeated setbacks when attempting to access training, secure recognition of their qualifications, or move into more stable employment. Evidence from the Career Compass research indicates that the cumulative impact of these barriers can generate significant psychosocial strain. Analysis conducted in Work Package 2.1 shows that prolonged insecurity and repeated setbacks contribute to stress, burnout, and declining motivation among migrant workers.

Economic insecurity further intensifies this strain. Migrant workers often depend on continuous employment to maintain financial stability, support family members, or secure their residence status in the host country. This combination of financial pressure and uncertain career prospects makes long-term planning difficult. It also reduces willingness to take risks associated with returning to education or pursuing training opportunities. The literature review conducted within the Career Compass project also shows that unclear recognition procedures and limited access to guidance discourage some workers from engaging with education systems at all.

Psychosocial strain does not operate as an isolated barrier. Instead, it reinforces the structural obstacles described earlier in this chapter. When workers experience prolonged insecurity or repeated rejection, their motivation and confidence to navigate education and training systems may decline. Interview analysis conducted during the project identifies frustration, loss of confidence, and fear of long-term stagnation as recurring themes among participants.

Over time, the accumulation of these experiences can lead to disengagement from education pathways. This reinforces the pattern in which migrant workers remain in low-skilled employment despite their initial aspirations for career advancement. Psychosocial strain should therefore be understood not as a secondary consequence only, but as a barrier that feeds back into the broader cycle of constrained mobility.

Final Overview

Despite shared patterns across countries, important differences exist between Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania in vocational education structures and recognition procedures. These variations influence the ease with which migrant workers can access education and career progression pathways. Nevertheless, the overall pattern identified in the research suggests that similar structural barriers affect migrant workers across the Nordic-Baltic region. These barriers do not arise primarily from individual motivation or capability. Instead, they emerge from the interaction between labour market conditions, institutional structures, and access to education systems.

Key Messages

Language functions as a gatekeeping mechanism in both education and labour markets.

Recognition, information, and employer behaviour interact to reinforce labour market stagnation.

Time poverty significantly limits the practical accessibility of training opportunities.

Effective policy responses must address these barriers in an integrated rather than fragmented way.

This section examines how the structural barriers identified in Chapter 5 manifest in the Danish national context. The analysis draws on the project's interviews with migrant workers, and stakeholder consultations conducted as part of the Career Compass research project. The purpose is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of Danish labour market policy, but rather to illustrate how structural barriers affect the ability of young migrant workers to access education, vocational training, and career progression pathways in Denmark.

Labour Market Context

Denmark is characterised by a relatively strong labour market, with consistently high employment rates and sustained demand for labour in sectors such as hospitality, cleaning, construction, agriculture, and logistics. The Danmarks Nationalbank notes that while only a small share of total recruitment comes from abroad, foreign labour has contributed significantly to employment growth in Denmark and plays an important role in addressing labour shortages in key sectors (Danmarks Nationalbank, 2022). However, these sectors often rely on migrant labour to fill positions that are physically demanding, seasonal, or difficult to recruit locally. As a result, many migrants are able to enter employment shortly after arrival, particularly in entry-level or low-skilled occupations. While this rapid labour market entry provides immediate income and stability, it may also influence longer-term career development. Entry-level jobs often offer limited opportunities for training, skill development, or progression into more qualified roles.

This pattern is also reflected in research, which highlights that migrants in Denmark often experience constrained upward mobility and may remain in lower-skilled employment despite having higher educational qualifications, due to structural barriers in the labour market (AKF, 2012). Several migrant workers interviewed during the project research reported working in manual or service-sector jobs despite holding university degrees or professional qualifications obtained abroad. These experiences reflect a broader pattern of occupational downgrading, in which migrants initially accept lower-skilled employment while attempting to re-enter their professional fields. However, this temporary strategy may become prolonged when structural barriers prevent movement into more skilled occupations. Using a vignette study design, a research finds that refugee jobseekers are evaluated less favourably by employers compared to otherwise similar native candidates, indicating the presence of a “refugee penalty” in hiring decisions. This suggests that labour market inequalities are not only related to qualifications or skills, but also to employer perceptions and selection processes. In relation to the findings of this study, this evidence adds an additional structural layer to the observed patterns of employment among migrants (Ravn, R. L., & Bredgaard, T., 2021).

Migration Patterns

Young migrant workers in Denmark are often part of intra-European labour mobility flows, particularly from Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, Denmark also hosts migrants from non-European countries who arrive through study programmes, family reunification, or professional migration schemes. Migration frequently occurs at a relatively young age, and many migrants prioritise immediate employment after arrival. While early labour market entry may support financial stability, it can also reduce opportunities to pursue further education or training. The interview data suggests that migrants who enter low-skilled employment may experience constraints in accessing later education or professional career pathways, particularly due to language barriers, limited access to information, and reduced opportunities for structured progression. For example, one respondent with extensive experience in accounting reported working in manual delivery work while attempting to navigate the Danish labour market and identify opportunities to use their professional skills. One interview participant who completed a master's degree in Denmark reported difficulties securing employment aligned with their academic field and for this reason, moved into self-employment in a sector outside their original professional path.

Key Barriers Identified:

Language Requirements

Language requirements represent one of the most significant barriers to career progression in Denmark. While migrants can often access entry-level employment with limited Danish proficiency, access to vocational education, professional training programmes, and many skilled occupations typically requires stronger language skills.

Interview data indicates that language influences multiple stages of integration. One participant explained that language barriers directly affected job applications and perceived employability, stating:

“ The inability to speak and understand Danish fluently affected my job applications in the past negatively (Interview 11). ”

Another respondent highlighted inconsistencies between job advertisements and hiring practices, noting:

“ Even when job advertisements mention English as the working language, recruiters often expect candidates to speak fluent Danish (Interview 1). ”

This suggests that language operates not only as a formal requirement but also as an informal gatekeeping mechanism in recruitment processes. Several participants also described language as a central obstacle in accessing training and improving career prospects. One respondent stated:

“ The biggest challenge has been language (Interview 10). ”

These findings indicate that language functions as a gateway barrier affecting multiple dimensions of labour market integration. It shapes not only access to employment, but also access to training, certification, and progression into more qualified roles.

Access to Vocational Education and Training

Access to vocational education and training (VET) emerged as another area of challenge for migrant workers in Denmark, particularly in relation to information access and navigability of available pathways. Several participants reported limited awareness of vocational training opportunities or uncertainty about how to access them. For example, one respondent stated:

“ No I do not know any vocational training (Interview 11). ”

Others indicated partial awareness but insufficient clarity regarding available options, noting that they lacked clear guidance or structured information about training pathways.

These experiences suggest that vocational pathways may be difficult to navigate, particularly for individuals who are unfamiliar with the structure of the Danish education system. One interview stated :

“ I once considered pursuing vocational education through VET Europe programmes but found the costs and process unclear. (interview 1) ”

Overall, the findings suggest that vocational education pathways may be formally available but are not always easily navigable for migrant workers. This appears to be linked less to formal exclusion and more to information gaps in how training systems are accessed.

Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

Recognition of foreign qualifications and professional experience represents another significant barrier. Several migrant workers participants reported difficulty translating prior education and work experience into the Danish labour market.

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One engineering graduate noted that prior professional experience obtained abroad was not recognised by Danish employers, limiting access to roles aligned with their field of expertise:

“ My previous work experience from back home was not recognized (Interview 2) ”

Similarly, another participant with extensive management training explained that their skills were not valued in the Danish context:

“ My skills from my home country are not valued at all (Interview 9). ”

These challenges can contribute to prolonged underemployment, particularly for migrants with specialised qualifications obtained outside Denmark. In this way, recognition barriers reinforce occupational downgrading and delay progression into employment aligned with workers' skills

Networks and Labour Market Access

Professional networks and informal connections play an important role in labour market integration in Denmark. Migrant workers frequently reported relying on personal contacts, or informal information channels when searching for employment. For example, one participant explained that relevant information typically came from their social environment rather than from official institutions (Interview 9). Similarly, others reported that friends and classmates were their main source of guidance when exploring employment or training opportunities.

These findings suggest that migrants who lack access to professional networks may face additional barriers when attempting to enter skilled employment.

Stakeholder Perspectives

Stakeholder consultations conducted during the project highlighted several structural challenges affecting migrant career pathways in Denmark. Across the interviews, a shared concern was that migrants often arrive with educational backgrounds and professional experience that do not easily translate into Danish labour market requirements.

VRGame/FUNFINITY Aalborg is one of Denmark's leading VR and immersive entertainment centers, offering virtual reality experiences, laser tag, simulators, and team-based activities. During the discussion with this stakeholder it was emphasised that many young migrant workers face systemic barriers related to the recognition of foreign qualifications and limited access to relevant job opportunities. It was highlighted that even migrants with higher education degrees are frequently unable to access jobs aligned with their qualifications, particularly non-EU migrants. It was further noted that existing policies are insufficiently supportive and often fail to provide effective long-term career pathways beyond initial settlement.

IFMT is a human-centered consultancy specializing in leadership development, organizational trust, communication, coaching, and culture transformation. With this stakeholder focused on broader structural and contextual barriers. It was emphasised that migrants often struggle at the very beginning of the integration process due to housing insecurity and limited financial resources. It was also highlighted that while information about opportunities exists, it is often scattered and fragmented, making it difficult for migrants to navigate available pathways effectively. These combined pressures create significant barriers to sustainable integration into the labour market.

Talent acquisition and recruitment consultancy for startups and scale-ups highlighted the importance of structured networking and intermediary support mechanisms. It was emphasised that migrants often struggle to understand the Danish labour market and need support in translating their skills into locally relevant opportunities. It was suggested that targeted networking events, such as profession-specific meetings (e.g. engineering or sales networks), as well as informal "coffee meetings," could help bridge migrants into professional environments. Community-based approaches where migrants can connect with others who have successfully navigated similar pathways was highlighted as important.

Across all stakeholder interviews, a common theme was the need for stronger coordination between educational institutions, employers, and support organisations. Stakeholders suggested that improved collaboration could help create clearer and more accessible career pathways for migrant workers.

Finland

This section examines how the structural barriers identified in Chapter 5 manifest in the Finnish national context. The analysis draws on the project's literature review, survey results, interviews with migrant workers, and stakeholder consultations conducted as part of the Career Compass project. The purpose is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of Finnish labour market policy, but rather to illustrate how structural barriers affect the ability of young migrant workers to access education, vocational training, and career progression pathways in Finland.

Labour Market Context

Finland's labour market presents a mixed and evolving picture. While the economy has shown resilience in recent years, unemployment rates among young migrants remain comparatively high, and competition for low-skilled jobs has intensified. Migrant labour is concentrated in sectors such as cleaning, hospitality, logistics, and agriculture, where entry requirements are relatively low but opportunities for progression are often limited.

Historically, many young migrants could enter low-skilled employment relatively quickly after arrival. However, interview evidence collected during the project suggests that even entry-level positions have become increasingly difficult to secure, with some migrants reporting repeated unsuccessful applications over long periods of time. Finland faces a problem with structural unemployment, which is unemployment that remains high even when the economy is performing well (Pyykkönen, 2025). Entry-level roles often offer limited opportunities for skill development or progression, and migrants with higher education or professional qualifications frequently find themselves underemployed or occupationally downgraded.

Interviews also highlighted what may be described as a language paradox. While many low-skilled positions do not formally require Finnish or Swedish, employers often insist on local language skills in practice. This creates an additional structural barrier, preventing otherwise capable migrants, including English-speaking graduates and professionals, from entering the labour market or gaining relevant work experience.

Key Barriers Identified:

Language Requirements

Language proficiency represents one of the most significant barriers to career progression in Finland. While some initial employment in low-skilled sectors may be possible with limited Finnish or Swedish, access to vocational education, training programmes, and higher-skilled occupations typically requires stronger local language skills.

Interviewees consistently identified language as a major factor limiting access to better employment opportunities. Several noted that even positions that do not formally require Finnish are often inaccessible in practice without it. Vocational courses are frequently delivered only in Finnish or Swedish, restricting participation, and limited fluency prevents career advancement even when migrants possess relevant qualifications or work experience. Furthermore, research and practitioner accounts suggest that language barriers are not limited to objective proficiency levels. Migrants with relatively strong Finnish-language skills may still face difficulties demonstrating their competence during recruitment processes, particularly when interview-related stress affects communication and employers' perceptions of language ability (Työmarkkinatori, 2025). These findings indicate that language proficiency functions as a gateway barrier affecting both education access and movement into skilled employment. In the Finnish context, language requirements operate not only as a communication issue, but also as a structural filter shaping labour market inclusion.

Access to Vocational Education and Training

Access to vocational education and training also presents challenges for migrant workers in Finland. In addition to traditional study programmes, the Finnish VET system also relies on apprenticeship placements and employer partnership, making it difficult for migrants who lack local networks or employer connections to secure training places. Nevertheless, participation in vocational education among migrants who do gain access is not negligible.

The research indicates that among those who moved to Finland between the ages of 16 and 20, 38% of men and 27% of women were participating in vocational upper secondary education within their fourth year of arrival, and after ten years, 60% of this age group had been enrolled in vocational upper secondary education (Pesola & Virkola, 2025). Participation is particularly notable among women, in all age groups under the age of 41, over 40% of women had been enrolled in vocational upper secondary education after ten years in the country. Enrolment in universities of applied sciences follows a similar pattern, with approximately 20% of men who arrived under the age of 25 having participated after ten years, alongside 20% of women who arrived between the ages of 16 and 20 (Pesola & Virkola, 2025).

These figures suggest that while access barriers are real, a meaningful proportion of migrants do eventually enter formal education pathways, though the timeframes involved point to delayed rather than immediate integration into the education system. While some interviewees were aware of VET pathways, many reported difficulties navigating the system, uncertainty about eligibility, and limited information about available opportunities. Migrant workers who lack knowledge of the training system often struggle to identify relevant programmes or apprenticeships, which limits their ability to build skills and transition into more qualified positions. Some migrants also reported limited access to TE Office language courses while employed, since eligibility conditions required unemployment. This points to a structural gap in support provision between employment-based integration needs and available services. Even when migrants undertook online university courses or independent learning, these efforts did not automatically translate into improved employment outcomes, highlighting the continued importance of local recognition of qualifications, professional networks, and employer trust alongside formal and informal learning. In several cases, migrants relied on informal networks or online searches to identify training opportunities rather than institutional channels. These experiences suggest that vocational pathways may formally exist, but remain difficult to access in practice due to fragmented information and weak navigation support.

Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

Recognition of foreign qualifications and previous work experience represents another barrier for many migrant workers in Finland. Drawing on a recent study that included focus group discussions with 50 forced migrants residing in Finland, Nassar (2025) found that foreign qualifications and prior work experience were often perceived as being systematically undervalued by employers. Participants reported that even when their qualifications had been formally recognised, employers continued to favour Finnish credentials, reflecting a lack of trust in the quality and relevance of education obtained abroad. In addition, extensive work experience acquired in migrants' countries of origin was frequently considered insufficient without Finnish certifications or qualifications (Nassar, 2025).

Several interviewees of Career Compass reported that despite holding academic degrees or professional experience, their qualifications were not recognised or sufficiently valued by Finnish employers, particularly in regulated or specialised fields such as healthcare or engineering. For example, engineering and IT graduates described spending several years in cleaning or hospitality jobs due to employer gatekeeping, strict language expectations, and limited access to internships, mentoring, or entry points into their professional fields. As one interview participant described:

“ Yes, I have faced some challenges with the recognition of my previous education and work experience. Certain qualifications and experiences from my home country are not automatically recognized in Finland, which makes it necessary to take additional courses or training to meet local requirements (Interview 2, FI). ”

This lack of recognition contributes directly to underemployment, as migrants are unable to fully use their qualifications and prior experience. This barrier restricts migrants' ability to translate their existing skills, education, and professional experience into meaningful employment opportunities within the Finnish labour market. Moreover, it causes frustration, delayed career progression, and, in some cases, prolonged unemployment. In this way, recognition barriers reinforce the broader pattern of occupational downgrading identified throughout the report.

Networks and Labour Market Access

Professional networks and informal connections play a significant role in labour market integration in Finland. Migrant workers frequently rely on personal contacts or community networks to identify jobs, internships, or training opportunities. A study conducted by the Finnish trade unions TEK and Insinööriliitto found that personal networks were regarded as the most useful and widely applicable job-seeking tool, with 80% of respondents identifying them as relevant to their situation and three quarters rating them as at least quite useful, with LinkedIn being the most frequently mentioned platform (Murto & Hopeaketo, 2025).

In contrast, public unemployment services and job fairs were considered unhelpful by the majority of respondents, despite usage rates of 43% and 53% respectively, pointing to a notable gap between the availability of formal support and its perceived practical value (Murto & Hopeaketo, 2025). These findings are consistent with both the survey data and interview evidence collected during the Career Compass project, which similarly identified informal networks as a useful pathway to employment among migrant workers in Finland.

As one interviewee recounted:

“ I got the job through a recommendation, the owner was a friend of a friend (Interview 9, FI). ”

This suggests that migrants who lack local professional networks are at a disadvantage when attempting to access better employment opportunities or training programmes. Without strong connections, many struggle to gain entry into higher-skilled jobs, apprenticeships, or professional environments where local referrals and trust play a substantial role.

In the Finnish context, labour market access is therefore shaped not only by qualifications and motivation, but also by the ability to build relationships, navigate informal hiring channels, and gain visibility within professional networks.

Everyday Challenges

Interviews also revealed that structural barriers are compounded by practical and psychological challenges in everyday life. Migrants described prolonged periods of unemployment, frustration, demotivation, and mental strain linked to repeated rejection and limited opportunities for progression. These findings align with the psychosocial barrier identified in Chapter 5. One of the interviewed migrants described his situation as:

“ quite challenging because there is limited time to commit to many activities at the same time. Studying in Finnish makes it hard as well. There's also a mental pressure to study because you know that's about the only way to get opportunities. It's overwhelming (Interview 1, FI). ”

At the same time, rigid work schedules, variable working hours, and uncertain income reduce migrants' ability to participate in training programmes or language courses, even when such opportunities are available. One interviewee highlighted the challenge of balancing multiple responsibilities, stating:

“ I really don't have enough time for all activities. It affects my sleep. As immigrants, we don't have the luxury of focusing on one thing at a time, so we have to find a way to juggle all activities together. (Interview 3, FI). ”

This suggests that time constraints and competing demands may create additional barriers to skill development and labour market integration. Migrants repeatedly emphasised that practical support, including mentoring, internships, schedule flexibility, and financial support, is often necessary to make career advancement realistically possible.

These everyday constraints illustrate how structural barriers are experienced in practice. In Finland, as elsewhere, labour market exclusion is not only a matter of formal access, but also of whether migrants have the time, support, and stability needed to pursue long-term development

Stakeholder Perspectives

Stakeholder consultations conducted during the project underscored several key challenges affecting migrant workers in Finland. Representatives from civil society organisations and labour market initiatives emphasised that migrants often possess educational backgrounds and professional experience that do not align easily with the requirements or expectations of the Finnish labour market.

These mismatches contribute to underemployment and occupational downgrading.

Stakeholders also noted that existing policies and programmes designed to support migrant integration often focus on rapid entry into employment rather than long-term career development. While such programmes may support short-term labour market participation, they frequently overlook the need for career progression, skill utilisation, and access to sustainable professional pathways. A further concern raised by stakeholders was that many migrants face additional barriers related to visa conditions, financial constraints, and limited access to training or support programmes. These barriers make it difficult to transition from temporary or low-wage work into more stable and higher-skilled employment. Employer gatekeeping also emerged as a significant issue. Migrants with limited local networks face additional difficulty in accessing professional opportunities, as employers often prioritise local candidates or applicants with familiar backgrounds and stronger local connections. Taken together, the findings from Finland illustrate how the structural barriers identified in Chapter 5 interact within a labour market where access to employment is shaped by language requirements, employer expectations, weak recognition of foreign qualifications, and uneven access to networks and support systems. While some migrants are able to enter low-skilled employment, progression into more stable and qualified roles remains difficult. As a result, many migrants remain underemployed despite holding relevant qualifications, strong motivation, and a clear desire to contribute more fully to the labour market.

Lithuania

This section examines how the structural barriers identified in Chapter 5 manifest in the Lithuanian national context. The analysis draws on the project's survey results, interviews, and stakeholder consultations conducted as part of the Career Compass project. The aim is to illustrate how structural conditions influence young migrant workers' access to education, vocational training, and career progression pathways in Lithuania.

Labour Market Context

Lithuania has experienced a significant increase in the number of foreign residents in recent years, although total numbers declined slightly between early 2024 and early 2025. At the beginning of 2025, Lithuania had approximately 2.89 million permanent residents, of whom 217,290 were foreign nationals, representing 7.52% of the population (Migration Department, 2025; IOM, 2025). Despite the recent stabilisation, the overall growth since 2022 has been substantial, indicating that migrant inclusion remains an important policy issue across education, training, labour market access, and public services. The largest groups of recent arrivals originate from Ukraine, Belarus, and Uzbekistan (Migration Department, 2025). Labour migration remains a key driver of third-country national presence in Lithuania. According to national data, migrant workers are concentrated in sectors such as transport, construction, manufacturing, and services, reflecting demand for labour in shortage occupations (Migration Department, 2025; Brazienė et al., 2023). At the same time, research highlights that migrant employment is often characterized by precarious conditions, including limited career progression opportunities and insecure contracts (Huseynova, 2024).

This contributes to a structural concentration of migrants in lower-skilled occupations and reinforces inequalities in labour market outcomes.

Lithuania has also strengthened its institutional framework for career guidance and vocational training. Since 2022, a national procedure for career guidance has regulated the planning and provision of services across education, vocational education and training. While this provides a formal basis for access to career guidance and planning support, including for migrant populations, existing research suggests that Lithuanian integration policy is often equal only on paper, with gaps between formal rights and actual opportunities (Brazienė et al., 2023). Young migrants in Lithuania can access initial VET programmes, further vocational training, and Employment Service measures such as re-skilling programmes, internships, subsidised employment, and career counselling. From a policy perspective, access to training and support systems is well established

“ Participants were offered two-month paid internships in well-known Lithuanian companies. It was very successful - most participants received job offers. I would say this project really helped to 'break the ice' (Interview 4, LT) ”

This example shows that paid internships can reduce employer uncertainty, provide migrants with local work experience and lead directly to employment.

However, in practice, access does not always translate into effective participation or successful labour market outcomes, particularly for newcomers with limited Lithuanian language skills or insufficient knowledge of the education and employment system (HRMI, 2023; Huseynova, 2024).

A recent policy development further shapes this context. From 1 January 2026, foreigners working in customer-facing roles are required to provide services in Lithuania at a minimum A1 level during the first two years of employment, increasing to A2 level thereafter (IOM, n.d.). While this requirement may support long-term integration, it may also create short-term barriers for newly arrived migrants if language learning opportunities are not available early and in flexible formats.

Key Barriers Identified

The analysis of the Lithuanian context highlights several key barriers affecting the integration and career development of migrant workers.

A primary barrier is limited knowledge of the Lithuanian labour market and vocational education system. Newcomers often lack information about available training pathways, career guidance services, qualification structures, and employer expectations. This makes it more difficult to identify suitable learning opportunities and delays entry into stable employment (HRMI, 2023).

Language represents a second major barrier. Lithuanian language skills are critical for participation in both education and employment. Evidence shows that lack of language skills can limit migrants' ability to access support and defend their rights, reinforcing vulnerability in the labour market (IOM, 2025; HRMI, 2023).

With the introduction of A1 and A2 requirements for customer-facing roles, language is becoming an increasingly central condition for labour market participation (LRT.lt, 2025). This challenge may remain even after migrants have acquired Lithuanian language skills and obtained the required certificates. As one young migrant living in a smaller town explained:

“ Even though I can speak Lithuanian, I have certificates, I passed the Lithuanian language exam, the Constitution exam, I have everything... But the problem is that the director wants to work with Lithuanians. ”
(Interview 1, LT).

A third barrier relates to access to work-based learning and employer networks. While formal access to vocational education exists, migrants may face difficulties securing apprenticeships, placements, or practical training opportunities. Studies also indicate structural weaknesses in integration systems and cooperation between institutions, which can hinder effective transitions into employment (Brazienė et al., 2023; Huseynova, 2024). This is particularly relevant in sectors where migrants are already concentrated in lower-skilled roles and where progression pathways are limited.

Institutional readiness represents a further barrier. Evidence suggests that Lithuanian systems were not fully prepared to respond to increased migration flows, particularly during the 2021 migration crisis, revealing gaps in capacity, coordination, and service provision (HRMI, 2023).

“ At the moment, the platform is only in Lithuanian. The system itself has not yet been translated into English or Russian, so it is really difficult for them to submit an application independently. ”
(Interview 2, LT)

As a result, vocational schools often have to provide individual assistance with applications, although this support is not formally built into the system. This includes the development of inclusive educational methods, language-sensitive approaches, and organisational practices adapted to multicultural environments. Ongoing national initiatives aimed at improving VET accessibility for third-country nationals represent important steps in this direction. Finally, challenges related to recognition of qualifications and employer attitudes also affect labour market integration. Migrants may experience difficulties in having their qualifications recognised by employers, particularly when obtained outside the European Union. At the same time, migrants may face dependency on employers due to residence permit restrictions, contributing to job insecurity and limited mobility (Huseynova, 2024). These factors can contribute to underemployment and delayed career progression, although their impact varies across sectors and individual cases.

Stakeholder Perspectives

From a policy perspective, Lithuania has developed a relatively comprehensive institutional framework combining migration management, labour market activation, career guidance, and integration support. Public institutions play defined roles: the Migration Department monitors foreign resident trends, the Employment Service supports labour market entry, the education system provides access to vocational training and guidance, and the Ministry of Social Security and Labour coordinates integration policy. However, research indicates that coordination and effective implementation remain key challenges, with integration outcomes often lagging behind formal policy commitments (Brazienė et al., 2023)

From the perspective of vocational education providers, the main challenge is not only access but also adaptation. Institutions require appropriate teaching methods, language-sensitive support systems, stronger cooperation with employers, and staff capacity to work effectively in multicultural learning environments. These needs align with ongoing national efforts to improve the accessibility of vocational education for third-country nationals.

From the perspective of migrant workers, the most effective support appears to be practical, localised, and personalised. Evidence highlights that access to information, social support, and community-based services plays a role in enabling integration, particularly in early stages (HRMI, 2023; European Commission, 2026). Civil society actors emphasise that integration should not be understood solely as a labour market issue. Social connections, mental health, and access to services are closely linked to education and employment outcomes. Initiatives such as community support programmes, literacy training, social counselling, and targeted support for specific groups (including women and displaced populations) play an important role in enabling migrants to progress toward education and employment.

Overall, Lithuania provides a relatively strong formal framework for the inclusion of young migrant workers in career guidance, vocational education, and labour market support measures. At the same time, evidence shows a gap between formal access and real opportunities, shaped by language barriers, limited system knowledge, labour market segmentation, and institutional capacity constraints (Brazienė et al., 2023; Huseynova, 2024; HRMI, 2023). Ongoing policy developments and targeted initiatives indicate a move toward a more structured and responsive approach, but continued coordination between public institutions, education providers, employers, and civil society remains essential for improving long-term career outcomes.

Best Practices and Existing Policies Models

This chapter examines selected best practices, policy models, programmes, and initiatives across the Nordic-Baltic region that aim to reduce structural barriers to labour market integration and career progression. These barriers, identified in Chapter 5, include language requirements, employer gatekeeping, limited access to professional networks, fragmented information systems, non-recognition of qualifications, time and income constraints, and psychosocial challenges.

Across Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania, integration approaches combine national labour market measures with initiatives delivered by municipalities, educational institutions, and civil society organisations. While institutional structures differ, several common strategies emerge: personalised guidance and mentoring, work-based learning pathways, employer engagement and incentives, integrated service delivery models, and mechanisms for recognising prior learning and qualifications.

Denmark: Bridging Low-Skill Lock-In and Network Barriers

Denmark has developed several initiatives aimed at preventing long-term concentration in low-skilled employment and improving access to training and professional networks.

A central example is the IGU programme (Integrations Grund Uddannelse, or basic integration education), established in 2016 through a tripartite agreement between the Danish government, employer organisations, and trade unions. The programme targets refugees and family-reunified migrants, particularly younger adults, and directly addresses key barriers such as language constraints, time poverty, employer risk aversion, and the low-skill lock-in effect. IGU combines paid employment with structured language and vocational training over a two-year period.

Municipal job centres match participants with employers, creating a bridge between labour market entry and vocational education. The programme has contributed to improved employment outcomes, with refugee employment increasing significantly over recent years and several thousand participants completing the programme. Its focus on younger migrants aligns closely with youth-oriented integration strategies.

Mentoring initiatives also play a key role in addressing barriers related to professional networks and access to employers. The Equal Access (Lige Adgang) mentor network connects migrants and refugees with Danish professionals through one-to-one mentoring, sector-specific matching, and employer engagement.

Similarly, KVINFO's mentoring programme supports migrant and refugee women through structured mentoring, networking, and employer interaction. Code of Care is a Danish non-profit organisation that works to improve employment opportunities for people who are outside or at risk of being excluded from the labour market. It collaborates with companies and municipalities to promote more inclusive hiring practices and to support job creation for people with limited labour market attachment, including vulnerable groups. In addition, organisations such as the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) provide integrated employment services combining job counselling, mentoring, language learning referrals, and vocational pathways in cooperation with municipal job centres. Acting as coordination hubs, these services help migrants navigate fragmented systems and access structured support.

Complementing these efforts, the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR) supports highly educated refugees whose documentation is incomplete by providing recognised assessments of their qualifications, work experience, and language skills.

Together, these initiatives illustrate how combining work-based learning, employer engagement, mentoring, and coordinated services can reduce structural barriers and support career progression.

Finland: Employment Coaching, Employer Incentives, and Career Pathways

In Finland, integration initiatives often combine personalised guidance with policy tools designed to influence employer behaviour and improve access to career pathways.

The Sauma employment coaching programme, implemented by the Finnish Refugee Council, provides tailored support for job-search skills, CV development, interview preparation, and workplace integration. By connecting jobseekers with employers, Sauma addresses both navigation challenges and employer gatekeeping, with a significant share of participants entering employment within a relatively short period (Suomen Pakolaisapu). Financial incentives also play an important role.

The Youth Employment Voucher (Nuorten työllistymisseteli) subsidises wages for employers hiring unemployed individuals under the age of 30, reducing recruitment risks and creating opportunities for young migrants (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 2026). For highly educated migrants, the SIMHE (Supporting Immigrants in Higher Education) network provides career counselling, recognition support, and guidance into further education or skilled employment (European Commission, 2025). This helps address the underutilisation of qualifications and supports transitions into appropriate career pathways.

Integrated service delivery models are a key feature of the Finnish approach. Ohjaamo youth guidance centres provide low-threshold, one-stop services combining career guidance, employment support, education counselling, and social services (OECD, 2024). These centres are particularly effective for young people with limited social capital or system knowledge. Similarly, International House services in major cities offer integrated support for international residents, combining employment guidance, residence advice, and employer services in one location.

Integration training (kotoutumiskoulutus) combines Finnish or Swedish language instruction with orientation to working life and elements of vocational preparation, aiming to support immigrants' broader integration into society and the labour market. The training is designed to develop language skills alongside knowledge of Finnish society and working life, and it may also include work placements or career guidance. In this way, language learning is closely linked to pathways into employment, helping to reduce barriers related to both communication and labour market entry (Opetushallitus, 2026). This model aligns language acquisition with employment pathways, helping to address the structural mismatch identified in Chapter 5.

Work try-out (työkokeilu) is a labour market activation measure in Finland that allows jobseekers to explore career options and gain practical experience in a workplace without entering an employment relationship. It is typically agreed upon in the individual employment plan with the employment authorities and the employer, and its purpose is to support career orientation, re-entry into working life, or assessment of suitability for a specific field. During the period, participants carry out normal work tasks in the workplace while retaining unemployment benefits, and the arrangement is intended as a low-risk way to connect individuals with potential employment pathways and improve labour market matching (Job Market Finland, 2026).

The *Talent Boost* programme is a Finnish government initiative aimed at attracting and retaining international talent to support labour market needs and economic growth. It focuses on improving the integration of international professionals by facilitating their entry into the Finnish labour market, strengthening cooperation between employers, educational institutions, and public authorities, and enhancing Finland's attractiveness as a destination for skilled migration. Additionally, the programme seeks to streamline recruitment processes, support employer readiness to hire international workers, and improve the availability of services that help migrants settle, work, and develop their careers in Finland (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 2026).

Civil society initiatives further complement this ecosystem. Startup Refugees connects migrants with employers, mentors, and entrepreneurship opportunities, strengthening professional networks and labour market access (Startup Refugees, 2026). What The Finland trains migrant-background experience experts who contribute to more inclusive employment and integration services by bringing lived experience into policy and practice (What the Finland Association, 2026). In addition, the Kuule Minua initiative (Ehjä ry) supports young refugees through peer groups and storytelling, strengthening psychosocial resilience and participation (Erityishuoltojärjestöjen liitto EHJÄ ry, 2026). Together, these initiatives demonstrate how combining guidance, incentives, integrated services, and community-based support can address multiple structural barriers simultaneously.

Lithuania: One-Stop Services and Community-Based Integration Support

Lithuania has developed a range of initiatives addressing structural barriers such as language requirements, limited system navigation, employer gatekeeping, time constraints, and recognition of qualifications. These approaches combine public employment services, municipal programmes, and civil society initiatives. A key work-based pathway is the apprenticeship model implemented by the Employment Service of Lithuania in cooperation with employers and training providers. This model allows participants to combine paid employment with vocational learning. Wage subsidies and support for workplace trainers reduce employer risk and make participation more accessible. By linking income with training, the programme addresses time and financial constraints that often prevent participation in education (Employment Service of Lithuania, 2026).

Service navigation is supported through one-stop integration models. International House Vilnius provides coordinated guidance for international residents, including employment support, administrative assistance, and referrals to relevant institutions (Go Vilnius, n.d.). Similarly, the Migration Information Centre “MiCenter”, operated by IOM Lithuania, offers consultations, sociocultural orientation, and psychological support, helping migrants navigate complex systems and reduce uncertainty (IOM Lithuania, n.d.). Civil society organisations play a central role in supporting integration. The Lithuanian Red Cross integration programme combines case management, language learning, community activities, and psychosocial support. These services strengthen migrants' practical integration and long-term self-reliance (IFRC, 2025).

The Vilnius Archdiocese Caritas Foreigners' Integration Centre provides language training, integration courses, and support related to legal, social, and employment issues. It also facilitates recognition pathways through cooperation with national authorities and the EQPR system (Vilnius Archdiocese Caritas, 2026). At the system level, Lithuania has strengthened its national career guidance framework, providing structured support for education and career decision-making. This helps connect vocational pathways with labour market opportunities. Local initiatives further complement national efforts. The "Tautų tiltai" ("Bridges of Nations") programme combines case management, language support, and practical skills development to improve access to employment and public services (Lithuanian Red Cross, 2025). Community-based initiatives also address psychosocial and practical barriers. One example is the FLIGHT project's Help Club in Lithuania, which provides Ukrainian women with information about the legal environment, taxes, and business opportunities while developing digital literacy and Lithuanian-language skills (FLIGHT, 2023). Together, all these initiatives demonstrate the importance of combining institutional support with community-based approaches to address both structural and everyday barriers.

Transferability and Scalability

The practices identified across Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania highlight several transferable approaches to improving migrant labour market integration. Denmark demonstrates the effectiveness of strong employer engagement and structured work-based learning pathways. Finland illustrates the value of integrated guidance systems and policy tools that influence employer behaviour. Lithuania highlights the importance of one-stop service models and community-based support mechanisms.

Several approaches show high transferability:

- Mentoring and coaching models, which rely on structured guidance and employer engagement rather than complex regulatory frameworks.
- Work-based learning pathways, which combine income, experience, and training but require coordination between employers and education systems.
- Integrated service centres, which simplify navigation and reduce fragmentation across systems.
- Recognition mechanisms, which support better utilisation of migrant skills.

Civil society initiatives also demonstrate strong potential for adaptation. Programmes such as Startup Refugees, What The Finland, and Kuule Minua show how peer support, lived experience, and community-based approaches can strengthen integration outcomes. Overall, the findings suggest that effective policy responses require multi-level approaches combining labour market measures, education systems, and social support. Transferability depends not only on programme design, but also on the ability to adapt initiatives to national institutional contexts and labour market conditions.

Policy Gaps and Systemic Challenges

Mismatch Between Labour Market Needs and Education Access

Across the Nordic-Baltic region, labour markets are experiencing growing demand for skilled workers in sectors such as construction, healthcare, manufacturing, logistics, and technical services. At the same time, evidence from the Career Compass project shows that migrant workers remain disproportionately concentrated in low-skilled employment with limited opportunities for career progression. This reflects a structural mismatch between labour market demand and access to education and training systems.

Many education and training programmes remain difficult to combine with employment. Adult learning systems frequently retain the rigid structures of initial education, requiring learners to study at a fixed time, location, and pace. This can limit participation among adults who are already working or managing other responsibilities (OECD, 2023). For migrants engaged particularly in physically demanding sectors, participation in such programmes is often not feasible. Language requirements can create an additional barrier (OECD, 2021).

Career Compass findings indicate that these conditions contribute to a “low-skill trap.” Migrants frequently enter the labour market quickly after arrival, often in sectors facing labour shortages. However, once employed, they encounter structural barriers that limit access to education and training pathways necessary for career advancement (see Chapter 5).

Research on intra-EU youth mobility also identifies trajectories of matching, re-skilling, and de-skilling among young migrants. This research highlights the challenges involved in transferring qualifications and skills across national labour markets, as well as the importance of structural opportunities in destination countries (Emilsson and Mozetič, 2021).

As a result, labour markets may simultaneously experience shortages of skilled workers while a significant share of migrant workers remain underutilised in low-skilled occupations. Addressing this mismatch requires policy approaches that more effectively link labour market demand with accessible, flexible, and inclusive education and training pathways.

Fragmented Policy Frameworks

A second key systemic challenge identified in the Career Compass project is the fragmentation of policy frameworks related to migration, labour market integration, and education.

Policies affecting migrant workers are typically distributed across multiple institutional domains. Responsibilities may be divided between migration authorities, public employment services, education institutions, local authorities, and other actors involved in migrant support. VET systems themselves frequently involve multiple stakeholders, jurisdictions, and levels of government. When migrant integration is added to these existing structures, governance and coordination challenges can become more pronounced (Jeon, 2019).

In practice, this fragmentation creates significant challenges for migrant workers attempting to navigate available support systems. Accessing education, training, or employment support may require interaction with multiple institutions operating under different administrative procedures, eligibility criteria, and communication systems.

External research confirms that fragmented governance structures can complicate the delivery of training opportunities, career guidance, and employment services.

The OECD notes that VET governance is often divided between a diverse constellation of actors, which can make it difficult to scale up good practices and implement comprehensive reforms. For migrant workers seeking to improve their qualifications or transition into more stable employment, this complexity can act as a barrier in itself. Unclear pathways, inconsistent information, and administrative complexity may discourage engagement with education and training systems altogether. Fragmentation in policy design and implementation therefore not only reduces system efficiency but also reinforces existing barriers to education and career progression..

Strengthening coordination between institutions - across public, private, and civil society sectors - represents a key opportunity to improve the effectiveness of education and training systems. More integrated approaches could support the development of pathways that are both accessible to migrant workers and aligned with labour market needs.

Coordination Challenges Between Institutions

In addition to policy fragmentation, the Career Compass research identifies significant coordination challenges between key actors involved in labour market integration, vocational education, and migrant support.

Stakeholder consultations conducted within the Career Compass project indicate that cooperation between public authorities, vocational education providers, employers, and civil society organisations is often limited or uneven. This lack of coordination can result in gaps between labour market demand and the training opportunities available to migrant workers.

Civil society organisations and migrant support initiatives frequently play a crucial role in bridging these gaps by providing guidance, mentoring, and practical support. However, these actors are not always systematically integrated into policy design or programme implementation, meaning that valuable insights from frontline experience are not fully utilised. As a result, training initiatives may fail to reflect the practical realities faced by migrant workers, including time constraints, financial pressures, and language barriers.

Cross-Country Systemic Challenges

Language requirements that restrict access to vocational education and skilled employment

Limited flexibility in education and training systems for individuals in full-time or irregular work

Complex and slow processes for recognising foreign qualifications and prior learning

Limited access to professional networks and employer-supported career pathways

Structural barriers within recruitment practices, including forms of employer gatekeeping

Although Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania operate within different institutional and policy contexts, the Career Compass research identifies a set of common systemic challenges affecting migrant workers across all three countries.

Across the region, these barriers interact with labour market dynamics that prioritise rapid entry into employment over participation in education or training. While early employment can provide immediate financial stability, it often reduces the likelihood that migrant workers will engage in further education at a later stage.

As a result, similar outcomes are observed across national contexts, reflecting broader regional structural dynamics. Migrant workers remain concentrated in sectors characterised by lower wages, limited career mobility, and physically demanding working conditions, despite the presence of labour shortages in higher-skilled occupations.

At the same time, emerging policy initiatives, such as programmes combining language learning with employment, more flexible vocational education pathways, and integrated support services, indicate that governments and institutions are beginning to respond to these challenges (European Commission, 2025; OECD, 2021; OECD, 2023). Continued policy experimentation, combined with stronger coordination and knowledge exchange across countries, will be essential for developing more effective and inclusive systems that support migrant workers' long-term career development.

11. Policy and Migrant-Led Actions for Labour-Market Integration

Migrant workers in Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania continue to face structural barriers that limit access to vocational education, skills development, and long-term career progression. As demonstrated in previous chapters, these challenges include language requirements, inflexible education systems, fragmented service provision, limited employer engagement, and slow or complex recognition of prior learning and qualifications. As a result, many migrants remain underemployed or experience occupational downgrading, despite existing labour shortages in key sectors. At the same time, the analysis of national practices highlights several scalable and transferable approaches. Denmark demonstrates the value of strong employer engagement and structured training pathways; Finland illustrates the effectiveness of integrated guidance systems and policy instruments that influence employer behaviour; and Lithuania provides examples of coordinated service delivery and community-based integration support. Civil-society-led initiatives further demonstrate the importance of peer support, lived experience, and youth participation in strengthening labour market integration. Building on these findings, this chapter outlines a set of policy and practice-oriented actions at both institutional and individual levels.

1. Flexible Vocational Education Pathways

Policy: Introduce flexible, work-compatible Vocational Education pathways by expanding modular and stackable programmes, strengthening paid work-based learning and providing targeted participation support (such as wage supplements, travel subsidies, and childcare) to enable access for working learners.

Inspired by Finland, integration training (kotoutumiskoulutus), Denmark, AOF and Lithuanian vocational training institutions.

In Finland, Integration Training (kotoutumiskoulutus) often combines learning a language with work orientation and, in some cases, vocationally oriented modules. It is designed to support migrants' transition into further education and the labour market; delivered through adult education providers and coordinated via public employment services. This model is particularly relevant because it integrates language acquisition with early exposure to vocational content, helping reduce barriers to entry into formal vocational education pathways and supporting gradual progression into skilled employment.

In Denmark, AOF Danmark plays an important role in providing flexible adult education, particularly language training and basic skills courses for migrants and adults. Through part-time and evening, AOF supports learners who are combining education with work. This flexibility makes it easier for participants to gradually build language proficiency and foundational skills needed for further education or labour market participation. As a non-formal education provider, AOF contributes to reducing access barriers by offering learning opportunities outside standard vocational education structures, although progression into formal qualifications often depends on additional pathways within the broader education system.

Lithuanian vocational training institutions provide opportunities for foreigners to obtain professional qualifications, and the educational process can be organized flexibly - through the use of translation, adapted curricula, blended learning, and the formation of groups based on language proficiency. This practice creates the conditions for more effective learning, especially during the early stages of integration when proficiency in the Lithuanian language is still insufficient. In some cases, separate groups are formed, consisting of representatives from a single linguistic community, to ensure a smoother start to the learning process and to create more favorable conditions for the acquisition of professional skills, despite limited proficiency in the Lithuanian language.

To support career progression, migrants should combine flexible learning with proactive skill development. This includes participating in modular training or online courses aligned with their career goals, gaining practical experience through project-based or entry-level roles in relevant sectors. These actions can help migrants demonstrate their competencies and improve access to further education and employment opportunities.

2. Integrated Language and Employment Programme

Policy: Combine language learning with work and vocational training, so migrants learn the language while working or training instead of before entry. Focus on high-demand sectors and include mentoring and apprenticeships to support faster access to skilled jobs.

In Finland, apprenticeship-based training combined with wage subsidies (oppisopimus + palkkatuki) enables migrants to enter paid employment while simultaneously developing language skills and vocational competencies. These programmes support learning directly in the workplace, allowing participants to build practical experience in sectors such as care, logistics, and services while receiving financial support.

This model facilitates faster transitions into skilled work and strengthens pathways from entry-level jobs into more stable vocational careers.

SOSU Danmark (Social- og Sundhedsskolerne) are Denmark's vocational schools for social and health care education, preparing students for work in: elderly care, hospitals and healthcare support roles, social care services, home care and municipal care systems. They offer official vocational education programmes (VET) leading mainly to: Social and health care helper (social- og sundhedshjælper) and Social and health care assistant (social- og sundhedsassistent). Many SOSU schools also offer language support for students with Danish as a second language, helping them develop the professional language skills needed for healthcare studies and workplace communication.

In Lithuania, elements of an integrated language and employment model can already be found in the work of NGOs and their partners. The Lithuanian Red Cross provides Lithuanian language clubs together with employment consultations, information about training opportunities, support with qualification recognition and individual guidance. In a related employment initiative, migrants were offered two-month paid internships in companies such as Yara Lietuva, Oxylabs, Rimi and Swedbank. Most participants received job offers, including permanent employment in several cases. Although these services are not yet provided through one unified national programme, they show how language learning, career guidance and direct contact with employers can be linked in practice.

Building on these practices, Lithuania could develop a continuous programme combining accredited Lithuanian language courses, employment counselling, qualification recognition support, digital skills training, individual case management and paid work placements.

Migrants can support their language development by engaging in formal and informal learning opportunities, participating in community-based language practice, and developing occupation-specific language skills aligned with their career goals.

3. Strengthened Employer Engagement

Policy: Introducing targeted incentives, such as subsidies or tax measures, to encourage participation in training and mentoring activities which can strengthen employer engagement in migrant integration and workforce development. They can also support the development of structured workplace training programmes and mentoring schemes while promoting employer networks that facilitate the exchange of good practices in inclusive recruitment and workforce development.

In Finland, a relevant example is recruitment training (RekryKoulutus), which is organised in cooperation with ELY Centres and TE Services. This model enables employers to actively participate in the design of training programmes tailored to specific occupational needs and labour market demands. By combining training with recruitment objectives, RekryKoulutus helps ensure that participants develop the skills required for job roles, while also allowing companies to address specific workforce shortages. This approach supports more direct and efficient pathways into employment by closely aligning training provision with employer needs.

In Lithuania, employer engagement is supported through several forms of cooperation. The Lithuanian Employment Service has organised job fairs where migrants can meet employers directly and discuss available job opportunities. It has also funded vocational training for some migrant groups. Training providers cooperate with companies and other social partners to provide practical learning and help participants move from training into employment. These examples show that job fairs, company involvement in training and paid internships can reduce barriers between employers and migrant workers and create clearer paths into stable employment.

4. One-Stop Integration and Guidance Services

Guidance services have emerged as an important policy response to the fragmentation of information and support systems that often hinders migrants' successful labour-market integration. These services seek to provide coordinated access to employment assistance, education and training opportunities, language support. By consolidating information and guidance within integrated service centres, they reduce administrative complexity, improve awareness of available opportunities, and facilitate more efficient navigation of institutional systems. Effective implementation further requires clear referral mechanisms between relevant organisations and accessible service provision across multiple languages to ensure that migrants can obtain timely and appropriate support tailored to their needs.

Policy: Consolidate and expand support service organisations by establishing them in major cities. This arrangement allows migrants to access essential resources, including registration procedures, employment assistance, and public services, within a single location. In addition, these services are typically provided in multiple languages to accommodate diverse populations.

Inspired by Finland, International House Helsinki, and Denmark, International House Copenhagen, International House Vilnius.

International House Copenhagen and International House Helsinki play an important role in supporting the labour-market integration and upskilling of migrants through targeted employment, career-development, and labour-market orientation programmes. Both organisations provide structured guidance designed to help international residents understand local labour-market expectations, identify and communicate their skills, and develop effective job-search strategies.

In Copenhagen, programmes such as the Greater Copenhagen Career Program, Career Kick Start, First Job Copenhagen, and Get Started offer mentoring, networking opportunities, career workshops, CV and LinkedIn training, and guidance on Danish workplace culture, with a strong emphasis on connecting international talent to employers and professional networks (International House Copenhagen, 2026). Similarly, International House Helsinki's Employment Coaching programme provides newcomers, international students, and recent graduates with labour-market information, career guidance, and small-group training focused on skills identification, career planning, CV and cover-letter development, networking, and navigating the Finnish job market. Through information sessions, coaching workshops, and individual advice, participants are supported in adapting their competencies to local labour-market requirements and strengthening their employability (International House Helsinki, 2026).

In Lithuania, a comparable one-stop-shop model exists in the form of International House Vilnius, established in 2021 by Go Vilnius and Invest Lithuania. The centre brings together specialists from multiple public institutions, including the Migration Department, Sodra, the State Tax Inspectorate, and the Employment Service, to provide guidance on residence permits, employment, social insurance, taxes, and business setup (International House Vilnius, 2026). NGOs in Lithuania often act as intermediaries between third-country nationals and government institutions, helping them navigate the Lithuanian education system, the labour market, and everyday social life more easily.

Taken together, these initiatives illustrate how local integration institutions can function as migrant upskilling intermediaries by combining career development, labour-market orientation, mentoring, and networking support. Their programmes focus on enhancing migrants' social capital and understanding of workplace norms, thereby facilitating access to employment opportunities and supporting the long-term retention of international talent in the Nordic labour market.

Service delivery models should integrate mentoring, peer support, and personalised guidance as core components of migrant support systems. Local initiatives should first be piloted with strong coordination mechanisms between relevant actors, before being scaled up to regional or national levels, ensuring effectiveness and adaptability across contexts. A relevant example is the Ohjaamo one-stop guidance model in Finland, where young people receive coordinated support for employment, education, and wellbeing under one roof, with a strong emphasis on personalised guidance, mentoring, and seamless referrals between services (OECD, 2024).

In addition to institutional development, migrant engagement is essential for effective integration outcomes. Migrants are encouraged to actively utilise available guidance services, including employment offices, integration centres, NGO support structures. Participation in peer networks and community organisations can further enhance access to information and network referrals. Moreover, involvement in volunteering and community activities assists migrants in gaining local experience and strengthening professional networks, which improves long-term integration prospects.

5. Recognition and Validation of Prior Skills

Policy: Simplify and standardise the procedures for recognising foreign qualifications and prior learning can make it easier and faster for migrants to access the labour market. This should be supported by the development of bridging programmes for regulated and high-demand professions, alongside greater use of alternative recognition tools such as portfolio-based assessment and the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR). In addition, improving communication and transparency around recognition processes is essential to ensure that migrants clearly understand the requirements, steps, and outcomes involved.

Näyttötutkinnot in Finland provides a formal system for recognising and certifying skills acquired through work experience as well as non-formal and informal learning, which is particularly relevant for immigrants. The system enables individuals to have prior competences evaluated against national qualification standards, regardless of where or how those skills were acquired, including experience gained abroad. Through a structured process of identification, documentation, assessment, and certification, immigrants can obtain full or partial vocational qualifications without necessarily completing traditional formal education pathways. This is especially beneficial for those who lack recognised credentials, are changing career fields, or hold qualifications that are not directly recognised in Finland. By making previously unrecognised skills visible, the system improves employability, shortens the time required to obtain qualifications, reduces training costs, and supports faster integration into the Finnish labour market (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2015).

In Lithuania, the recognition of prior education and skills depends on the purpose for which recognition is needed. When a migrant applies to a vocational or higher education institution, the institution carries out the academic recognition procedure, with guidance and support from the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education. Vocational schools may also assess an applicant's readiness for a programme when formal education documents are unavailable, which is particularly important for people who had to leave their country quickly. The result of the assessment carried out by the first-choice vocational school may also be accepted by other schools. For employment in non-regulated professions, employers usually assess the applicant's actual skills and work experience, while formal recognition and licensing remain necessary in regulated fields such as medicine and teaching.

NGOs also support migrants by explaining qualification recognition and licensing procedures step by step. This practice could be strengthened through clearer multilingual information, individual guidance and more opportunities to assess practical skills acquired through previous work, non-formal learning or education completed abroad.

Additionally, some of the actions that can benefit migrants include preparing and maintaining clear documentation of education, training, and work experience to support recognition processes. Migrants are encouraged to engage in bridging or supplementary training where necessary and to actively seek guidance from relevant authorities in order to better navigate qualification recognition procedures.

Another important dimension of this issue concerns the dual nature of qualification recognition. While foreign qualifications may be formally recognised by government authorities, this recognition does not always translate into acceptance by employers. In practice as was explained in previous chapters, employers and workplaces may remain hesitant to fully acknowledge or value qualifications obtained abroad, even when they have been officially validated. As a result, migrants often continue to face barriers in accessing employment that matches their skills and experience. Therefore, greater efforts are needed to raise employers' awareness of qualification recognition procedures and to strengthen their confidence in the validity and relevance of foreign credentials.

6. Institutional Stability and Sustainable Funding

Policy: Multi-year funding should be provided for proven pilot initiatives to enable scaling and ensure long-term impact. In addition, coordination between municipal, regional, and national levels should be strengthened to reduce duplication of efforts and improve efficiency. Robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks are also needed to assess the effectiveness and scalability of initiatives over time. Finally, cross-country learning and knowledge exchange within the Nordic–Baltic region should be supported to promote the sharing of best practices and policy innovation.

Inspired by Finland and Lithuania scaling pilots through ESF+ funding: European Social Fund Plus finances many employment and integration pilots in Finland and Lithuania. For example, the KOTO-SIB programme is an ESF-supported integration initiative that aims to improve the employment outcomes of immigrants through outcome-based funding. Private and public actors collaborated to provide intensive employment services, language training, and job matching. Successful elements of the model have informed later integration policy development and service design in Finland (Fi-Compass, 2020). Lithuania has used funding from the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) to support the labour market integration of migrants and other vulnerable groups through employment services, skills development, and social inclusion measures. These initiatives aim to improve access to jobs by providing training, career guidance, and support tailored to individual needs.

Examples include projects that combine language learning, vocational training, and employment counselling to help migrants enter the labour market more quickly. By addressing barriers such as language difficulties, skills recognition, and limited knowledge of local labour markets, these programmes contribute to more effective and sustainable migrant integration (European Commission, 2025).

Beneficial migrants-led actions include giving feedback to service providers and programmes in order to support continuous improvement and adaptation of services. Moreover, they are encouraged to participate in community and civil-society initiatives that contribute to policy development and better reflect local needs. Consequently, engagement in programmes that support long-term career development and skills acquisition can further strengthen employability and integration outcomes.

Key Lessons and Expected Impact

The analysis highlights several key lessons for improving migrant labour market integration. The first and most important recommendation is to address language barriers by integrating language learning with employment and vocational training. Learning a language in the workplace allows migrants to develop proficiency in job-specific terminology and communication skills, which can support both immediate workplace integration and future career advancement.

Secondly, employers should be encouraged and incentivised to engage in migrant integration through mentoring programmes, workplace language support, paid internships and skills development initiatives. Employer awareness activities are also needed to reduce stereotypes and ensure that migrants are assessed on the basis of their skills, experience and potential. Simplified and well-coordinated service delivery can improve access to education, training and employment opportunities. Individual case management and one-stop support services can be especially helpful for migrants who need assistance with qualification recognition, job applications, digital systems, legal requirements and access to training. Such support should also reflect regional differences, as migrants living in smaller towns and rural areas may have fewer employment and education opportunities than those living in larger cities.

Additionally, flexible and modular education systems enable individuals who are already employed or have family responsibilities to continue developing their skills. Transparent and efficient qualification recognition processes, together with practical skills assessment, help prevent the underutilisation of migrants' existing skills, experience and non-formal learning. Migrants should also be involved in the planning and evaluation of integration measures. Their direct experience can help institutions identify barriers that may not be visible to policymakers, employers or service providers. Regular feedback and monitoring should be used to assess whether programmes lead not only to participation, but also to stable employment, improved skills and long-term career development.

Finally, stable and coordinated funding structures are essential for expanding and sustaining successful integration initiatives. Short-term projects can test useful approaches, but lasting impact requires continuity and cooperation between public authorities, employment services, education providers, employers and civil society organisations. Consequently, when combined, the measures described above can significantly improve migrants' integration into the labour market by enabling them to utilise their skills more effectively and access employment opportunities more quickly. The expected impact includes reduced skills mismatch and overqualification, improved job retention, stronger employer readiness to recruit migrant workers and more equal access to career development opportunities.

Overall, the findings suggest that effective integration requires coordinated action across policy domains, combining institutional reform, employer engagement, and migrant participation. Scalable solutions will depend on the ability to align these elements within coherent and accessible systems that support long-term career development.

Conclusions

The Career Compass project demonstrates that the challenges faced by young migrant workers in the Nordic–Baltic region are primarily structural, arising from the interaction between labour markets, education systems, as well as policy frameworks. Migration often enables rapid entry into employment, it does not automatically translate into long-term career development. Drawing on DiPrete's (1987) distinction between horizontal and vertical mobility, our analysis led us to conceptualise the pattern observed across the interviews as "horizontal mobility without progression". Although participants frequently moved between employers, sectors, or comparable occupations, these transitions rarely resulted in upward career advancement or employment that reflected their qualifications and skills. Instead, movement within the labour market often reproduced the same occupational position, as cumulative structural barriers, including language requirements, fragmented information, limited recognition of foreign qualifications, employer gatekeeping, and restricted access to vocational pathways. Those factors constrain opportunities for vertical mobility. The concept of horizontal mobility without progression therefore captures a form of labour market participation characterised by movement, but not meaningful career advancement. Without targeted and coordinated actions that address these barriers, many young migrants are likely to remain confined to low-skilled employment, limiting both their individual potential and the broader productivity of Nordic–Baltic labour markets.

Summary of Key Messages

Three central conclusions emerge from the analysis:

First, **labour market integration alone is not sufficient**. Although employment rates among migrant workers may be relatively high, access to stable and skilled career pathways remains limited. Policies that focus primarily on rapid job entry risk reinforcing long-term segmentation within the labour market.

Second, **education and training systems are not sufficiently adapted to the realities of migrant workers**. Many programmes are designed around full-time participation, stable schedules, and advanced language proficiency. These conditions often do not reflect the working and living situations of young migrants already engaged in employment.

Third, **policy fragmentation reduces effectiveness**. The separation of labour market, education, and integration policies creates institutional gaps that migrants must navigate individually. In the absence of clear and coordinated pathways, access to education and career development opportunities remains limited.

Why Action Is Urgent

Across the Nordic-Baltic region, employers face persistent shortages of skilled labour, particularly in healthcare, construction, and technical services. Yet a significant share of migrants remain underemployed, working in roles below their qualifications and skill levels. Failing to address this mismatch risks:

- Prolonging labour shortages in critical sectors
- Increasing long-term dependence on low-skilled labour markets
- Reinforcing inequality and social exclusion among migrant populations

Way Forward

Addressing these challenges requires a shift from fragmented, short-term interventions toward coordinated and long-term policy approaches. The following priorities should guide future action:

1. **Embed flexibility into education systems**

Vocational education and training systems must adapt to the realities of working learners. Modular programmes, blended learning formats, and work-based training pathways can enable migrants to upgrade their skills without exiting the labour market.

2. **Integrate language, employment, and training**

Language learning should be embedded within employment and training pathways rather than treated as a prerequisite.

3. **Strengthen cross-sector coordination**

Improved alignment between labour market policies, education systems, and integration programmes is essential. One-stop service models and clearer guidance pathways can significantly reduce system complexity.

4. **Expand employer involvement**

Employers play a decisive role in shaping career opportunities. Incentives, partnerships, and structured training programmes can strengthen their engagement in upskilling and workforce development.

5. **Promote cross-country learning**

The Nordic–Baltic region offers strong potential for policy exchange. Sharing best practices and piloting transferable models can accelerate the development of effective and scalable solutions.

Annex: Survey structure, Career Compass - Survey on Work and Education Experiences

Intro text : This survey is part of the Career Compass project by Aalborg Institute for Development (Denmark), What The Finland ry (Finland), and Innovation Office (Lithuania). We aim to understand how young migrant workers and students access education, training, and career opportunities.

The survey takes 5–7 minutes. Participation is voluntary and anonymous. You can stop at any time.

Data is stored securely until July 2026 and then deleted. For questions or withdrawal: projects@aalborgid.com

By ticking “I agree,” you confirm that you understand this information and consent to participate.

Age:

15 or younger
16-20
21-25
26-30
Over 30

Country where you live/work now :

Denmark
Finland
Lithuania
Other

Were you born outside this country? Yes - No

What year did you arrive in this country? Open answer

Have you worked (paid job, part time, seasonal or platform work) in the last 12 months? Yes - No

Which best describes your main job?

Cleaning / Janitorial
Kitchen / Dishwashing
Restaurant / Café Staff
Retail (cashier/shelf)
Delivery / Warehouse
Construction (helper/assistant)
Agriculture / Greenhouse
Other (manual/service)
Office/Professional

Employment type

Full-time
Part-time
Temporary / Agency
Seasonal
Self-employed
Unemployed
Student working part-time in unrelated field

How long have you worked in your current job?

< 6 months
6–12 months
1–2 years
3–5 years
> 5 years

Did your job require formal training or a certificate before starting?

No
Yes, short training
Yes, formal qualification

Have you attended any courses or training in this country? Yes - No

If yes what type?

Language course
Vocational training
University course
Online course
Other

How did you learn about it?

Employer
Job centre
NGO
Friends / Family
Social media
Other

Was there a cost for you? Yes - No

Did you finish or are you still attending? Completed - Still studying - Dropped out

Did it help you get a better job or skills? Yes - Partly - No - Too early to say

Which barriers have you faced when trying to access courses or training?

Language requirements
Cost
Lack of time because of work
No childcare
Lack of information
Non recognition of foreign qualifications
Discrimination or bias
Visa/ permit limitations
None of the above - I did not face any barriers
Other

Which barrier is the biggest for you? Open answer

How often do your work hours stop you from joining a course or class?

Never
Sometimes
Often
Always

Have your previous qualifications been officially recognized here?

Yes fully
Partly
No
Not applicable

Do you know any government or NGO programmes that help migrant workers with training or career development? Yes - No

If yes, which ones? open answer

How useful do you think such programmes are? Rating from 1 (not useful) to 5 (very useful)

Where would you prefer to get information about training opportunities? (choose up to 2)

Employer
Job Centre
School/ University
NGO
Social Media
Friends
Government website
Everywhere
non-government website

What kind of job would you like to have in five years? Open answer

Do you plan to stay in this country for the next two years? Yes - No - Not Sure

What support would help you achieve your goal?

Languages courses
Free or cheap training
Mentoring / Career guidance
Recognition of qualifications
Flexible study hours
Financial aid
Visa / permit rules
Networking with companies

Survey Results

Total responses

- **Total responses analysed:** 182

Responses by country (based on country-of-residence field)

- Denmark: **113**
- Finland: **41**
- Lithuania: **28**

Demographics

Age group

- 16–20: 6
- 21–25: 18
- 26–30: 54
- Over 30: 104

Gender

(Only where answered)

- Female: 70
- Male: 74
- Other / prefer not to say: 6
- No answer: 32

Employment situation

Employment type

(Answered by 92 respondents)

- Full-time: 45
- Part-time: 36
- Unemployed: 8
- Temporary / agency: 2
- Seasonal: 1

Education and training

Ever participated in education or training in the current country

(Answered by 93 respondents)

- Yes: **76**
- No: **17**

Barriers to accessing education or training

(Multiple choice, multiple selections allowed)

Total selections per barrier:

- Language requirements: **59**
- Cost of courses or training: **28**
- Lack of time due to work: **24**
- Lack of information: **16**
- Non-recognition of qualifications: **15**
- Discrimination: **11**
- Visa or residence restrictions: **9**
- Lack of childcare: **7**
- No barriers: **5**

Biggest barrier

Number of responses that could be clearly coded: 57

- Language-related: 22
- Cost-related: 11
- Work schedule / lack of time: 10
- Recognition / experience requirements: 7
- Migration or permit issues: 4
- Other or mixed: 3

Remaining responses were too complex or narrative to code reliably.

Work hours as a barrier to training

How often work hours prevent participation

(Answered by 89 respondents)

- Never: 20
- Sometimes: 36
- Often: 22
- Always: 11

Recognition of prior qualifications

(Long-form survey only)

(Answered by 92 respondents)

- Fully recognised: 30
- Partly recognised: 27
- Not recognised: 20
- Not applicable: 15

Awareness of programmes supporting migrant education or upskilling

(Answered by 87 respondents)

- Aware of programmes: 8
- Not aware of programmes: 79

Preferred sources of information about education or work opportunities

(Multiple choice, multiple selections allowed)

Total selections:

- Social media: 57
- Employer: 47
- Government website: 40
- Job centre: 35
- School or university: 27
- Friends or community: 22
- NGOs: 15

Support needed to improve access to education or work progression

(Multiple choice, multiple selections allowed)

Total selections:

- Language courses: 64
- Mentoring or career guidance: 62
- Free or low-cost training: 45
- Flexible study hours: 29
- Recognition of qualifications: 27
- Financial aid: 24
- Visa or permit support: 22

Intention to stay in the country for the next two years

(Answered by 93 respondents)

- Yes: 81
- Not sure: 11
- No: 1

Intention to stay in the country for the next two years

(Answered by 93 respondents)

- Yes: 81
- Not sure: 11
- No: 1

Public Hearing - Validating for Migrant Career Progression

Intro text : We are finalising the Career Compass policy report on barriers preventing migrant workers from moving into stable and skilled jobs. The report identifies six key structural barriers and proposes a set of policy solutions. These barriers often interact and reinforce each other, making progression difficult. We are now validating these findings with stakeholders and practitioners. Your input will directly shape the final recommendations shared with decision-makers.

Takes 4–6 minutes

1. Which best describes your role?

Migrant worker NGO / support organisation Employer / HR Education / training provider Policy / public sector

2. BARRIERS

Many migrant workers can enter jobs with basic language skills, but progressing further often requires a much higher level of proficiency. Vocational education and better-paid roles typically demand strong language skills, which are difficult to develop while working full-time. As a result, language becomes more than a skill — it acts as a barrier that delays or blocks access to career advancement. (LANGUAGE) Most migrant workers enter full-time jobs quickly to secure income, often in sectors with long or irregular hours. This makes it difficult to attend courses that are usually scheduled during the day. Even when opportunities exist, workers often cannot afford to reduce working hours, creating a situation where improving skills becomes practically impossible. (TIME POVERTY) Information about education and career pathways is often scattered across different institutions and platforms. Many migrants do not know where to look, how to apply, or which options are relevant to them. Without clear and accessible guidance, people rely on informal networks, which can lead to missed opportunities or incorrect information. (INFORMATION) Many migrant workers arrive with education or work experience from their home countries, but these are often not fully recognised. The process for validating qualifications can be slow, or unclear, and employers may be uncertain about how to assess foreign experience. As a result, many people end up working in jobs below their skill level. (RECOGNITION) Employers play a key role in career progression. In some cases, they may prioritise immediate productivity over long-term development, limiting opportunities for training or advancement. Migrant workers may also hesitate to request time for education due to fear of losing their job or being seen as less reliable. This can keep workers in the same roles for long periods, even when they are motivated to improve. (EMPLOYERS) Many migrant workers experience financial pressure, job insecurity, and uncertainty about the future. These conditions make it difficult to plan long-term or take risks, such as returning to education. Over time, repeated barriers can lead to frustration, fatigue, and reduced motivation, making it even harder to move forward. (STRESS)

3. Which of these barriers reflect reality in Denmark?

Language barriers (Language as a structural gatekeeper) - Time constraints (Time poverty and incompatibility between work and learning) - Lack of clear information (Fragmented information and limited navigational support) - Qualification recognition issues (Non-recognition of prior learning and qualifications) - Employer-related barriers (Employer gatekeeping within labour markets) - Stress and instability (Psychosocial strain linked to prolonged insecurity)

4. Which barrier is most underestimated?

Language barriers (Language as a structural gatekeeper)- Time constraints (Time poverty and incompatibility between work and learning) - Lack of clear information (Fragmented information and limited navigational support) - Qualification recognition issues (Non-recognition of prior learning and qualifications)- Employer-related barriers (Employer gatekeeping within labour markets) - Stress and instability (Psychosocial strain linked to prolonged insecurity)

5. **Are we missing an important barrier?** Open answer

6. **POLICY SOLUTIONS**

Many education and training programmes are designed for full-time students, not for people who are already working. This recommendation focuses on creating more flexible options, such as part-time courses, evening classes, online learning, and modular programmes that allow people to study step by step. The goal is to make it possible to combine work and learning without losing income. (Flexible Education) Language learning is often treated as something you need to complete before accessing better jobs or education. This recommendation focuses on integrating language learning directly into work and training. For example, sector-specific language courses linked to real job tasks or combining language training with vocational programmes. (Language learning at work) Employers play a key role in whether workers can develop their skills. This recommendation focuses on encouraging employers to support training and career progression through incentives, partnerships, and structured programmes such as mentoring or apprenticeships. The goal is to shift from short-term workforce use to long-term workforce development. (Employers incentives) Support systems for jobs, education, and integration are often spread across different institutions, making them hard to navigate. This recommendation focuses on creating coordinated “one-stop” services where people can get clear guidance on their options in one place. The goal is to simplify access and make pathways easier to understand and follow. (One-stop shop) Many migrants struggle to have their previous education or work experience recognized. This recommendation focuses on simplifying and speeding up recognition processes, improving transparency, and creating alternative ways to assess skills, such as practical tests or portfolio-based evaluation. The goal is to ensure people can use the skills they already have. (Recognition of skills)

7. **Which solutions are relevant?**

Flexible education pathways - Language integrated with work - Stronger employer engagement - One-stop support services - Easier recognition of qualification

8. **Which ONE would have the biggest impact?**

Flexible education pathways - Language integrated with work - Stronger employer engagement - One-stop support services - Easier recognition of qualification

9. **Which ONE is the hardest to implement?**

Flexible education pathways - Language integrated with work - Stronger employer engagement - One-stop support services - Easier recognition of qualification

10. **What is missing from these solutions?** Open answer

11. **What should be removed or deprioritized?** Open answer

12. **Where is the biggest gap today?**

Policy exists but is not implemented Employers are not engaged People don't know about opportunities System too complex Not enough funding

13. **Who should take the lead?**

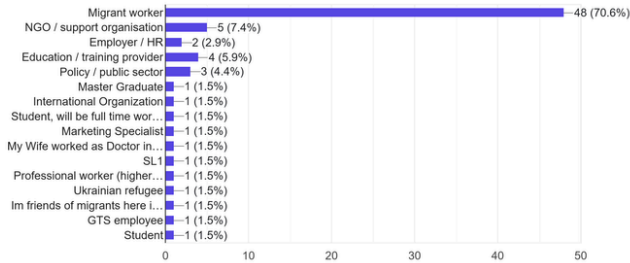
Government - Employers - Education providers - NGOs - Shared responsibility

14. **If you could change ONE thing tomorrow, what would it be?** Open answer

Public Hearing results

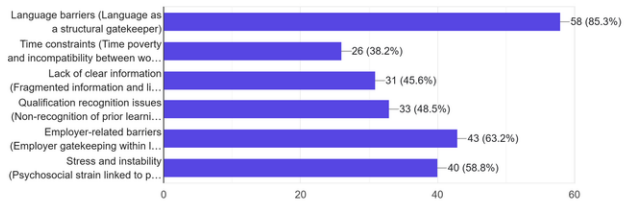
Which best describes your role?

68 responses



Which of these barriers reflect reality in Denmark?

68 responses



Which ONE has the biggest real-life impact?

68 responses



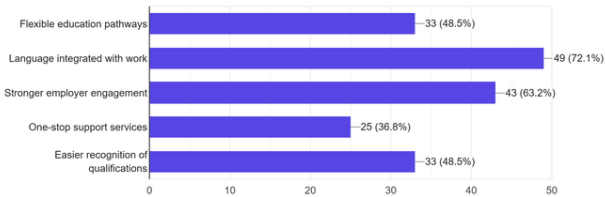
Which barrier is most underestimated?

68 responses



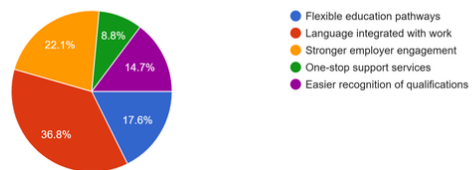
Which solutions are relevant?

68 responses



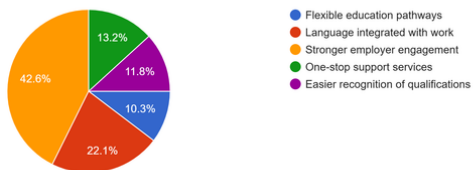
Which ONE would have the biggest impact?

68 responses



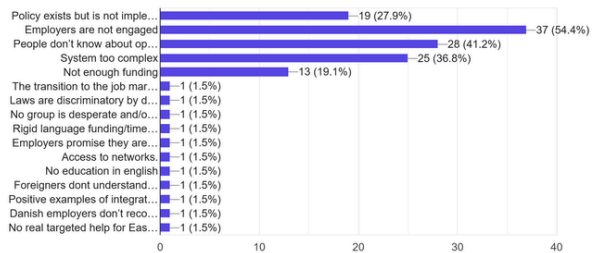
Which ONE is hardest to implement?

68 responses



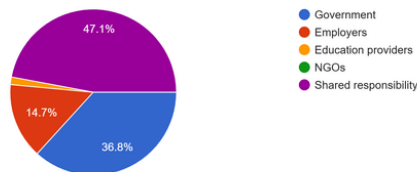
Where is the biggest gap today?

68 responses



Who should take the lead?

68 responses



Interviews structure

Target group

Young migrant workers aged **16–30**, foreign-born, living in **Denmark, Finland, or Lithuania**, yarrived within the last 10 years, working or recently worked in **low-skilled/entry-level jobs** (cleaning, hospitality, logistics, etc.) or studying while working in such jobs.

1. Introduction (2 min)

Purpose: “We’re collecting stories from young migrant workers to understand how people find jobs, training, and career opportunities in [country]. Your answers will help improve future policies. Everything you say is confidential and anonymous.”

Confirm consent (recording / notes) and start.

2. Migration & Work Pathway (Pillar A – Pathways & Transitions)

Goal: Map career trajectory and expectations.

- When did you come to [country] and why?
-
- What kind of job do you do now? How did you find it?
-
- What were your expectations before arriving?
-
- Have you changed jobs or industries since arriving? Why/why not?
-
- (If student) How do you balance work and studies? Do you see your studies leading to a job in your field?
-

■ *Extract:* Entry routes, recruitment channels, expectations vs. reality.

3. Education & Training Access (Pillar B)

Goal: Understand experiences with formal and informal learning.

- Have you tried to take any courses or training in this country?
-
- How did you learn about it? (Employer, job centre, NGO, friends...)
-
- What language was it in? Was that difficult?
-
- Were there costs involved? Did anyone help cover them?
-
- Did the course help you get a better job or skills? Why/why not?
-
- If you haven't joined any training, what stopped you?
-

■ *Extract:* Accessibility, awareness channels, real usefulness.

4. Barriers & Everyday Challenges (Pillar C)

Goal: Identify what keeps people stuck in low-skill work.

- What makes it hard for you to study or change jobs?
-
- How does your work schedule affect your ability to attend training?
-
- Have you faced problems with recognition of previous education or experience?
-
- Do you feel treated fairly at work compared to locals?
-
- What would need to change for you to move into a better position?
-

■ *Extract:* Structural and institutional barriers (time, cost, discrimination, recognition).

5. Awareness of Support & Policy (Pillar D)

Goal: Measure communication and policy gaps.

- Have you ever heard of any government or NGO programs that help migrant workers with training or career development?
-
- If yes, which ones? How did you find out about them?
-
- Did you use them? Were they useful?
-
- If no, what kind of support do you wish existed?
-
- Do you think the government or employers understand what migrant workers need?
-

■ *Extract:* Awareness, trust, perception of national/institutional support.

6. Future Aspirations (Pillar E)

Goal: Capture motivation, goals, and required support.

- What kind of job or career would you like to have in five years?
-
- Do you plan to stay in this country or move elsewhere? Why?
-
- What kind of help would make your goals possible? (Language courses, mentoring, recognition, financial support, visa rules...)
-

■ *Extract:* Desired outcomes and perceived enablers.

7. Closing (2 min)

Thank the participant, remind them data will be anonymised, and give a contact for withdrawal or follow-up. Optionally ask if they want to receive a summary of results.

Data Handling

- Duration: 25–30 min
-
- Record or take detailed notes (with consent).
-
- Filename: WP1_2_[Country]_Interview_[Number]_[YYYYMMDD].docx
-
- Remove names and identifiers before analysis.

The total interview pool is **27 interviews** (DK + FI + LT).

Core Pattern	Indicative Count	Percentage of Total Interviews
Language as a key barrier	17–20 out of 27 interviews	~66–74%
Entry into low-skilled work despite higher qualifications	15–18 out of 27 interviews	~56–67%
Participation in some form of training or language course	18–22 out of 27 interviews	~67–81%
Difficulty combining work and training	12–15 out of 27 interviews	~44–56%
Limited awareness of formal support programmes beyond public employment services	18–21 out of 27 interviews	~67–78%
Clear aspiration for upward mobility or skilled work	24–26 out of 27 interviews	~89–96%
Conditional intention to stay in the country	8–12 out of 27 interviews	~30–44%

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