

Career Compass – Literature Review

Purpose of WP 1.1

The purpose of WP 1.1 is to establish a shared, evidence-based understanding of the current landscape of labour migration, vocational education and training, and employment pathways affecting young migrant workers aged 16–30 in Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania. Through a comparative review of existing research, policy documents, and statistical sources, this work package identifies what is already known, where national approaches diverge, and which knowledge gaps require further investigation in subsequent work packages.

1. Labour Migration Patterns and Employment Reality

Across Denmark, Finland, and Lithuania, existing literature consistently shows that young migrant workers are overrepresented in low-skilled and low-paid sectors such as construction, logistics, cleaning, hospitality, agriculture, and manufacturing. Migration to Finland is influenced by a combination of factors, including employment, family reunification, education, and EU free movement, rather than being primarily driven by economic necessity or wage differentials alone (OECD, 2025). While initial employment often provides short-term financial stability, studies indicate that prolonged employment in low-skilled roles significantly reduces the likelihood of later educational participation or upward career mobility.

The interviews revealed a structural pattern where migrant workers cycle between similar low-skilled jobs across countries, and between cities in one country, often referred to as “horizontal mobility without progression.” This mobility sustains labour market participation but rarely leads to skill accumulation or formal qualifications. National statistics tend to track employment rates but provide limited insight into skill development trajectories for this group, making long-term outcomes difficult to assess.

2. Access to Vocational Education and Training

Existing research shows that access to vocational education and training systems varies significantly across the three countries but presents common barriers for young migrant workers. In Denmark, vocational pathways are closely linked to formal prerequisites, language proficiency, and employer sponsorship, which disproportionately exclude migrants already working full time. In Finland, adult education is formally accessible but is delivered through a decentralised system with multiple providers, funding streams, and regional responsibilities, which can make navigating options and support services challenging without clear guidance (OECD, 2025). In Lithuania, vocational education participation among returning migrants and mobile workers is documented as low, with limited flexible or modular options adapted to working adults.

Across all three contexts, the literature points to a disconnect between labour market demand for skilled workers and the accessibility of education for migrants already embedded in low-skilled employment. Recognition of prior learning and informal skills remains inconsistently applied, further discouraging participation in vocational education and training.

3. Language, Information, and Institutional Navigation

Language barriers emerge consistently in the literature as a critical cross-cutting issue. While national policies often acknowledge language acquisition as essential for integration, vocational education pathways rarely align language learning with occupational training. Migrant workers are frequently expected to reach a certain language threshold before entering education, rather than being supported through integrated learning models. However, Ehtapalvelut (2026) points towards progress by highlighting a new initiative in Kanta-Häme, Finland, where employers can receive financial support to enhance Finnish language skills among their employees, aiming to improve language proficiency of workers and hence assist the integration into the Finnish workplace and society.

In parallel, multiple studies note a lack of targeted, precise information for migrant workers regarding education and career pathways. Information is often dispersed across institutions, presented in national languages only, or framed for traditional students rather than working adults. As a result, awareness of opportunities is low even when formal eligibility exists.

4. Policy Focus and Structural Blind Spots

Policy documents reviewed in all three countries tend to focus either on labour market participation or on education systems, with limited integration between the two. Migrant workers are frequently discussed as labour supply rather than as potential learners with long-term career trajectories. Youth policies often exclude mobile migrant workers due to residency or age criteria, while adult education policies rarely address the specific constraints of precarious employment, irregular working hours, or cross-border mobility.

The literature further shows that data on migrant workers is often aggregated, masking differences between age groups, education levels, and mobility patterns. This limits policymakers' ability to design targeted interventions and contributes to the persistence of structural blind spots.

5. Identified Research Gaps

The literature review identifies several critical gaps that justify the need for further research under Career Compass:

- Limited comparative analysis of how young migrant workers transition, or fail to transition, from low-skilled employment into education across Nordic–Baltic contexts

- Insufficient qualitative data capturing migrant workers' lived experiences, decision-making processes, and perceived barriers, as well as systematic evidence from labour market intermediaries and integration actors working between migrants and companies
- Weak documentation of how policy design, rather than individual motivation, shapes exclusion from vocational pathways
- There is limited systematic evidence on effective coordination between labour market actors and education providers for this target group. While some examples of cooperation exist, they are not consistently documented or rigorously evaluated.

These gaps indicate that existing research and policy frameworks do not sufficiently explain why young migrant workers remain trapped in low-skilled employment despite clear labour market demand for skilled workers.

6. Role of WP 1.1 in the Project Logic

WP 1.1 establishes the analytical foundation for Career Compass by clarifying what is already known and, crucially, what remains unexplored. The documented gaps directly inform the design of WP 1.2 (policy repository and direct engagement) and WP 1.3 (stakeholder engagement), ensuring that subsequent data collection addresses concrete structural blind spots rather than duplicating existing knowledge. This step is essential for enabling the data-driven barrier identification in WP 2.1 and the formulation of evidence-based policy models later in the project