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PAVING THE WAY FOR FUTURE LABOUR MIGRATION

A Belgian-Tunisian Skills Mobility Partnership

Policy Insight

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Abstract

In September 2017, the European Commission included pilot projects on legal migration in the European Agenda on Migration.¹ The aim was twofold: to offer legal alternatives to irregular crossings, and to test new structures and approaches to better manage legal migration with key partner countries.²

This paper analyses the results from a recently concluded 22-month skills mobility partnership between Belgium and Tunisia that offered Tunisian graduates a six-month internship in Belgium and job seeking support on their return to Tunisia. It provides examples of the main challenges encountered and the lessons learnt in each phase of the project, and insights into the different factors that shaped participants' satisfaction and their performance (e.g. skills-development and employability).

The multidimensional cooperation of different stakeholders (e.g. immigration office, public employment services and employers' associations) from both countries determined the project's success. The stakeholders supported implementation steps, including assessing labour market needs in both countries, streamlining administrative and logistical procedures, and selecting participants.

From the participants' perspective, having their plans and expectations taken into account was key to have a satisfactory experience. The welcome received in the team and any additional training provided on arrival, interactions with an internship supervisor, and the degree of responsibility given during the internship also affected participants' overall satisfaction, their skills development and feelings about integration.

Even if limited in scope, such pilot projects can pave the way to fully fledged skill mobility partnerships by identifying the aspects and dimensions that could be scaled up. The evidence and analysis resulting from these experiences could provide important insights for the design of the recently proposed Talent Partnerships within the New Pact on Migration and Asylum.³

¹ European Commission, COM(2017) 558 final

² European Commission, COM(2019) 126 final

³ European Commission, COM(2020) 609 final.

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Contents

Key messages..... 1

1. Shrinking opportunities for legal migration to the EU for African citizens 2

2. Skill mobility partnerships as new legal pathways 3

 2.1 A Belgian-Tunisian example 4

 2.1.1 Awareness campaign and recruitment process 5

 2.1.2 Departure and internship in Belgium 6

 2.1.3 Return support for integration in the labour market 6

 2.1.4 Participants’ satisfaction 7

 2.1.5 Companies’ satisfaction..... 13

 2.1.6 Main achievements and lessons learnt for the future 13

3. Conclusions 16

References 17

Appendix: Questions and scales 18

List of Boxes, Figures and Tables

Box 1. Project’s development and implementation: challenges and lessons learnt..... 15

Figure 1. Evolution of first-time permits to citizens of African countries: absolute values (left-hand side) and relative to overall EU permits (right-hand side) 2

Figure 2. Irregular crossing and permits for occupation reason of African citizens 3

Figure 3 Participants by type of degree and sex 7

Figure 4 Evaluation by education level and affinity of studies with the internship sector 8

Figure 5. Evaluation of participants by employment type upon return..... 9

Figure 6. The role of supervision and integration: overall satisfaction 10

Figure 7. The role of supervision and integration: skills acquired and network established 12

Table A 1. Evaluation questions, grading and conversion scales 18

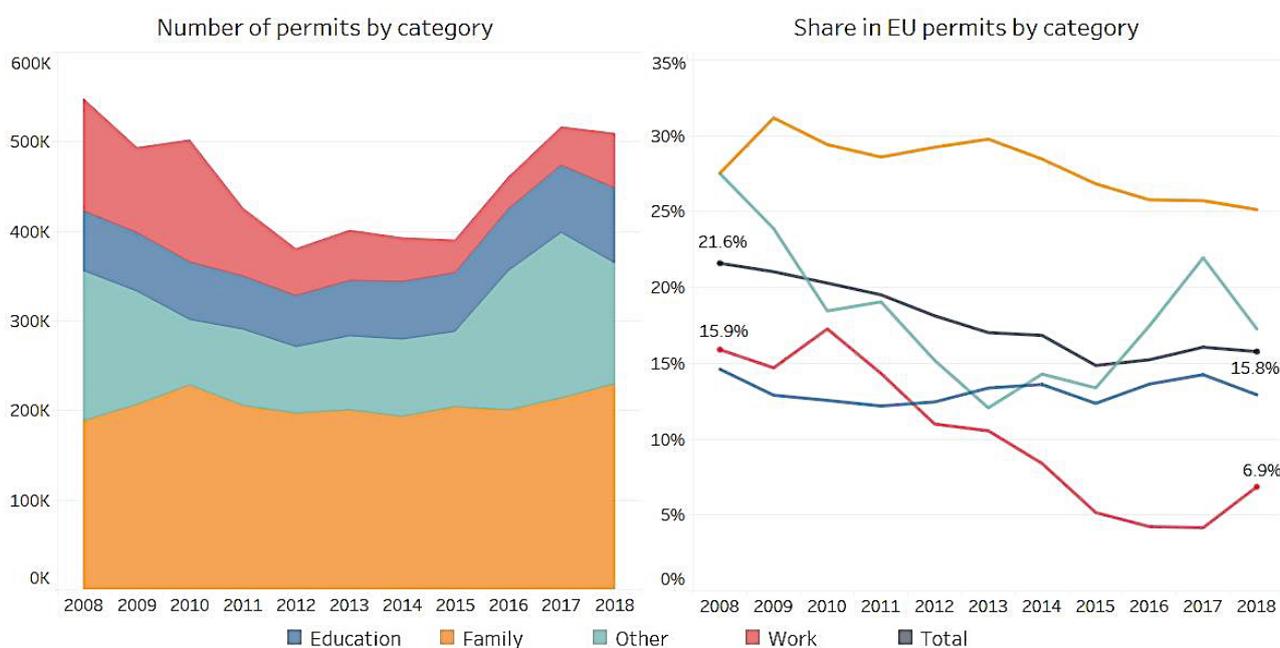
Key messages

1. The European Commission encourages the use of new approaches to broadening labour migration to the EU, with the twofold aim of improving migration management with key partner countries, and decreasing the likelihood of people relying on irregular crossings.
2. Pilots for skill mobility partnerships are currently being tested by partner countries. These can differ in several aspects: target group (e.g. recent graduates or young professionals), type of contract (e.g. internship or work) or duration.
3. The IOM skill mobility partnership between Belgium and Tunisia relied on the multidimensional cooperation of different stakeholders (e.g. immigration office, public employment services and employers' associations) to successfully provide recent Tunisian graduates with an internship in Belgium and job seeking support upon return to Tunisia.
4. Identifying labour market needs in both countries, as well as those of Tunisian companies interested in hiring participants after their Belgian internship, has been an important project development determinant in facilitating job seeking and placement upon return.
5. With the exception of two participants who continued their studies, all graduates found employment after the internship project: 50% found jobs during the internship before returning to Tunisia; 90% are employed in Tunisia; and 26% are employed by the same Belgian host company (either in a subsidiary in Tunisia or, in one case, at the Belgian headquarters).
6. In terms of participants' experience and development, factors such as interactions with the internship supervisor, additional training received on arrival, welcome to the team on arrival and degree of responsibility during the internship affected not only participants' overall satisfaction, but also their assessment of the skills learnt and how important they regarded them for future employability.
7. Foreign direct investments were a positive spill over of the project, as some Belgian companies decided to establish a subsidiary in Tunisia. In a long-term view, this aspect can help increase the understanding of the growth potential of partner countries while strengthening relationships and favouring skills returns at the same time
8. Close collaboration since the project development between the IOM and the companies has helped both sides build knowledge. The IOM has improved its understanding of the private sector's interest in international hiring and the practical issues that companies face, and companies have become acquainted with different aspects of international labour migration, such as ethical recruitment practices and skills recognition.
9. With an overall budget of €350,000, the cost per participant was around €11,500, which included all aspects of the project from accommodation and monthly allowances to travel and training.
10. Lessons learnt and good practices from these pilot projects can help identify the core elements and mechanisms necessary to establish successful, fully fledged skills partnerships in the future. In addition, the capacity building and relationships established throughout these projects will allow for progressive economies of scale and further decrease costs.

1. Shrinking opportunities for legal migration to the EU for African citizens

Between 2008 and 2018, first-time permits issued to non-EU citizens increased by 2.2% each year on average, with those for work growing by 1.1%. Yet, as far as citizens of African countries are concerned, the overall number has remained rather flat, at between 450,000 and 500,000 permits each year, except for the dip between 2012 and 2015. Moreover, while overall permits have decreased on average by only 0.7%, those for occupational reasons fell by 6.4% each year (Figure 1, left-hand side). Citizens of African countries have lost importance in relative terms too: their share in the overall permits issued to non-EU citizens fell from 21.6% in 2008 to 15.8% in 2018, and from 15.9% to 6.9% for work permits (Figure 1, right-hand side).

Figure 1. Evolution of first-time permits to citizens of African countries: absolute values (left-hand side) and relative to overall EU permits (right-hand side)

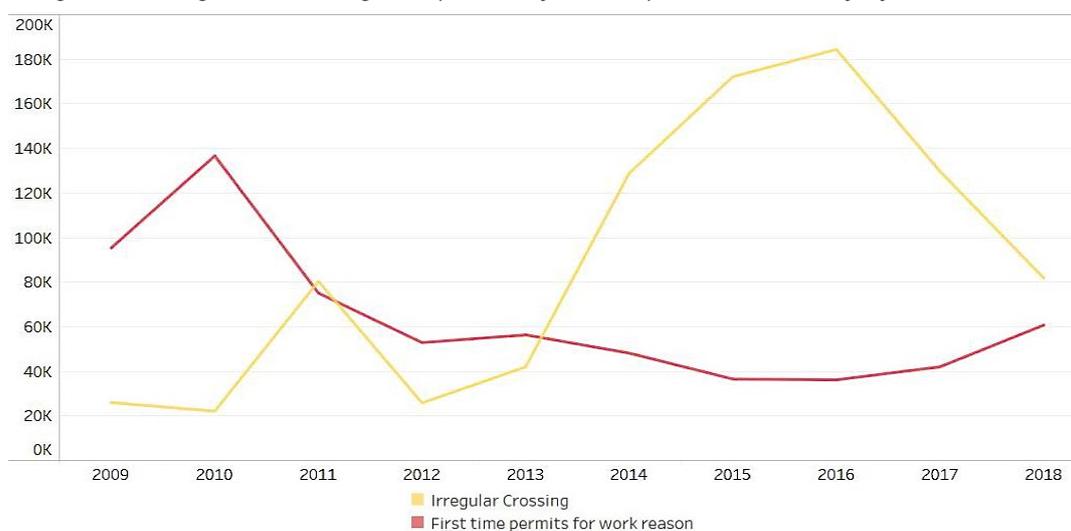


Source: own computation based on EUROSTAT 2020 [migr_resfirst]

The largest drop in work permits was registered between 2015 and 2017 when, on average, 38,000 EU permits were issued every year to citizens of African countries, compared to an average of 84,000 before 2015. This diverges from the overall trend, as the average number of work permits issued to all non-EU citizens went up from 620,000 between 2008-14 to 850,000 between 2015-17.

While work permits issued to African citizens have decreased since 2010, irregular crossings to the EU started to rise in 2012, reaching their peak in 2015-2016 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Irregular crossing and permits for occupation reason of African citizens



Source: own computation based on EUROSTAT 2020 [migr_resfirst] and FRONTEX

2. Skill mobility partnerships as new legal pathways

The increase in irregular crossings was one of the reasons for including pilot projects on legal migration in the European Agenda on Migration in September 2017.⁴ Similar projects already existed on a bilateral basis between member states and selected third countries;⁵ however, besides broadening opportunities for legal migration, these new proposed pilot projects aim to test and put in place structures and approaches that will more effectively manage legal migration with key partner countries.⁶ Although it was first indicated that third countries with a good level of cooperation on migration management independently from their region would be prioritised, the focus on African countries was clearly stated in the 2018 State of the Union.⁷ The first projects are, in fact, established with African countries, mostly North African.⁸

The focus in terms of purpose of migration (e.g. occupation or study) as well as economic sectors of such projects is left to member states to decide, with the European Commission providing financial support and coordination with third countries for the projects' implementation, and the private sector and public-private partnerships identifying shortages in the labour market and facilitating integration in the latter. This follows the approach of the

⁴ European Commission, COM(2017) 558 final

⁵ See for instance GiZ projects between Germany and, for instance, Morocco in the hotel and hospitality industry. (<https://www.giz.de/en/mediacenter/68745.html>), or Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Philippines and Tunisia in the health sector for nurses (<https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/41533.html>); or ENABEL project between Belgium and Morocco in the ICT sector (<https://www.enabel.be/content/europees-proefproject-palim-linkt-it-ontwikkeling-marokko-aan-knelpunberoeopen-vlaanderen-0>), and Beirens et al (2019).

⁶ European Commission, COM(2019) 126 final.

⁷ State of the Union 2018 Factsheet "Enhancing safe and legal pathways to Europe" (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/state-union-speeches/state-union-2018/state-union-2018-migration_en).

⁸ European Commission, COM(2019) 126 final.

Global Skills Partnership, where programmes between countries aim to share costs and benefits, and favour human capital formation.⁹ The flexibility of such partnerships would also allow one or more countries (both of origin and destination) to be included, and, in the EU's case, envisage a coordinating role for the European Commission, in order to show the EU's common commitment and reflect the integration and interdependence of member States' labour markets.¹⁰ The Talent Partnerships proposed in the recently released New Pact on Migration and Asylum show that this is the direction intended by the European Commission for the future, by providing a "comprehensive EU policy framework [...] to better match labour and skills needs in the EU, as well as [...] engaging partner countries strategically on migration".¹¹

The collaboration between the private sector, inter-governmental organisations, and public employment services in both countries is pivotal to correctly assess the scope of the projects and the needs of the stakeholders. The recent pilot projects appear to strengthen the role of this public-private collaboration, especially in terms of evaluating the needs of both countries' labour markets. This aspect is especially important if their developmental impact is to be increased by both i) encouraging skills return and ii) attracting foreign investments.

2.1 A Belgian-Tunisian example

The recently concluded IOM project "Enhancing Tunisian Youth Employability through Professional Internships in Belgian Companies"¹² did indeed involve Belgian companies both with or without an interest in expanding business in Tunisia, and Tunisian companies interested in hiring recent graduates with specific skills and experience abroad.

This 22-month project provided 31 Tunisian students and university graduates with opportunities to upscale their skills and increase their employability. Supported financially by the Government of Belgium, the project has sought to address the dual challenge of a high unemployment rate among young Tunisians, particularly recent graduates, and the persistent risk of youth resorting to irregular migration.¹³

Through the IOM's support and the creation of a solid network of public organisations and private enterprises in both countries, the participants started six-month internships in 12 different companies in Belgium. Upon return to Tunisia, participants were supported in jobseeking in Tunisia for five months and received additional training to further enhance their professional skills.

⁹ Clemens (2015), and Clemens and Gough (2017, 2018).

¹⁰ Barslund, et al. (2019), European Commission, COM(2020) 609 final.

¹¹ European Commission, COM(2020) 609 final.

¹² Initial project information sheet available at: https://belgium.iom.int/sites/default/files/Gallery/Factsheet%20Enhancing%20Tunisian%20Youth%20Employability_EN.pdf; Video of the project including participants' opinions <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msfilYm2hHA&feature=youtu.be>

¹³ Alcidi, et al. (2020), EMNES Policy Paper 012.

Except for two participants who wanted to continue their studies, everyone found a job at the end of the project, and half had already done so during the internship period in Belgium.¹⁴

The overall budget allotted to the project was €350,000. This included all expenses anticipated in the planning phase as well as additional ad hoc training and support upon return as needed.

Despite its novelty and the resulting sunk costs during implementation, the project still managed to keep to a cost of around €11,500 per participant. Given that all participants found a job upon their return to Tunisia, this is an encouraging result. From a long-term perspective, costs could be significantly reduced if such projects are scaled up into fully fledged skills partnerships by exploiting economies of scale and building on established relationships.

2.1.1 Awareness campaign and recruitment process

In the initial phases, the IOM set up an awareness campaign aimed at the private sector in Belgium. The support provided by different intermediary organisations, such as the Public Employment Services (e.g. VDAB) and foreign investment agencies (e.g. Invest-Export.Brussels and FIPA Tunisia) in promoting the project within their networks was key to identify interested companies.

In total, 116 companies were contacted by IOM Belgium through different channels (email, in person, etc.), of which 12 ultimately confirmed their availability to host one or more interns. Once the internship offers were transferred to Tunisia, IOM Tunisia, in collaboration with the Tunisian Export Promotion Center (CEPEX), identified interested Tunisian companies and assessed their recruitment needs in terms of profiles and skills needed. IOM Tunisia then matched these needs with the content of the internship offers received from Belgian companies. Seven companies in Tunisia confirmed their interest in collaborating with the IOM to identify and select beneficiaries and support their recruitment after the internship. Several other Tunisian companies were interested in taking part in the project but were not able to confirm the early recruitment of candidates due to uncertainty about their recruitment needs in six months' time.

Once the recruitment framework was put in place, vacancies were disseminated by the Tunisian Public Employment Service (i.e. ANETI) and IOM Tunisia via their offices and partners (i.e. career centres) in different Tunisian cities. The vacancies were also shared with those Tunisian companies interested in recruiting the trained participants, so they could identify which profiles would be of interest upon return from Belgium. By the end of the recruiting phase, IOM Tunis had received around 4,000 applications for 38 positions available in Belgium. Candidates were shortlisted in an early pre-selection process based on the following criteria:

- Recently graduated youngsters
- No previous work experience

¹⁴ Two interns continued their studies, while the other 27 found an occupation, of which 24 were in Tunisia and three abroad. Finally, two interns were ultimately excluded from the project due to professional misconduct at the workplace and general lack of commitment towards the internship.

- Relevant educational background
- Language proficiency in French and English as requested in the vacancy they were applying to.

Shortlists were then shared with the recruiting companies in Belgium so they could finalise the recruitment process through tests and/or interviews. The considerable amount of applications took a long time to process, mainly because of the lack of automated processes and screening tools to filter applications. For future projects, therefore, it is necessary to identify partners adopting such tools at the project development stage.

2.1.2 Departure and internship in Belgium

The IOM gave the selected interns the necessary administrative and logistical assistance for their travel to Belgium, coordinating with the Belgian Immigration Office for visa processing and booking the flights, for example. IOM Belgium provided accommodation for each intern, as well as a monthly expenses allowance in line with the cost of living in Belgium.

The main challenge during this phase of the project was finding accommodation for participants. The IOM worked with several urban housing providers (university campus, youth hostels, housing associations, estate agents etc.). In more rural and remote areas it was necessary to liaise with private homeowners, often at higher cost. Some participants were not satisfied with the accommodation provided. The freedom to choose their accommodation could be left to participants in future projects, therefore, with the IOM and relevant partners providing logistical and financial support.

From the aspect of interns' profiles and skills, 'soft skills' represented unforeseen challenges in different ways. Hence, in response to employers' interim evaluations highlighting the issue, the IOM provided a training in Belgium covering topics such as:

- General introduction to the concept of soft skills
- Time management
- Communication and conflict management
- Professional behaviour (in-house rules, how to deal with leave requests, sick leave, etc.)
- Teamwork

2.1.3 Return support for integration in the labour market

The IOM supported participants on their return by providing additional training and/or internships, with the aim of helping them find employment. IOM Tunisia continued to communicate with participants through monthly email exchanges and phone calls. The exercise started with the first returning interns in August 2019 and continued until the end of January 2020, when all remaining participants had found a job.

All participants could choose training that was tailored to their specific professional profile. For the fourteen participants who found before returning in Tunisia, the training was linked to their future employment to maximize its benefit. Furthermore, all returning interns took part in five

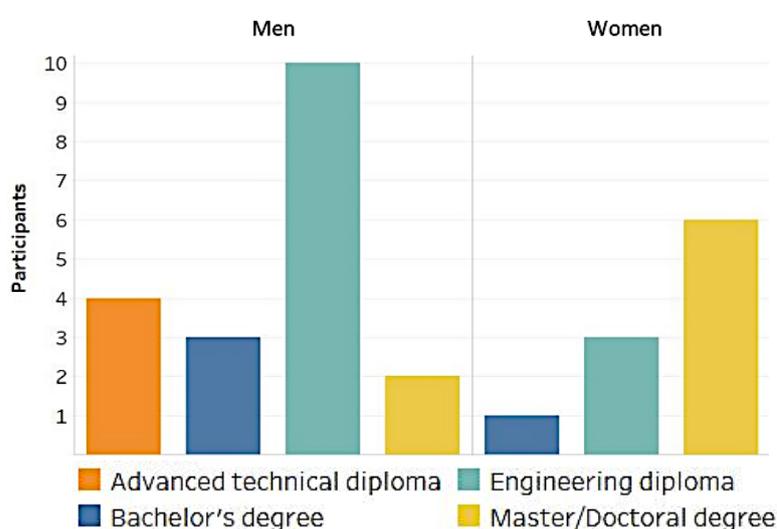
days' training on soft skills. This covered three topics – 'horizontal and vertical communication in the workplace', 'preparing your CV and job interview', and 'developing your personal effectiveness' –and complemented the training delivered in Belgium halfway throughout the project in response to the companies' interim evaluation.

Finally, on a case by case basis and where necessary, the IOM provided tailored support to participants to enable them to exploit hiring opportunities relevant to them. For instance, scholarships were provided to cover accommodation costs in Tunis to complete trial periods in recruiting companies' headquarters, and co-finance arranged so they could buy the equipment needed to start entrepreneurial activities.

2.1.4 Participants' satisfaction

Most participants hold an engineering diploma (75% of which are men), followed by graduates with a master's or doctoral degree (75% of which are women). Participants with an advanced technical diploma or a bachelor's degree represent together about a quarter of all participants (Figure 3). In terms of field of education, IT features most among graduates with an engineering diploma, and account for half of the graduates with a bachelor's degree. Almost all graduates with a master's or doctoral degree, however, undertook business studies. Finally, the group of participants with an advanced technical diploma is the most diverse, with subjects ranging from baking to shooting and video editing.

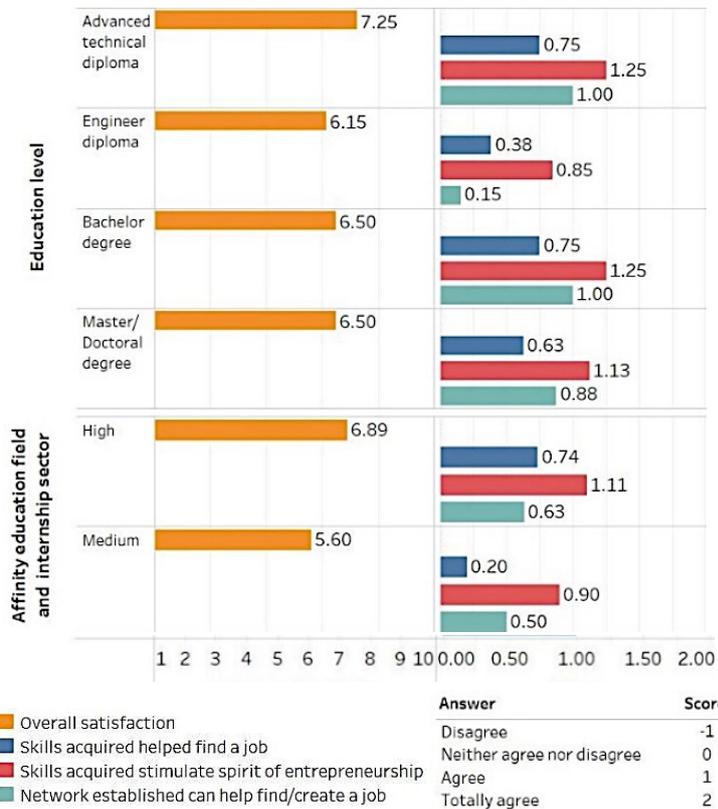
Figure 3. Participants by type of degree and sex



Besides the level of education, the affinity between the field of education and the sector of the company hosting the intern could shape participants' evaluation of the project and its added value. Even though the selection process provided a high level of affinity overall, some fitted better than others. For example, someone with an advanced technical diploma as a plumber working in the construction sector could have a higher affinity than someone with a master's degree in business management and marketing working in the IT sector.

Participants were asked to give a score from 1 to 10 on their overall satisfaction with the internship, as well as a qualitative assessment on the extent to which:

Figure 4. Evaluation by education level and affinity of studies with the internship sector



- skills acquired helped them find a job,
- skills stimulated the spirit of entrepreneurship, and
- the network established helped them find or create a job back home.

For these qualitative questions, a four-entry grading scale was provided, moving from ‘disagree’ to ‘totally agree’. Figure 4 reports results both by education level and by affinity between the field of education and the internship sector.

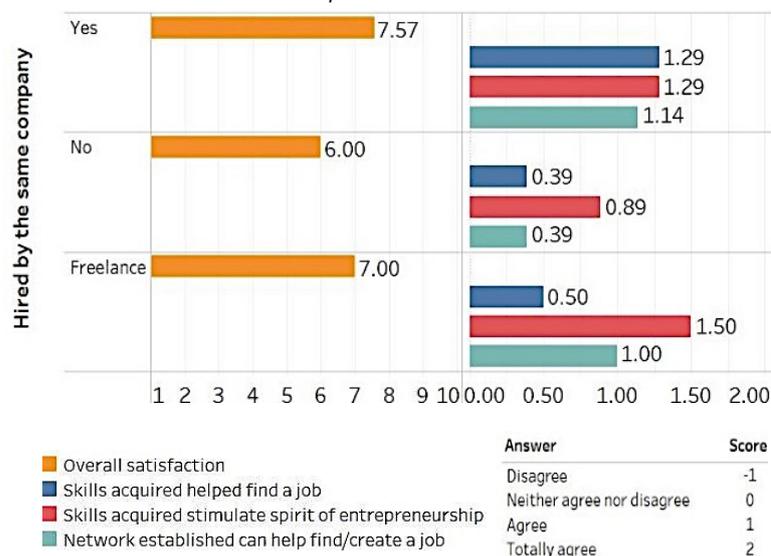
Participants with an advanced technical diploma reported the highest scores on overall satisfaction, and – together with bachelor degree holders – on the

other three qualitative dimensions as well. Engineering graduates are the least satisfied across all dimensions, scoring the importance of the network established in facilitating jobseeking particularly low. In fact, while the others agree on the importance of the network, engineering graduates seem neither to agree nor to disagree. In terms of affinity between education field and internship sector, there is more than a point difference on overall satisfaction between high (6.9) and medium (5.6) affinity. However, the main difference between the two groups lies in the rating of the importance of skills acquired in facilitating jobseeking. The high-affinity group, on average, agree more closely with the statement (0.75) than the group with medium affinity, who neither agree nor disagree (0.20). Overall, it is the spirit of entrepreneurship that gains the most from the skills acquired during the internship.

Upon termination of the project, 93% of participants found a job, while the rest continued to study. Of those with a job, 89% found it in Tunisia, 7% in Belgium and 4% in Germany. Moreover, 26% of all participants were hired by the company that hosted their internship, specifically in subsidiaries in Tunisia (except for one participant in Belgium), while 67% were hired by a different company and the remaining 7% are working freelance in Tunisia.

While all three groups by type of employment evaluated the project as positive overall, the participants hired by a different company scored one point below freelance workers, and one point and a half below those hired by the same company at the end of the internship (Figure 5). The other three qualitative indicators show results in line with the working situation of participants: those hired by the same company report the highest score for the importance of skills and network developed during the internship in finding a job; while freelance workers in Tunisia report the highest score for the role of skills acquired in increasing the spirit of entrepreneurship and second highest for the role of the network.

Figure 5. Evaluation of participants by employment type upon return



2.1.4.1 The role of supervision and integration

Participants were in contact with the IOM throughout the entire project to have their progress monitored and support provided if needed, and were asked questions at each of the three steps (i.e. pre-departure, internship, and return). Clearly, different experiences and the type of support received during the internship can affect a participant's overall satisfaction with the project and its concrete outcomes (e.g. developing skills or ease of finding a job upon return).

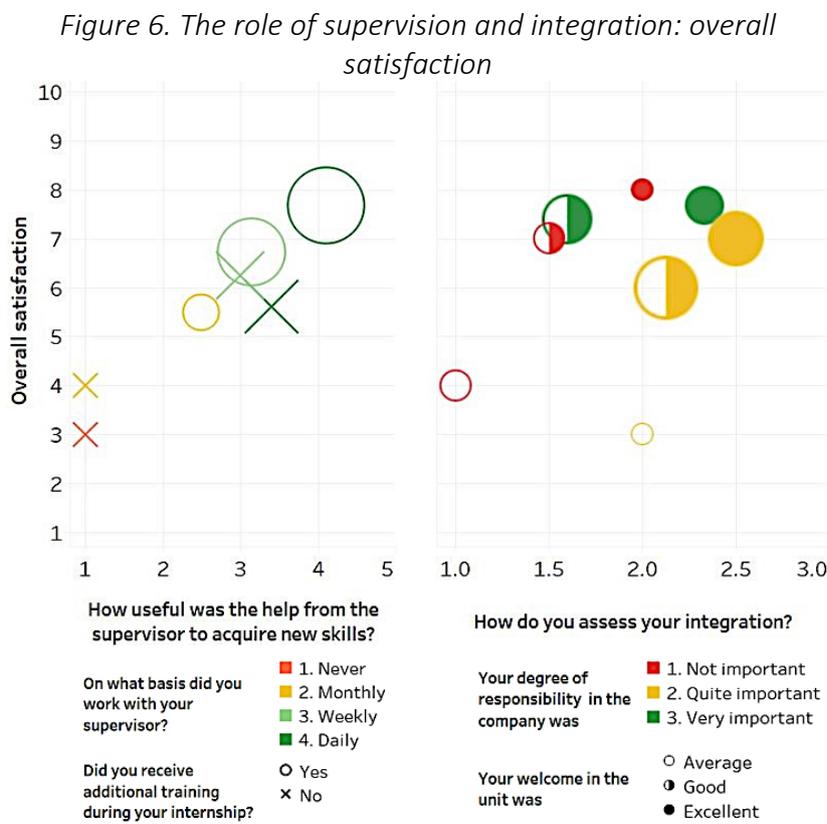
From a professional development perspective, the supervisor's involvement in the intern's tasks shapes the type of mentoring provided and can thus affect skills development. From a personal development perspective, how interns are welcomed and the responsibilities they receive can affect their feelings of integration within the company and thus their overall satisfaction, especially in a short-term experience like a six-month internship.

In this context, Figure 6 and Figure 7 analyse the interns' overall satisfaction and their judgement on how the skills and networks developed enhanced their employability.¹⁵ As for Figure 4 and Figure 5, average scores are shown for each subgroup; however, the inclusion of more dimensions implies smaller sub-samples. It is important, therefore, to also analyse results in relation to the number of respondents in each subgroup, which is represented by the size of the marks in Figure 6 and Figure 7 below.

¹⁵ See Table A 1 in Annex for a complete overview of questions asked and their grading and conversion scales.

Starting with the role of supervision and support received, the left-hand side of Figure 6 shows that overall satisfaction with the project (Y-axis) increases in participants' judgement on the role of supervision in developing skills (X-axis). In terms of frequency of interaction (denoted by coloured marks), participants working on a daily basis with their supervisor represent the largest group, closely followed by those working on a weekly basis. Both the judgement on the importance of the supervisor in developing skills (X-axis) and the overall satisfaction (Y-axis) show a positive trend with frequency of interaction between interns and their supervisors. In other words, the more often participants worked with their supervisor, the higher, on average, their overall satisfaction and judgement of supervision.

Figure 6 also considers whether participants received additional training during the internship



to prepare them better for the assigned tasks. This further breakdown shows that training had, to some extent, an impact on interns' judgement. Within each group by frequency of interaction with supervisors, participants who received additional training show higher average scores in both overall satisfaction and judgement on the role of supervision in developing skills. For instance, within the group working on a daily basis with the supervisor, participants with additional training report an average

satisfaction of 7.7 compared with 5.6 of those without, and an average judgement on the role of supervision in developing skills of 4.1, compared with 3.4 of those without. The subgroup working on a daily basis and with additional training has the highest scores on both dimensions. The role of additional training also seems to have had a significant effect for participants working only on a monthly basis with their supervisors, while this is less for the group working with them on a weekly basis.

The right-hand side of Figure 6 shows the relationship between overall satisfaction and the extent to which participants felt integrated in the company. Subgroups are defined by the degree of responsibility given by the company and how participants evaluated the welcome received from their team upon arrival. Overall satisfaction increases, on average, according to

the extent to which participants felt integrated in the company, but this trend is less clear than that of the judgement of the role of supervision in developing skills (Figure 6, left-hand side).

Concerning the degree of responsibility in the company, participants in the *very important* group reported a higher overall satisfaction compared with the *quite important* group, but a lower level of integration in the company. In the *not important* group, participants reported higher or similar overall satisfaction compared with the other two groups, but lower levels of integration. However, results for this group are based on a limited number of observations compared with others (even more so when also differentiating by their welcome in the team), as only approximately 18% of participants considered their degree of responsibility in the company as *not important*.

Within groups by degree of responsibility in the company, it can be seen that participants' judgement of their welcome on arrival does affect overall satisfaction and the extent to which participants felt integrated. For the group with a *very important* degree of responsibility, participants who considered the welcome in their team as *excellent* report a significantly higher feeling of integration, while only slightly higher overall satisfaction with the project. Within the other two groups by degree of responsibility (i.e. *quite important* and *not important*), the *excellent* subgroup in terms of welcome in the team reports consistently higher scores on both dimensions than the *good* welcome group, which in turn reports higher scores than the *average* welcome group. The differences between the *average* and *good* welcome groups in particular show the importance of the very first-time integration in how participants' overall experience is affected.¹⁶

Participants' judgement on the three qualitative dimensions related to skills developed and network established during the internship also appears positively correlated with supervision and integration (Figure 7).¹⁷

Participants' opinion on all three dimensions is again positively correlated – although to different extents – with both the role of supervision and the frequency with which participants worked with their supervisor (Figure 7, left-hand side). However, whether participants received additional training during the internship does not appear to have had a further positive effect on their judgement on the role of skills developed and network established in finding a job, whereas it had when looking at overall satisfaction with the project. Additional training seems to make a difference only within the group of participants working on a daily basis with their supervisor, which is the largest group and the one consistently most satisfied across all three dimensions; it always ranges between *agreeing* (i.e. score of 1) and *totally agreeing* (i.e. score of 2) with the statement.

¹⁶ Once again, however, it is important to consider the small size of the *average* welcome groups, which reflect the experience of a limited number of respondents.

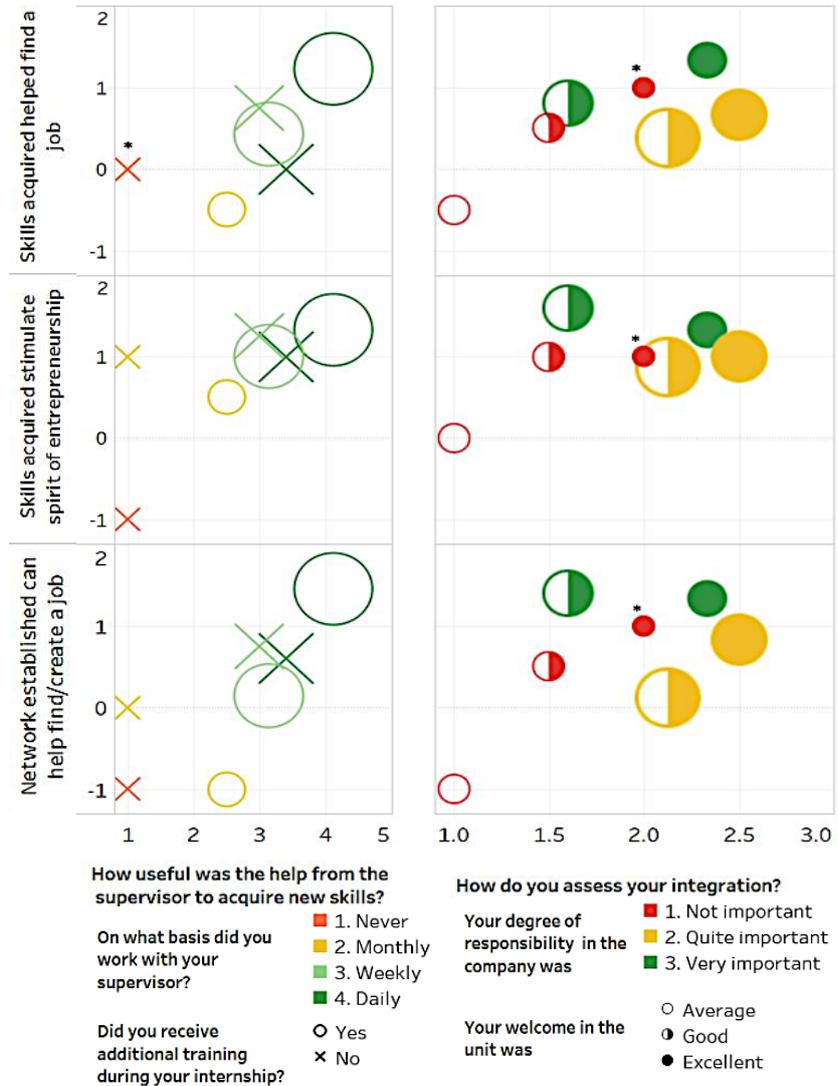
¹⁷ See Table A 1 in Annex for a complete overview of questions asked and their grading and conversion scales.

As with overall satisfaction, the correlation with integration is less clear than with supervision: participants' judgement on the extent to which skills acquired helped find a job is the dimension showing the clearest positive trend with integration (Figure 7, right-hand side).

When also considering participants' degree of responsibility within the company, those with a *very important* responsibility report the highest scores in all three dimensions, mostly between *agreeing* (i.e. score of 1) and *totally agreeing* (i.e. score of 2) with the statement.

Participants' welcome in the team, though, appears to have a significant additional effect for the other two groups in terms of degree of responsibility in the company (i.e. *not important* and *quite important*). A more positive welcome in the team increased participants' opinion on the extent to which the skills acquired and the network established can help find a job. For instance, the average opinion of participants with a *not important* degree of responsibility, ranges from *not agreeing* (i.e. score of -1) when the welcome was *average* to *agreeing* (i.e. score of 1) when the welcome was *excellent*.¹⁸ Overall, this difference seems more pronounced for the role of the network than the other two dimensions, which could imply

Figure 7. The role of supervision and integration: skills acquired and network established



Note: The * marks overlapping groups: between participants without an additional training, who had never worked or worked with the supervisor on a monthly basis with supervisor (upper left corner); and between participants with a not important responsibility and an excellent welcome, and those with a quite important responsibility and an average welcome (left-hand side)

¹⁸ Looking at the two single-respondent groups, scores overlap between the one with a *not important* responsibility but with an *excellent* welcome, and the one with a *quite important* degree of responsibility but with only an *average* welcome in the unit (marked with a * in right-hand side of Figure 7).

that a good short-term integration helps develop better ties with colleagues, and therefore a more solid network, besides simply favouring the learning process.

2.1.5 Companies' satisfaction

Once interns completed their placement period, each employer completed a final evaluation that encompassed the entire project implementation.

The overall evaluation of the project was, on average, 6.5 out of 10. The main issues raised by employers were: uncertainty with administrative procedures; long waiting times before the intern(s) could join their company due to visa processing and having to find accommodation; and the need for a more tailored screening process. It is also important to highlight the novelty of the experience for these companies – seven out of the 12 who participated had never hired an international intern before.

Glad to have a fresh new eye in our company [...] The language skills Arabic-French-English are a big asset to work with us and our customers

Although it was not possible under this pilot project, companies were interested in hiring interns directly in Belgium before they returned to Tunisia. By the end of the project, four companies had started the hiring process for five interns who would have started working for them once returned in Tunisia: this is an important result in terms of the development dimension of the project. Companies without a presence in Tunisia also expressed their interest

I recommend the programme because it helps us develop skills that we need in the future to respond to our process and our technologies

in hiring returning interns and considered the project as a stepping stone to launch their activities in Tunisia, thus favouring not only skills returns and human capital formation, but also foreign investment. In one case, two companies even got in touch to collaborate in Tunisia in their common field of operation (ICT). Lastly, all

companies but one manifested their interest in cooperating with the IOM in future internship projects and said that they would advise other employers to do the same.

2.1.6 Main achievements and lessons learnt for the future

The mobility project, which was based on the matching of common needs, successfully managed to engage the private sector in both Belgium and Tunisia.

The needs assessment carried out early on in the project implementation allowed it to identify and focus on the common interests: a supporting workforce (mostly in the IT, engineering, and technology sector) in Belgium, and a willingness from Tunisian companies to recruit trained, ready-to-work profiles. By combining these two needs, the project secured both a placement in Belgium and an employment opportunity upon return. This dual approach allowed the project to successfully enhance the interns' employability, with all participants employed at completion of the project, mainly in Tunisia, with a few in Europe¹⁹. This success is down to

¹⁹ Two participants decided to continue with their studies.

certain components of the skills mobility partnership model being put into operation: ex-ante research on the labour market needs in the two countries; the participation of multiple stakeholders in project activities; and a focus on interns' aspirations and plans.

Last but not least, two key objectives of the skills mobility partnership were achieved: job and business creation, and skills' return. Firstly, the overall positive results have increased the private sector's appetite for similar projects, as well as for investing in Tunisia. Secondly, the experience shows that providing participants with learning opportunities tailored to their interests and skills' profiles, and a professional perspective upon return, is key to reduce the intrinsic risk of overstaying after the completion of the project, thus ensuring skills' return.

The analysis of survey responses identified some elements that can influence final outcomes in terms of participants' experience and development (i.e. satisfaction and employability upon return).

Close supervision during the internship showed a positive effect on all dimensions, from overall satisfaction to the judgement on the importance of the skills and the network developed for future employability: the more often participants worked in direct contact with their supervisor, the higher their evaluations. Participants' evaluation of the importance of supervision in acquiring new skills also increased hand in hand with the frequency of interaction with the supervisor (i.e. daily or weekly). Finally, within each level of interaction with the supervisor, attending additional training upon arrival in the company further increased participants' overall satisfaction.

The degree of responsibility within the company and the welcome received upon arrival also influenced participants' satisfaction, as well as on their feeling of being integrated into the host company. At similar degrees of responsibility in the company, satisfaction was increasing in welcome received at arrival. In particular, the differences between the *average* and the *good* welcome groups show the importance of the very first-time integration in how participants' experience was affected.

Finally, the evaluation of similar pilot projects can also help identify the working elements and mechanisms that could be implemented in fully fledged skilled partnerships in the future, as well as the possible limitations and pitfalls to be taken into account during the project development stage (Box 1). In this experience, for instance, the early involvement of immigration offices helped streamline visa processing, thus ensuring compliance with the project schedule. The employers' interim evaluation, instead, picked up the need for soft skills training on arrival in Belgium, and this led the IOM to provide an additional follow-up training on return to Tunisia to strengthen this dimension of the project. Future projects should include a pre-departure orientation component that includes training on soft skills.

Box 1. Project's development and implementation: challenges and lessons learnt

Challenges	Lessons learnt
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • very high ratio of applicants to number of vacancies; • many applications did not match the preliminary selection criteria; • less than 50% of the invited candidates showed up at the interview. 	<p data-bbox="695 331 927 358">➤ <u>Selection process</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improve automated processes and screening tools; • publish vacancies only in targeted networks and/or universities/educational institutes to reduce non-relevant applications; • early process to assess motivation, for instance by asking for additional documents (e.g. diplomas, certificates).
<p data-bbox="528 629 1091 656">➤ <u>Participants' skills assessment and development</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • poor skills-assessment can generate mismatches between companies' needs and participants' capabilities and interests; • account for different expectations and needs of both participants and companies; • IOM monitoring identified gaps regarding soft skills (e.g. communication, planning) that led to a tailored training halfway through the project; • VET institutions were often inaccessible either due to eligibility criteria for enrolment (e.g. being registered as jobseekers) or to budget limit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increase companies' involvement using their internal recruitment procedures and tools; • companies should set up online tests tailored to their needs to assess participants' skills; • develop more in-depth pre-departure orientation activities, to manage participants' expectations and prepare them to work abroad, fully integrating professional practices and cultural habits; • involve VET institutions since the development stage to explore possible exceptions for eligibility criteria.
<p data-bbox="695 1055 922 1081">➤ <u>Accommodation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • frictions deriving from the lack of involvement of the interns in the choice of the accommodation; • IOM had limited experience with the real estate market; • most landlords are not interested in renting for periods shorter than one year. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participants should select their accommodation and sign the rental agreements themselves; • IOM should provide logistical and financial support in cooperation with relevant stakeholders in destination country; • partnerships should be strengthened and further exploited in follow-up projects to reduce costs and facilitate the search for housing.
<p data-bbox="671 1361 946 1388">➤ <u>Length of procedures</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • medical checks and visa procedures necessary for travel might need long processing time; • difficulties in finding accommodation delayed the departure in some cases, leading to the reshuffling of the project planning and activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluate <i>ex-ante</i> each project stage's requirements to better account for the length of procedures; • introduce buffer time between selection and departure to address on time all administrative and logistical aspects; • cooperate from the early stages with the authorities for tailored support.
<p data-bbox="711 1666 943 1693">➤ <u>External visibility</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • outreach was limited to partners and key stakeholders; • challenging to reach employers' associations effectively; • challenges and opportunities related to these kinds of mobility schemes should be disseminated as broadly as possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • allocate sufficient budget to visibility activities in the planification stage; • plan for targeted events with employer associations and/or policymakers to communicate results and spur discussion on challenges and ways forward.

3. Conclusions

Labour migration from third countries will become increasingly relevant in the coming decades, and similar initiatives, if well managed, can pave the way for effective comprehensive approaches to legal migration.²⁰ Skills mobility partnerships work on a needs' basis, so for this outcome, a multidimensional cooperation between states is required, along with a better understanding of both labour market needs in partner countries and the social element (i.e. participants' plans and interests). In addition, each stakeholder involved should be held responsible for its role so as to avoid exploitation of project benefits without any contribution to its costs. To shift the cost-benefit analysis of key stakeholders and achieve a balance between costs and benefits in such partnerships, constraints and risks need to be minimised.²¹

If, besides broadening legal pathways, the aim is to improve overall migration management with major African partners, investing concretely in such partnerships should be preferred to a negative conditionality approach (e.g. trade and development aid). Previous experiences with negative conditionalities led only to limited and temporary increases in return rates of irregular migrants, especially where the EU had a limited leverage effect vis-à-vis other actors in the region (e.g. China) or other economic factors (e.g. remittances).²² This experience, even if very limited in scope, is instead an example of cooperation in legal migration that managed to successfully comply with all aspects of migration management without applying conditionality on other policy dimensions. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum of the European Commission could promise a policy shift towards positive rather than negative conditionality, with the aim of reaching a comprehensive cooperation with key partners on migration. The Talent Partnerships proposed in the New Pact seem to move in this direction, by aiming to scale up pilot projects experiences and provide a reinforced and more comprehensive approach to international mobility with key partner countries.²³

²⁰ European Commission, COM(2019) 126 final; and European Commission, COM(2020) 609 final.

²¹ Smith and Hani (2020).

²² Kipp, D. et al (2020), SWP Comment.

²³ European Commission, COM(2020) 609 final.

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Appendix: Questions and scales

The analysis of participants' satisfaction with the project, and their outcomes, is based on participants' answers to the evaluation questionnaire prepared by the IOM. Questions were mostly qualitative, with grading scales provided for respondents. The detailed scales and quantitative conversions applied for the analysis are provided in Table A1 below.

Table A 1. Evaluation questions, grading and conversion scales

Question	Grading Scale	Quantitative conversion
Overall satisfaction with the project	Participants were asked to provide a score from 1 to 10	Already quantitative, therefore no conversion applied
Skills acquired helped find a job	Participants were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Totally Agree	Disagree (-1), Neither Agree nor Disagree (0), Agree (1), Totally Agree (2)
Skills acquired stimulate spirit of entrepreneurship	Participants were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Totally Agree	Disagree (-1), Neither Agree nor Disagree (0), Agree (1), Totally Agree (2)
Network established can help find/create a job	Participants were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Totally Agree	Disagree (-1), Neither Agree nor Disagree (0), Agree (1), Totally Agree (2)
How useful was the help of the supervisor in developing new skills?	Participants were asked to grade the help received: Not useful at all, Not very useful, Useful, Very useful, Extremely useful	Not useful at all (1), Not very useful (2), Useful (3), Very useful (4), Extremely useful (5)
How do you assess your integration?	Participants were asked to evaluate their integration in the company: irrelevant, relevant, and very relevant.	Irrelevant (1), Relevant (2), Very relevant (3).
On what basis did you work with your supervisor?	Frequency of interaction with supervisor: Never, Monthly, Weekly, Daily	Used to see differences among groups. No conversion applied
Did you receive additional training during your internship?	Received additional training or not	Used to see differences among groups. No conversion applied
Your degree of responsibility in the company	Participants' assessment of their degree of responsibility: Not important, Quite important, Very important	Used to see differences among groups. No conversion applied
Your welcome in the unit	Participants' assessment of their welcome in the unit at arrival: Average, Good, Excellent	Used to see differences among groups. No conversion applied



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