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Overqualified, still satisfied? Revisiting job satisfaction among overqualified migrants

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ABSTRACT

Overqualification – possessing qualifications exceeding job requirements – is a persistent challenge in many high-income countries and disproportionately affects migrant workers. However, little is known about how migrants’ overqualification influences their job satisfaction across different groups. Using the Labour Force Survey and Heckman selection models, this study examines these dynamics in Italy – a revealing case given its relatively recent migration history, rapidly ageing population, and highly segmented labour market – while also speaking to broader debates on migrant integration in contemporary destination countries. Specifically, we analyse (1) differences in overqualification risks between natives and migrants across age-at-arrival groups, and (2) how the association between overqualification and job satisfaction varies with age at arrival. The latter is a crucial factor since it captures migrants’ exposure to host-country education and institutional contexts. Results show that migrants, especially those arriving after age 18, face substantially higher risks of overqualification. Yet the negative association between overqualification and job satisfaction is markedly weaker among them. This ‘overqualification–job satisfaction paradox’ may reflect psychological adaptation, differing comparison standards, or selective attrition from the labour market. Overall, the findings highlight mechanisms that enrich our understanding of how structural disadvantages and subjective experiences interact in shaping migrant labour market integration.

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Overqualification; job satisfaction; immigrants; age at arrival; Italy

Introduction

Employment is a central dimension of migrants’ life in the destination country. Work is the main driver of migration decisions (OECD 2023), and according to the International

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Labour Organisation, in 2022, 61% of all international migrants of working age are in employment (ILO 2024).

However, employment does not necessarily translate into equal opportunities or adequate use of migrants' skills. The quality of the jobs migrants obtain is a crucial dimension of their labour market integration. One key indicator of such quality is overqualification – a condition in which individuals possess higher educational qualifications than required for their jobs (Eurostat 2021; OECD 2007). Research consistently shows that migrants are more likely than natives to be overqualified across high-income countries (Chiswick and Miller 2010; Jacobs et al. 2021). This overrepresentation of migrants in overqualified positions is often interpreted as part of an 'ethnic penalty' (Heath and Cheung 2007). Such disadvantages are linked to several negative labour market outcomes, including wage penalties and limited wage growth (Korpi and Tåhlin 2009), restricted career mobility (Baert, Cockx, and Verhaest 2013), and under-utilisation of skills (Mavromaras, Sloane, and Wei 2015).

A related but distinct and documented finding in the literature is the so-called 'job satisfaction paradox', whereby migrants often report higher job satisfaction than natives, despite facing poorer employment conditions. This paradox has been attributed to lower work-related expectations, as migrants often face more barriers in the job market and thus set their expectations lower (Hodson 1985; Piccitto and Avola 2023) as well as to different work values, such as a stronger emphasis on stability or job security over income or prestige (Kashefi 2011). In addition, migrants' expectations are often shaped in the country of origin, reflecting different labour market conditions and reference standards, which may lead them to evaluate employment outcomes in the destination country more positively (Bartram 2011; Donegani and McKay 2021).

This study bridges these two strands of research – on educational – occupational mismatch, i.e. overqualification and on job satisfaction – by examining the link between overqualification and job satisfaction among migrants. Overqualification is not only an indicator of labour market inefficiency but also a key dimension of migrants' social and economic integration. When large numbers of highly educated migrants are relegated to low-skilled or poorly matched positions, it signals both a loss of human capital and the labour market's limited capacity to integrate migrant talent effectively (Fernández and Ortega 2008). Moreover, the consequences of overqualification extend beyond economic outcomes such as earning capacity (Chiswick and Miller 2010), affecting migrants' well-being and health (Dunlavy, Garcy, and Rostila 2016; Frank and Hou 2018) and the broader effectiveness of migration as a demographic and economic strategy. In particular, overqualification may erode job satisfaction – a central aspect of employment quality linked to job performance (Judge et al. 2001), sickness-related absences (Ybema, Smulders, and Bongers 2010), and early retirement (Schnalzenberger et al. 2014). While in the general population overqualification is generally associated with lower job satisfaction due to skill mismatch (Fleming and Kler 2008; Voces and Caínzos 2021), to the best of our knowledge, there has not been a published quantitative study analysing this relationship among migrants – a group that is disproportionately affected by overqualification.

The extent and implications of overqualification, however, are shaped by age at arrival, which captures exposure to the host-country educational system, language, and institutional environment (Ghio, Bratti, and Bignami 2023; Hermansen 2017). Migrants

who arrive as children are more likely to acquire host-country qualifications and achieve adequate occupational matches, whereas those who migrate as adults face credential recognition barriers and limited local networks (Lancee and Bol 2017), heightening their risk of overqualification and dissatisfaction (Schaafsma and Sweetman 2001). Importantly, age at arrival also influences the formation of work-related expectations, as individuals who arrive at younger ages are more likely to develop reference standards shaped by the destination country, while those arriving later may retain expectations formed in the country of origin. As a result, these groups may differ not only in their skills and resources, but also in their expectations regarding work, working conditions, and career opportunities. Age at arrival thus provides a crucial – yet understudied – lens for understanding and interpreting the heterogeneity in how overqualification shapes migrants' job satisfaction.

Understanding these mechanisms gains additional relevance in light of Europe's demographic ageing. In ageing societies, international migration is increasingly seen as a short- to medium-term strategy to sustain the labour force and ensure welfare state sustainability (Alderotti et al. 2026). Yet migrants themselves are ageing, which raises new challenges for their long-term integration and well-being in the labour market. In this context, overqualification and job satisfaction become particularly important: job satisfaction signals the quality of employment and retention; persistent dissatisfaction could undermine both individual well-being and the effectiveness of migration as a demographic strategy. Ensuring that migrants' skills are effectively used and that their employment remains rewarding is therefore essential not only to assess their current contributions to the economy, but also to anticipate future challenges posed by population ageing.

Building on these considerations, this study relies on the Italian Labour Force Survey data (2014–2022) and applies Heckman sample selection models (Heckman 1979) to pursue two main aims: (1) to assess the likelihood of overqualification among migrants compared to natives by age at arrival; and (2) to analyse how overqualification relates to job satisfaction, focusing on migrant background and age at arrival.

Italy represents a particularly informative case study because, despite migrants being on average less educated than in other European destination countries, levels of overqualification remain comparatively high (Reyneri and Fullin 2011). While the analysis focuses on Italy, the findings offer insights relevant to other European labour markets marked by demographic ageing, limited skill recognition, and persistent mismatches between migrants' qualifications and occupational opportunities. In this sense, Italy serves as an illustrative case for understanding how migration can both mitigate and reproduce inequalities in ageing societies.

Literature review, theoretical framework and research hypotheses

Migrants' integration in the European labour market

The literature identifies different models of migrant labour market integration (Piccitto, Avola, and Panichella 2025; Reyneri and Fullin 2011). In Northern Europe, highly regulated labour markets limit demand for low-skilled workers, resulting in lower employment probabilities for migrants relative to natives, although those employed typically

face fewer disadvantages in job quality. In contrast, in Southern Europe, including Italy, demand for low-skilled labour is high, and lower regulation at the bottom of the labour market allows migrants better access to employment compared to Northern Europe and natives. However, this often comes at the cost of overrepresentation of migrant workers in low-quality, secondary labour market jobs.

Comparative evidence shows that in Mediterranean countries, including Italy, non-Western migrants exhibit higher levels of overqualification compared to natives and migrants from other European regions (Pricila Birgier and Cantalini 2025). Institutional factors such as labour market segmentation, prevalence of small firms, and low demand for qualified jobs exacerbate skill underutilisation (Cantalini, Guetto, and Panichella 2023; Reyneri and Fullin 2011). By contrast, in Continental countries, non-Western migrant men face smaller overqualification penalties, while women often experience a ‘double penalty’: low employment probabilities coupled with higher overqualification risks. Nordic countries display diverse patterns, with double-penalty scenarios more common among women and varying outcomes among men. Selection into employment, particularly among women in these countries further contributes to variation in overqualification risks, highlighting the importance of education, family circumstances, and migration motivations (Pricila Birgier and Cantalini 2025).

Within the European context, Italy exemplifies the Southern European pattern: migrants have relatively high employment rates – 71% for men (about five percentage points higher than native men) and 45% for women (five percentage points lower than native women) (Istat 2023) – but are concentrated in low-skilled, flexible, often irregular, low-paid jobs with poor social recognition. Men largely substitute native workers in agriculture, construction, small trade and manufacturing (Avola 2022; Corrado, de Castro, and Perrotta 2017; Fellini and Guetto 2019), while women are concentrated in domestic care work for the elderly (Ballarino and Panichella 2018; Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies 2024). Structural barriers limit the utilisation of migrants’ skills, resulting in persistent overqualification. Occupational mobility is generally low, particularly for migrants from low-income countries, with initial employment strongly shaping long-term career trajectories (Avola and Piccitto 2020). Higher overqualification persistence among immigrants may be one of the main reasons for this low occupational mobility, indicating that overqualification is closely linked to inequality in career mobility between natives and immigrants, particularly in contexts where occupational segregation channels educated migrant workers into jobs structurally misaligned with their qualifications. These dynamics underscore the trade-off between employment levels and job quality, and the broader waste of human capital this entails, making Italy an informative case for studying how overqualification affects job satisfaction among migrants.

Overqualification among immigrants

Overqualification occurs when an individual’s level of education exceeds the requirements of their current job (ILO 2018). The term is often used interchangeably with overeducation – particularly when measured via formal credentials (Brynin 2002; Chevalier and Lindley 2009) – but differs from overskilling, which concerns the underutilisation of practical or cognitive abilities rather than educational attainment (Giuliano et al. 2024). Although educational qualification and skills are interrelated, mismatches often arise in

only one dimension, underscoring the need to distinguish between qualification and skill mismatches (Flisi et al. 2017). Much of the literature conflates overqualification and underqualification into a single mismatch measure, though they have distinct determinants and implications (Visintin, Tijdens, and van Klaveren 2015). In addition, underqualification is often considered an advantageous position in the labour market, particularly for individuals with low levels of human capital (Schaeffer, Höhne, and Teney 2016). Therefore, this paper focuses exclusively on overqualification.

Evidence across Western Europe shows that migrants are more likely than native-born workers to be overqualified (Jacobs et al. 2021; Montanari 2025), particularly those from non-Western or non-European countries (Hardoy and Schöne 2014; Joona, Gupta, and Wadensjö 2014). This disadvantage reflects both labour supply factors (Ghignoni and Verashchagina 2014) – such as limited destination-country language proficiency (Budría and Martínez-de-Ibarreta 2021; Chiswick and Miller 2013), limited transferability of labour market skills and qualifications acquired in the country of origin (Chiswick and Miller 2009; Friedberg 2000; Lancee and Bol 2017), and weaker or less effective social and job-search networks (Kalfa and Piracha 2018; Kracke and Klug 2021), as migrants' social capital often takes the form of bonding ties within co-ethnic communities, which may provide support but offer limited access to broader labour market opportunities compared to bridging ties with the native population (Lancee 2012; Fellini and Fullin 2018).

In addition, labour demand factors, including labour market regulations (del Rey Poveda et al. 2024), welfare regimes (Pricila Birgier and Cantalini 2025), and employer discrimination against immigrants or ethnic/racial minority workers (Rafferty 2012, 2020), may push migrants to accept jobs below their qualifications (Pager and Pedulla 2015) to avoid unemployment (Khattab and Fox 2016), creating a structural trade-off between unemployment and overqualification among migrant workers from ethnic or racial minority backgrounds (Pricila Birgier and Cantalini 2025).

Importantly, migrants may partially overcome labour-supply side barriers as migrants gradually are incorporated into the destination countries. Education obtained in the destination country (Duvander 2001), longer residence duration, and citizenship acquisition (Jacobs et al. 2021) reduce the risk of overqualification. Within this dynamic, migrants' age at arrival to the destination country serves as a key moderating factor shaping migrants' integration into the labour market. Those who arrive at young ages are more likely to complete their education in the destination country, attain language fluency, accumulate country-specific skills, and establish professional and social networks that facilitate labour market participation (Chiswick and Miller 2009; Gustafsson, Mac Innes, and Österberg 2017). In contrast, those who arrive as adults face greater challenges: foreign qualifications are often devalued, linguistic adaptation is harder, and career mobility is constrained by both age and institutional barriers (Schaafsma and Sweetman 2001). From a life-course perspective (Elder 1994), age at arrival shapes the accumulation of human and social capital, producing divergent labour market trajectories – early arrivals build cumulative advantage, while later arrivals face persistent disadvantages (Dannefer 2003). Age at arrival also influences the formation of work-related expectations, as individuals who arrive earlier are more likely to develop expectations aligned with the destination-country context, whereas those arriving later may retain

expectations shaped in the country of origin (Chiswick and Miller 2009; Lancee and Bol 2017).

However, structural constraints on the demand-side, such as labour market discrimination, may persist regardless of migrants' arrival age or duration of residence. Some studies show that even the children of non-European migrants – born and raised in the destination country – continue to experience high risks of overqualification (Kim 2024; Weber, Ferry, and Ichou 2024), indicating that structural disadvantages linked to ethnic or racial minority status can persist across generations, independent of migration background.

In Italy, research on migrants' overqualification remains limited. A recent regional study focussing on the Lombardy region found high risks of overqualification among women and migrants from non-EU Eastern Europe and the Philippines, while Italian education and longer residence mitigate these risks (Maiorino and Terzera 2024). A comparative study by Pricila Birgier and Cantalini (2025) highlighted a Mediterranean paradox: migrant workers face relatively low unemployment but high risk of overqualification, suggesting that overqualification often functions as a compromise to avoid unemployment (Pager and Pedulla 2015).

Two theoretical frameworks help explain these patterns. *Human capital* theory (Becker 1964) posits that individuals invest in education to enhance productivity and expecting proportional returns in the labour market. From this perspective, overqualification is seen as a temporary mismatch that can be resolved as workers' skills are better matched over time. However, migrants' human capital is often undervalued in destination-country labour markets due to non-recognition of foreign credentials, language barriers, and limited familiarity with local workplace norms (Chiswick and Miller 2009). This devaluation depends, among other factors, on the age at arrival, as it tends to be especially pronounced for migrants who receive education abroad. In the Italian context, for instance, migrant workers face significant administrative and bureaucratic challenges when seeking recognition of their educational qualifications (Fullin and Reyneri 2011). This process is cautious, fragmented, and highly individualised, often depending on the intended use of the credential and assessed on a case-by-case basis (Zanfrini et al. 2015).

Complementarily, *labour market segmentation* theory (Piore 1979) emphasises structural barriers that channel migrants into secondary segments of the labour market – characterised by low wages, precarious conditions, and limited upward mobility – regardless of their qualifications. This structural positioning is not attributed to individual shortcomings, but reflects the systemic demand for a flexible and low-cost labour force to fill positions that are unattractive to native workers. In Italy, these dynamics explain the persistence presence of highly educated migrants in low-skilled occupations (Panichella, Avola, and Piccitto 2021).

Building on this literature,

we hypothesise that migrants are more likely than natives to be overqualified, with the extent of overqualification varying by age at arrival. Those arriving in early childhood (pre-school age) are expected to show levels of overqualification similar to natives, due to earlier exposure to host country norms and culture. In contrast, migrants arriving during school-age or adulthood are expected to face higher risks of overqualification due to greater adaptation barriers (Hypothesis 1 – H1).

Overqualification and job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is widely recognised as a key component of both overall life satisfaction and individuals' well-being (Aleksynska 2018). It is commonly understood as a positive affective state arising from individuals' evaluation of their work experiences (Locke 1976). As such, it represents a subjective and comprehensive assessment of one's job, encompassing multiple facets, including intrinsic elements – such as task content, autonomy, and opportunities for self-development – and extrinsic aspects, such as pay, job security, and working conditions (Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman 1959; Weiss et al. 1967). In empirical research, job satisfaction is often measured using single-item self-assessments capturing individuals' overall evaluation of their job, which provide a synthetic measure encompassing these different dimensions (Wanous et al. 1997). Because work constitutes an important source of identity and self-recognition, job satisfaction is closely linked to broader well-being outcomes, including mental and physical health (Faragher, Cass, and Cooper 2005) and life satisfaction (Judge and Watanabe 1993). In addition, it plays a key role in shaping organisational outcomes, influencing job performance, absenteeism, turnover, and the overall work environment (Ostroff 1992). Given these wide-ranging effects, job satisfaction offers a useful lens to assess migrants' integration and the quality of their employment.

Overqualification not only constrains employment prospects but also undermines workers' well-being, often leading to reduced job satisfaction due to skill underutilisation and a mismatch between expectations and outcomes. Overqualified workers tend to face wage penalties and slower earnings growth compared to their well-matched peers (Korpi and Tählin 2009). Theoretically, these patterns can be interpreted through frameworks such as *effort-reward imbalance* and *relative deprivation* (Siegrist 1996), which emphasise the role of perceived unfair returns to individual effort (Fleming and Kler 2008; Voces and Caínzos 2021), as well as *status inconsistency* theory, which highlights the misalignments between education, income, and occupational status (House and Harkins 1975; Lenski 1956). Based on these frameworks, overqualification is expected to reduce job satisfaction.

However, the strength of this relationship may vary across social groups. Clark's (2003) *less vulnerability* hypothesis suggests that individuals from disadvantaged labour market positions – such as migrants – may be psychologically shielded from the negative effects of poor job matches by comparing their current employment to less favourable alternatives, including unemployment. Some migrants may thus interpret overqualification as a temporary or strategic compromise, prioritising job stability over occupational status or wage expectations (García-Mainar and Montuenga-Gómez 2020). In addition, migrant workers may evaluate their position relative to other migrant groups rather than natives (Bartram 2011), potentially mitigating the effects of relative deprivation (Frank and Hou 2018). *Social comparison* theory (Sheeran, Abrams, and Orbell 1995) similarly posits that when an undesirable condition is widespread within one's reference group, it can become normalised, reducing its negative impact (Chiswick and Miller 2009).

More generally, migrants' job satisfaction should be understood as the result of both job-related and extra-work factors. These include not only objective working conditions – such as wages, contract security, working hours, and occupational status – but also

subjective and contextual determinants, including perceived job quality, future prospects, and a sense of control over one's career trajectory (Judge et al. 2001). Education also plays an important and potentially ambivalent role, as higher educational attainment may enhance expectations and aspirations (Iecovich 2011), but can also lead to frustration when qualifications are not adequately recognised or utilised in the labour market (Fullin and Vercelloni 2009). While these factors are key predictors of job satisfaction among natives, migrants may evaluate them differently, through specific reference frames shaped by migration trajectories, expectations formed before migration, and comparisons with employment opportunities in the country of origin. More specifically, the determinants of job satisfaction may differ between natives and migrants due to structural and experiential factors. While natives tend to place greater weight on job quality, career prospects, and working conditions, migrants may attach greater importance to immediate access to earnings and income stability, particularly in the early stages of labour market integration (Donegani and McKay 2021). In addition, migrants may compare their current employment situation with working conditions in the country of origin, which can lead to more positive evaluations even in the presence of objective disadvantages (Bartram 2011). At the same time, experiences or expectations of discrimination in the destination labour market may further shape how job conditions are perceived and evaluated (Rafferty 2012, 2020). In this sense, job satisfaction may partly reflect processes of adaptation and downward revision of expectations, as well as a more instrumental orientation to work, whereby employment is valued primarily as a source of income security, legal stability, or transnational family support, even in the presence of precarious conditions (Donegani and McKay 2021).

These mechanisms help explain seemingly paradoxical patterns in the literature, whereby migrants – and more generally individuals in disadvantaged positions – may report similar or even higher job satisfaction than natives despite unfavourable labour market conditions, due to adaptive expectations and the relative importance of extrinsic rewards, a pattern consistent with the so-called *job satisfaction paradox* (Hodson 1985; Piccitto and Avola 2023). At the same time, this does not imply that unfavourable job conditions are irrelevant: overqualification, underemployment, and linguistic or social marginality may still undermine satisfaction, although their effects may be filtered through migrants' expectations, language proficiency, and broader adaptation processes (Wang and Jing 2018).

These perceptual mechanisms may further differ by age at arrival, which shapes migrants' expectations and reference frameworks. Those arriving in early childhood – having received education and socialised primarily in the host country – are more likely to compare themselves with native peers and thus experience greater dissatisfaction when overqualified. In contrast, migrants arriving at older ages may evaluate their job situation against pre-migration experiences or the possibility of unemployment, leading to more muted reactions, suggesting that the impact of overqualification on job satisfaction varies systematically by age at arrival. These differences are consistent with the broader evidence on migrant job satisfaction and can be interpreted through *adaptation-level* theory (Helson 1964) and *expectation – disconfirmation* theory (Oliver 1980), which suggest that satisfaction depends on prior expectations and comparison standards.

Based on these frameworks and the existing literature,

we hypothesise that overqualification is negatively associated with job satisfaction, but the relationship varies by migrant status and age at arrival. Specifically, we expect the association between overqualification and job satisfaction to be stronger among migrants who arrived in early childhood, due to earlier educational and social integration. In contrast, we expect the overqualification/job satisfaction link to be weaker for migrants who arrived during school age or adulthood, as they may perceive overqualification as an acceptable compromise (Hypothesis 2 – H2).

Data and methods

Data

We use the Italian Labour Force Survey (IT-LFS) from 2014 to 2022 conducted by the Italian National Statistics Institute (Istat). The IT-LFS surveys Italy's resident population annually, providing comprehensive information on individuals' demographic characteristics, household composition, employment status, job tenure, and job satisfaction. Despite being a cross-sectional survey, it offers the most valuable microdata source for Italy, particularly for migrant-focused studies, due to its large immigrant sample (Alderotti, Mussino, and Comolli 2023; Fullin and Reyneri 2011).

Our analysis draws on individuals aged 25–64 with no missing information at key variables ($n = 1,017,800$ individuals; 13.3% migrants), with migrants identified by place of birth. Since our outcomes of interest – overqualification and job satisfaction – are defined only for workers, we also report the size of the employed population within the full sample. Out of the total sample, 657,211 individuals are employed (12.9% migrants).

Among the employed, we further exclude individuals with missing information on job satisfaction ($n = 12,031$). In addition, we exclude workers employed in the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO)-08 major groups 1 and 2 (i.e. managers and professionals), as they are very unlikely to be overqualified. Hence, our final analytical sample of employed individuals consists of 514,448 workers (15.1% migrants).

While the employed sample is used to analyse the overqualification and job satisfaction link, we rely on a broader sample of 884,516 (14.61% migrants) when modelling selection into employment.

Our choice to focus on individuals aged 25–64 reflects the aim to exclude ages at which respondents may still be in full-time education and not yet fully exposed to the labour market. At the same time, we exclude individuals aged 65 and over, as they are more likely to be partially or fully retired and therefore not consistently exposed to the labour market. Additionally, our sample includes only resident migrants, meaning that the analysis refers exclusively to regularly residing migrant populations.

Measuring overqualification

In this study, we use the objective approach to define overqualification (Capsada-Munsech 2019; Hartog 2000). We especially use the Job Analysis methods, which are a normative approach based on an assumed correspondence between occupation and educational qualifications based on the assessment by job experts. In other words, a worker is considered overqualified when his/her level of educational attainment exceeds the

qualifications typically required for his/her job. This method has been widely used in the overqualification literature (e.g. Montanari 2025; OECD 2007), including in the Italian context (Maiorino and Terzera 2024), mainly due to its parsimonious application, i.e. comparing an individual's occupation and education levels following the internationally standardised categories or their equivalences. Also, compared to the subjective measures of overqualification, such as the self-assessment by workers, the job analysis approach does not suffer from recall bias or respondents' confounding overqualification with job characteristics unrelated to misalignment between educational qualification and occupation levels (Capsada-Munsech 2019).

While the objective approach to measuring overeducation offers valuable insights, it is important to recognise that it also has limitations. One major limitation is its inability to capture the diversity of educational requirements within specific occupations. Many jobs, even within the same occupation, may have different levels of educational demands. In addition, the educational requirements for a given occupation can evolve over time, reflecting changes in the labour market, advances in technology, or shifts in societal needs (Voces and Caínzos 2021). Moreover, the job analysis measure assumes that human capital is acquired mainly through formal education, and educational level is an accurate proxy for an individual's skills. However, over the past decades, the importance of informal education and on-the-job training in human capital investment has grown significantly (Grip and Andries 2024). Despite these limitations, we contend that the heterogeneity in educational requirements is unlikely to substantially bias our estimates of overqualification, given that the observations are drawn from a relatively short time span. Thus, credential inflation in the labour market was not likely to affect our overqualification measure substantially.

As previously mentioned, overqualification status was determined based on two variables: education level (based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level) and job type (based on ISCO-08 classification, 3-digit level). Education is composed of five options: no education, primary education, lower secondary education, upper secondary education, and tertiary education. We decided to group this variable into three categories: no/primary education, secondary education (including both lower and upper secondary), and tertiary education. To classify occupations as low-, medium-, or high-level professions, we used the ISCO-08 competence levels assigned to specific job types. We then matched education levels with job types to determine overqualification. We defined individuals as overqualified if (i) they have tertiary education and are employed in medium- or low-skilled occupations (ISCO from 400 to 999), or (ii) they have secondary education and are employed in low-skilled occupations (ISCO from 900 to 999 plus housekeepers (515) and personal care workers (531 and 532)).

Analytical strategy, dependent and independent variables

We estimate Heckman selection models (Heckman 1979) to analyse, first, the relationship between migrant background and overqualification, and second, the association between overqualification and job satisfaction, while correcting for non-random selection into employment. This approach is appropriate in our case, as both overqualification and job satisfaction are observed only for employed individuals. Failing to account for this selection process would likely bias the estimates.

The first set of analyses addresses the link between migrant background and overqualification. Here, two dependent variables are simultaneously modelled: a binary indicator for overqualification, and a binary indicator capturing whether the individual is observed in employment (i.e. included in the analytical sample). These are jointly estimated through a probit model for the overqualification equation and a probit model for the employment-selection equation. The selection equation includes controls for migrant background by age at arrival (natives; migrants arriving at ages 0–5, 6–18, and 18+), age group (25–34 [reference], 35–44, 45–54, 55–64), macro-area of residence (North [reference], Centre, South), and survey year fixed effects. In addition, the selection equation requires at least one variable that predicts employment but is not expected to directly affect overqualification – an exclusion restriction. Drawing on previous research on labour supply and ethnic wage gaps (Heckman 1976; Cantalini, Guetto, and Panichella 2022; 2023; Pricila Birgier and Cantalini 2025), we use marital status as the exclusion restriction, as it is commonly associated with employment probabilities but should not directly influence whether a worker is overqualified. The overqualification equation includes the same control variables (excluding the exclusion restriction) and adds job-related characteristics: type of contract (permanent [reference], temporary, self-employed, other), working hours (full-time [reference], part-time), and ATECO (Classification of Economic Activity) sector (agriculture [reference], industry, construction, commerce).

The second set of analyses investigates the relationship between overqualification and job satisfaction. Again, we model two dependent variables: job satisfaction – measured on an 11-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied), a widely used and validated measure of work-related satisfaction (Piccitto and Avola 2023; Spector 1997) – and the same employment indicator used in the first set of analyses. The selection equation includes the same controls as previously described. The job satisfaction equation features a binary indicator for overqualification as the main explanatory variable, along with the same set of covariates included in the overqualification equation. The binary indicator for overqualification is interacted with the variable about migration background in order to allow the effect of overqualification to vary across subgroups. Descriptive statistics for the whole sample are reported in Table A1 in the Supplementary Materials.

All analyses are stratified by sex to account for sex-related occupational differences. For ease of interpretation, we report and discuss only the results from the main equations; selection-equation estimates are not commented on, as they behave as theoretically expected. All results are presented as Average Marginal Effects (AMEs), with 95% confidence intervals. All data management and analyses were performed using Stata 18.

Results

Overqualification by migrant background

Figure 1 presents the AMEs of migrant background on the probability of overqualification, separately for men and women. A clear gradient by age at arrival emerges for both sexes: the later individuals arrive in Italy, the higher their likelihood of being overqualified, net of all control variables included in the models. Migrants who arrived

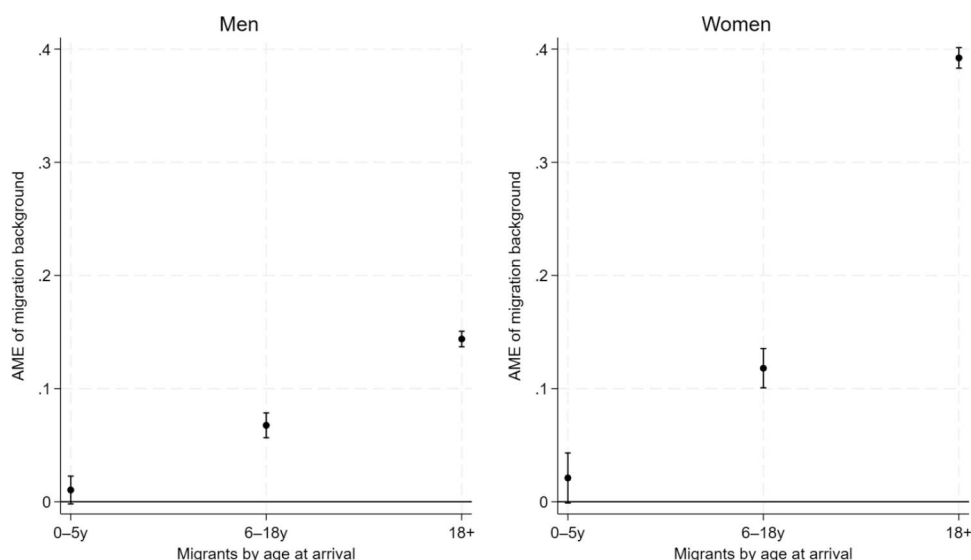


Figure 1. Adjusted average marginal effect of migrant background on the probability of being overqualified for men and women (reference: natives). Source: Authors' elaboration on IT-LFS data. Note: Results refer to the outcome equation of a Heckman selection model accounting for selection into employment. The models control for age group, type of contract, working time, ATECO code, residence area in Italy, and survey year. Full models are provided in the Supplementary Materials, see Tables A2-A5.

between ages 0 and 5 display only slightly higher probabilities of overqualification compared to natives (by 1 percentage point – hereafter p.p. – among men and 2 p.p. among women, the latter significant at 10% level, $p = 0.06$). The gap widens substantially for those who arrived between ages 6 and 18, whose probability of being overqualified exceeds that of natives by 6.8 p.p. for men and 11.8 p.p. for women. Finally, migrants arriving after age 18 exhibit by far the highest levels of overqualification: +14.4 p.p. among men and, strikingly, +39.2 p.p. among women.

Is the association between overqualification and job satisfaction different by migrant background?

We now turn to the association between overqualification and job satisfaction across migrant-background groups. Figure 2 displays the adjusted AMEs of overqualification on job satisfaction – separately for men and women – by age at arrival. Despite relatively wide confidence intervals for some subgroups, a consistent pattern emerges for both sexes: the negative association between overqualification and job satisfaction is weakest among migrants who arrived in Italy after age 18. Among men, the largest negative AME is observed for natives, whose job satisfaction is on average 0.23 points lower when overqualified (statistically significant). Migrants who arrived between ages 6 and 18 and those who arrived after age 18 also display lower job satisfaction when overqualified – by 0.17 and 0.06 points, respectively. For migrants who arrived between ages 0 and 5, the AME is not statistically significant ($p = 0.12$), largely due to wide confidence intervals reflecting limited sample size.

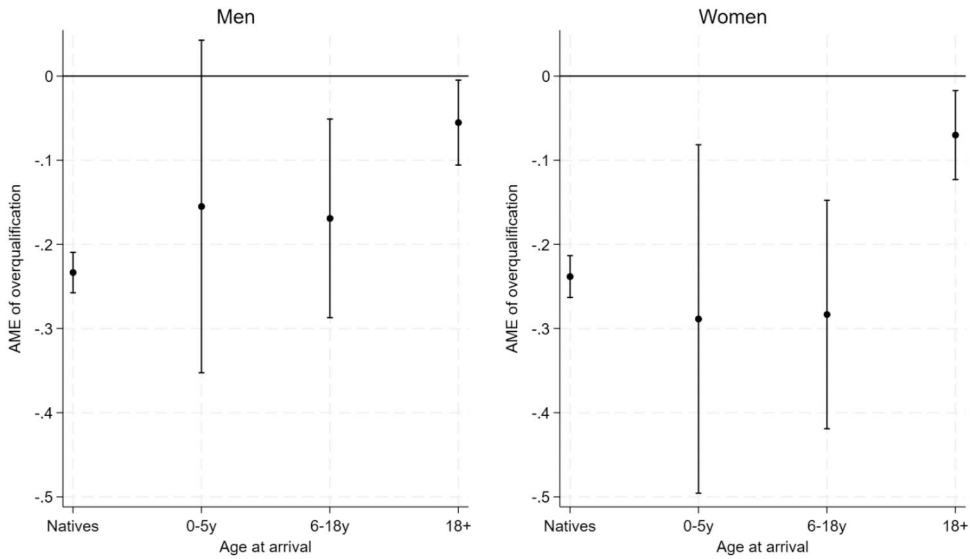


Figure 2. Adjusted average marginal effects of overqualification on job satisfaction by migrant background for men and women. Source: Authors' elaboration on IT-LFS data. Note: Results refer to the outcome equation of a Heckman selection model accounting for selection into employment. The models control for age group, type of contract, working time, ATECO code, residence area in Italy, and survey year. Full models are provided in the Supplementary Materials, see Tables A6-A9.

A similar pattern is found among women. Native women report, on average, 0.23 points lower job satisfaction when overqualified compared to their non-overqualified counterparts. The estimated associations are even larger for migrant women who arrived between ages 0 and 5 and 6 and 18 (−0.29 and −0.28, respectively), although the considerable uncertainty around these estimates invites caution in interpreting subgroup differences. As with men, the smallest negative AME is observed among women who arrived after age 18, who report 0.07 points lower job satisfaction when overqualified.

Robustness check

As a robustness check, we replicate our analysis using an alternative measure of overqualification based on the realised match approach. In this case, the required level of education for each occupation is defined *ex post*, based on the distribution of educational attainment among workers employed in that occupation. More specifically, for each occupation (ISCO-08, 2-digit level), we identify the typical educational requirement using the modal level of education observed among workers. Individuals are then classified as overqualified when their educational attainment exceeds this modal level (Muñoz de Bustillo Llorente et al. 2018).

We construct the realised match measure separately by gender and survey year. This allows us to account for labour market evolution, as well as for well-documented gender differences in occupational sorting and educational attainment. By doing so, we allow the educational distribution within occupations to vary both across years and between men

and women. The results obtained using this alternative operationalisation of overqualification are substantively consistent with those reported in the main analysis, confirming the robustness of our findings (see Figures B1, B2 and Tables A10–A17 in the Supplementary Materials). The first set of analyses – examining the relationship between migrant background and the probability of overqualification – remains largely unchanged. The only differences worth mentioning are that the AME for migrant men who arrived between ages 0 and 5, which is not statistically significant in the main specification, reaches significance in this alternative measure, and that the AME for migrant women who arrived after age 18 is slightly smaller in magnitude (33.2 vs. 39.2 p.p.). In the second set of analyses, focusing on the association between overqualification and job satisfaction, some differences emerge mainly in terms of statistical significance. For instance, among native men, the association is smaller in magnitude (around -0.10 compared to -0.23 in the main specification). Among women, the association for those who arrived between ages 6 and 18 becomes weaker and is no longer statistically significant. Additionally, among men who arrived after age 18, the association turns slightly positive, although it remains not statistically significant. Overall, despite somewhat lower statistical precision, these results confirm the robustness of the main findings: the likelihood of overqualification increases with age at arrival, while the negative association between overqualification and job satisfaction is strongest among natives and tends to attenuate with later arrival.

Discussion and conclusions

This study contributes to the literature on migrant labour market integration and employment inequality by bridging two research strands that are usually analysed separately: overqualification and job satisfaction. While overqualification is widely studied as a measure of labour market inefficiency and skill mismatch (Eurostat 2021; OECD 2007), job satisfaction is generally analysed as an indicator of individuals' well-being and employment quality (Aleksynska 2018; Ostroff 1992). By analysing these two dimensions jointly, this study provides novel evidence on how the mismatch between qualifications and job requirements shapes migrants' job satisfaction, offering a more comprehensive understanding of integration outcomes. This is particularly relevant in ageing societies, where growing reliance on migrant labour raises important questions about employment quality and long-term integration.

Using national-level Italian data and Heckman selection models, we investigate both the likelihood of overqualification among migrants and its link with job satisfaction, paying particular attention to age at arrival. This dimension allows us to move beyond the standard native – migrant dichotomy and capture meaningful heterogeneity linked to migrants' exposure to the host country's educational and institutional context.

Consistent with prior evidence (Budría and Martínez-de-Ibarreta 2021; Maiorino and Terzera 2024; Pricila Birgier and Cantalini 2025), our results confirm that migrant workers are significantly more likely to be overqualified than their native counterparts, though this risk is not uniform, supporting *Hypothesis 1 (H1)*. Migrants who arrived in Italy as adults (aged 18 and over) face the highest risk of overqualification, underscoring the challenges faced by individuals who enter the host country after completing their education or beginning their career abroad. The strong gradient by age at arrival in

overqualification risks suggest that key formative phases – particularly schooling – play a decisive role in shaping skill recognition and occupational trajectories. It also aligns with broader evidence showing that migrants' human capital is often undervalued in destination countries due to difficulties in the recognition of foreign qualifications, limited proficiency in the host country's language, weaker social networks, and, in some cases, discriminatory practices in hiring or job placement (Chiswick and Miller 2009; Fullin and Reyneri 2011). Interestingly, we also observe gendered patterns: migrant women exhibit higher risks of overqualification than men, suggesting that multiple disadvantages can compound to limit labour market outcomes (Baran 2024), aligning with previous studies which refers to the well-known migrant women 'double-disadvantage' (e.g. Pricila Birgier and Cantalini 2025). Beyond individual-level disadvantage, our results clearly point to a significant waste of human capital at the societal level. When educated immigrants are systematically channelled into low-skilled occupations, their skills and qualifications could remain structurally underutilised, particularly in labour markets characterised by strong occupational segregation, such as Italy's. This not only perpetuates inequalities between migrant and native workers but also represents a broader inefficiency for the host country's economy, undermining the potential economic and social returns of immigration.

Regarding the association between overqualification and job satisfaction, our results confirm a negative association, in line with previous studies on general (Voces and Caínzos 2021) or on migrant populations as a homogeneous group (Frank and Hou 2018). However, our analysis of job satisfaction reveals that overqualification does not carry the same 'cost' across migrant-background groups, supporting *Hypothesis 2 (H2)*. While natives and migrants who arrived in early childhood display the strongest negative association between overqualification and job satisfaction, the weakest association observed among migrants who arrived as adults (18+) suggests different standards in terms of returns according to efforts. Natives and migrants who arrived in early childhood might have higher standards in their returns according to their efforts. Migrants who arrived after having completed their education (18+), by contrast, may perceive overqualification as an acceptable trade-off to avoid unemployment (Clark 2003), compare their labour market outcomes to those of other migrants rather than to native workers, and normalise what is widespread in their group (Sheeran, Abrams, and Orbell 1995). Importantly, this weaker penalty should not be interpreted as a diminished disadvantage: rather, it illustrates how subjective indicators can mask persistent structural barriers.

The combined analysis of overqualification and job satisfaction uncovers a layered paradox. Beyond the well-known 'job satisfaction paradox', whereby migrants often report higher job satisfaction than native workers, despite worse labour market conditions (Piccitto and Avola 2023), our results point to what may be termed an 'overqualification – job satisfaction paradox': overqualification, which is especially common among migrants, appears to have a less negative impact on job satisfaction among the most disadvantaged migrant groups – namely, those who arrived in Italy as adults. This dynamic can be read through the *effort-reward imbalance*, *relative deprivation*, and *social comparison frameworks*, as well as with *adaptation-level* and *expectation-disconfirmation* theories, which emphasise that satisfaction depends on prior expectations and reference standards rather than absolute outcomes (Clark 2003; Helson 1964;

Oliver 1980; Sheeran, Abrams, and Orbell 1995). It also offers insight into why overqualification may persist over time: lower dissatisfaction may reduce incentives for job mobility, while structural constraints limit opportunities for skill upgrading.

Although the estimated decreases in job satisfaction linked to overqualification may appear modest, prior research indicates that even relatively small variations in job satisfaction are associated with meaningful differences in retention, turnover intentions, and health (Clark 2001; Faragher, Cass, and Cooper 2005). When interpreted alongside the large gaps in overqualification by age at arrival, these subjective penalties help explain how disadvantages may accumulate over migrants' life courses.

This study has some limitations, which are mainly data-driven. First, the cross-sectional nature of the data used prevented us from assessing how overqualification and job satisfaction evolve over time. By utilising an alternative operationalisation of overqualification that accounts for labour market evolution as a robustness check, we have partially mitigated this concern. Second, the IT-LFS does not consistently record migrants' reasons for moving during the years under analysis. Since prior labour-market experience, human capital, and motivation to work in the host country can vary considerably by migration motive, the absence of this information restricted our ability to explore heterogeneity further. Furthermore, limited sample sizes prevent us from examining differences among migrants from distinct countries of origin, testing whether the overqualification/job satisfaction paradox that we find is robust across cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, drawing on previous findings of persistent ethnic segregation and hiring discrimination across European labour markets (Bursell and Bygren 2025; Quillian et al. 2019), it is reasonable to speculate that non-European immigrants would exhibit a higher risk of overqualification, while the negative influence of overqualification on job satisfaction may be weaker among this group relative to European immigrants. Additionally, by design, the Labour Force Survey captures only regular migrants – excluding both undocumented workers and those not formally settled at the time of interview – so our sample likely represents a relatively well-integrated subset of Italy's migrant labour force. Finally, as noted in the 'Measuring overqualification' section, our objective operationalisation of overqualification based on international classifications of education and occupation rather than task-based or expert assessments has inherent limitations. In particular, occupations requiring different levels of qualification may be grouped under the same category, which can affect the accuracy of mismatch estimates. Although this issue should not compromise the internal validity of our findings, it does warrant caution in generalising results to all migrant groups in Italy.

Despite these limitations, this study shows that analysing the link between overqualification and job satisfaction offers a richer assessment of labour market integration than studying either dimension in isolation, highlighting how structural constraints and individual expectations jointly shape migrants' employment experiences in Italy – a highly segmented labour market within a rapidly ageing society, where migrants play an increasingly vital role. By integrating age at arrival into the analysis, we capture important heterogeneity in both overqualification risks and job satisfaction among migrants. The findings also point to important policy implications. First, improving early integration into the school system remains crucial, as the disadvantage among those arriving after school age is particularly pronounced. Second, adult-arrival migrants would benefit from more systematic procedures for foreign credential recognition and from active

labour market programmes explicitly oriented toward skill utilisation. Third, the weak subjective penalty of overqualification among adult-arrival migrants underscores the risk that employers may exploit migrants' lower expectations; monitoring and enforcement of equal treatment regulations in recruitment and progression are therefore essential.

Future work should build on these findings, particularly through longitudinal data, to explore how early and late integration trajectories influence migrants' employment outcomes and well-being over time in different institutional contexts, bearing in mind the chief role played by age at arrival as a moderator. In the paradigm of fast versus slow demography (Billari 2022), migration represents the only short-term (and as such, provisional) solution to the challenges posed by population ageing. Understanding migrants' labour market dynamics in depth is now, more than ever, crucial for assessing the sustainability, quality, and long-term viability of demographic responses to ageing.

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Author contributions

CRedit: **Eleonora Trappolini**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Wooseong Kim**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Giammarco Alderotti**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study. Data are available <https://www.istat.it/en/data/microdata/> with the permission of ISTAT.

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