FUNDACJA OCALENIE

Untapped Potential

Working Below One's Competencies Among Non-EU Foreign Nationals in Poland

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Mateusz Jeżowski
Julia Şimşek
Kristina Stankiewicz

Research context

According to Poland's Central Statistical Office, in February 2025 there were 1,057,400 foreign nationals working in Poland, 5.3% more than in the same month in 2024. Of these, 402,400 were employed on civil-law contracts (such as contracts of mandate) and men accounted for 59.8% of the foreign workforce described.

The largest groups of foreign workers were citizens of Ukraine (67%), Belarus (11%), Georgia (2.3%), India (2%), Colombia (1.5%) and the Philippines (1.4%). Almost one in five foreigners worked in the Warsaw metropolitan region (19.9%), while the smallest share resided in the Świętokrzyskie region (below 1%).

Data from the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy show the industrial sector had the highest demand for foreign workers[1]. Foreigners were also employed in administrative and support services, transport and logistics, followed by construction, HoReCa (hospitality) and trade. The most common jobs were elementary occupations (40%), craft and related trades (20%), and machine operators and assemblers (15%); clerical workers accounted for 12%, and the remaining categories for 14%, including specialists—2.5%.

It is worth emphasizing that people coming to Poland have diverse levels of education. Recruiting them largely for low-skilled work can lead to employment below their qualifications and competencies, especially for those who previously held higher-level positions in their countries of origin. Eurostat data indicate that in Poland this issue may affect almost 50% of foreign

1 Data on foreign nationals employed in Poland in 2024. Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (PL: Informacja o zatrudnieniu cudzoziemców w Polsce - 2024 rok. Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2025)

workers, nearly 10 percentage points above the EU average. Similar challenges are seen in countries with a recent rise in the share of migrant and refugee populations, such as Greece (69.6%), Italy (64.1%) and Czechia (56%)[2].

Employing foreign nationals below their qualifications or outside their field of study can have far-reaching negative consequences for both the individuals and the Polish labour market. For individuals, this can mean limited career progression, lower earnings, and a sense of untapped potential, all of which, over time, may undermine motivation and well-being and negatively affect quality of life, social integration and cultural capital. From the economy's perspective, it means under-utilising human capital: skills that could meet growing demand in high-competence sectors remain unused, which entrenches shortages of specialists in key industries even as excess labour pools form in low-wage sectors. Ultimately, working below one's qualifications reduces the potential gains from migration and hampers full economic integration of foreign nationals in Polish society.

Research purpose and methodology

The aim of the research is to analyse the situation of foreign nationals who received career counselling from the Ocalenie Foundation, focusing on the match between their jobs and their education, qualifications, and competencies. We sought answers to the following research questions:

- What was the employment situation of the respondents before coming to Poland?
- What is their current employment situation in Poland?

2 Over-qualification rate for employed people, Eurostat, 2023.

- What are the key barriers to accessing work aligned with their qualifications and professional experience?
- How do respondents see their professional future in Poland?

Research sample

The online survey was sent to 800 people - foreign nationals who are currently living in Poland - who had used the Ocalenie Foundation's career counselling at least once in the last four years. We received 137 fully completed questionnaires (51 in English, 26 in Russian, 18 in Polish, 18 in Ukrainian, 12 in French and 12 in Persian). Men predominated in the sample and the largest number of respondents were in the so-called mobile age group (18–44 years old)[3].

Figure 1. Gender of respondents. N=137.

3 The mobile age group refers to people aged 18 to 44, considered part of the working-age population. This group includes individuals capable of changing jobs, developing their skills, or retraining, which makes them more adaptable and open to changes in the labour market.

In the sample, most respondents had higher education. There were no statistically significant differences in education level between women and men

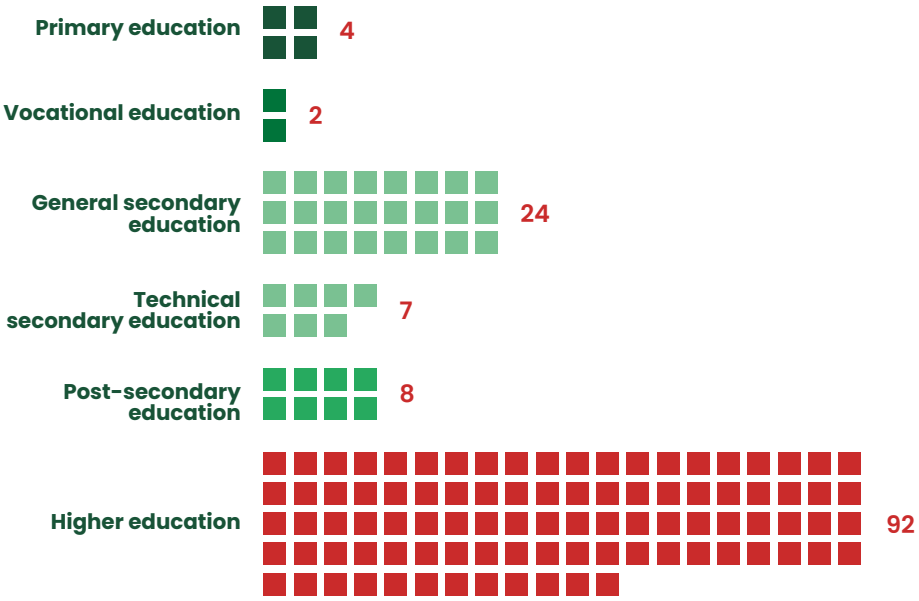

Figure 2. Education level of respondents. N=137.

Respondents came from 37 countries, most commonly Ukraine, Belarus, Afghanistan and Iran.

In addition to an online survey, 13 individual in-depth interviews were carried out with individuals who work below their qualifications and competences in Poland.

Research findings

85% of respondents were economically active before moving to Poland. Their jobs fit into 14 categories (see figure 3). Of the 21 people who reported no employment before relocation, 10 were studying and 11 were unemployed, both groups took their first jobs in Poland. Among those previously employed, the most common sectors were finance, managerial roles, and customer service.

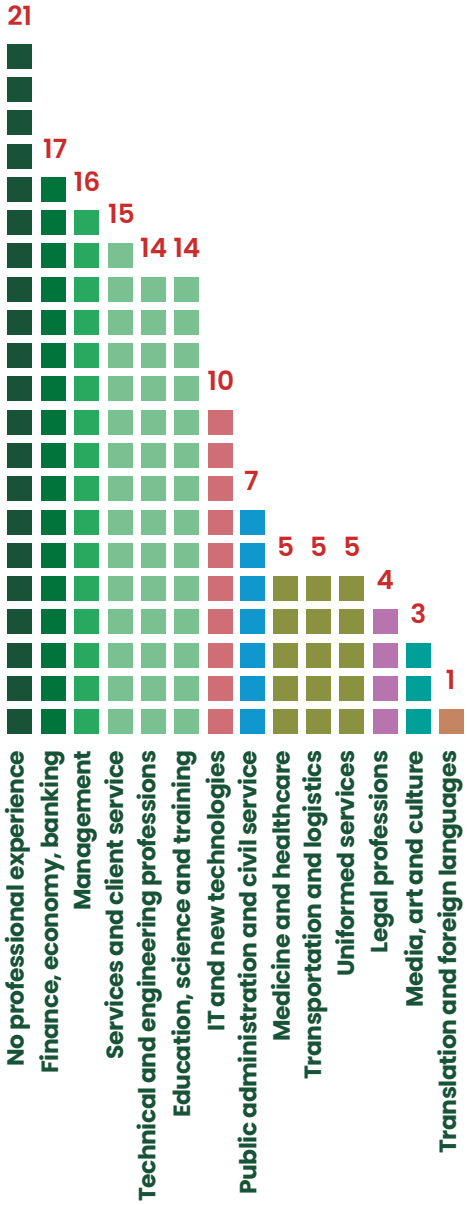

Figure 3. Occupation before arriving in Poland. N=137.

At the time of the survey, over half of the respondents were employed in Poland, most in full-time roles; one in three was unemployed, and almost one in ten was no longer working in Poland.

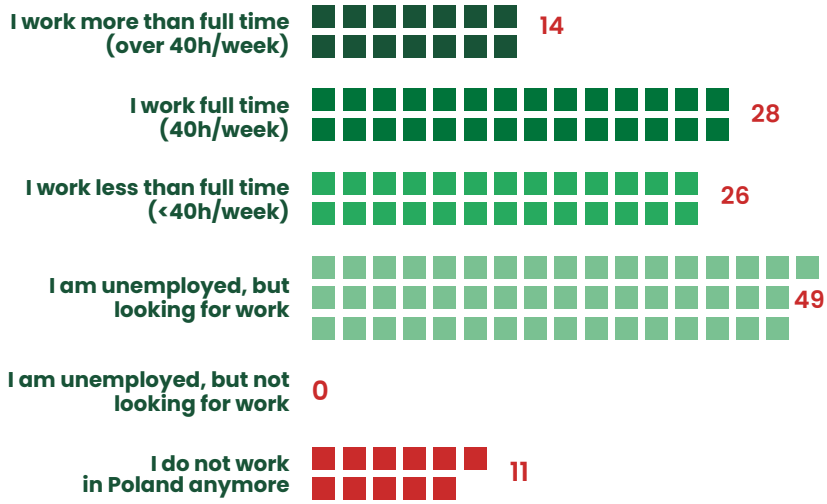

Figure 4. Current employment in Poland. Question: "Are you currently working in Poland?" N= 128.

Currently in Poland almost half of the participants reported carrying out manual work and employment in gastronomy at the time of the study. None of them had worked in these two sectors before coming to Poland. Overall, two-thirds were doing work requiring lower qualifications than the work they had performed before coming to Poland.

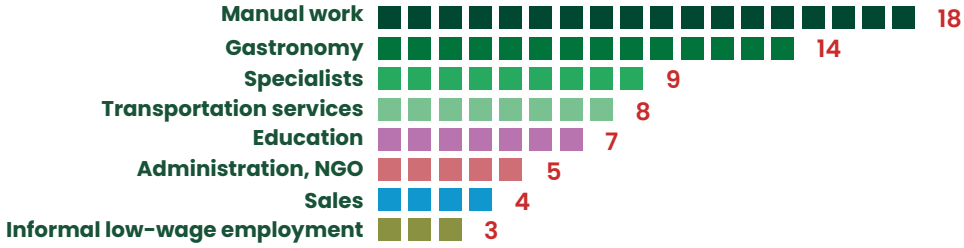

Figure 5. Occupation currently held in Poland. N=68.

There are statistically significant differences ($p < 0.001$) in job satisfaction, alignment with qualifications, and alignment with education before and after arriving in Poland: respondents reported much lower satisfaction in all three areas after arriving in Poland. The difference in pay satisfaction is not statistically significant ($p \approx 0.09$).

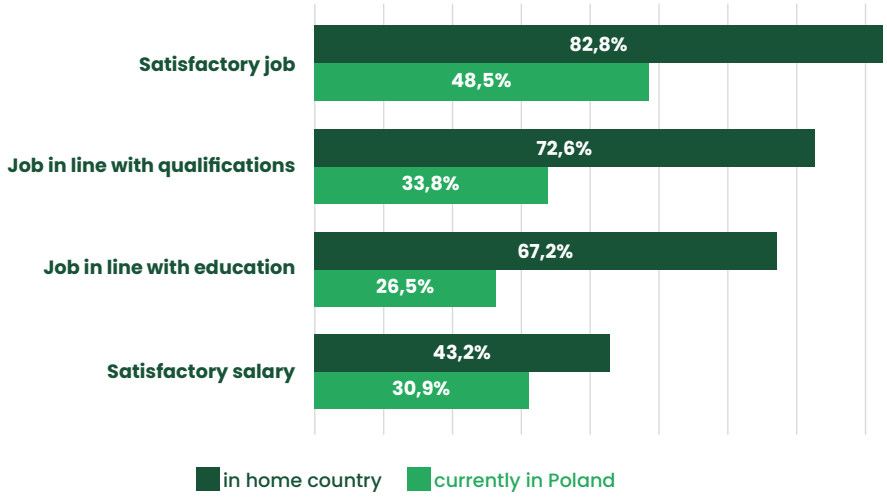

Figure 6. Comparison of the situation before arriving in Poland (N = 122) and in Poland (N = 68). 95% confidence intervals; significance at $p < 0.05$.

Key conclusions

- For the vast majority of respondents, the decision to move to Poland was driven primarily by the search for safety, not by strictly economic motives. People were seeking refuge from war, persecution or political repression, rather than coming to look for work.
- Most respondents had higher education and were professionally active before coming to Poland. Many had held managerial or specialist positions; some had more than one master's degree. Only 21 people in the sample were unemployed prior to arrival. Yet, at the time of the survey in Poland, often after

months or even years in the country, one in three was unemployed.

- Before coming to Poland, most respondents liked their work and worked in line with their education and qualifications. Currently, fewer than half like their jobs; only one in three works in line with their qualifications, and one in four in line with their education.
- Almost half reported carrying out manual work and work in gastronomy in Poland during the study period; none had previously worked in those sectors. Two-thirds are doing work below their previous qualification level. Even so, many expressed gratitude for having any job in Poland.
- Most interviewees want to find work in their trained profession; some plan to re-skill into fields they believe offer better prospects in Poland. The vast majority also acknowledged the need to improve their Polish language skills to enhance their situation on the labour market.
- The most frequently cited barriers to labour-market access were: insufficient Polish language proficiency, discrimination and bias during recruitment and at the workplace, legal and administrative hurdles related to employment, non-recognition of qualifications and experience obtained abroad, and health and age-related obstacles.
- Career counselling consultations are a valuable tool helping foreigners navigate the Polish labour market. They are most effective not as a single meeting, but as a series providing comprehensive support: from assessing work experience and preparing application documents to realistically mapping career opportunities and taking steps toward obtaining required qualifications in Poland. Regular participation allows both sides to build trust and co-create workable solutions.

Recommendations

For foreign nationals seeking work in Poland

- Polish language proficiency is one of the key determinants of recruitment success. It directly affects not only finding a job, but also securing work that matches one's qualifications and future career progression. Learning sector-specific Polish is especially important: mastering professional terminology enables confident communication in the workplace, helps understand procedures, standards and documentation, and supports effective interaction with employers, colleagues and clients. This fosters team integration, greater autonomy and employer trust. Recommended steps include regular language courses, reading specialist literature, attending industry events, and learning by doing through daily practice at work.
- It is vital to use career counselling and labour-market integration programmes consistently, not just once. Career counselling works best as an ongoing process where both the counsellor and the jobseeker are engaged. It takes time to diagnose one's life and work situation, identify barriers and potential, and then plan and follow through on concrete steps. Continuous cooperation helps create professional application documents, prepare for interviews, strengthen soft skills and develop individual job-search strategies. NGOs and public employment services offer free support in these areas.
- A crucial part of integration is to build work experience in Poland gradually. It is not always possible to immediately land a position that matches one's prior qualifications. Offers that may seem less attractive should not be dismissed, provided one's rights and safety are respected. Such work can be a valuable stepping-stone: it helps understand the specifics of the Polish labour market, employer expectations, and build pro-

fessional networks. It also develops new language and practical competencies and strengthens adaptability, a quality valued in any market. Over time, diverse experience increases competitiveness and can make it easier to return to work aligned with one's qualifications. This process takes patience and commitment, but it is an important step toward a stable, satisfying career path.

- It is recommended to align one's plans with labour-market demand and grow in high-need occupations. Analyses point to shortages in construction, logistics and transport, IT, education, and healthcare. Specialising in these sectors boosts one's chances of stable employment and career progression. Gaining additional competencies, licenses and qualifications is crucial therefore it is important to make use of upskilling courses, industry training and qualification programmes offered by public institutions and NGOs (including publicly funded vocational courses). Regularly using these forms of support helps plan one's professional development and respond flexibly to changing economic needs.

For organisations supporting foreign nationals in finding work

- Where resources allow, it is recommended to expand access to language and vocational courses, especially at flexible hours and online, so that people who are already working can participate.
- Providing counselling in the language the client uses increases openness and engagement from the outset, enables clearer understanding of needs and expectations, and supports the development of coherent, long-term career plans. At the very beginning, it is important to explain the benefits of ongoing counselling, especially when someone is looking only for quick temporary work, to help shift the perspective from short-term to strategic. Active participation in counselling, in a language

the client understands, supports realistic career pathways, better preparation for labour-market requirements, and more informed decisions aligned with individual competencies and goals.

- It is advised to build cooperation with employers. Co-creation internship programmes, training, job fairs and other events can help develop durable partnerships with companies willing to employ foreign nationals in line with their qualifications and experience. Career-counselling organisations can play a key role by supporting employers in the onboarding of new staff, for example, helping design induction programmes, facilitating team communication, offering guidance on cultural differences, and supporting workplace integration. These measures improve employment outcomes, reduce turnover, and foster inclusive work environments. It is also advised to consider advocacy for simplifying diploma recognition, speeding up residence and work legalisation, and combating discrimination, as evidence-based communication with decision-makers can raise awareness of the value foreign workers bring to the Polish labour market.

For employers

- Employers can fully tap into employees' potential by systematically assessing their actual skills and experience, for example through competency tests, individual evaluation interviews, analysis of past work, and observation of practical skills on the job. This helps match duties to capabilities, plan career paths, and increase satisfaction and engagement. Conscious competency management enables better use of human capital, improves process efficiency, and builds a stable, motivated team that contributes to the organisation's long-term success.

- Creating internships and providing language and onboarding support makes it easier for foreigners to start effectively in Poland. Internships offer first-hand experience of Polish workplace realities, procedures, organisational culture and industry requirements, and help develop practical skills and confidence. Language support, both general Polish and sector-specific courses, enables clear workplace communication and understanding of documentation and professional terminology. Conduct OHS training in a language people understand to ensure safety and confidence in performing tasks. Comprehensive onboarding programmes familiarise new hires with structure, procedures and standards, and support team integration, reducing stress and uncertainty and accelerating full independence on the job. It is recommended also to invest systematically in training and staff development, including for multicultural teams. Such training improves task execution and quality, supports integration, and reduces misunderstandings stemming from cultural differences. Over time, this builds motivation, engagement and loyalty, increases organisational effectiveness, and creates a welcoming environment for culturally diverse teams, now a standard on modern labour markets.

Untapped Potential
Working Below One's Competencies
Among Non-EU Foreign Nationals in Poland

Full report in Polish available here:

Authors:
Mateusz Jeżowski, Julia Şimşek, Kristina Stankiewicz

Project coordination:
Katarzyna Tuzinek

Cooperation:
Mahdieh Gholami, Joanna Biedrzycka, Tatsiana Marmysh, Natalia Jakoniuk

Graphic design:
Paweł Sky

Publisher: Fundacja Ocalenie, ul. Krucza 6/14a, 00-537 Warszawa
www.ocalenie.org.pl

FUNDACJA OCALENIE

Support Ocalenie Foundation's activities

ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG

This publication was produced with the support of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation – Regional Office in Warsaw, funded by the German Federal Foreign Office. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation or the German Federal Foreign Office. The publication is distributed free of charge and may not be used for electoral campaign purposes.

FUNDACJA
OCALENIE