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Identity and Integration Challenges of Highly Skilled Tunisian Youth in Italy: a Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

Since the 2011 Tunisian Revolution, the country has experienced a growing wave of highly skilled migration. Many young Tunisians, including engineers, researchers, and graduate students, have sought opportunities abroad in response to domestic economic stagnation, political instability, and a perceived lack of professional prospects. Italy, because of its geographical proximity, historical ties, and cultural influence, has emerged as a primary destination.

This paper explores the integration experiences of highly qualified Tunisian migrants in Italy, focusing on the social, cultural, and identity-related challenges they encounter. Building on a qualitative methodology, the research is based on semi-structured interviews conducted remotely with young Tunisian professionals and students, complemented by exploratory discussions with experts in economics and management. Participants were recruited via professional networks such as LinkedIn and personal contacts, ensuring a diverse sample across regions and sectors.

The findings highlight three main dimensions of integration. First, the cultural and religious context of Italy—secular but Catholic-influenced—shapes identity negotiations for Muslim migrants, raising questions of belonging, recognition, and adaptation. Second, professional and linguistic barriers significantly hinder insertion, as participants reported struggles with Italian proficiency and under-recognition of their qualifications. Finally, broader structural and policy-related issues, such as public initiatives for inclusion, played a dual role: while facilitating integration in some cases, they often fell short of addressing deeper identity concerns.

This study demonstrates that skilled migration is not solely an economic phenomenon but also a complex social process involving identity reconstruction. It argues for stronger bilateral cooperation between Tunisia and Italy to mitigate brain drain while fostering inclusive integration policies that respect cultural diversity.

Keywords: Tunisia/Italy, Skilled Migration, Brain Drain, Identity, Integration