

Beyond the Narrative: Mapping Young Migrant Experiences in Malta



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A. Executive summary

This report presents the key findings of the mapping study carried out within the framework of the Erasmus+ project [*GAME – Generating Awareness for Migrant Experiences*](#), co-funded by the European Union and implemented in partnership by [GMD Training and Consultancy Services Ltd](#) (Malta) and [We Are Muesli Srl Impresa Sociale](#) (Italy).

The GAME project aims to promote new narratives about migration through the co-creation of a video game called *"In Their Shoes – Malta"*. At the heart of this Erasmus+ project is the *GAME Co-Creation Lab*, a workshop that will take place in Malta in November 2026, where young people aged 18–30 with a migration background residing in Malta will actively shape the narrative content of the game by sharing their stories, experiences, and perspectives.

One of the activities foreseen within the GAME project is the “Mapping of Context and Youth Needs Analysis”, aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and experiential context of young people with a migration background living in Malta, as well as identifying their needs, expectations, and perspectives in relation to participation and storytelling. The present report constitutes the main output of this activity.

To build this picture, the report combines two sources of evidence. Desk research draws on national statistics (NSO, Jobsplus, Eurostat), EU and international sources (UNHCR, IOM, European Commission), and academic literature to map Malta's migration context, demographic profile, education and employment conditions, legal framework, and the emotional and psychosocial dimensions of the migrant experience. This is complemented by primary data collected through the GAME survey, distributed to young people aged 18–30 with a migration background living in Malta, and by an empathy map built from respondents' own words.

Several findings recur across the report. Malta's labour market is highly dependent on migrant workers, particularly third-country nationals, who are also disproportionately exposed to insecure contracts, high turnover and administrative barriers tied to their legal status. Access to rights, from healthcare and housing to citizenship, varies sharply depending on migration status, with third-country nationals and protection beneficiaries facing the steepest barriers. At the same time, survey respondents describe a more personal set of struggles: finding housing and work, language barriers, and social isolation, raised repeatedly and largely unprompted and often described as an aspect of life in Malta that goes unspoken. Alongside these challenges, respondents also report a genuine sense of belonging to Malta, hybrid identities they hold with pride, and moments of inclusion that are frequently small, spontaneous and personal rather than institutional.

Statistics on young migrants specifically are often limited, outdated, or not disaggregated by age, legal status or nationality. This is a gap that runs through several sections of this report and limits the extent to which the needs of this age group can be precisely measured.

Based on these findings, the report closes with a set of recommendations addressed to policy makers, employers, NGOs and educational institutions engaging with this target group (see Section L).

B. Introduction and objectives

B.1 Purpose of the research and target group

This report aims to map the Maltese context for young people with a migration background aged 18–30, including migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, expatriates and second-generation youth. The purpose of this research is twofold.

On the one hand, the data and insights collected will inform the design and implementation of the Game Co-Creation Lab, helping to shape its methodology, activities, and content in a way that responds effectively to the characteristics and needs of the target group.

On the other hand, the findings will provide an important starting point for the development of the “In Their Shoes – Malta” videogame, offering evidence-based insights that should be considered throughout the game co-creation process.

This report will also be shared with relevant stakeholders, youth organisations, project partners, and other actors working in the field of migration and youth inclusion. Making the findings accessible to a wider audience will contribute to strengthening knowledge and awareness of the experience and needs of young people with a migration background in Malta.

The report will thus serve as a resource for stakeholders and organisations seeking to develop new initiatives and interventions that respond to the specific needs of GAME’s target group, particularly in relation to belonging, active participation, social inclusion, and empowerment. In this way, the research can support not only the implementation of the GAME project, but also the development of future actions and opportunities that foster the meaningful participation and inclusion of young people with a migration background.

B.2 Research focus

The analysis gathers information on countries of origin, education and work situations, English language skills, and the everyday challenges faced while settling in Malta. It also explores emotional and identity needs (including empowerment, advocacy and the sense of belonging) helping to better understand the realities and priorities of young migrants.

B.3 Operational definitions

The following terms are defined for the purposes of this report to ensure conceptual clarity and to make clear how each term is understood and used throughout the analysis. This clarification is particularly relevant given the frequent and sometimes interchangeable use of these terms in media discourse, political agendas and public debate, where their meanings may vary or become blurred.

- **Migrants:** An umbrella term not defined under international law, reflecting the common understanding of a person who moves away from their place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers, as well as persons whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law (IOM).
- **Refugees:** A person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality and is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of their former habitual residence, is unable or unwilling to return to it owing to such fear (1951 Refugee Convention; IOM).
- **Asylum seekers:** An individual who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualised procedures, an asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which it has been submitted. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognised as a refugee, but every recognised refugee is initially an asylum seeker (IOM).
- **Temporary protection holders:** Persons benefiting from temporary protection, an exceptional measure providing immediate and temporary protection in the event of a mass influx or imminent mass influx of displaced persons who are unable to return to their country of origin. Temporary protection is granted without prior individual refugee status determination and is intended to provide immediate protection and minimum standards of treatment (European Commission; UNHCR; IOM).
- **Expatriates / expats:** A person who voluntarily renounces his or her nationality in some national legislations, though the term is commonly used to identify nationals who have taken up residence in a foreign country, such as employees of multinational companies or international civil servants (IOM).
- **Second generation:** A person who was born in and is residing in a country that at least one of their parents previously entered as a migrant (European Commission).
- **Unaccompanied migrants:** Unaccompanied migrant children are children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so (IOM).
- **Third Culture Kids:** A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a child who has spent a significant part of their formative years living in a culture different from their parents' homeland and their birthplace. This experience often leads to the development of an identity that blends elements from different cultural environments encountered during upbringing (EBSCO, Harmon, 2023).
- **Children of mixed couples:** Children born to parents of different racial, ethnic, national, or cultural backgrounds, often experiencing multiple cultural influences in the construction of their identity and sense of belonging.

C. Methodology

C.1 Secondary data sources

This report draws on a broad range of secondary sources, including national statistics from the NSO and Eurostat, reports from international bodies such as UNHCR, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and Asylum Information Database (AIDA), Maltese policy and legal documents, academic and scientific literature on migration and psychosocial wellbeing, and reporting from local NGOs and press. The full list of sources consulted is provided in the References section.

C.2 Survey methodology

To complement the desk research presented in this report, an online survey was conducted using Google Forms to collect primary data from young people aged 18–30 with a migration background living in Malta. The full name of the survey is "Beyond the Narrative - The GAME Survey on Migration and Youth in Malta"; however, for brevity, it will hereafter be referred to as the GAME survey.

The survey aimed to gather information on participants' socio-demographic characteristics, migration experiences, living conditions, sense of belonging, experiences of inclusion and exclusion, and perceptions of migrant representation, offering primary evidence alongside the secondary sources analysed throughout the report.

The questionnaire was developed by Global Mindset Development (GMD) in collaboration with project partner We Are Muesli. Before its dissemination, it underwent a participatory review involving four members of the project's target group, who provided feedback on the clarity, relevance and comprehensibility of the questions. Their observations were incorporated into the final version before the survey was launched.

The survey targeted young people aged 18–30 living in Malta with a migration background, including migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, beneficiaries of temporary protection, second-generation migrants, expatriates, Third Culture Kids and children of mixed families. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The questionnaire was administered online between June 1st and July 15th 2026, and required approximately eight minutes to complete.

The survey was disseminated through the communication channels of GMD and the project partner, including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and WhatsApp. Project stakeholders further supported the dissemination by sharing the questionnaire through their own channels, extending its reach among the target population.

To improve accessibility, the research team also developed additional versions of the questionnaire. Simplified, translated versions containing fewer open-ended questions were prepared to facilitate participation among respondents who might experience language or time constraints. In addition, a Word version of the questionnaire was made available for participants facing potential digital access barriers, although no responses were received through this format.

The questionnaire combined closed-ended and open-ended questions and was organised into five thematic sections: (i) socio-demographic and migration profile; (ii) education, employment and living conditions; (iii) identity, belonging and emotional wellbeing; (iv) experiences of inclusion, exclusion and discrimination; and (v) representation of migration and participation in the project's co-creation activities. Closed-ended questions generated quantitative data describing respondents' characteristics and experiences, while open-ended questions collected qualitative information on participants' perceptions and personal narratives.

Given the exploratory nature of the survey, responses to closed-ended questions were analysed using descriptive statistics, while responses to open-ended questions were analysed through thematic analysis in order to identify recurring themes across participants' accounts.

C.3 Survey findings: preliminary results

The GAME survey collected 30 responses in total: 24 complete responses to the English questionnaire and 6 further responses to the simplified translated versions (Spanish, Arabic and Ukrainian). Given this sample size, the findings below should be read as preliminary and directional, as it shows recurring themes among early respondents, rather than statistically representative of Malta's migrant population as a whole.

Respondents were asked about their socio-demographic and migration profile, education, employment and living conditions, sense of identity and belonging, experiences of inclusion and exclusion, and how they relate to representations of migration in media and public narratives.

Respondents skewed towards the upper end of the target age range, with three-quarters aged 26–30, and were fairly balanced by gender. The sample included EU citizens, third-country nationals on work or study permits, temporary protection holders, an asylum seeker, and children of mixed couples, reflecting the diversity the project aims to represent. Most had lived in Malta for one to three years, and just over half were in full-time employment.

On sense of home, most respondents rated it positively (4 or 5 out of 5), and a majority reported feeling a strong connection to Malta — though nearly as many reported an equally strong connection to their country of origin, suggesting that belonging in Malta does not come at the expense of ties to home. The most frequently cited challenges were finding housing, finding a job, administrative processes and language barriers; loneliness and social isolation were also named repeatedly, including in open-ended answers, as an under-discussed part of life in Malta. Emotional wellbeing was mostly reported as "generally okay" or better, though a meaningful minority described going through a difficult period.

Regarding media representation, most respondents said they either don't think about it or feel stereotyped or only partially represented when migrants appear in news, film or games, reinforcing the relevance of the "*In Their Shoes – Malta*" videogame.

Responses reveal a complex emotional landscape: while many participants maintain a powerful connection to their home countries (fuelled by family and cultural roots), a parallel attachment to Malta emerges strongly among those who have built stable daily routines and social circles on the island.

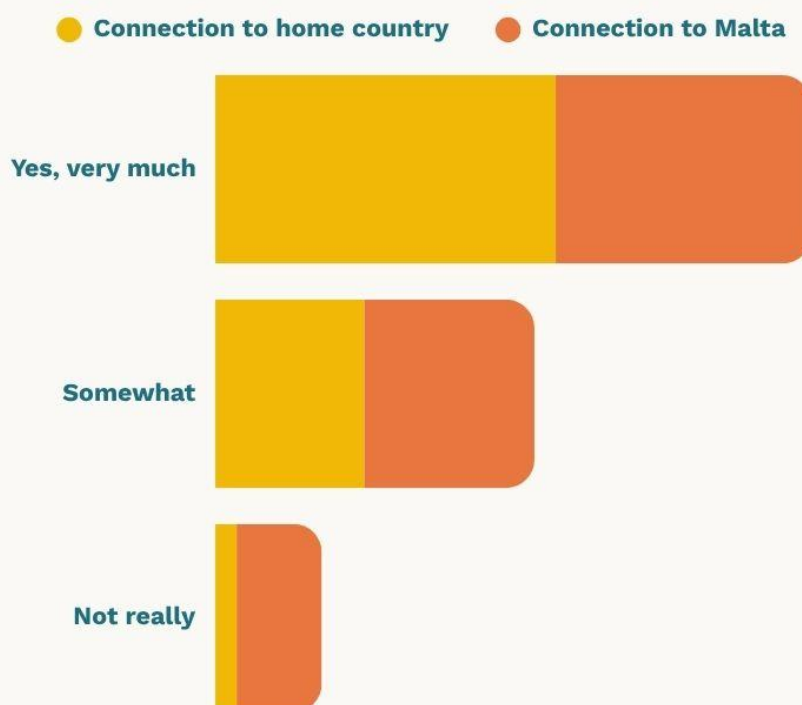


Figure 1. Survey results: connections to Malta and/or home country

The survey findings are further integrated, where relevant, within the thematic chapters alongside official statistics, academic literature and other secondary sources.

C.4 Empathy Map

An empathy map is a collaborative tool commonly used in design thinking and user research to synthesise qualitative data into a single, human-centred view of a target group's experience. Rather than presenting findings as isolated statistics, it organises them around what a person in that group typically **says, thinks, feels, and does**, together with their **pains** (frustrations, obstacles, fears) and **gains** (needs, hopes, what would make their experience better). This format was chosen for the GAME project because it translates the raw findings of the survey into a form that is immediately usable for the design of the Game Co-Creation Lab and of "In Their Shoes – Malta": it keeps participants' own words and lived experiences at the centre of the process, rather than reducing them to numbers alone.

The empathy map below was built entirely from the responses collected through the GAME survey (see C.2 and C.4). Given the current sample size (n=24), it should be read as a preliminary, illustrative synthesis rather than as a statistically representative profile of young migrants in Malta.



Figure 2. Empathy Map

D. The Maltese migration context

D.1 Historical overview

Malta has always been subject to migration flows. During the 19th century, following its incorporation into the British Empire, the island became a headquarters of the British fleet, which caused the migration of thousands of British working men and their families. Moreover, because of established trade routes, a consistent migration flow of people from India also began.

Since 2004, Malta has been a member of the European Union. This facilitated the internationalisation of the workforce, especially from nearby Italy. However, the European workforce (and the Italians in particular) was not enough to meet the demand for cheap labour: the construction boom on the island required an increasing number of workers, who came from other European countries such as Serbia and Bulgaria. Migration has therefore always been highly labour-driven, making it, as defined by the Malta Chamber of Commerce, a “valuable resource” which ought to be mobilised, even though it has also been politicised as a “burden” particularly referring to the number of asylum seekers reaching the country through the Mediterranean route.

Alongside these labour-driven migration patterns, Malta has also seen the arrival of workers from countries such as India, Nepal and Pakistan through agencies that often engage in exploitative practices. Many of these migrants, despite arriving with permits, work contracts and accommodation arranged through these agencies, face discrimination and racism. They often find themselves employed in sectors such as caregiving, transportation and delivery, where specialised skills are not required and working conditions verge on exploitation. A significant portion of these migrants do not arrive directly from their countries of origin, but come via intermediaries in Dubai or other Gulf countries; despite the relative ease of arrival facilitated by these channels, they still encounter discrimination and exploitation upon arrival in Malta.

This complex interplay of historical legacies, economic imperatives and global migration networks underscores the nuanced realities of migration in Malta, challenging simplistic narratives and highlighting the need for comprehensive and inclusive approaches to address the diverse needs and experiences of migrants on the island.

D.2 Malta today: numbers and trends

More recently, Malta experienced a significant population spike between 2008 and 2019, partly due to the growth in incoming mobility of migrant persons, which quadrupled from 4% to 17%. This is particularly meaningful given that Malta, while a small country, is also one of the most densely populated in Europe, with a population density of 1,322 inhabitants per square kilometre.

Migration to Malta is highly motivated by labour opportunities, reinforced by the fact that it is a European country where English is an official language and the economy is growing. In recent years, various sectors (including construction, finance, information and communication technology, and healthcare) have experienced skills and labour shortages, largely due to a high level of under-qualification within the domestic workforce (European Commission, 2019).

As a result, the labour market relies heavily on international labour: the working-age population in Malta increased from 290,447 in 2013 to 390,555 in 2023 (Government of Malta, 2024). This increase was significantly driven by a net migration of foreigners, which surpassed 20,000 in 2023 (Government of Malta, 2024) making the registered employed foreign workers to reach 122,187 by September 2024 (Central Bank of Malta, 2024). This reliance is significant in the current political climate, where migration is often framed as a “burden”, while in Malta migrants remain a valuable resource for the highly-skilled sector, for low-skilled sectors, and for the informal labour market alike.

D.3 Public perception and social climate

The diverse origins of a significant portion of the population can sometimes lead to tensions, stemming from the variety of languages spoken, different cultural practices and varying religious beliefs. While Malta has historically embraced its pluralistic nature, recent years have seen a rise in social tensions, particularly concerning asylum seekers and refugees, whose numbers have been steadily growing. As a result, the rapid and substantial increase in migrants to Malta is likely to have stronger repercussions in terms of public perception, as highlighted by Fenech and Secuna (2020).

A general opinion survey of the Maltese population conducted in 2021 found that nearly half of respondents (48%) stated that immigrants are more of a burden to the country, while only 16% believed that immigrants do more to strengthen it. Moreover, a quarter of respondents agreed that immigration is to blame for Maltese wages remaining low, while most respondents (45.8%) claimed that they would feel comfortable if immigrants were to live close to their homes (Azzopardi et al., 2021).

E. Demographic profile and background

E.1 Countries of origin

- **Main nationalities:** According to the Census of Population 2021, the largest non-Maltese communities are Italians (13,838), British (10,614), Indians (7,764), and Filipinos (7,571). However, the profile of individuals seeking international protection differs significantly from that of the broader migrant population. According to the UNHCR February 2026 Fact Sheet, as of mid-2025, the top three countries of origin for refugees in Malta were the Syrian Arab Republic (2,341), Ukraine (2,335) and Libya (1,728). For asylum seekers specifically, the main countries of origin were Syria (280), Libya (175), and Sudan (160).
- Trends over time: Malta has experienced an increase in its foreign-born and foreign-national population. The number of non-Maltese residents increased from 20,289 in 2011 to 115,449 in 2021, representing 22.2% of the total population. By the end of 2024, the total foreign population had reached an estimated 168,938 persons, equivalent to 29.4% of the total population. This growth continued through 2025: by 31 December 2025, Malta's total resident population stood at 588,254, of whom 182,693 (31.1%) held foreign citizenship, up from 29.4% a year earlier (NSO, 2026). Net migration remained the main driver of this growth, reaching 13,906 persons in 2025, around a third higher than the 10,614 recorded in 2024 even as both immigration and emigration flows eased slightly over the same period (NSO, 2026). Based on the authors' calculations using Eurostat data, the total number of applicants for international protection aged 18–34 from non-EU countries decreased by 27.71%, falling from 415 in 2024 to 300 in 2025 (Eurostat, 2026a). This trend is broadly consistent with NSO findings (NSO, 2025a), which reported a 17.9% decrease in asylum applications during 2024 compared to the previous year. However, the two figures are not directly comparable, as the Eurostat data refer specifically to applicants aged 18–34 from non-EU countries, while the NSO figure refers to asylum applications more broadly.

This pattern is reflected in the GAME survey sample too, where Italian nationals were the largest single group (33%), followed by Colombian (12.5%) and Indian respondents (8%).

E.2 Age and gender distribution

- **Age groups (18–24 / 25–30):** The foreign population is notably younger than the Maltese population, with an average age of 34.9 years compared to 43.6 years among Maltese citizens. According to the 2021 Census, 22.9% of all non-Maltese residents belong to the 20–29 age group. Furthermore, among immigrants who arrived during the year preceding the census, 63.7% were aged between 20 and 39 years. Regarding applicants for international protection, NSO News Release NR-109-2025 indicates that 59.3% of all applicants in 2024 were aged between 18 and 34. More recent population data confirm that the foreign population remains concentrated in this age range: as at 31 December 2025, 22.1% of non-Maltese residents were aged 20–29 and a further 34.8% were aged 30–39, together placing well over half of the foreign population within or close to the 18–30 age band covered by this report (NSO, 2026).

- **Gender breakdown:** The foreign population is predominantly male (59.3%), although the Filipino community represents a notable exception, with women accounting for approximately 65% of the group. Among asylum applicants in 2024, 71% were male and 29% were female. Based on the authors' calculations using Eurostat data, the total number of applicants for international protection decreased by 27.71%, falling from 415 in 2024 to 300 in 2025 (Eurostat, 2026a). Based on the authors' calculations using Eurostat data, the gender composition of new applicants shifted slightly in 2025: women represented 27.91% of new applicants, compared to 24.00% in 2024, while men accounted for 72.09% and 76.00% respectively (Eurostat, 2026a). It is also noteworthy that 68.2% of beneficiaries of Temporary Protection, primarily displaced persons from Ukraine, are female.

Among GAME survey respondents, three in four (75%) were aged 26–30, and the group skewed slightly female (54% women against 42% men), in contrast with the male-majority profile of the wider foreign population.

E.3 Age at arrival in Malta

The majority of migrants arrive in Malta as adults, primarily through labour migration pathways. According to the AIDA Update 2024, 82% of asylum applications were submitted by adults, while 18% were submitted by children. NSO News Release NR-109-2025 further reports that, out of all asylum applicants registered in 2024, 94 were minors aged 0–17. In addition, as of December 2024, 12 unaccompanied minors were registered as beneficiaries of Temporary Protection in Malta. Census data from 2021 also indicate that only 9.4% of immigrants who arrived during the year preceding the census were under the age of 19.

Family reunification is nonetheless the main channel through which minors enter the country. Eurostat data show that in 2024 Malta issued more first residence permits to minors relative to its under 18 population than any other EU country, at 3,379 permits per 100,000 minors, around five times the EU average of 674 (Eurostat, 2025a). At EU level, two thirds of all first residence permits issued to minors in 2024 were granted for family formation and reunification reasons (Eurostat, 2025a). National research on family reunification permits issued in Malta points in the same direction, finding that minor children of sponsors account for the largest share of permits granted under this route (Camilleri, 2022a).

E.4 Migration status

Malta's migration profile is diverse but remains largely labour-driven, reflecting labour shortages in sectors such as construction, healthcare, tourism, hospitality, and other services.

- **Economic migrants and expatriates:** This is the largest migration category in Malta. By the end of 2024, non-Maltese citizens accounted for nearly 30% of the resident population. By the end of 2025, non-Maltese citizens accounted for 31.1% of the resident population, up from 29.4% a year earlier (NSO, 2026). Only 34.7% of foreign residents were citizens of EU Member States, indicating that the majority of foreign residents were Third Country Nationals (TCNs).

- **Refugees and asylum seekers:** As of mid-2025, Malta hosted 8,556 refugees and 1,425 asylum seekers. In 2024, Malta received 528 applications for international protection, including 444 first-time applications. Based on the authors' calculations using Eurostat data, first-time applicants represented 60.24% of all applicants recorded in 2024 (Eurostat, 2026a).
- **Temporary protection holders:** Introduced in response to displacement caused by the war in Ukraine, Temporary Protection covered 2,221 persons by the end of 2024, of whom 99.3% were Ukrainian nationals.
- **Irregular migrants:** In 2024, 238 irregular migrants reached Malta through sea arrivals. According to available data, 80.7% originated from Asian countries, particularly Bangladesh and Syria. While official statistics do not explicitly track the asylum outcomes of sea arrivals, the vast majority are presumed to have applied for protection. In practice, authorities routinely detain migrants immediately upon arrival, and those subject to accelerated processing often remain in detention throughout their entire asylum procedure (Aditus Foundation, 2025). However, access to protection is not guaranteed in every instance; for example, in 2023, a group of Bangladeshi nationals was deported without being informed of their right to apply for asylum (Aditus Foundation, 2025).

In line with this pattern, close to half of GAME survey respondents (46%) identified themselves as 'expats', with economic migrants forming the next largest group (17%).

E.5 Second-generation youth

No official Maltese statistics track second-generation youth as a distinct group, so this profile relies on what can be established from citizenship law and existing qualitative research, rather than from population data.

Legal status is the clearest documented factor shaping this group's experience. Malta shifted from *ius soli* to *ius sanguinis* in August 2001: before that date, children born in Malta automatically acquired Maltese citizenship regardless of their parents' nationality, but since then, birth on the island no longer confers citizenship on its own (Buttigieg & Debono, 2015). A child born in Malta to non-Maltese parents inherits their parents' nationality instead, and in many cases their parents' more restricted residence status, which can mean precarious legal standing well into adulthood for children of protection beneficiaries in particular (see I.6).

Qualitative research on multiethnic families in Malta offers a rare direct window into how second-generation youth navigate identity in this context. Interviews with young people growing up in mixed households describe recurring experiences of everyday discrimination, sometimes referred to as schoolyard racism, alongside a range of identity strategies that do not map neatly onto either heritage or nationality: some identify as European, others as citizens of the world, and others describe feeling rooted in Malta without identifying as Maltese (Cassar et al., 2016). This layered sense of identity is echoed by more recent local initiatives, such as the Third Culture Kids Hub launched by NWAMI International Malta, which specifically addresses the identity trajectories of youth who have grown up across multiple cultural environments (NWAMI International Malta, 2024).

F. Migration trajectories

F.1 Reasons for arrival

Particularly in the Maltese context, situated in a distinct position from other EU countries with regard to migration, the reasons behind inflows to the island can be broadly categorised as related to work, family reunification, education, or international protection and asylum seeking (Vella, 2020), with employment representing the largest share. Overall, the fluctuating trends of labour demand have been on the rise over the last decades and remain the main force driving migration flows in Malta, as reflected in the publicly available statistics dividing migration groups by reason of entry. In this context, the NSO 2021 Census puts the figure of non-Maltese residents at 115,449 out of the total 519,562 residents of Malta for that year, with an estimated 34.7% of these coming from EU countries. Recent updates from the Eurostat database on active residence permits granted to non-EU migrants recorded 61,885 in 2021, implying that the remaining 53,564 of total non-Maltese residents likely belong to EU nationals (Eurostat, 2026b). However, rising inflows of third-country nationals (TCNs) shifted these proportions in the following years, reaching 132,067 active residence permits for non-EU migrants by 2025 (Eurostat, 2026b). These statistics are useful for estimating some of the main reasons behind migration to Malta:

- **Employment:** Employment continues to be the primary driver of inward migration to Malta. For employment data, all estimations are made using registered contracts and termination forms submitted to Jobsplus, the national Public Employment Service (Borg, 2025). Starting in 2013, in an attempt to address growing labour market shortages affecting the country, Malta's government adopted a series of strategies to attract foreign workers and meet the rising demands of the service industry (Borg, 2025). Since then, the migrant population has experienced an exceptional increase, recording the highest net immigration rate in the EU in 2019 and continuing to expand rapidly in the years that followed. In the 2021 census, around 38,000 of the 61,885 TCNs resided in the country for employment reasons, while EU nationals accounted for roughly 32,000 registered employees at that time. However, the situation has rapidly shifted since toward a higher proportion of non-EU working migrants. By 2025, TCNs accounted for up to 70% of the total migrants in active employment, with 86,134 registered workers (Eurostat, 2026b).
- **Education:** To a lesser degree, education also accounts for a substantial share of immigration to the country, particularly among young Europeans. Facilitated by international programmes like Erasmus+, these initiatives rely on partnerships between Maltese universities and vocational institutes across the country. By default, these courses result in short stays, ranging from under six months to two years. Among TCNs, education-related migration is also on the rise, reaching 7,161 international students for the year 2025 (Eurostat, 2026b). Many third-country national students who enroll in long-term English language courses use their stay as a gateway to the local job market (GSE - Gateway School of English, 2024; ESE - European School of English, 2026). After completing the initial 90 days of study required by Maltese law, students can legally obtain a part-time employment licence through Jobsplus (ESE, 2026).

This regulatory framework allows TCN students to build local connections and secure a job offer, which enables their employers to transition them into full-time foreign workers via a Single Permit (GSE, 2024; Identità, 2026a). Consequently, language school enrolment frequently functions as a pathway to enter and remain in Malta's labour market (ESE).

- **International protection:** Refugee status places individuals under a completely different regulatory framework regarding their long-term residence permissions and work eligibility; whilst recognised refugees enjoy immediate and full access to the labour market, asylum seekers face restricted or conditional work permissions.
- **Family reunification:** Family reunification is one of the main reasons for TCNs relocating to Malta, with recent statistics identifying it as the second leading cause of migration right after employment for this collective. For 2021 and 2025, these numbers reached 10,685 and 14,580 respectively (Eurostat, 2026b). While the exact numbers of EU nationals migrating for these reasons are difficult to estimate as the free movement EU rules do not require specific visas, family-driven mobility can still be expected to be high due to strong migrational ties with other EU member states where most working migrants come from, such as Italy or Spain.

This is confirmed by the GAME survey, where work was the single most cited reason for moving to Malta (selected by half of respondents), followed by study (33%).

F.2 Length of stay

Regarding the duration of stay of foreign nationals, Borg (2025) highlights Malta's high inward and outward migration rates to show that while the country leads the European Union in net migration, it suffers from low retention rates compared to other member states. In 2023, Malta's inflow and outflow rates reached 75.0 and 37.8 per thousand inhabitants respectively (roughly 4.5 times the EU median for both metrics). This dynamic is driven by Malta's unique migration context: its geographic position makes it a primary entry point for asylum seekers, while its strong labour demand attracts a large influx of third-country national workers, who accounted for 78% of all inflows between 2020 and 2023 (Borg, 2025). In practice, there are significant differences in average duration of stay and settlement intentions between EU nationals and TCNs, explained by differing levels of skilled work between the two groups, future prospects, and differential ease of movement across the EU. In broad terms, EU nationals remain more mobile than TCNs and show higher variance in the duration of their stay, related to a broader spectrum of work positions available to them in managerial and higher-paying roles within the service sector. Between EU nationals and TCNs, the average length of stay is 2.0 and 3.3 years respectively (Borg, 2025). Whilst TCNs have on average longer periods of stay, this remains significantly below the EU average, reflecting a lower retention rate for TCN migrants specific to the Maltese context.

Specifically for the demographic group of interest of this report, young EU nationals have the highest mobility rate of the migrant population, with a median stay of 1.0 year for those under 25 and 2.4 years for those aged 25 to 34. Against these numbers, young TCNs under 25 have an average stay of 2.7 years, still the smallest median among their age groups (Borg, 2025). These differences between groups can be explained by educational schemes like the Erasmus programme and generally more flexible employment regimes that are, in practice, limited to EU nationals, making young TCNs comparatively less flexible regarding their stay.

Malta has already begun addressing its difficulty in retaining the foreign workforce through the new Malta Labour Migration Policy, so an increase in the average length of stay can be expected if its measures are properly implemented and address decisive factors such as social integration, living conditions and career progression (Borg, 2025). However, it remains unclear how Malta's social policy is aiming to address the length of stay and future prospects of the unemployed or inactive migrant population.

Among GAME survey respondents, 46% had been living in Malta between one and three years, and a quarter for more than five, a distribution broadly in line with these national patterns.

F.3 Mobility and transitions

- **Changes in legal status:** Malta's Public Employment Service forwards the registration of new contracts via Jobsplus, an application required for all types of employment regardless of nationality and mandatory for both workers and employers (Borg, 2025). For TCNs working in Malta, legal status can be a deciding factor for outward mobility. Even though EU migrant workers enjoy a high degree of freedom and flexibility for their employment in the country, as agreed under the EU principle of free movement of persons, workers coming from outside the EU face significant challenges when trying to secure long-term residency. For their annual work contracts, non-EU migrants are required to obtain Single Permits, authorisations that must be renewed once a year to allow the TCN to work in Malta, requiring also sponsorship from their employer. On top of the difficulties in obtaining these initial permits, long-term residence permits are rarely granted to TCNs despite their intention of staying in the country for work. Instead, the formal requirements for long-term residence applications have increased in recent years, making approval very difficult to achieve and dependent on integration processes such as the "*I Belong*" programme, including written exams in Maltese and cultural orientation courses (Sonne, 2026).
- **Movement to other countries and return migration:** While specific statistics on long-term permit rejections are not available for this report, the demanding nature of these requirements can be understood as one of the decisive factors driving outward mobility for TCN migrant workers in search of more stable residence within the EU. From 2020 to 2023, an estimated 41% of foreign nationals who left Malta migrated to other countries in the European Union, contrasting with the 22% of migrant inflows coming from EU countries in that same period (Borg, 2025).

- This data suggests that, although a high proportion of TCNs effectively returned to either their country of origin or other third countries (78% of inflows came from TCNs against 59% of outflows to TCNs), a significant part migrated instead to other EU countries. This phenomenon is explained by some accounts describing an initial period for TCN migrants in Malta used as a “stepping stone” from which to migrate to other European countries (Borg, 2025). This trend has been especially present in our target demographic, as both movement to other countries and return migration are more prevalent among young migrants aged 20 to 30.

F.4 Reasons for staying or leaving

As with other aspects of migration discussed above, the reasons for staying or leaving Malta greatly diverge from one migrant group to another. Across all age groups, the opportunities and life prospects of migrants are radically different in relation to their country of origin. TCNs often face significant challenges, as Malta's legal framework entitles them to the same rights and access to opportunities as the Maltese population only in a few areas, rather than as a general rule — a status EU nationals benefit from through freedom of movement and work shared within the union (Debono, 2021). More specifically, while previous regulations severely restricted TCNs by requiring them to secure new employment within just 10 days of contract termination under threat of deportation (Debono, 2021), this rule was reformed under the Malta Labour Migration Policy introduced in 2025 (Government of Malta, 2025a). Under the updated framework, terminated TCN workers are granted an automatic 30-day grace period to seek new employment, which can be extended up to 60 days upon proving financial self-sufficiency (Government of Malta, 2025a). Nonetheless, administrative hurdles in renewing work permits and these regulatory constraints continue to highlight a broader institutional framework that remains open to these migrants primarily on the basis of their contribution to the country (Debono, 2021; Government of Malta, 2025a). Altogether, these differences in job security and employment-related prospects can be a decisive factor for TCNs' decision to stay. Altogether, these differences in job security and employment-related prospects can be a decisive factor for TCNs' decision to stay.

- **Economic factors and work opportunities:** Malta's ongoing economic expansion has created high labour demand over recent decades. This growth attracts foreigners to fill shortages across both entry-level roles and specialised industries that now rely heavily on migrant labour and technical expertise. EU nationals benefit from flexible work arrangements, enabling them to access a wide variety of roles where proficiency in Maltese is not required. Although job openings are common, hiring for TCNs is often managed by temporary agencies before their arrival in the country, frequently leaving them with short-term contracts and low starting wages that add to their already limited career progression prospects. This situation is worsened by a stated lack of structured support, training, and access to relevant information (Camilleri, 2018). As a result, many TCNs choose to move to more stable EU countries or return home when local economic realities fail to offer them a secure path to long-term stability.

- **Quality of life:** In a similar way, daily living conditions vary significantly across migrant groups based on their reason for arrival, legal status, and economic position. While average salaries in Malta are lower than the EU average, foreign high-skilled professionals in specialized sectors like finance and tech, earn higher net incomes and enjoy comfortable living standards (ICMPD - International Centre for Migration Policy Development, & MPF - Migration Partnership Facility, 2024). However, rising living costs and limited rental housing opportunities derived from high population density and constant demand, make living conditions difficult for lower-income migrant workers and students. In addition, unskilled TCNs and seasonal EU workers frequently face low pay alongside these high rents, resulting in overcrowded housing and financial pressure (Borg 2025).
- **Integration and discrimination experiences:** During their stay, social cohesion and integration play a significant role in migrants' long-term decisions to stay. Research highlights prevailing issues related to workplace exploitation, differential treatment, and negative attitudes toward non-EU migrants. Although high migration flows have become somewhat normalised and these challenges are acknowledged in recent policy guidelines, structural inequalities persist in daily life (Camilleri, 2018). Altogether, experiences of discrimination in employment and housing, combined with xenophobia and legal vulnerability, make long-term prospects in Malta difficult for many migrants.

Time in Malta

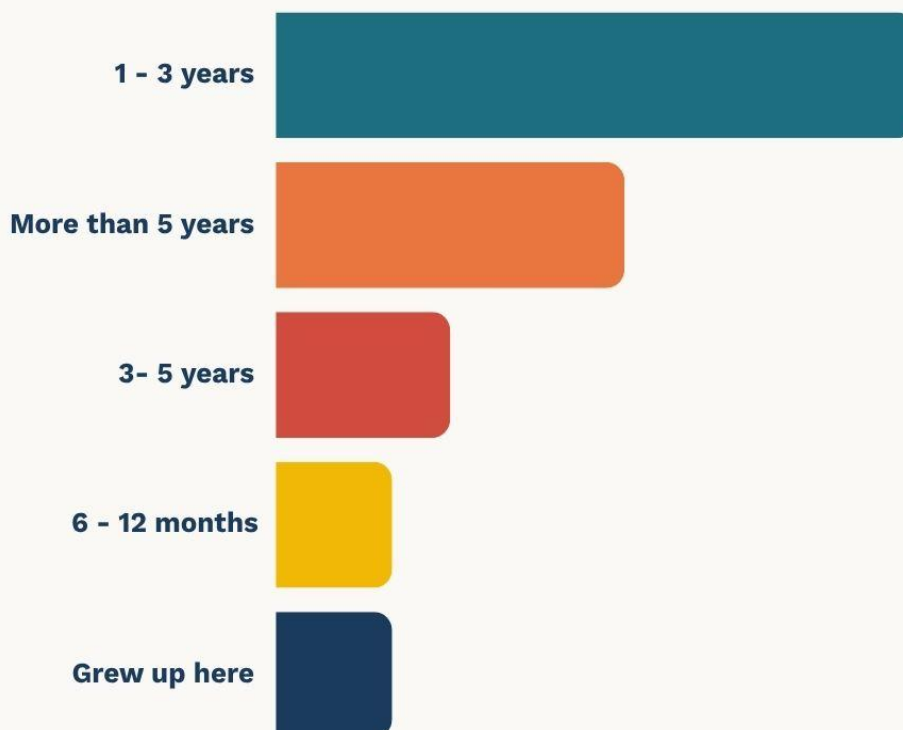


Figure 3. Survey results: time in Malta

G. Education and skills

G.1 Educational background

- **Qualifications prior to arrival:** Census data show that migrant workers in Malta are not necessarily less qualified than the local population. Taken as a whole, the foreign population is more educated than the Maltese one, partly because it is younger (NSO, 2023a). Among Indian residents aged 15 and over, 48% declared a tertiary qualification in 2021, a share very close to that of migrants from other EU Member States (50%) and slightly higher than that of Italians (45%) (NSO, 2023a). More than a third of Filipinos and Libyans also declared a tertiary level of education, while the lowest shares were recorded among Syrians (12%), Albanians (14%) and Nepalese (16%) (NSO, 2023a). At the highest levels of education, foreigners represent 23% of all PhD holders and 32% of all master's degree holders living in Malta (NSO, 2023a).

One element must be taken into account: the Census was carried out before the expansion of the gig economy, which attracted a large number of low-skilled workers through temporary work agencies. Indian workers increased from approximately 5,800 in September 2021 to more than 13,000 by mid-2023, and Nepalese workers from about 2,500 to over 8,000 in the same period (Jobsplus, 2024). The Census figures therefore tend to underestimate the share of low-qualified labour now present on the island.

At the lower end of education, the picture for young migrants is less favourable. In the EU in 2023, 25.3% of non-EU citizens aged 18 to 24 had left education and training early, against 22.8% of citizens of other EU countries and 8.2% of nationals (Eurostat, 2024a). The gap is wider among men than among women, at 28.2% and 22.2% respectively for non-EU citizens (Eurostat, 2024a). Malta does not publish this indicator broken down by citizenship, so the position of young migrants on the island cannot be measured.

- **Access to education in Malta:** Malta grants immigrants and their children free access to education and vocational training (Aditus Foundation, 2025). Beyond compulsory schooling, the main instrument is the I Belong programme, active since July 2018, which allows third-country nationals to attend courses at the University of Malta and at Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) with a fee waiver (Human Rights Directorate, 2020). In practice, eligibility extends to all migrant groups, regardless of their protection status (Aditus Foundation, 2025). The second National Integration Strategy and Action Plan 2025-2030 restructures the programme into several stages and introduces pre-departure measures (Government of Malta, 2025b). For young people inside the protection system, access is formally open but thinly used. All beneficiaries of international protection are covered by free compulsory state education up to the age of 16, and adult and young asylum applicants may apply for a fee exemption at state educational institutions, including the University of Malta and vocational training colleges (Aditus Foundation, 2025). The conditions attached to student support at tertiary level, however, exclude most young refugees in practice (see I.9).

The GAME survey sample reflects this same trend: over half of respondents (54%) hold a Master's degree or higher. This high qualification rate was echoed in qualitative feedback, where some respondents noted the frustration of being 'overqualified for the local job market' or unable to find roles that matched their academic background.

Education Level

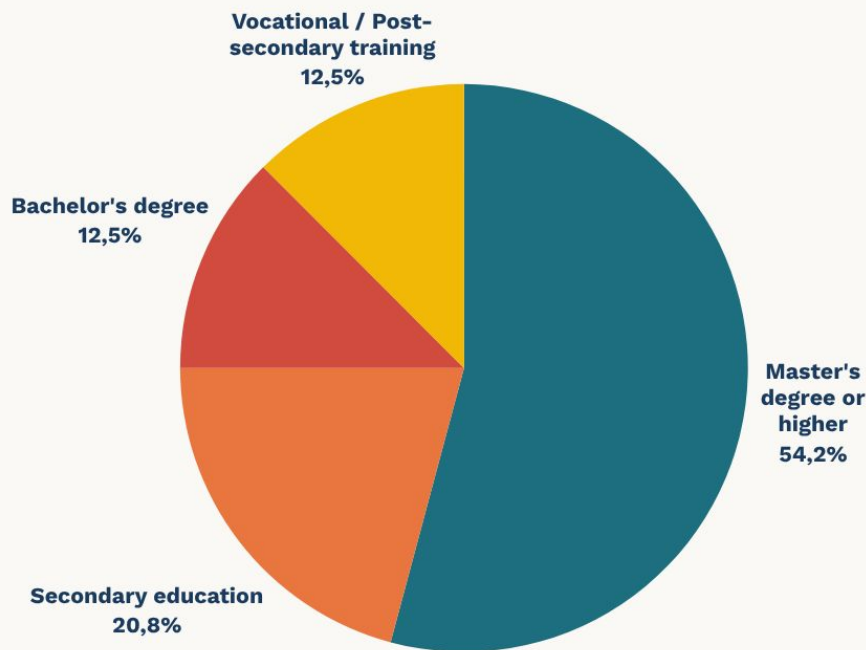


Figure 4. Survey results: education level

G.2 Language skills

- **English proficiency:** English is the language most widely understood by people living in Malta. According to the Malta Skills Survey, 96% of residents understand English, ahead of Maltese (90.4%) and Italian (62%) (NSO, 2023b). Among those who understand English, a majority report an advanced level: 70.5% in listening, 68.4% in reading, 63.2% in speaking and 61.6% in writing (NSO, 2023b). Proficiency decreases with age, so younger residents are more likely to report an advanced level than older ones (NSO, 2023b).

These figures should be read with caution for the purposes of this mapping. The Skills Survey sampled 130,000 individuals aged 15 to 64, but non-Maltese citizens were included only if they had lived in Malta for at least five years before the survey (NSO, 2023b). Recently arrived migrants, who are the group most likely to face language barriers, are therefore not represented. No public statistic reports English proficiency by migration status, country of origin, or for the 18 to 30 age band. This absence is itself a relevant finding, because it limits the ability to measure the real language needs of young recent arrivals.

- **Other languages:** No official source records which languages migrants in Malta actually speak. The 2021 Census measured only the main language spoken from early childhood, with a focus on the Maltese population, and no statistic reports language by migration status, origin or age (NSO, 2023a). Languages can therefore only be inferred from country of origin. The largest communities by citizenship are Italians (13,838), British (10,614), Indians (7,764) and Filipinos (7,571), which points to Italian, English, Indian languages such as Hindi, Punjabi and Malayalam, and Filipino or Tagalog (NSO, 2023b). People under international protection mainly come from Arabic-speaking countries like Syria and Libya, alongside Ukrainian and Russian speakers from Ukraine (UNHCR, 2026). However, the main point remains: these languages are only assumed based on nationality rather than directly measured, and the specific linguistic profile of young migrants has never been documented.

The GAME survey offers a first glimpse into this gap: nearly all respondents rated their English at a high level, while three out of four (75%) said they do not speak Maltese at all. This lack of Maltese proficiency was frequently identified by respondents as a 'glass ceiling' for social integration, limiting their ability to engage with community activities or understand local bureaucracy.

G.3 Recognition of Qualifications

- **Procedures:** The body responsible for recognising foreign qualifications is the Malta Qualifications Recognition Information Centre (MQRIC), which operates within the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA) and is Malta's ENIC-NARIC (European Network of Information Centres and National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union) contact point (MFHEA, 2026). MQRIC assesses both academic and vocational qualifications and maps them to a level of the Malta Qualifications Framework and the European Qualifications Framework (MFHEA, 2026). Applications are submitted only through the MFHEA online portal, since MQRIC no longer accepts applications in person or by email (MFHEA, 2026). The resulting statement is the standard document used by employers, educational institutions and funding schemes, and it is required for single permit, visa and citizenship applications made through Jobsplus (MFHEA, 2026).

The cost depends on whether the qualification has been assessed before. A programme already listed on the MQRIC database costs €15, a new Maltese programme €30 and a new foreign programme €65 (MFHEA, 2026). Migrants arriving with a qualification that has never been assessed in Malta therefore fall into the most expensive category. A fast track procedure is available, but the number of places is capped, and applicants who first apply through the standard route and then re-apply through fast track are not reimbursed for the first payment (MFHEA, 2024).

MQRIC applies the same procedural criteria to all applicants, without distinction based on legal status (ENIC-NARIC, 2026). Applicants who hold temporary protection, refugee status or a refugee-like status, and who do not possess documentary evidence of their academic qualifications, have their application accepted without the usual requirement to submit that documentation (MFHEA, 2026). This is a meaningful safeguard, since loss of certificates is common among people who have fled conflict.

- **Timeframes:** There is no fixed statutory processing time published for MQRIC recognition. The authority states that the assessment depends on information received from its counterparts in the country that issued the qualification, and that MQRIC is therefore dependent on the speed of reply of its international partners (MFHEA, 2026). Qualifications already assessed in the past are consequently faster to process than qualifications never assessed before, which require verification abroad. The absence of a published service standard makes it difficult for applicants to estimate how long recognition realistically takes.
- **Challenges:** Recognition is one step, but it does not by itself open access to regulated professions. For fields such as medicine, law and architecture, additional recognition by the relevant professional body is required beyond the MQRIC statement (MFHEA, 2026). An appeal against a recognition decision must be filed within ten days of the date of issue (MFHEA, 2026). Combined with documentation problems for those arriving from conflict zones, this means that formal qualifications are frequently not reflected in the jobs migrants actually do. The consequence is measurable at European level: in 2025 the over-qualification rate among people aged 20 to 34 was 37.6% for non-EU citizens, against 21.8% for nationals (Eurostat, 2026b; see H.5). No published data report how many MQRIC applications are submitted by migrants each year, the success rate, or outcomes by country of origin

H. Employment and working conditions

H.1 Employment status

- **Employed:** Migrant labour has become structural to the Maltese economy. The share of foreign workers in the labour force rose from about 10% in 2013 to roughly one third by the end of 2022 (Central Bank of Malta, 2023). By the end of 2025, 135,417 foreign nationals were employed in Malta and Gozo, of whom 70% were third-country nationals, 30% EU nationals and 0.3% nationals of European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries (Jobsplus, 2026). Their employment is almost entirely full-time: 97% of third-country nationals and 89% of EU nationals held full-time contracts, against 3% and 11% respectively in part-time work (Jobsplus, 2026). In 2024 the employment rate of foreign nationals aged 15 to 64 stood at 79.2% (Eurostat, 2026d), against a general national employment rate of 75.3% for the same 15-to-64 age group (NSO, 2025c), making Malta one of the few EU countries where non-EU citizens are more likely to be in work than nationals (Eurostat, 2024a).

The pattern is strongest among young people. In 2023 the employment rate of non-EU citizens aged 15 to 29 in Malta was 77.0%, the highest recorded in the EU, and above the 67.1% registered by Maltese nationals of the same age (Eurostat, 2024a). In the 15-to-24 age band, the employment rate in 2024 was 50.8% for foreign nationals (Eurostat, 2026c) against 54.4% for Malta as a whole (NSO, 2025c). Neither NSO nor Eurostat publishes an employment rate for the specific 18-to-30 band. Administrative data confirm that the migrant workforce is young: 21% of employed third-country nationals are aged between 25 and 29, against 13% of employed EU nationals, while 68% of both groups are aged between 30 and 54 (Jobsplus, 2026). Employed third-country nationals are 67% male and 33% female, and EU nationals 58% male and 42% female (Jobsplus, 2026).

- **Unemployed:** Malta has one of the strongest labour markets in the EU, which limits unemployment overall: the general rate was 3.0% in July 2024 and fell to about 2.7% by late 2025, while youth unemployment among 15 to 24 year olds was 5.1% in December 2024 and the rate of young people not in employment, education or training aged 15 to 24 was 7.6% in 2024 (NSO, 2025d). The very high employment rate of non-EU nationals implies that few economically active migrants are unemployed.

Malta does not publish a separate unemployment rate for foreign nationals, nor one for young migrants, and Jobsplus does not keep information on unemployment rates for beneficiaries of international protection (Aditus Foundation, 2025). The available benchmark is European. In 2023 the unemployment rate of non-EU citizens aged 15 to 29 in the EU was 15.1%, against 10.9% for nationals (Fasani, 2024), and The NEET rate for non-EU citizens was 11.1 percentage points higher than for EU home-country nationals in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024b). Whether Malta follows this pattern cannot be established from national data.

- **Self-employed:** No official figure is published for the number of self-employed migrants, by nationality or by age, so the size of this group cannot be quantified. Self-employment is in any case a marginal route for third-country nationals, because access is conditional on strict criteria set by Jobsplus, such as a substantial minimum capital investment, leading a project approved by Malta Enterprise, or being a highly skilled person whose project will create jobs for European Economic Area (EEA), Swiss or Maltese nationals (Jobsplus, 2026).
- **Students:** International students are a large and fast-growing part of the young foreign population. In the 2023/2024 academic year, 8,252 foreign students were enrolled at tertiary level, equal to 37% of all tertiary enrolments, of whom 21.9% were non-EU nationals and 15.1% citizens of other EU countries, a 27% increase over the previous year (NSO, 2025e). Growth was led by Indian students, who rose from 1,033 in 2022/2023 to 2,378 in 2023/2024, an increase of 130.2%, followed by Nigerian (97.3%), French (48.9%) and Libyan (27.1%) enrolments (NSO, 2025e). Foreign nationals were also the majority of students at doctoral level, at 72.7% (NSO, 2025e). This is the one area of migrant status where Malta publishes detailed and recent data disaggregated by nationality, although not by the 18 to 30 band or by gender.

H.2 Main sectors of employment

Foreign workers are concentrated in a small number of sectors. Among third-country nationals, 25% work in professional, scientific, technical, administration and support service activities; 21% in wholesale and retail trade, transportation and storage, and information and communication; 16% in accommodation and food service activities; 10% in construction; 9% in manufacturing, quarrying and utilities; and 9% in public administration, education, human health and social work (Jobsplus, 2026). The distribution of EU nationals is similar at the top, with 24% in professional and administrative services and 21% in trade and transport, but differs below it, since 16% work in arts, entertainment and recreation, a sector that does not appear among the main ones for third-country nationals (Jobsplus, 2026). Dependence on foreign labour is highest in remote gaming, where non-Maltese nationals make up about 58.6% of the workforce, mostly EU citizens, while nearly half of all construction workers are foreigners (The Malta Independent, 2024).

The sharper difference between the two groups lies not only in the sectors in which they are employed, but also in their occupational distribution. Among EU nationals, employment is concentrated in clerks and support workers (20%), professionals (18%), technical and associate professionals (17%), managers (15%), and service and sales workers (14%) (Jobsplus, 2026). By contrast, third-country nationals are employed across a range of sectors, with the largest shares working in professional, scientific, technical, administrative and support services (25%), wholesale and retail trade, transportation and storage, and information and communication (21%), accommodation and food services (16%), and construction (10%) (Jobsplus, 2026).

These sectoral and occupational distributions capture different dimensions of labour-market position: while the occupational data point to differences in the types and levels of jobs held by the two groups, the sectoral composition also matters because some of the sectors in which TCNs are significantly represented have high labour turnover.

Sector composition therefore helps explain, but does not by itself establish, why employment is unstable for this population. In 2022, labour turnover among TCNs reached 149%, compared with 114% among EU citizens and 63% among Maltese workers (Grech, 2023). At the same time, turnover was particularly high among younger workers, reaching 181% among those aged 20–24 and 101% among those aged 25–34, compared with 66% among 35–44-year-olds (Grech, 2023). The sectoral data provide a plausible mechanism for this instability: accommodation and food services and administrative support recorded turnover rates of 144% and 141%, respectively, compared with 52% in public administration, health and education (Grech, 2023). However, because the available data do not cross-tabulate age, nationality and sector, they do not establish that young TCNs are specifically concentrated in the highest-turnover sectors. They do show, more cautiously, that TCNs have a substantially higher overall turnover rate and that younger workers experience particularly high labour mobility, while TCNs are also represented in sectors characterised by high turnover (see H.4).

H.3 Types of contracts

Fixed-term / permanent

Migrant workers are more exposed to insecure contracts than nationals. Across the EU, non-EU citizens consistently record the highest share of employees aged 20 to 64 on contracts of limited duration: 22.5% in 2024, down from a peak of 27.1% in 2018. Over the same period the share fell from 18.0% to 12.5% among citizens of other EU countries, and from 13.7% to 10.9% among nationals (Eurostat, 2026c). The distance between the three groups has therefore not closed.

The same disadvantage appears in the age group covered by this mapping. Non-EU citizens aged 15 to 29 hold a higher share of both temporary and part-time employment than nationals and than citizens of other EU countries (Eurostat, 2024a).

Malta stands out in the opposite direction on access to work. As shown in H.1, young non-EU citizens in Malta record the highest youth employment rate in the EU, which moves the question from access to employment towards the quality of the contracts they hold. Contract type in Malta is not published by age and citizenship together, so the share of young migrants on fixed-term contracts cannot be measured directly.

Informal / illegal work

Irregular employment of third-country nationals is a documented problem. In 2021, 1,695 Maltese companies were found to be illegally employing third-country nationals, and authorities reported around 1,200 workers in “illegal” food-delivery and taxi jobs (MaltaToday, 2021). In 2023, 1,695 Maltese companies were caught illegally employing migrants from third countries (Newsbook Malta, 2024). Recruitment agencies and fleet operators have played an important intermediary role in Malta’s platform economy, particularly in food delivery and ride-hailing. MaltaToday reported that leading food-delivery platforms relied on recruitment agencies to supply couriers, while fleet operators were used to provide drivers and couriers to mobility platforms (MaltaToday, 2024).

Two legal rules push young applicants for international protection towards this informal margin. First, a policy introduced in May 2021, and still in force during 2024, blocks applicants from countries on the safe-country-of-origin list from working for nine months after they lodge their application (Aditus Foundation, 2025). Second, employment licences for asylum applicants last only three months when the application has been rejected at first instance, and up to six months when it is still pending. Each licence also needs clearance from the Immigration Police, and this has produced refusals on unspecified “security” grounds, with NGOs unable to obtain the reasons (Aditus Foundation, 2025). Since 59.3% of applicants registered in 2024 were aged between 18 and 34 (NSO, 2025a), these rules fall mainly on the age group covered by this mapping. In 2025 Jobsplus issued 1,089 employment licences to beneficiaries of international protection: 240 to refugees and 849 to beneficiaries of subsidiary protection (Jobsplus, 2026).

H.4 Job stability

- **Frequency of job changes:** Turnover among foreign workers in Malta is high, and administrative data measure it directly. Using the engagement and termination forms that every employer must submit to Jobsplus, the labour turnover rate in 2022 was 63% for Maltese workers, 114% for EU citizens and 149% for third-country nationals (Grech, 2023). Around 70% of the termination forms submitted for third-country nationals concern people who had been employed for less than twelve months (Grech, 2023).

Age works in the same direction, and here too it is measured directly. In 2022 the labour turnover rate was 181% among workers aged 20 to 24 and 101% among those aged 25 to 34, against 66% in the 35 to 44 group (Grech, 2023). The two factors are linked: the inflow of foreign workers made the Maltese workforce younger, and because younger workers move jobs far more often, this pushed overall turnover upwards (Grech, 2023). Age and citizenship are not cross-tabulated, so the turnover rate of young migrants is not given as a single figure, but both components point in the same direction and the two populations largely overlap.

- **Reasons for changing jobs:** The available evidence links instability to the structure of employment rather than to the choices of workers: informal casual work, a higher risk of poverty despite long working hours, and restrictive labour immigration laws which can trap third-country nationals workers or push them to move as soon as conditions allow (Debono, 2021). Recent policy confirms this reading, because it acts on employers rather than on workers: since August 2025 Jobsplus records how often each employer terminates contracts and uses this record inside the Labour Market Needs Test when assessing new permit applications for third-country nationals (Jobsplus, 2025).

Three rules decide when a young migrant can actually change job. Jobsplus, Malta's public employment agency, and Identità, the national agency that issues residence and work permits, jointly administer this process. Under the 2025 Labour Migration Policy reform, Single Permit holders whose employment ends are granted 30 days to look for new work, extendable by another 30 days if they can prove they are able to support themselves, whereas before this change they had to leave Malta immediately (Identità, 2025a). If a change of employer application has been submitted within the 60 days, the individual can remain in Malta until the application is processed by the authorities even if the grace period has expired. If this grace period expires without a new change of employer application in place, the permit holder is left without a valid status, as remaining in the country constitutes an overstay under the Immigration Act and can result in deportation, a re-entry ban, and serious complications for any future applications to work in Malta or elsewhere in the Schengen Area (Konnekt, 2026). The fee for a first permit or for a change of employer has doubled to €600, while renewals have been halved to €150 (Identità, 2025a), so moving to a new employer now costs four times more than staying. A breakdown of the reasons migrants change jobs in Malta, by age, gender or country of origin, is not published.

H.5 Working conditions

- **Salaries:** Malta's national minimum wage rose to €213.54 per week from 1 January 2024, about €5.34 per hour or roughly €11,104 per year (Department for Industrial and Employment Relations, DIER, 2024), while the average gross monthly salary across the economy was about €1,837 in the fourth quarter of 2023 (The Malta Independent, 2024). Migrant workers in low-skilled sectors usually sit at or near the minimum wage. Tax records show the size of the gap: the median employment income of third-country nationals who worked a full year in 2024 was €18,200, about 38% below the national average, against €32,500 for Maltese nationals and €32,700 for EU/EEA nationals (Grech, 2026). Maltese and EU workers are therefore almost equal, and the distance falls on third-country nationals alone.

Over-qualification is a structural sign of underpayment, and Eurostat publishes it for the relevant age group. In the EU in 2025, the over-qualification rate among people aged 20 to 34 was 37.6% for non-EU citizens, against 28.0% for citizens of other EU countries and 21.8% for nationals (Eurostat, 2026e). More than a third of young non-EU workers therefore hold jobs below their level of education. This should be read together with G.1, where the migrant population in Malta is shown to be no less qualified than the Maltese one.

- **Working hours:** Working time in Malta is built around a standard average of 40 hours per week, which can be extended to a maximum of 48 hours including overtime only if the individual worker signs an opt-out (DIER, 2024). Actual working time is above the European average: full-time employees worked 40.4 hours per week in 2023, against 39.6 hours in the EU (Malta News Agency, 2024). Migrant workers are concentrated in the sectors where hours are longest and least predictable, such as accommodation and food service, transport and delivery, caregiving and construction (see H.2). The opt-out is formally voluntary, but it is hard to refuse for a worker whose residence permit depends on staying with the same employer (Debono, 2021).

The platform-delivery sector shows the extreme end of this pattern and is staffed largely by third-country nationals. Couriers have reported earning around €3 per delivery before commissions, while the agencies that supply them to platforms such as Bolt and Wolt take up to 50% of their income, so many work up to 80 hours a week (MaltaToday, 2024). No Maltese statistic records working hours by age and citizenship together, so the number of young migrants working beyond the 48-hour limit cannot be measured.

Two recent developments target this sector specifically. In July 2025, the International Organisation for Migration and Bolt signed a partnership called Bridging the Gap, piloted in Malta, aimed at improving integration support for migrant couriers and drivers (IOM, 2025). Separately, in June 2026 the General Workers' Union and the Malta Delivery Fleet Operators Association signed collective agreements covering food couriers employed by member operators, replacing commission-based pay with a fixed monthly salary and introducing paid annual and sick leave, overtime rates, and a ban on charging workers for uniforms or equipment (GWU - General Workers Union Malta, 2026). Both measures are too recent to assess their effect on migrant couriers specifically, and the collective agreements cover only operators who are members of the association.

- **Job security:** Beyond pay and hours, NGO research with refugees and migrants has documented poor conditions, including very long hours, the impossibility of taking sick or injury leave, and verbal abuse, all linked to weak structured support and information (JRS Malta & Aditus Foundation, 2021). The insecurity is structural. Applicants for international protection are often required to leave the open reception centres while still holding only a three-month renewable asylum-seeker document, which makes it hard to find both work and housing, and the allowance of €130.48 per 28 days is not enough to pay rent (Aditus Foundation, 2025).

Insecure contracts (see H.3), turnover affecting more than half of foreign workers within a single year (Grech, 2023) and the dependence of many residence permits on continued employment leave migrant workers with limited job security, and young lower-skilled third-country nationals most of all. The Integration Strategy and Action Plan 2025-2030 includes labour measures aimed at reducing exploitation (Government of Malta, 2025b), and the 30-day grace period introduced by the 2025 Labour Migration Policy is the first measure that directly loosens the tie between permit and employer (Identità, 2025a). Neither has been in force long enough for its effect on young workers to be assessed.

I. Access to rights and administrative procedures

I.1 National legal framework

Migration and asylum in Malta are regulated by two main laws. The Immigration Act (Chapter 217 of the Laws of Malta) is the older one and covers entry, stay and removal of foreign nationals. It gives the Principal Immigration Officer wide powers to decide who counts as a “prohibited immigrant”. The International Protection Act (Chapter 420 of the Laws of Malta) transposes Malta's obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the EU asylum acquis. Together with subsidiary regulations such as S.L. 420.07 (procedural standards) and S.L. 420.06 (reception conditions), this Act sets out how asylum applications are examined and how applicants should be treated while their claim is pending. Citizenship, covered in I.6, is regulated separately by the Maltese Citizenship Act (Chapter 188). A recent amendment, Act III of 2025, revised Chapter 420 to clarify the distinction between “unfounded” and “manifestly unfounded” applications, a technical change that matters in practice since the latter category is fast-tracked with fewer appeal rights.

I.2 Entry, Residence and Visa Categories

Malta applies two different regimes depending on whether a person is an EU national or a third-country national (TCN). TCNs' short stays are covered by the Schengen Short-Stay (C) Visa, valid for up to 90 days in any 180-day period. Longer stays require a National Long-Stay (D) Visa, usually the first step toward a residence permit for work, study or family reasons. TCNs who want to work need a Single Permit, a combined work and residence authorisation submitted by the employer rather than the applicant. Since January 2026, first-time applicants must also obtain a Skills Pass before departure, a pre-departure step that can take up to 42 days. Highly qualified workers with a job offer of at least six months and a salary of around 1.5 times the national average (about €3,125/month in 2025) can apply for an EU Blue Card (Identità, 2026a). Remote workers earning at least €3,500/month from foreign sources can apply for the Nomad Residence Permit (Residency Malta Agency, 2026a). Malta also offers residence through investment, via the Global Residence Programme (lower property/tax thresholds) or the Malta Permanent Residence Programme (which requires proof of assets of at least €500,000) (Residency Malta Agency, 2026b).

Most third-country nationals who come to Malta for work must obtain a Single Permit issued by the national agency Identità, which combines a residence permit and a work permit in one document (Identità, 2026a). Since January 2026, first-time applicants for a Single Permit are also required to complete a mandatory pre-departure course and obtain a valid certificate before entering Malta. The course combines requirements related to skills, English language proficiency and cultural awareness, followed by an oral interview in English and, for specific sectors, a further skills assessment and interview. From March 2026, Identità is responsible for verifying the relevant certificates as part of the standard Single Permit application process (Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2026). The process involves Jobsplus, which carries out a labour market test from the employment side, together with other stakeholders such as the Immigration Police (Jobsplus, 2025). From 2026 the procedure also requires a pre-departure integration course before the application can be considered (Government of Malta, 2025a).

One rule falls directly on the age group covered by this mapping. Malta does not recognise derivative protection status for dependent family members of refugees, so during 2024 children of refugees who turned 18 reverted to an undocumented status (Aditus Foundation, 2025). At 18 they are required to obtain a residence permit in their own name, on the basis of international protection, employment or studies, yet several factors prevent them from being eligible for any of these (Aditus Foundation, 2025). NGOs report that the permit available to them is not accessible in practice, because of the length of family reunification procedures, the residence requirement applied to the years before they turned 18, and its exclusion of children born in Malta to protection beneficiaries. For this reason, most children of protection beneficiaries risk becoming undocumented on reaching majority (JRS Malta & Aditus Foundation, 2021). The same threshold affects unaccompanied minors: those whose asylum applications have been rejected are automatically granted Temporary Humanitarian Protection until they reach the age of eighteen, at which point their asylum decision is revived (Aditus Foundation, 2025).

I.3 Rules for EU vs. non-EU nationals

EU citizens and their family members (including TCN relatives) can enter and reside in Malta for up to three months with nothing more than a valid passport or ID card, and acquire permanent residence after five years, with equal treatment to Maltese nationals in employment and social assistance. TCNs face a much more regulated path: entry is governed by the Immigration Act, and since the Single Permit is employer-led, a TCN's legal status stays closely tied to their job. The 2025 Labour Migration Policy reform introduced some flexibility here, granting a 30-day grace period (extendable to 60) for TCNs who lose their job to find new employment without having to leave the country.

I.4 Family reunification

Family reunification for TCNs is regulated by S.L. 217.06 and applies to sponsors who have held a residence permit for at least one year. Sponsors generally need to show resources at least equal to the Maltese average wage plus 20% per additional family member, along with suitable accommodation. Refugees benefit from a more favourable regime: if they apply within three months of being granted status, they are exempt from the income and accommodation requirements. Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are currently excluded altogether from the right to family reunification under Maltese law, a gap repeatedly flagged by human rights organisations as one of the more restrictive parts of the system.

I.5 Asylum procedure

Malta runs a single procedure to assess eligibility for refugee status, subsidiary protection and Temporary Humanitarian Protection (THP). The International Protection Agency (IPA) is the sole first-instance decision-making body. Registration comes first: an Asylum-seeker Document is issued and applicants are fingerprinted for Eurodac, after a mandatory health screening. Then comes lodging of the formal application, which includes a Dublin questionnaire to establish whether another Member State is responsible for the claim. A personal interview follows, conducted in English by IPA caseworkers. The law sets a target of six months to reach a decision, though the maximum legal limit extends to 21 months. Agency for the Welfare of Asylum-Seekers (AWAS) carries out vulnerability assessments alongside this process to flag applicants who may need special support. Rejected applicants have 15 days to appeal before the International Protection Appeals Tribunal (IPAT), and appeals in the regular procedure suspend removal until a final ruling is given. Applications considered “manifestly unfounded” or “inadmissible”, for instance those from applicants coming from countries on Malta's safe country of origin list, follow an accelerated track: the IPAT Chairperson reviews the decision within three working days and no further appeal is possible.

In 2024 there were 528 applications, including 444 first-time applications, and 507 applications were still pending at first instance at the end of the year (Aditus Foundation, 2025). During 2024 the IPA took 985 decisions at first instance and the IPAT 450 decisions at second instance; 54 persons were recognised as refugees and 174 were granted subsidiary protection, giving an overall protection rate of 27.4% (Aditus Foundation, 2025). The composition of the negative decisions matters: of the 985 first-instance decisions, 586 were negative on procedural grounds rather than on the merits, including 194 applications declared implicitly withdrawn and 132 closed administratively (Aditus Foundation, 2025). Since 59.3% of applicants registered in 2024 were aged between 18 and 34 (NSO, 2025a), procedural rejection is the most common outcome for young applicants.

I.6 Citizenship

Citizenship in Malta is regulated by the Maltese Citizenship Act (Chapter 188). Malta does not apply the principle of *ius soli*, meaning that children born in Malta do not automatically acquire Maltese citizenship unless at least one parent is a Maltese citizen. For ordinary residents, naturalisation generally requires five years of legal residence (effectively twelve months of continuous residence immediately before the application, plus an aggregate of at least four years during the previous six) together with adequate knowledge of Maltese or English and good character (Maltese Citizenship Act, Art. 10(1)).

For beneficiaries of international protection the bar is far higher: following a 2024 change, refugees must have resided in Malta for at least 15 years, up from 10, and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection for over 20 years, while in practice subsidiary protection applications are usually not even considered (Aditus Foundation, 2025). The application fee is €450, with no exemption for refugees or stateless persons (Aditus Foundation, 2025). For a person who arrives at 20 with refugee status, this places naturalisation at 35 at the earliest, and beyond 40 for subsidiary protection. This means the entire 18 to 30 age band covered by this report is spent without any prospect of citizenship. The Minister responsible for citizenship also has broad discretion when deciding applications, is not required to provide reasons for refusal, and these decisions cannot be appealed before the courts; documented cases exist of refugees obtaining citizenship close to 20 years after arrival (Aditus Foundation, 2025). A route through marriage to a Maltese citizen is available after five years, and Malta additionally operates investment-based and merit-based routes; dual citizenship is permitted (Maltese Citizenship Act). Since 2020, citizenship may also be granted for exceptional services or contributions to Malta.

1.7 Rights of unaccompanied minors

Unaccompanied minors (UAMs) are protected under the Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act (Chapter 602) and subsidiary provisions of the International Protection Act. When a potential UAM is identified, the Principal Immigration Officer must notify the Director of Child Protection, and a provisional Care Order placing the minor under AWAS care must be requested within 72 hours. AWAS is then responsible for appointing a legal representative to support the minor through the asylum process.

Malta does not apply a presumption of minority. Where doubts exist about a claimed age, AWAS social workers carry out an age assessment, which can include medical examinations such as wrist X-rays, and any appeal must be lodged within three working days before the Immigration Appeals Board. NGOs have criticised this process for lacking independent oversight and for often being carried out while minors remain in detention. Under the 2024 amendments to the Reception Regulations, detention of minors is meant to be a last resort and UAMs should not be placed in restrictive accommodation, though in practice children awaiting age assessment are sometimes still held alongside unrelated adults.

Confirmed UAMs are usually accommodated in dedicated open centres such as Dar il-Liedna, although those aged 16 and over may still end up in adult facilities. UAMs have free access to education and healthcare on the same basis as Maltese children, even if language barriers and pressure to find work often get in the way of regular school attendance. Any UAM whose asylum claim is rejected is automatically granted Temporary Humanitarian Protection until they turn 18 — a safety net that expires exactly when it might be needed most.

I.8 Processing times

- **Time required to obtain documents:** Processing times differ sharply by procedure. A Single Permit application may take up to four months to be processed by Identità and the other stakeholders involved (Identità, 2026b). In the asylum system, most decisions in the regular procedure are in practice not taken before six months have passed (Aditus Foundation, 2025).
- **Differences across groups:** Detention practice shows clear differences depending on the applicant's profile. In 2024 the average detention duration was 46.5 days, with a minimum of one day and a maximum of 754 days (Aditus Foundation, 2025). Duration depends largely on nationality rather than on individual assessment: applicants from countries with low protection rates and high return rates, such as Bangladesh, Egypt, Morocco, Ghana, Ivory Coast and Nigeria, were detained for the entire duration of their asylum procedure, while applicants from Syria and Libya were generally released after about two months (Aditus Foundation, 2025). Because sea arrivals and detention overwhelmingly concern young men (NSO, 2025a), this difference falls mainly on the age group covered by this mapping. Beyond detention, there is no single published dataset giving average processing times broken down by permit type and nationality.

I.9 Access to services

- **Healthcare:** Access to public healthcare depends on legal status. Refugees have access to state medical services free of charge, with equal rights compared with Maltese citizens (Aditus Foundation, 2025); beneficiaries of subsidiary and temporary humanitarian protection also have access, according to guidelines of the Healthcare Entitlement Unit (Aditus Foundation, 2025); all other third-country nationals, including most young migrant workers, obtain full access only by presenting three recent payslips at the hospital (Aditus Foundation, 2025), which ties healthcare to formal, continuous employment. In practice, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Malta reported that in 2023 and 2024 a significant number of the people it follows had trouble accessing healthcare, due to unclear entitlements, limited information, language barriers and stigma, and subsidiary protection holders without payslips were charged for services, including pregnant women (Aditus Foundation, 2025); Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX, 2020) likewise notes that healthcare entitlements are “more unclear and discretionary in Malta than almost anywhere else” (MIPEX, 2020). Depression prevalence among refugees and migrants is 5 to 44% against 8 to 12% in the general population, psychosis incidence among asylum seekers is 400 per 100,000, and in 2019 foreigners accounted for 25.7% of acute involuntary psychiatric admissions (Government of Malta, 2024). No health statistic is disaggregated for migrants aged 18 to 30.

- **Housing:** State-provided housing is minimal: beneficiaries of international protection are generally not allowed to stay in the open reception centres, which at the end of 2024 hosted 5 refugees, 139 subsidiary protection holders and 16 THP holders (Aditus Foundation, 2025); only four refugees in the whole country were reported to be accommodated in social housing in Malta at the end of 2024 (Aditus Foundation, 2025); The main form of housing support was instead the Housing Benefit Scheme, a cash grant for private renters supporting 108 refugees and 234 subsidiary protection holders (Aditus Foundation, 2025). Almost all migrants therefore depend on the private market, where systemic structural gaps persist. At EU level, Disaggregated Eurostat data shows that home ownership among EU nationals stands at 73.6%, whereas for non-EU citizens it drops to just 22.9% (Eurostat, 2025b), suggesting a strong reliance on rented accommodation. This financial vulnerability is further underscored by the housing cost overburden rate, which affects 18.8% of non-EU citizens compared to 7.6% of nationals (Eurostat, 2025b), as well as the overcrowding rate, standing at 34.2% for non-EU citizens against 20.8% for EU citizens residing in another EU country and 13.7% for nationals in 2023 (Eurostat, 2025b). Discrimination is documented: 23% of black respondents were denied accommodation by a private landlord because of their race or ethnicity, 29% lived in severely deprived housing, and 84% respondents of African descent who live in overcrowded housing against 3% of the general population (FRA, 2018). Malta publishes no official homelessness statistics; A 2022 YMCA study, conducted among participating homeless shelters and services, found that 47.8% of recorded residents were non-Maltese, far above their population share, with financial problems (34.9%) and domestic violence (33.7%) as main causes (YMCA Malta, 2022).
- **Education:** State education free and compulsory for beneficiaries of international protection up to the age of 16: the Migrant Learners' Unit provided language induction to 1,421 beneficiaries of international protection in 2024, some 1,644 refugees and/or family members were in Maltese schools in 2023/2024, and the *I Belong* programme was accessed by 39 refugees and 109 subsidiary protection holders (Aditus Foundation, 2025). At tertiary level, which is the level most relevant to the 18 to 30 group, entitlement is not specified in law or policy for any of the asylum-seeking groups: in practice all groups may apply to the University of Malta or MCAST with a fee waiver, but the student maintenance grant requires five years of residence and cannot be combined with Social Assistance (Aditus Foundation, 2025), and these two conditions exclude most young refugees. The wider tertiary-education context also shows the importance of distinguishing between international students and protection beneficiaries. In the 2023/2024 academic year, 8,252 foreign students accounted for 37.0% of all tertiary enrolments in Malta, including 21.9% non-EU nationals and 15.1% nationals of other EU Member States (NSO, 2025e). These figures concern foreign students as a whole and therefore cannot be used as a direct measure of tertiary participation among refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. TCNs are not less educated than nationals, with 40% highly educated against about 22% in 2019, but their participation in adult learning was below 10% (Government of Malta, 2024), and the cited education statistic does not distinguish the 18 to 30 band.

- **Legal support:** State-funded legal aid in the asylum procedure is limited to the appeal stage: at first instance, free legal assistance is provided in practice by lawyers working with NGOs and by the Legal Clinic of the Faculty of Laws of the University of Malta (Aditus Foundation, 2025). This lack of legal aid from the outset of proceedings was also highlighted as a serious concern by the UN Human Rights Committee, which called on Malta to ensure access to free legal aid and adequate interpretation services “from the outset of proceedings” (CCPR, 2024). In *S.H. v. Malta*, the European Court of Human Rights noted that the applicant had not benefited from legal assistance in preparing his asylum application, during his interview or throughout the proceedings until shortly before the first-instance decision (ECtHR, 2022). Capacity is thin: the legal-aid pool comprised 10 lawyers in 2022, who were paid €100 per asylum appeal submission (Aditus Foundation, 2025). Where appellants fail to attend their appointment with a legal-aid lawyer, it has occurred that the lawyer does not file submissions, leading to the appeal being decided negatively without an assessment on the merits (Aditus Foundation, 2025). More generally, 139 of 283 IPAT decisions in 2021 (49%) were rejections linked to the absence of submissions filed by the appellant (Aditus Foundation, 2025). The previously cited figure of 10 positive decisions out of approximately 190 appeals in 2025 is not supported by the AIDA 2025 report and is therefore omitted. Access to legal assistance is particularly difficult in detention: interpreters are not available, and appeals against negative first-instance decisions must be lodged in person within 15 days (Aditus Foundation, 2025). Conditions of communication have also been problematic: AIDA reports that in 2024 telephones in some detention facilities were switched off or otherwise made unusable, sometimes for days or weeks after detainees' arrival (Aditus Foundation, 2025). UNHCR conducted six visits to detention facilities and met 61 applicants in 2024 (Aditus Foundation, 2025). This figure should not, however, be directly compared with the 528 asylum applications registered in 2024, since the two figures refer to different populations and measures (Aditus Foundation, 2025). The available sources do not provide a statistic on the number or proportion of asylum applicants receiving legal assistance at first instance.

I.10 Key barriers

- **Bureaucracy:** Residence permit applications with Identità take three to five months, during which applicants cannot work, cannot leave the country and cannot access healthcare or state benefits; since work, study and Blue Card permits last up to one year, the cycle repeats at every renewal (Aditus Foundation, 2021). A European Commission study found rules that change frequently and are applied inconsistently between departments (European Commission, 2019). The scale involved is exceptional: in 2023 Malta issued 41,927 first residence permits to third-country nationals, equal to 77.3 per 1,000 inhabitants, the highest ratio in the EU, with 66.3% issued for work and 17.4% for education (EMN & Eurostat, 2025). Protection beneficiaries wait months holding only a receipt with no real legal value, must prove their address with a rent agreement, the landlord's identification document and, since 2024, legal attestation, and face a card-only payment policy that penalises those unable to open a bank account (Aditus Foundation, 2026).

The barrier that falls most directly on this report's target group is the loss of dependent family member status at the eighteenth birthday, described in I.2, which throughout 2025 left young family members of protection beneficiaries undocumented on turning eighteen and unable to obtain a permit in their own name (Aditus Foundation, 2026). The outcomes are among the weakest in the EU: only 5.3% of TCNs held a long-term residence permit in 2019, against an EU average of 51% (Aditus Foundation, 2021), and the naturalisation rate was 0.9% (Camilleri, 2022b). In 2025 the authorities published no national asylum statistics at all, while pending cases nearly tripled from 507 to about 1,415 (Aditus Foundation, 2026).

- **Racism, xenophobia and discrimination:** The most recent large-scale survey covering Malta remains FRA's EU-MIDIS II: 38% of respondents of African descent felt discriminated against in the previous 12 months, the fifth-highest rate of the 12 countries surveyed, while racist harassment was the lowest at 20% over five years, which suggests that exclusion operates through unequal treatment in jobs, housing and services rather than through street-level hostility (FRA, 2018). The youth figures are the most relevant for this mapping: 70% of respondents aged 16 to 24 were neither in work nor in education or training, against 8% of their Maltese peers, the second-highest gap in the EU, and 82% had household incomes below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold against 17% of the general population (FRA, 2018). These figures rest on a small subsample and date from 2016, but they are the only youth-specific statistics available. More recent data confirm the economic divide, with 29.7% of non-EU adults at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2024 against 15.8% of nationals (Eurostat, 2026f).

FRA reports that one third of Sub-Saharan African immigrants experienced discrimination based on skin colour, with the highest levels when looking for work, at work and in access to housing (FRA, 2017), yet in 2023 it received only 9 complaints on racial or ethnic grounds out of 65 in total (NCPE, 2024), which confirms substantial under-reporting driven by fear of retaliation and lack of trust. In 2024 the police recorded 18 hate crimes, 9 of them racist and xenophobic, with no data collected at prosecution and sentencing stage (OSCE & ODIHR, 2024), and the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance found that trust in the police among people with a migration background has been significantly undermined by allegations of serious abuses by police officers (ECRI, 2024). No recent or age-specific discrimination data exist.

Several GAME survey respondents described comparable experiences in their own words, from being denied entry to a nightclub because of skin colour to feeling routinely spoken over at work until a Maltese colleague stepped in. Overall, three in ten (29%) said they generally feel stereotyped or misunderstood in daily life.

- **Lack of information:** Only 9% of respondents of African descent in Malta knew of at least one equality body and only 18% were aware of anti-discrimination legislation, in both cases the lowest levels of the 12 countries surveyed (FRA, 2018). The group most exposed to discrimination, in which young people are over-represented, is therefore also the least equipped to recognise and report it. Administrative information is fragmented at every step a young migrant has to take: a European Commission study found a lack of consistent and clear information across all phases of migration, with processes that are unclear, conflicting and arbitrarily applied, no specific guidelines for key permits including student permits, and no dedicated help desks at Identità (European Commission, 2019), while JRS identified lack of information as a root cause of failed access to healthcare (Aditus Foundation, 2026). In the asylum system, whose applicants are mostly young (NSO, 2025a), there is no structured provision of information outside detention, and inside it UNHCR reached only 61 asylum seekers through six sessions in 2024 (Aditus Foundation, 2025). Positive developments are the AWAS Migrant Advice Unit, with welfare officers and a focal point in each open centre, and independent online information through UNHCR Malta's Help page and the Aditus "Know your rights!" fact sheets (Aditus Foundation, 2025). The Integration Strategy and Action Plan 2025-2030 also creates a National Integration Support Centre as a one-stop service for migrants (Government of Malta, 2025b). However, no study measures how much of this information actually reaches young migrants aged 18 to 30.

I.11 National integration strategy and outlook

Malta's current migration strategy is outlined in the Integration Strategy and Action Plan 2025–2030, which promotes a whole-of-government approach to integration. The strategy introduces four stages covering pre-departure measures, early integration, long-term integration and the development of more inclusive communities. Among the main measures are the expansion of the *I Belong* Programme, the introduction of mandatory pre-departure training for third-country nationals, the creation of the National Integration Support Centre (NISC) as a one-stop service for migrants, and new labour market measures aimed at reducing exploitation, including a grace period for workers who lose their employment. The strategy is also aligned with the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion and the National Action Plan Against Racism 2025–2030.

J. Social and civic participation

J.1 Participation in youth activities, NGOs and community initiatives

Young migrants' participation in civil society initiatives and groups is often regarded as a keystone for integration and social cohesion between migrants and the broader communities of Malta. However, tracking the extent of their participation is complicated because local NGOs do not report membership data to a centralised body, and official statistics frequently aggregate migrants alongside other vulnerable groups. Specifically, available data on youth participation remains fragmented across various civil society bodies, but participation levels are difficult to assess as many young migrants also engage in informal groups.

Furthermore, the varying living conditions between different migrant groups, such as EU nationals, TCNs, and migrants with international protection status, are a decisive factor regarding the needs and disposition towards participation with the broader community. Migrant-led organisations play a key role due to their first-hand experience, representing a direct opportunity for migrants to foster their own social integration (Falzon, 2022).

- **NGOs:** Mapping all NGOs working with migrants in Malta is complicated, as both formal organisations and informal grassroots groups converge (Falzon, 2022). Migrant-led NGOs are especially relevant for fostering integration, as they address practical concerns and bridge institutional actors with lived realities. Most of these organisations address the needs of specific diaspora communities, serving as a point of contact between nationals of a given origin country and Maltese society. Recent research confirms this landscape, showing that Malta's migration activism is predominantly composed of formal organisations rather than grassroots groups, as shown in a study interviewing nine active entities including [Integra Foundation](#), [Aditus Foundation](#), [Moviment Graffiti](#), and [Spark15](#) (Mainwaring & Stierl, 2025). Spark15, Malta's first refugee-led youth NGO, was founded in 2015 following a UNHCR workshop (Spark15, 2023). It assists refugees and young migrants through civic engagement, peer support, and education promotion (Falzon, 2022). Its initiatives include English and digital literacy courses organised with the University of Malta, sports tournaments, and a higher education programme supporting access to university education (Melita Foundation, 2023). [Kopin](#) is a non-profit development and human rights NGO which works in international cooperation for sustainable development, global education and global and inclusive society. [Blue Door Education](#) is an NGO that offers free language courses for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, given by qualified volunteers. [Dance Beyond Borders](#) is a Malta-based activist organisation founded in 2020. It uses the arts to create meaningful encounters that bridge people, communities and perspectives, fostering dialogue around migration, identity, belonging, decoloniality and social justice. DBB is also the coordinator of [Refugee Week Malta](#). [African Media Association Malta](#) is a non-profit organisation promoting ethical journalism, media freedom, and positive representation of Africa.

Community initiatives and Youth activities: Among successful community activities, intercultural dialogue, food and sport events and capacity building workshops have been organised (Bugre & Hirsch, 2016). For young migrants, these activities allow them to socialise, practise language skills, and connect with local peers. Migrant networks also provide physical spaces and social environments to develop connections among themselves and with the wider community, while also providing the skills needed to navigate their personal and professional journeys in Malta (Bugre & Hirsch, 2016). Spark15, for example, organises educational and sporting activities, cultural events, and advocacy initiatives that bring refugees, migrants and Maltese residents together, creating spaces for social interaction, cultural exchange and community participation (Fenech & Fratescu, 2024). In the framework of Refugee Week Malta every year Spark15 organises SparkFest, the official closing event, celebrating diversity, culture, talent and connection as part of Refugee Week. At a policy level, Malta's Integration Strategy and Action Plan 2025–2030 further recognises community participation, social dialogue, migrant-led initiatives and socio-cultural engagement as important components of migrant integration and social cohesion. However, despite these developments and the growing recognition of community-based approaches, initiatives remain diverse and fragmented, while systematic data on participation rates and longer-term outcomes are still limited, making it difficult to assess their overall impact.

J.2 Participation in European programmes

Participation in European Union programmes is not limited to EU citizens, as candidates legally residing in an EU Member State are granted the same rights to participate regardless of their country of origin. However, tracking participant numbers remains a complex task, as EU databases record mobility by country of residence rather than citizenship, which can make it difficult to identify the exact share of TCN residents who take part in these programmes.

These EU initiatives are primarily structured around education and non-formal learning for youth. However, participation may be less accessible to young TCN workers because of employment conditions, limited free time, and the practical constraints associated with their residence and work status. In contrast, young people who are studying or have greater flexibility may find it easier to participate in study exchanges, youth activities or volunteering programmes.

These programmes draw a diverse range of international migrants to Malta, developing participants' practical skills at academic institutions like the University of Malta and MCAST, while contributing to the local academic environment. Beyond this, EU initiatives foster community development as participants serve as volunteers in civil society projects under the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) or engage directly in Malta's civic life. For some participants, these experiences can also provide opportunities to establish social and professional networks in Malta, although participation does not necessarily lead to longer-term integration or employment.

J.3 Barriers to participation

Among some of the main barriers for integration identified by NGO and social initiative participants were structural integration difficulties related to education, economic and legal opportunities, which were added to tensions between migrant groups. More generally, differences in legal status, employment conditions and socio-economic position can also shape migrants' ability and willingness to participate in wider community life.

On a more general note, EU migrants generally face fewer legal and administrative barriers to participation than TCNs because of their different residence and mobility rights. For some EU professionals working in sectors such as iGaming and financial services, relatively advantageous economic conditions and high mobility may also shape their patterns of interaction with wider Maltese society, particularly where social and professional networks remain concentrated within international and English-speaking environments.

- **Language:** Language represents a main obstacle to the social and civic participation of migrants in Malta. In the workplace and most basic situations, English is used and understood broadly by EU citizens and most TCN migrants working in service jobs. Although this fluency allows them to interact with others and perform needed daily tasks like getting groceries and filing paperwork, it can also limit interaction with parts of the native social sphere where Maltese is primarily used. In practice, this can create barriers to participation in local community life and make it more difficult for migrants to engage in political and communal events and organisations, while also creating difficulties in legal proceedings carried out in Maltese.

Furthermore, under official frameworks such as the "*I Belong*" integration programme managed by the Human Rights Directorate (HRD), language learning and cultural orientation form part of the integration process. Migrants with limited English proficiency face additional difficulties in accessing information and services, relying more heavily on members of their own communities for assistance. This can also increase their vulnerability when navigating employment and understanding their legal labour rights (Camilleri, 2018).

- **Financial constraints:** Some of the main difficulties for potential participants stem from employment and financial barriers. It is common for TCNs who otherwise might benefit from participating in these programmes to feel overburdened with work, sometimes working unpredictable shifts and often striving to send money to their families in their countries of origin, which leaves little time to engage with community building initiatives (Bugre & Hirsch, 2016). It is common for TCN migrants who settle in Malta for employment to devote their time and energies to work, leaving civic participation to a secondary position. This also affects the workings of migrant-led groups and NGOs as these commitments get in the way of the voluntary participation that keeps these initiatives running.

Lastly, the difficulties TCN migrants face when opening bank accounts in Malta also complicate the administrative and financial autonomy of these networks (Falzon, 2022), and the high cost of living and housing can further encourage migrants to prioritise immediate financial needs over participation in activities that require additional time or expenses, such as transportation.

- **Lack of information:** Lack of information also represents a barrier to participation, as migrants often struggle to map out the different initiatives and community opportunities available to them, whether they are organised by formal institutions or informal social groups. Similar problems affect migrants' access to employment. In the case of TCNs, many rely on word-of-mouth referrals to find job opportunities because they struggle to navigate official channels and recruitment portals, or because they need quick work arrangements to secure employment and maintain their legal status in the country, referring to informal support networks like family or friends as one of the main channels to find work (Camilleri, 2018). The same reliance on informal networks can also affect access to information about social and civic opportunities, particularly for migrants who have limited contact with formal institutions or local organisations.

K. Emotional, identity and social needs

K.1 Sense of belonging and transnationalism

Recent scholars have had an increasing interest in migrant's sense of belonging and transnationalism when integrating to a new society. Mansouri et al. (2025) argue that youth tend to not abandon their former cultural practices, but keep them as "transcultural capital" when analyzing, adapting to, and interpreting the new cultural surroundings. Furthermore, they state that these hybrid identities of former and new cultural identity allows the youth to leverage their social and affective capabilities when aiding others in society and keep in contact with their relatives at home. However, the process of navigating a transnational identity may also result in mental health challenges and emotional distress, specifically if the youth is unable to assist in challenging circumstances for relatives in their home country (Svensson, 2024).

Furthermore, the transnational identity has also shown to aid the migrant's ability to relate to the new society, creating associations between similarities experienced between their former home (Nikielska-Sekuła, 2023). Through "embodied familiarity", the migrant may utilize their experiences from home when relating to their new environment, where similar and compared sensory and physical experiences may result in a "bodily translocality", meaning that they start building belonging to the new place (Nikielska-Sekuła, 2023). However, the same process may create a larger emotional distance for the migrant through "embodied unbelonging", emphasizing feelings of displacement. In order for migrants to feel belonging, Ager & Strang (2008) argue that migrants need to experience both stability and safety, and that harmful discriminatory experiences severely disrupt the process of integrating into society.

This dynamic is further shaped by institutional frameworks and spatial boundaries that condition how belonging is negotiated. Sonne highlights how integration policies, such as the "*I Belong*" programme, often require migrants to demonstrate a willingness to adapt to a national identity framed around specific historical and religious narratives, creating a form of "inclusive exclusion". Furthermore, daily geographies of surveillance and border controls deeply impact migrants' ontological security, forcing them to continuously navigate feelings of safety and selfhood within local public spaces (Vaughan-Williams & Pisani, 2018). Interestingly, even when migrants leave the island, their lived experience in Malta continues to leave a lasting mark on their ongoing identity narratives (Sonne, 2026).

K.2 Identity construction

The construction of identity within the new context is heavily impacted by the transnational experience of the migrant. Sonne (2025) argues that third-country nationals (TCNs) participating in the Maltese government's "*I Belong*" program are subjected to constructing a new identity to prove their potential to integrate. This process demands significant emotional labour through state-mandated "feeling rules" and prioritizes secular European liberal stances (e.g., LGBTQIA+ rights, gender equality), which can generate exclusionary practices and "othering" towards migrants from non-European or religious backgrounds. (Phinney et al., 2001) note that forced separation from one's home culture or pressured assimilation hinders transnational identity formation, a phenomenon Berry (1997) describes as a "pressure cooker" leading to marginalization rather than integration. Consequently, government-led regulations are often perceived merely as bureaucratic hurdles rather than genuine support in identity development (Sonne, 2025).

This tension between institutional mandates and lived reality is evident across diverse migrant populations in Malta. Research on multiethnic families highlights how young people navigate everyday discrimination, such as "schoolyard racism," by developing varied identity strategies ranging from identifying as European or "citizens of the world" to feeling rooted in Malta without identifying as Maltese (Cassar et al., 2016). Additionally, dedicated initiatives such as the Third Culture Kids (TCK) Hub by NWAMI International Malta address the specific identity trajectories of youth growing up across multiple cultural environments (NWAMI International Malta, 2024).

K.3 Social relationships

Researchers distinguish between different levels of social connections formed by migrants. Ager & Strang (2008) categorize these into three framework components:

Social bonds: connections with family and co-ethnic community members that create a vital safety net, mitigating depression and providing emotional support.

Social bridges: links between different subcultures and the host majority, where community friendliness, joint activities, and intercultural engagement enhance quality of life and long-term socio-economic integration.

Social links: connections between migrants and state/governmental structures, where language and institutional barriers often hinder effective integration.

These social dimensions are clearly illustrated by established diaspora communities and informal support networks. Social bonds are historically embodied by the Indian community, which maintains cultural continuity through public celebrations such as Diwali, Holi, and Onam (Hopkins, 2026). Similarly, the Filipino community relies heavily on parish groups, formal associations, and social media networks like "Pinoy Malta" to provide essential orientation for newcomers (Gollcher, 2026). However, significant structural hurdles impede the development of social bridges and links. Despite high educational attainment, many are employed in low-skilled positions or essential care roles characterized by long working hours, blurred work-life boundaries, and language barriers (Debono & Vassallo, 2019; Peregin, 2026).

This matches closely what GAME survey respondents reported: family (63%) and friends from the same country (54%) were named as the main sources of support, well ahead of local Maltese friends or institutional services. This reliance on 'bonds' over 'bridges' highlights the difficulty many young migrants face in penetrating local social circles.

K.4 Emotional wellbeing

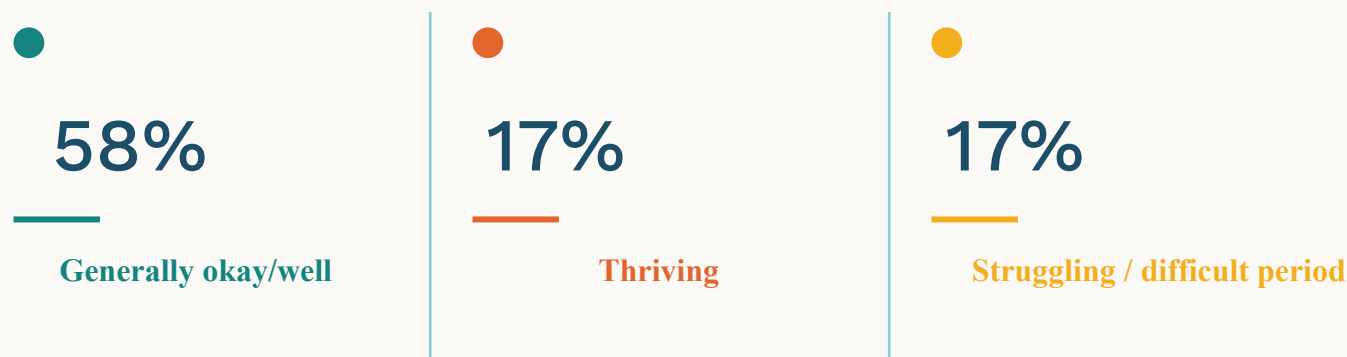
Migrants' emotional wellbeing may be significantly impacted by the process of acclimation to the new environment and community. Berry (1997) argues that many undergo acculturative stress, usually known as culture shock, when there is a large difference between the migrants' own cultures and the culture they are acclimating to. This form of stress is conceptualized as a reaction to environmental factors of intercultural contact, specifically when individuals feel they cannot easily adjust their behaviours to fit the new community. Some migrants will possess sufficient coping strategies to avoid long-lasting consequences of stress, while others may struggle more with adjustment. These difficulties can be particularly relevant when migrants experience a loss of social status, difficulties in transferring educational qualifications, or expectations that are not met in the receiving society (Berry, 1997).

Furthermore, migrant youth are often experiencing loneliness through loss of closeness, connection, and societal acceptance (Rich Madsen et al., 2021). Loneliness may be defined as an "emotional and adverse state associated with unpleasant feelings of emptiness, frustration, anger, and sadness" and is often intentionally concealed by youth who may perceive themselves as the only ones experiencing these feelings (Rich Madsen et al., 2021). Cultural loneliness specifically addresses the feeling experienced by migrants when their language, culture, and religion are misunderstood or unaccepted in their receiving community (Rich Madsen et al., 2021). However, evidence specifically measuring loneliness among migrants in Malta remains limited. National research on loneliness provides an important contextual indication, but it concerns the Maltese population as a whole rather than migrants specifically. The National Suicide Prevention Strategy reports that 43.5% of the population aged 11 and above experienced some degree of loneliness in 2019, with loneliness increasing to 54.6% in 2022. The Strategy identifies factors including low subjective wellbeing, poor coping abilities, unemployment, financial insecurity and other forms of social vulnerability as associated with loneliness in Malta (MHA - Ministry for Health and Active Ageing, 2025).

The situation of young people in Malta also provides a broader context for understanding emotional wellbeing. The World Happiness Report 2024 ranked Malta 57th globally for happiness among people under 30, making young people in Malta the least happy among the EU countries included in the ranking (Helliwell et al., 2024). This finding concerns young people in Malta generally and cannot be interpreted as evidence of lower well-being among migrant youth specifically. Nevertheless, it indicates that emotional wellbeing among young people represents a broader concern within the Maltese context.

Lastly, the migrant youth is often perceiving experienced discrimination, which also has a significant impact on their emotional wellbeing (Schmitt et al., 2014). When experienced on several dimensions and as systemically ingrained, perceptions of discrimination have shown to result in increased anxiety, depression, lower self-esteem, decreased life satisfaction, and depression (Schmitt et al., 2014). The negative effect of perceived discrimination has also been recorded larger when directed directly to the individuals instead of a whole group (Schmitt et al., 2014). Specifically, when migrants perceive discrimination towards a concealable characteristic, they are faced with the mental load of deciding whether to disclose their identity to their new society (Schmitt et al., 2014). In the Maltese context, these concerns should also be considered alongside the limited availability of migrant-specific evidence on mental health and emotional wellbeing. Borg et al. (2020), in the development of Malta's 2020–2030 Mental Health Strategy, identify migrants as a population potentially exposed to increased risk of common mental disorders, particularly in relation to factors such as social support and wider social conditions. The authors also highlight the need to strengthen mental health services and address the pressures placed on Malta's mental health system. More recent national policy continues to recognise the need for improved mental health research and data collection in Malta, particularly to inform services and policies addressing local social needs (MHA, 2025).

In the GAME survey, most respondents described their emotional wellbeing in Malta as generally okay (58%), though 17% said they were going through a difficult period, in some cases linked to burnout or financial strain. One respondent noted: 'I love the opportunities here, but the constant pressure to secure my visa and the rising rent leaves little mental space for anything else'.



K.5 Key needs

Successful adaptation to a new cultural environment depends heavily on the receiving community's willingness to be openly inclusive and accommodating toward migrants' cultural diversity (Berry, 1997). In order to prevent the social marginalization of migrant populations, it is significantly important to counter cultural, linguistic, and legal barriers and increase migrants' ability to fully participate in their new communities (Ager & Strang, 2008). Educational institutions may play a critical role in facilitating this by adopting approaches that explicitly value diversity and address the emotional and educational needs of migrant and refugee students (Block et al., 2014). This need for inclusive environments is also reflected in Malta's current Integration Strategy, which identifies the creation of strong, inclusive and cohesive communities as a policy priority and calls for greater migrant participation in local community life.

Crucially, meeting these needs is not only a matter of survival. As Dela Cruz (2025) argues in her research on working migrants in Malta, "thriving signifies more than survival; it reflects an upward trajectory marked by resilience, self-determined goals, and engagement in meaningful pursuits" (p. 27). One participant in her study captured this distinction directly: "surviving is, meet at the end of the day, more or less, exactly as you were when you started the day; thriving is improving" (Dela Cruz, 2025, p. 63). This distinction matters for how the needs of young migrants in Malta should be understood: addressing only their immediate, basic needs risks keeping them in a surviving phase, when the goal of inclusion should be to support their movement toward thriving

The process of forming personal identity in the new community relies significantly on receiving continuous recognition from the surrounding social environment (Zurn, 2000). When migrant youth face a lack of social recognition or experience systematic disrespect regarding their cultural background, this can damage their self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem (Zurn, 2000). Therefore, educational and societal contexts need to recognize the different backgrounds and experiences of migrant youth while avoiding approaches that define them exclusively through vulnerability (Block et al., 2014). Recognition should therefore involve both acknowledging migrants' specific needs and valuing their existing skills, experiences and cultural resources.

Empowerment can be defined as the transformative process through which individuals who have previously been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire that capacity (Kabeer, 1999). For migrant youth, this involves gaining access to essential resources while developing the personal agency needed to define and pursue their own life goals. In the Maltese context, empowerment therefore requires opportunities for migrants not only to receive support, but also to actively contribute to the communities in which they live. The experience of Spark15 provides a concrete example of this approach, as the organisation emerged from consultations with young refugees and developed into a refugee-led organisation providing peer support, education, advocacy and community activities (Spark15, 2023). This type of migrant-led participation can strengthen agency by allowing young migrants to act as contributors and peer supporters rather than only as recipients of services.

The same principle is reflected in the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) recommendations on migrant integration, which highlight the potential of training migrants as peer supporters and expanding educational and employment programmes as ways of reducing isolation and strengthening participation (Camilleri, 2022c). Access to education, employment and opportunities for social participation should therefore be considered interconnected needs, as they can provide both practical resources and opportunities to build social networks and autonomy.

This approach is also reflected in initiatives such as [ORRAJT - Migrantour Malta](#), implemented by GMD. This initiative, born as an Erasmus+ project, places people with a migrant background at the centre of intercultural learning and community engagement. By involving migrant-origin citizens as intercultural companions and co-creators of the learning walks, the initiative creates opportunities for participants to share their knowledge, experiences and perspectives, transforming personal migration narratives into valuable resources for the wider community.

A fundamental component of establishing a sense of belonging for migrants is the psychological and physical experience of feeling secure and "at home" within their new environment (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Refugees themselves frequently emphasize that without a strong sense of personal safety, stability, and peacefulness in their local neighbourhoods, achieving any meaningful level of integration is difficult (Ager & Strang, 2008). Housing and local environments must therefore provide more than basic physical shelter; they should function as stable places of safety that allow young migrants to establish social ties and recover a sense of stability after displacement. For migrant youth more broadly, safe spaces also include schools, community organisations and local activities where they can interact without fear of discrimination or exclusion.

Overall, the key needs identified across the literature are therefore inclusion, social recognition, empowerment, access to education and employment, opportunities for meaningful participation, and safe spaces. These needs are closely interconnected: reducing structural barriers alone is not sufficient if young migrants are not also given opportunities to exercise agency, develop social relationships and be recognised as active members of Maltese society. Malta's current Integration Strategy similarly places emphasis on socio-cultural involvement, migrant-led initiatives and increased participation in community activities and decision-making processes.

Key resources and strategies

Starting a business is a vital strategy that provides economic security and facilitates the societal integration of newcomers (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008). The success of these enterprises is best understood through the concept of "mixed embeddedness", which highlights how immigrants navigate both their own social networks and the formal opportunity structures of the host economy (Kloosterman & Rath, 2001). Concentration in ethnic enclaves further provides entrepreneurs with critical resources, such as start-up capital, business tips and a dedicated labour force, continuously generated through dense community networks (Portes, 1998).

No dedicated data on migrant entrepreneurship in Malta specifically was identified during this research, reflecting a broader gap in disaggregated statistics on this target group noted throughout this report.

Unlike traditional economic migrants, refugee entrepreneurs are primarily driven by a necessity for survival rather than the pursuit of better opportunities (Bizri, 2017). Due to their sudden displacement, these individuals face unique barriers, including a lack of financial capital, lost educational certificates, and limited access to established social networks (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008). To overcome these obstacles, refugee entrepreneurs often adopt a “one-way-ahead” attitude and rely heavily on co-ethnic connections to establish “pseudo-family businesses” grounded in moral obligation and trust (Bizri, 2017), a process facilitated through “collective bootstrapping”, where both the entrepreneur and their employees use personal resources to ensure the survival of the venture (Bizri, 2017).

Migrant associations serve as key institutional platforms capable of mobilizing collective social capital to facilitate both economic survival and transnational engagement (Turkina & Thai, 2013). Informal arrangements, such as rotating credit associations, leverage high levels of interpersonal trust and horizontal networking to supply immigrant entrepreneurs with necessary capital, effectively offsetting structural barriers in the host country's formal financial system (Turkina & Thai, 2013). Beyond local economic integration, migrants construct organised transnational networks to maintain institutionalized connections with their countries of origin (Vertovec, 2004). These organisations aggregate financial and social resources to fund infrastructure, educational, and civic projects in home communities, directly responding to state institutional deficits (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Vertovec, 2004). This form of bottom-up transnationalism enables migrant collectivities to exert significant socioeconomic influence across borders, fostering local development while simultaneously strengthening institutional trust and civic integration within the receiving society (Vertovec, 2004; Turkina & Thai, 2013).

Transnationalism defines a social field structured by continuous, cross-border practices and relationships that operate across multiple spatial scales (Erdal, 2020). Moving beyond linear models of assimilation, contemporary frameworks emphasize the simultaneity of migrants' lives: incorporation into the host society and active engagement with the homeland occur as mutually reinforcing processes rather than mutually exclusive choices (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Erdal, 2020). Within these transnational social fields, individuals develop a dual frame of reference, navigating dual societal norms and institutional structures simultaneously (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Consequently, cross-border mobility and resource exchange function as alternative pathways for socioeconomic advancement, where success depends on bridging diverse social networks and institutional environments (Turkina & Thai, 2013). Rather than creating friction or divided loyalties, the interaction between transnational ties and local integration generates complex, multiscalar dynamics, additive, synergistic, or productive that enhance migrants' overall agency and social positioning across borders (Erdal, 2020; Premazzi, 2014).

K.6 Mental health profile

Young migrants and refugees are frequently diagnosed with a complex combination of internalizing and externalizing psychological disorders following their displacement (Fazel et al., 2012). Among these vulnerable populations, the most frequently observed internalizing conditions are major depression, generalized anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Guruge & Butt, 2015). Beyond these primary diagnoses, these youth often experience localized symptoms of distress, which can manifest as chronic sleep disturbances, separation anxiety, and significant somatization (Fazel et al., 2012). In addition to these internalizing struggles, refugee adolescents regularly demonstrate externalizing behavioral challenges, such as conduct disorders and noticeably reduced levels of self-esteem (Guruge & Butt, 2015). Moreover, clinical assessments of resettled refugee communities have increasingly identified substance abuse and active suicidal ideation as serious mental health concerns requiring immediate intervention (Seagle & Vargas, 2019).

The established prevalence rates of psychological disorders among migrant groups can fluctuate significantly depending on the specific diagnostic tools employed and the unique pre-migration traumas a given cohort has endured (Kien et al., 2018). For young refugees and asylum seekers resettling across Europe, the median point prevalence for post-traumatic stress disorder is exceptionally high at 35.3%, with interquartile ranges spanning between 19.0% and 52.7% (Kien et al., 2018). Within this same demographic of youth, the median prevalence rate for depression sits at approximately 20.7%, while anxiety disorders impact roughly 15.0% of these individuals (Kien et al., 2018). Extensive systematic reviews of broader adult refugee populations reveal similarly alarming global statistics, with post-traumatic stress disorder affecting 31.46% and depression impacting 31.5% of the assessed individuals (Blackmore et al., 2020). Conversely, the overall prevalence of anxiety disorders across general adult refugee populations is documented at a slightly lower 11.09%, a figure that remains relatively comparable to lifetime anxiety prevalence rates observed in non-migrant host communities (Blackmore et al., 2020). Notably, demographic breakdowns consistently show that unaccompanied migrant minors suffer from a markedly higher prevalence of both post-traumatic stress disorder and depression when compared to their accompanied peers (Kien et al., 2018).

Local figures point the same way, though nothing is broken down for the 18 to 30 age group specifically. Psychosis incidence among asylum seekers in Malta is 400 per 100,000, against roughly 26 per 100,000 in the general population, and non-Maltese nationals face a 2.2% higher likelihood of admission to Mount Carmel Hospital (Camilleri, 2022c). Foreigners made up 25.7% of acute involuntary psychiatric admissions in 2019 (9.6% were non-Maltese European Union / European Economic Area citizens, 13.3% were persons from medium and less developed countries and 2.8% were persons from very highly and highly developed countries; Camilleri, 2022c). Moreover, migrant admissions to Mount Carmel nearly doubled between 2017 and 2019, from 53 to 105, prompting the Mental Health Commissioner to warn of a looming crisis (Camilleri, 2022c). Moreover, migrant admissions to Mount Carmel nearly doubled between 2017 and 2019, from 53 to 105, prompting the Mental Health Commissioner to warn of a looming crisis (Camilleri, 2022c). Depression and anxiety sit at 6.6% and 7.8% in the general population, while schizophrenia is 0.4% among asylum seekers against 0.026% generally (Scerri et al., 2023); a review of suicide patterns on the island also points to higher risk among migrants and foreign workers (Cachia, 2022).

Despite experiencing severe levels of psychological distress, young migrants frequently encounter substantial personal and systemic obstacles that hinder them from recognizing their symptoms and accessing professional mental health care (Gulliver et al., 2010). A fundamental barrier is poor mental health literacy, meaning that youth often struggle to accurately interpret their symptoms and may normalize their severe distress to avoid clinical intervention (Gulliver et al., 2010). Furthermore, intense social stigma and the fear of personal embarrassment serve as major deterrents, compelling adolescents to conceal their emotional struggles from peers, family members, and medical professionals to escape the invisible shame associated with psychiatric diagnoses (Gulliver et al., 2010). Additionally, many young migrants maintain a strong preference for absolute self-reliance, holding the belief that they must resolve their psychological difficulties independently rather than depending on external clinical providers (Gulliver et al., 2010). Structural obstacles further complicate this process, as a lack of knowledge regarding how to navigate mental health clinics and legitimate fears about medical confidentiality actively prevent formal care-seeking (Gulliver et al., 2010). Finally, successful symptom identification by healthcare providers is frequently compromised by immense language barriers, deeply ingrained cultural stigmas surrounding psychiatric care, and an overall lack of culturally appropriate screening protocols during the initial resettlement phases (Seagle & Vargas, 2019).

K.7 Stressors specific to the migration experience

Pre-migration trauma. Refugees and asylum seekers often endure horrific events before fleeing their home countries, including war-related violence, torture, and the loss of loved ones (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). Exposure to these traumatic events frequently leads to severe mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and clinical depression (Lindert et al., 2009). The severity of pre-migration trauma often shows a dose-response effect, where higher levels of exposure to violence and destruction predict greater psychological distress (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). For example, a significant proportion of asylum seekers report extreme pre-migration traumas, such as being close to death, experiencing imprisonment, or surviving torture (Silove et al., 1998). Furthermore, these pre-migration traumas create profound vulnerabilities, making it exceptionally difficult for migrants to cope with subsequent emotional challenges during resettlement (Rousseau et al., 1999). However, pre-migration trauma should not be viewed as the sole cause of refugee distress, as ongoing daily stressors in the post-migration environment also play a critical role in shaping their overall mental health (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). Stakeholder interviews conducted in Malta point to the same pre-departure profile, citing war, loss, torture, violence, discrimination and economic hardship at home, followed by further life-threatening events in transit such as unsafe sea crossings, detention abroad and human trafficking (Camilleri, 2022c).

Stress related to legal status and uncertainty. This type of stress is shared by both asylum seekers and third-country nationals more broadly, whose residence status is frequently tied to a single employer, meaning that losing that job can mean losing legal status altogether (see H.4, I.2). Asylum seekers often face prolonged and complex legal procedures that significantly increase their psychological distress and hinder their ability to integrate (Laban et al., 2004). The uncertainty regarding the outcome of their asylum applications and the constant fear of being deported back to dangerous situations serve as major sources of ongoing, uncontrollable stress (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). Studies indicate that asylum seekers report higher levels of distress related to the refugee determination process and fears of repatriation compared to migrants who have already secured permanent residency (Silove et al., 1998). A lengthy asylum procedure is a strong independent predictor of lower overall quality of life, higher functional disability, and an increase in chronic physical complaints (Laban et al., 2004). Furthermore, asylum seekers who are held in detention centers while their claims are processed experience severely deteriorated mental health, which often improves significantly only after they are released (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). Therefore, the immediate problems relating to insecure residency status create an environment of continuous threat that heavily depletes the psychological coping resources of asylum seekers (Silove et al., 1998).

Malta's mandatory detention policy for migrants arriving by sea makes this concrete. In one JRS study, 80% of detained respondents said the experience itself had affected their mental health, citing loss of freedom, isolation, poor conditions and separation from family (Camilleri, 2022c); detention has been described in the literature as a system that by its nature causes psychological harm. Self-harm and suicide attempts among detainees taken to Mount Carmel Hospital rose from 17 in 2018 to 93 in 2020, and a former Safi detention centre worker told the press that attempts occurred almost daily, with emergency services often not called (Camilleri, 2022c).

Family separation. Prolonged separation from family members is a critical post-migration stressor that severely impacts the psychological well-being of individuals (Rousseau et al., 1999). Being separated from immediate and extended family deprives migrants of essential social support networks, increasing the risk of social isolation and profound depression (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). Conversely, successful family reunification can serve as a vital source of resilience, helping migrants shift their focus away from past trauma and toward future adaptation in the host society (Rousseau et al., 1999). Refugees often report intense feelings of powerlessness, guilt, and constant worry regarding the safety of relatives left behind in conflict zones or refugee camps (Rousseau et al., 1999). These family-related issues have been shown to independently predict higher functional disability and more chronic physical diseases among asylum seekers, regardless of their psychiatric status (Laban et al., 2004). Furthermore, the deep solitude caused by family separation often acts as an amplifier for past traumas, causing distressing memories and traumatic flashbacks to become overwhelmingly intrusive (Rousseau et al., 1999).

No Malta-specific data quantify this directly, but isolation from family is listed among the recognised risk factors for long-term refugees on the island, alongside lack of freedom, inactivity and legal uncertainty (Camilleri, 2022c).

Discrimination and racism. Experiencing discrimination and racism in the host country represents a profound threat to the psychological well-being of migrants and minority groups (Schmitt et al., 2014). Perceiving oneself as a target of discrimination communicates societal rejection and exclusion, which directly thwarts fundamental human needs for acceptance and drastically undermines an individual's sense of control over their life (Schmitt et al., 2014). The negative psychological impact of discrimination is particularly severe when it is perceived as pervasive and systemic across multiple contexts, rather than as a rare or isolated incident (Schmitt et al., 2014). Furthermore, perceptions of discrimination are consistently linked to increased psychological distress, depression, and anxiety, alongside decreased life satisfaction and self-esteem (Schmitt et al., 2014). Discrimination is especially harmful for disadvantaged groups compared to advantaged groups, as it reflects a broader lack of societal power and a higher frequency of negative treatment (Schmitt et al., 2014). Ultimately, the daily stress of navigating racism and discrimination in the post-migration environment compounds the adversity that refugees and migrants face, significantly impeding their mental health recovery (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017).

Discrimination and racism, together with the feeling of not belonging, are explicitly listed among the main risk factors for migrants' mental health once settled in Malta, alongside poor living conditions, restricted access to entitlements, domestic violence, and isolation (Camilleri, 2022c).

K.8 Access to mental health services

Availability of services. Even in nations that provide universal health care coverage, immigrant and refugee populations frequently experience significant difficulties in having their psychological needs met appropriately (O'Mahony & Donnelly, 2010). A major institutional barrier limiting service availability is strict clinical gatekeeping, where individuals are often denied necessary support unless they exhibit acute or severe psychiatric symptoms (Colucci et al., 2015). Furthermore, mental health facilities frequently operate on rigid schedules, maintaining standard daytime office hours while rarely offering evening or weekend appointments to accommodate working migrants or students (Satinsky et al., 2019). The immediate availability of vital psychological support is additionally hindered by extensive waiting lists and inflexible intake procedures (Colucci et al., 2015). To enhance the overall availability of care, researchers advocate for improved knowledge exchange and coordination between physical and mental health sectors to create dedicated, supportive care networks (Satinsky et al., 2019). Mental health service utilization remains disproportionately low among displaced populations despite the existence of multiple potential access points, such as specialist clinics and primary care facilities (Colucci et al., 2015).

Malta's main community mental health provider, the Richmond Foundation, only takes migrant referrals through existing social services rather than accepting them directly, and the Jesuit Refugee Service, which offers brief intervention and counselling to asylum seekers, had its psychosocial team's access to detention centres suspended in 2022 (Camilleri, 2022c). Detainees at the Safi centre are seen by a general practitioner service with no mental health practitioner on site, and Malta currently has no specialised treatment available for torture survivors or traumatised refugees due to a lack of capacity in the sector (Camilleri, 2022c). AWAS does screen asylum seekers for PTSD, depression and anxiety as part of its vulnerability assessment, but referrals based on mental health grounds have been found to take longer to process than those involving more visible vulnerabilities such as physical disability (Camilleri, 2022c).

More recent sources suggest this picture has changed only partially. As of the latest AIDA update, JRS psychologists and social workers are still not permitted to provide services inside detention centres, despite a revised visitors' policy negotiated with NGOs and signed, with reservations, in December 2023 (Aditus Foundation, 2024). A 2025 report by the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture, covering its 2023 visit to Malta, found that medical infrastructure at Safi and Hal Far had improved since 2020, with better equipped clinics and more medical staff, but explicitly noted that gaps remain in mental health support and continuity of care (CPT, 2025).

Affordability and accessibility. Beyond clinical availability, newly arrived immigrants are frequently prevented from receiving necessary psychological care by practical obstacles including financial costs, transportation deficits, and a pervasive lack of information regarding how to navigate the healthcare system (O'Mahony & Donnelly, 2010). While out-of-pocket expenses are not universally identified as the primary deterrent, evidence from European settings suggests that the inability to afford transportation or the denial of insurance coverage for specialist care can completely block refugees from receiving crucial trauma interventions (Satinsky et al., 2019). Geographic accessibility is further compromised when displaced youth are housed in settlement zones lacking adequate public transit infrastructure, rendering physical travel to clinical sites exceptionally burdensome (Colucci et al., 2015). To mitigate these accessibility barriers, experts recommend utilizing community-based outreach initiatives and engaging clients in informal environments rather than relying exclusively on sterile clinical offices (Colucci et al., 2015). Locating mental health programs within schools has also been shown to greatly enhance accessibility, providing youth with a familiar, on-site environment to receive support without the logistical challenges of commuting (Satinsky et al., 2019). Ultimately, overcoming these logistical hurdles requires clinical services to adopt holistic, flexible approaches that address the practical realities of their clients, such as offering childcare support and highly adaptable appointment scheduling (O'Mahony & Donnelly, 2010).

Language barriers in accessing care. Difficulties with language represent one of the most prominent structural barriers preventing immigrant populations and refugee and immigrant populations from effectively accessing and navigating mental health systems (O'Mahony & Donnelly, 2010). Across various European capitals, a severe shortage of culturally appropriate language services and professional interpreters actively restricts communication and prevents displaced individuals from even scheduling clinical appointments (Satinsky et al., 2019). In the absence of professional translators, clients are frequently compelled to rely on relatives for interpretation, a dynamic that can create discomfort for healthcare providers while compromising both clinical accuracy and patient privacy (Satinsky et al., 2019). Moreover, when navigating small, tightly-knit ethnic communities, refugees may hesitate to use local interpreters due to fears regarding breaches of confidentiality or the potential for inappropriate community judgments regarding their psychiatric status (Colucci et al., 2015). To successfully alleviate these language-based barriers, clinical professionals must meticulously consider the dialect, gender, and ethno-cultural background of the interpreter to guarantee a comfortable and appropriate match for the patient (Colucci et al., 2015). Strategic recommendations to foster trust and ensure precise communication include employing bilingual mental health practitioners and utilizing formal telephone translation services (Colucci et al., 2015). Additionally, implementing innovative modalities such as telepsychiatry conducted entirely in a client's mother tongue has the potential to substantially increase both the accessibility and the cultural acceptability of psychological care (Satinsky et al., 2019).

In Malta, this work falls mainly on the Migrant Health Liaison Office, which trains cultural mediators and runs health education sessions for migrant groups, but was funded at just €40,675 a year in 2018, covering one full time liaison officer and two cultural mediators for a combined 48 hours a week (Camilleri, 2022c). Taylor-East et al. (2016) reach a similar conclusion in their review of detention specific services, recommending expanded interpreting provision and cultural competence training for clinicians as two of the most immediate improvements needed on the island.

L. Summary of needs and recommendations

Throughout this report, we have examined the circumstances surrounding young migrants' lives and prospects in Malta. By reviewing existing literature and available reports, we have obtained a cohesive overview across several guiding fronts previously identified as decisive for migrants' social and personal integration in the country. To achieve this, we first examined background factors, such as demographics, migration trajectories, education and working conditions, alongside administrative procedures and Malta's migration policies. We then connected these factors to daily experiences, evaluating social and civic participation in section J and emotional, identity and mental health needs in section K, including accounts related to migrants' sense of belonging, identity construction and psychosocial wellbeing. Recurring daily challenges, namely housing, employment, language barriers, cultural integration and access to services, surface across nearly every section of this report and continue to shape the everyday experience of young migrants in Malta.

The findings of the GAME survey are integrated throughout the thematic sections rather than presented separately, appearing as short additions alongside the relevant desk research, for example on reasons for arrival, representation and stereotyping, and sources of social support. Given the exploratory size of the sample, these findings should be read as an indication of local patterns worth exploring further rather than as statistically representative evidence. The empathy map is intended to translate these findings into concrete personas for the design phase and draws on both the desk research and the survey results.

Regarding migration trajectories, the largest share of migrants arriving in Malta does so for employment purposes, reflecting the rising demand for labour over recent decades. Family reunification and international protection are also relevant reasons for arrival, but migration in Malta remains heavily linked to economic factors. The trajectories of EU and third-country national migrants diverge significantly in relation to their legal status and living conditions. For TCNs, tight legal requirements tied to employment contracts leave them dependent on short-term visas, resulting in low retention rates, brief stays and limited long-term prospects. EU migrants are generally more mobile, yet they enjoy greater legal security, employment stability and, on the whole, a better economic position and quality of life. Legal vulnerability, workplace exploitation and higher rates of discrimination disproportionately affect TCNs, while issues such as low-wage jobs, rental housing scarcity and social isolation affect a broader spectrum of the migrant population, in practice limiting long-term prospects and integration efforts across the board.

For social and civic participation, these circumstances greatly influence migrants' access and disposition toward integration, as different barriers arise. Limited language skills in English or Maltese, financial constraints, lack of information, and anxiety stemming from job or legal instability can discourage migrants from engaging with their local community or from taking part in European programmes that, although formally open to TCN residents in Malta, are overwhelmingly pursued by EU nationals who do not face the same legal constraints. Participation in social initiatives and organisations remains an important means of fostering integration and social cohesion between migrant groups and the broader society. Multiple organisations and networks exist to address these barriers, but inconsistent reporting and the prevalence of informal associations make it difficult to evaluate the full extent of their contribution.

On the emotional, identity and mental health front, the picture that emerges is one of significant unmet need set against a system with very limited capacity to respond to it. Malta's own institutional research confirms elevated risk among migrants across several indicators, from psychosis incidence to involuntary psychiatric admissions, alongside structural gaps such as the absence of specialised services for trauma survivors and a health monitoring system that does not record migration background at all. Sense of belonging and identity construction are similarly shaped by local conditions rather than being purely individual processes, as integration programmes such as *I Belong* ask migrants to adopt specific cultural and value frameworks in exchange for recognition, while established diaspora communities continue to provide the bulk of everyday emotional and practical support that formal services do not.

These insights were further expanded through the GAME survey distributed to our target group, which helped capture the diverse profiles of young migrants living in Malta today. With this information, we have outlined the practical recommendations below, addressed to the organisations, institutions and communities engaging with this target group. This approach ensures that any future action reflects the distinct experiences of different migrant groups, while situating the broader migrant demographic within the Maltese community. Furthermore, the recommendations below respond to this picture by combining structural measures that require policy or institutional action with smaller, cultural and relational forms of inclusion that individuals, employers and communities can act on directly.

L. Recommendations

- Invest in better data collection on this target group: throughout this report, statistics on young migrants aged 18–30 in Malta are frequently unavailable, outdated, or not disaggregated by age, legal status or nationality. This lack of information limits the ability of policy makers, NGOs and researchers to identify needs and measure progress over time.
- Combat social isolation, which emerged as one of the most under-discussed and recurring struggles among young migrants in Malta
- Continue and expand peer-to-peer and migrant-led initiatives, which respondents associate with their strongest sense of inclusion.
- Recognise young migrants as active agents rather than passive beneficiaries: wherever possible, involve them directly in the design, delivery and evaluation of policies, services and initiatives that concern them, since their own perspectives, skills and lived experience are a resource for shaping more effective and relevant responses, not just a target population to be served.
- Strengthen support and access to services, including language-support schemes, streamlined recognition of qualifications, and referral pathways for administrative and mental health support.
- Ensure that any new narrative, campaign or resource aimed at this target group reflects its real diversity: EU nationals, third-country nationals, asylum seekers, expats and second-generation youth face structurally different challenges, and a single narrative risks flattening these differences.
- Small, everyday gestures of kindness matter as much as formal policy, as respondents' strongest moments of belonging came from spontaneous interactions, not institutional programmes.

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Partner organisations:

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hello@gmd-global.com

We Are Muesli Srl Impresa Sociale, Italy:

wearemuesli@gmail.com

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