

# NAVIGATING INTEGRATION

## Designing a Way-Finding System for Non-EU Students in Italy

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Sometimes I feel like my generation inherited the most unstable period to live in. But then I wonder — when has life on Earth ever actually been stable? Has there ever been a long enough period of human history without wars, violence, hatred and obsession with our differences? Why are we becoming increasingly isolated from each other with every passing year, focusing more and more on what divides us rather than what brings us together?

After moving away from my homeland, I started feeling that the best thing in the world is sharing. Seeing how people of different nations and cultures show an interest in each other, wanting to know each other better and share life experiences, delights me. Time, interest and care have become the most valuable things to me — qualities that a lot of people lack. Especially people who were forced or who personally decided to start life from scratch in another country.

This work is dedicated to these people. Specifically, to the non-EU student community in Milan, part of which I also am. My thesis touches upon some fragile political, economic, social and cultural issues, as without them the context would never be fully complete. However, my goal was never to blame anyone for the existing issues the international community faces in Italy. It has always been about sharing. Sharing stories, experiences, knowledge. To understand each other better, to empathize and to change for the better. To have a brighter future together, free from the burdens of differences and misunderstandings.

Before beginning, I want to express my gratitude to Prof. Laura Galluzzo, who was interested in this topic from the beginning, guiding me toward the most promising directions, always maintaining friendly, engaging mentorship as a foundation for our collaboration. I also want to say a big thanks to the international students community. I was genuinely surprised by the number of responses I received, along with the incredible openness people showed in sharing their stories, never hiding the emotional, heavy parts. In the process, these interviews grew into dialogues, acts of mutual respect and support. Acts of togetherness.

Dedicate to all,  
for whom home is no longer a place

# Abstract

## ENGLISH

Italy faces a structural labor shortage driven by depopulation, workforce ageing, brain drain and brain waste, with a growing demand for immigrant workers. Yet it systematically fails to retain the non-EU international students it successfully attracts. While the country has become quite easy to enter — thanks to English-taught programs, relative affordability and accessible admissions — it remains difficult to settle in. This work frames the gap as an "entry-stay paradox": students arrive willing to remain but gradually face bureaucratic delays and difficulties, economic instability, social isolation and cultural mismatch until leaving Italy becomes the rational choice. The core problem is reframed not as missing information but as poor integration into the institutional, socio-economic and relational-cultural fabric of the country. While information and real help are often available here, they do not explain how the rules are applied in practice and are not designed specifically for the target audience of international students. In the context of decentralized governance and a "Temporary Integration" policy paradigm, students are forced to navigate a fragmented integration system alone.

Using a Progressive Focusing methodology, the work narrows from the national picture to the local Milan context. The study's findings indicate that official resources lack students' trust, while peer communities and AI tools have become the de facto integration infrastructures. Internationals lack a single, comprehensive digital resource for finding reliable official and experience-based information, as well as the ability to seek human assistance in ambiguous, complex or emotionally heavy situations.

In response, this work proposes a way-finding system: not merely an information platform but a trusted connector orchestrating official rules, crowdsourced lived experience, services and reachable human support. Built on a multi-tenant digital architecture and complemented by physical university-related touchpoints, it supports institutional literacy, socio-economic stability and relational-cultural belonging, helping each student find their own personal "integration way."

## ITALIANO

L'Italia si trova ad affrontare una carenza strutturale di manodopera, determinata da spopolamento, invecchiamento della forza lavoro e fuga di cervelli, a fronte di una domanda crescente di lavoratori immigrati. Eppure il paese fatica sistematicamente a trattenere gli studenti internazionali extra-UE che riesce ad attrarre con successo. Se da un lato l'accesso al sistema universitario italiano è diventato relativamente agevole — grazie alla diffusione di programmi in lingua inglese, alla accessibilità economica e a procedure di ammissione semplificate — dall'altro il radicamento nel paese rimane profondamente difficoltoso. Il presente lavoro inquadra questo divario come un "paradosso ingresso-permanenza": gli studenti arrivano con l'intenzione di restare, ma si trovano progressivamente esposti a ostacoli burocratici, instabilità economica, isolamento sociale e dissonanza culturale, fino al punto in cui lasciare l'Italia diventa la scelta razionale. Il problema centrale viene reinterpretato non come assenza di informazioni, bensì come scarsa integrazione nel tessuto istituzionale, socio-economico e relazionale-culturale del paese. Nel contesto di una governance decentralizzata e di un paradigma politico di "integrazione temporanea", gli studenti si trovano costretti a navigare da soli un sistema frammentato.

Adottando una metodologia di Progressive Focusing, la ricerca restringe progressivamente l'analisi dal quadro nazionale al contesto locale Milanese. I risultati indicano che le risorse ufficiali faticano a guadagnarsi la fiducia degli studenti, mentre le comunità tra pari e gli strumenti di intelligenza artificiale sono diventati le infrastrutture di integrazione di fatto. Gli studenti internazionali mancano di una risorsa digitale unica e completa per reperire informazioni affidabili — tanto ufficiali quanto basate sull'esperienza vissuta — nonché della possibilità di accedere a supporto umano nelle situazioni ambigue.

In risposta, il lavoro propone un sistema di way-finding: non una semplice piattaforma informativa, bensì un connettore di fiducia che orchestra norme ufficiali, esperienza vissuta condivisa collettivamente, servizi e supporto umano accessibile. Costruito su un'architettura digitale multi-tenant e affiancato da punti di contatto fisici in ambito universitario, il sistema aiutando ciascuno studente a trovare la propria personale "via dell'integrazione."

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# **BACKGROUND RESEARCH**

"How are people from different cultures, different backgrounds, with different languages, different religious beliefs, produced by different and highly uneven histories, but who find themselves either directly connected because they've got to make a life together in the same place, or digitally connected because they occupy the same symbolic worlds — how are they to make some sort of common life together without retreating into warring tribes, eating one another, or insisting that other people must look exactly like you, behave exactly like you, think exactly like you [...]?"

*Hall, S. 2007, "Living with Difference. Stuart Hall in Conversation with Bill Schwarz"*



# 1.1

**Italy's**

## **Demographic-Labour Crisis and the Untapped Potential**

- i. Italy's Demographic Winter and the Labour Supply Gap
- ii. The Non-EU Student Influx and "Entry-Staying" Paradox
- iii. Beyond Retention: Framing the Research Questions

# Italy's Demographic Winter and the Labour Supply Gap

The development of this thesis reflects the changing paradigm of Non-EU students' marginal position within Italian society. Modern demographic and work realities reshape Italian relation to young foreign talent highlighting a need for new ways of their retention. The work will start with understanding of this phenomenon and further framing of research questions.

It is evident that Italy is currently navigating a profound labour crisis, characterized by a widespread talent outflow and a deepening dependence on international migration to sustain its social and economic models. The causes of this problem lie in several interconnected areas presented below (*Figure 1*).

## DEMOGRAPHIC WINTER

Driven by decades of low birth rates and rising life expectancy, Italy has already entered a profound and prolonged phase of population aging. It is now one of the oldest countries in the EU — as of January 2026, the mean age of the resident population reached 47.1 years, and the median age stands at 49.1 years — more than four years higher than the EU average (*ISTAT, 2026*). On one hand, one of the main influencing factors is the fertility rate, which in 2025 dropped to 1.14 children per woman, accompanied by a shift in the timing of parenthood, with the mean age of mothers at the birth of their first child rising to 31.9 years. On the other side is life expectancy, which by 2025 had risen to 81.7 years for men and 85.7 years for women (*ISTAT, 2026*). The population is rapidly aging, while fewer children are being born — or not born at all — as in 2024 over 10.5 million individuals report not wanting children in the future, with about one-third of them explicitly citing economic reasons (*ISTAT, 2025*). And this contraction is already creating structural labor shortages.

## WORKFORCE SHRINKAGE

The demographic winter has triggered a critical labor market mismatch with employers facing obstacles in hiring staff. Across the country, recruitment difficulties affect nearly half (47.8% in 2024) of

all personnel searches, with peaks of 66.2% for specialized workers and 52.4% for technical professions (*EURES, 2025*). This mismatch is driven by two factors: quantitative — there simply are not enough people, and qualitative — even when candidates exist, they do not match what employers need (*Unioncamere, 2024*).

This qualitative mismatch is further complicated by the structure of the national labor market, which heavily relies on family-owned business models, seniority systems, and closed professional networks, often redirecting younger workers into precarious fixed-term contracts and part-time employment. As a result, young people may receive such a signal: investing heavily in education and specialization does not always lead to proportional returns at work in Italy (*Codogno & Galli, 2022*). This dynamic discourages some young Italians from investing in higher education, while many educated young people tend to emigrate in search of better opportunities, contributing to the country's brain drain.

### BRAIN DRAIN PHENOMENON

Population outflow is widespread across both northern and southern Italy and is particularly noticeable among people under the age of 45. According to the latest data, in 2024 around 156,000 Italian citizens left the country to move abroad, marking a 36.5% increase compared to 2023 — the highest figure recorded in the last 25 years (*ISTAT, 2026*). This tendency to leave is also reinforced by wage stagnation and generally low salaries for graduates — Italy is the only EU country where real wages have declined since 1990 (*OECD,*

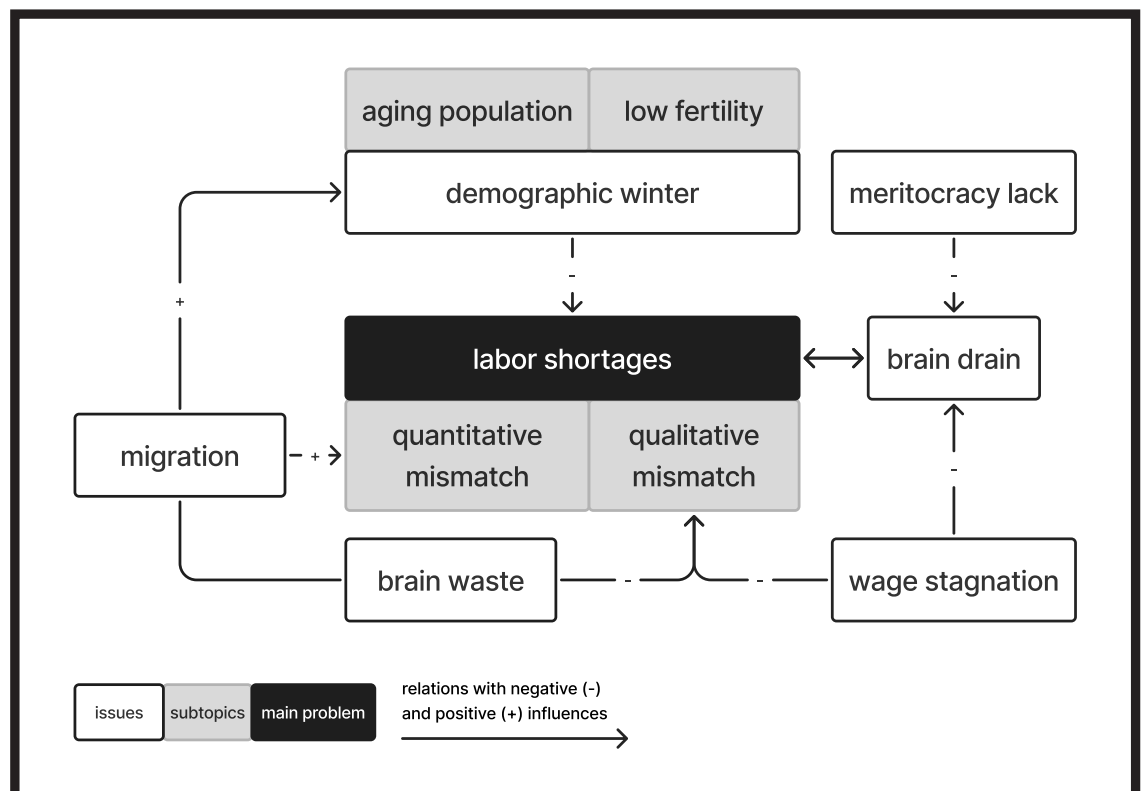


Figure 1: Italy's Labour Crisis: A System of Interconnected Causes

*n.d.*). The average adjusted full-time monthly salary per employee in Italy was €2,793 in 2024 (*Eurostat, n.d.*), more than €500 below the EU average. At the same time, Italy has a tax burden comparable to that of France and Germany (47.1%), but applied to significantly lower gross wages, meaning that take-home pay is substantially lower (*OECD, 2025*).

These figures reflect average conditions, while recent graduates often face even lower starting salaries, in fact, a young graduate in Germany earns on average 80% more than their peer in Italy (*Panetta, 2026*).

### FUTURE PROGNOSIS

Without structural interventions to address all issues mentioned above Italy risks facing a potential economic stagnation and an overburdened social security system. Due to the existing prognoses (*ISTAT, 2025*) by 2050:

- the resident population is expected to decline to 54.7 million;
- the share of the elderly aged 65 and older rises to 34.6 percent (from 24.3 percent);
- the pool of women of reproductive age (15–49) is projected to shrink from 11.5 million to just 9.1 million;
- the working-age population (15–64) is projected to shrink from 63.5% to 54.3% by, resulting in a loss of nearly 7.7 million potential workers.

Especially because of the last point, Italy's pension system is likely to face a structural crisis. Fewer working-age people means a smaller tax base available to fund growing public service demands, including healthcare, education, infrastructure, and elder care. The ratio of working-age contributors to elderly dependents is projected to shift from 2.4:1 today to just 1.3:1 by 2060 (*OECD, 2025*).

However, there is one factor partially compensating for Italy's negative population change.

### POSITIVE NET MIGRATION

Currently, immigration provides a vital demographic buffer for Italy. In 2025, overall migrants residing in Italy reached 5.4 mil (9.2% of the whole population), while net international migration stood at +296,000 individuals (*ISTAT, 2026*). In 2024, foreign workers accounted for 10.3% of the total employed population (*Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali (MLPS), 2025*). This means that, proportionally, more migrants officially participate in the labor market compared to Italian citizens, despite possible yearly variations. Still, the incoming foreign workforce is systematically unable to fill the high-skills gap left by emigrated young Italians.

For the migrants who do enter and stay in the Italian labor market, their human capital frequently faces brain waste and/or other inequalities. Thus, foreign workers face a 30.4% lower average annual salary than Italian workers (*MLPS, 2025*). In addition, 48 out of 57 employed migrants in regular situations (about 84%) work as unskilled manual workers, with 74% of respondents facing obstacles in finding work,

ranging from language barriers to the non-recognition of foreign degrees (*Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), 2025*).

Despite these work-related constraints, migrants contributed €177 billion to Italy's GDP, accounting for around 10% of the country's added value in 2024 (*Fondazione Leone Moressa, 2025*). In addition, immigrants are becoming very important as entrepreneurs. For example, in Milan, the growth of entrepreneurship has been driven disproportionately by foreign-born residents. In 2024, foreign-born entrepreneurs represented 16.4% of all entrepreneurs and recorded growth of +45.3% since 2014, while Italian-born entrepreneurs grew by only +3.5% during the same period (*Fondazione Leone Moressa, 2025*).

Therefore, migration cannot simply be viewed as a fiscal burden. Basic economic data shows that total public revenue connected to immigration reached €41.1 billion, while expenditure amounted to €39.9 billion, resulting in an estimated positive balance of €1.2 billion (*Fondazione Leone Moressa, 2025*).

**“However, the potential of immigration in Italy remains largely untapped, limited by low social mobility and a general difficulty in harnessing talents and skills. Greater recognition and utilisation, on the other hand, would lead to higher GDP contribution, increased consumption, and greater revenue for the State.”**

*Fondazione Leone Moressa, "Rapporto 2025 sull'economia dell'immigrazione"*

#### UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

Italy is caught in a difficult cycle: a shrinking and aging population is reducing the available workforce, while low wages and lack of meritocracy are pushing many talented professionals to leave the country. While mass migration is used as a quantitative basic aid, it frequently relies on the exploitation of unskilled labor failing to make full use of migrants' qualifications and talents. As a result, immigration in its current form is not fully closing the high-skills gap.

Addressing this problem requires a different approach — as Italy struggles to attract foreign professionals natively, capturing the talent already trained within its borders may be the most viable solution. As Italy becomes an increasingly attractive study destination, especially for non-EU students, these graduates could become an important source of future human capital for the Italian economy.

# The Non-EU Student Influx and “Entry-Staying” Paradox

In the broader context of global enrollment trends, the European continent has established itself as a leader in higher education. Within this competitive environment, Italy is rapidly rising as a premier study destination, currently ranking as the fifth-most-searched study destination globally, second only to Canada, the UK, the US, and Germany (*Studyportals & British Council IELTS, 2025*). International enrollments here have grown by approximately 10% per year since 2022, marking the second-fastest growth rate in Europe behind Spain (*Quacquarelli Symonds, 2025*).

## PULL FACTORS

This growth in international enrollment is the result of a deliberate alignment of economic, academic, and administrative "pull factors" that have made Italy a competitive alternative to other destinations.

Firstly, Italy has expanded the number of university programmes it offers in English. It is now the fifth largest provider of these courses in Europe, up from seventh in 2019. This is in contrast to Spain, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, which have reduced their English-taught programmes supply (*Quacquarelli Symonds, 2025*).

Secondly, Italy's growing popularity can also be explained by its relative affordability. In Italian public universities, annual tuition fees typically range from €500 to €4,000, with final costs determined by the specific institution and the student's financial background (*Study.eu, 2025*). Italy maintains pretty accessible financial requirements for visa issuance; the required proof of funds — approximately €7,000 per year — is less than half the amount demanded by Canada, Australia, the UK, and Germany (*Euro American Education, 2026*). Furthermore, Italy utilizes a "scholarship-driven attraction" model. There are different scholarships and regional support programmes for international students (e.g., DSU Scholarship, MAECI Scholarships and University-Specific Grants).

Thirdly, Italy now has enough universities with high reputation and rank. The Politecnico di Milano became the first Italian higher education institution to obtain a top 100 position in the QS World University Rankings in 2026 (98th). In all, 15 Italian universities made it into the top 500 putting Italy in second place in Europe after Germany in the

overall ranking (*Quacquarelli Symonds, n.d.*).

This, combined with the "soft power" of Italian heritage and urban lifestyle, creates a compelling narrative for prospective students.

## FOREIGN STUDENTS PORTRAIT

First of all, before coming to statistics, the picture requires understanding an important terminological distinction defined by OECD. "Foreign students" includes anyone with non-Italian citizenship — both EU citizens and international degree-seekers. "International students" means only those who received prior education abroad and came to Italy specifically to study in university.

According to the latest statistics, the typical foreign student in Italy is not very young, with an average age of 24.5, and is primarily seeking advanced specialization, with the majority enrolled in two-year Master's programs (*Uni-Italia, 2024*). If to look exclusively at international students, the top five nationalities in the academic year 2023-2024 were Iran (11.93%), Turkey (5.84%), China (5.56%), India (3.80%), and Russia (2.86%), together representing 30% of the total (*Statista, n.d.*). Furthermore, between 2019 and 2023, the total number of study visas issued by Italian diplomatic representations abroad rose for nearly 55% with the sharpest increases in Iran, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Ethiopia, and Tunisia (*Uni-Italia, 2024*). These two points are signaling that Italy has successfully transitioned into a primary global destination rather than just a regional hub for citizens and local migrants.

It is also noticeable that international students are heavily drawn to STEM (engineering + natural sciences + computer science + math/physics) and business-related fields. This is followed by the increase of international students in the AFAM system (Alta Formazione Artistica, Musicale e Coreutica). Related to this career topic, there is an interesting fact — for extracurricular internships out of 28,531 internships activated for foreign citizens in 2023, 4,547 involved EU citizens and 23,984 involved non-EU citizens. That's a 84% non-EU share for post-graduation work experiences (*MLPS, 2024*). This fact is showing that non-EU students are the overwhelming majority of those foreigners trying to enter the Italian labor market after studies.

After looking at this statistic, it can be stated that Italy grows as a destination for non-EU degree-seekers, studying in fields directly relevant to labor shortages and concentrated at master's level. Considering their willingness to enter the local job market in comparison to EU citizens — they could be the population most relevant to Italy's labor needs. But also the one most vulnerable to the system's failures in retention.

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS RETENTION REALITY

Despite the fact that Italy excels at attracting global talent, it significantly underperforms in retaining it, struggling to keep its international graduates. While certain sectors and elite institutions show promising



short-term retention, Italy's overall long-term retention is lacking. For example, Politecnico di Milano reports that 53% of their international graduates choose to stay in Italy within one year of graduation, but only 37% at five years, showing that the real possibility of staying drops over time (*Politecnico di Milano, 2024*). Overall, only 13% of international students who arrived in Italy for study purposes in 2015 were still in the country five years later. This long-term retention rate is lower than the 50% retention rates observed in countries like Canada, Germany, and Estonia (*Uni-Italia, 2024*).

This retention crisis is fueled by several systemic challenges:

- First — bureaucratic bottlenecks. Although Italy recently canceled numerical quotas to make converting study permits into work permits easier, the administrative immigration system remains complex, slow, and heavily discouraging for international graduates to enter the workforce;
- Second — economic and labor market barriers. Firstly, as discussed in the previous chapter, graduates in Italy face high youth unemployment and remarkably lower compensation than their European peers. Secondly, highly educated migrants who choose to stay in Italy face the highest gap in overeducation in Europe. Educated migrants frequently find themselves working in low-skilled positions, precarious internships or informal Partita IVA arrangements due to language barriers, systemic labor market inefficiencies and other issues;
- Third — socio-cultural and relational barriers. It includes language proficiency challenges, significant cultural distance for specific nationalities, the relative insularity of Italian social networks and other more profound psychological barriers that prevent international students from achieving a genuine sense of belonging within the host society. These obstacles are compounded by systemic discrimination and a prevailing negative public perception of migrants — notably, over 50% of Italians view migration as a threat to national identity and urban quality of life (*European Commission, 2023*).

And all these issues are interconnected — each makes the others harder to navigate. This creates a loop. In the end, graduated international students face the same work issues as Italian post-graduates, but with the additional integration barriers that all immigrants face in Italy, including bureaucratic procedures and evident cultural gaps. Hence they have a double pressure during the work-transition period.

## STUDENTS PARADOX

Even if Italy's attractiveness to international students has risen significantly, the problem of staying here due to all issues covered above creates an "entry-stay" paradox (*Figure 2*) — even if you entered Italy in a quite easy way, it does not mean it will be easy for you to stay. The result is a revolving door — talent arrives, is educated, frequently at public expense, and then leaves.

The OECD highlights that attracting and retaining international students is no longer just an educational goal, but a vital economic strategy to reduce the severe labor shortages. Particularly interesting is the estimated demand for immigrant workers in Italy during the



2024-2028 period, which is expected to represent more than one-fifth (21%) of the total estimated workforce needs for the five years (*Unioncamere, 2024*).

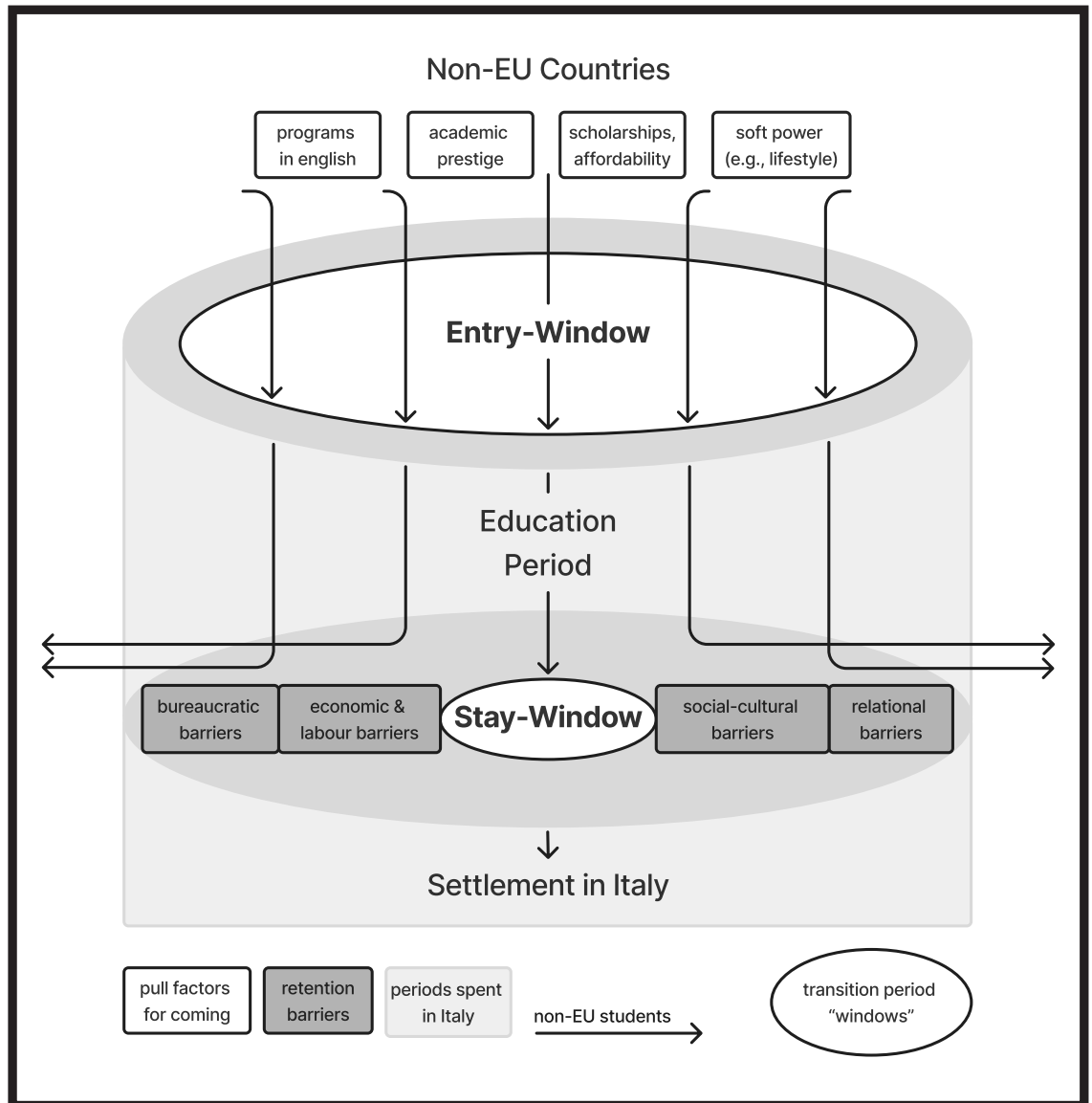


Figure 2: Non-EU Students Entry-Stay Paradox

And it can be stated that the bottleneck for students is not a willingness to stay. A lot of students chose Italy deliberately for their first international experience, a choice requiring significant commitment (*Uni-Italia, 2024*). Non-EU students are actively seeking entry into the Italian labor market. Still, due to universities and national data, there is a collapse between year-one and year-five staying, which can not be explained just by a change in motivation. It is mainly explained by what the system puts students through during that period — it eroding them gradually, until leaving becomes the rational choice.

Though the government is trying to retain international talent, it will need to do more to transform a temporary educational influx into a permanent influx of highly skilled human capital and provide the needed economic stability required to support an aging society by 2050.

## Beyond Retention: Framing the Research Questions

As it was shown in previous chapters, Italy faces a structural labor crisis that requires new skilled workers. International students — predominantly non-EU, studying in shortage fields, actively seeking employment — are already present in the country, due to notable Italian progress in attracting talents. A considerable percentage of them have an initial intention to remain for work here. Yet, the system retains barely one in eight of this human capital over five years, highlighting the existing significant challenge. Italy invests in attracting international students and then systematically does not succeed to keep it. Consequently, it has one of the lowest proportions of working-age foreign residents with a university degree in the EU — 11.7% compared to the EU average of 28% (*ICEF Monitor, 2026*). Hence, also due to Uni-Italia, the retention of international students is essential for addressing the country's demographic and economic challenges.

### EXISTING RETENTION STRATEGY

One of the ongoing challenges in Italy's talent retention strategy is the limited focus on students who have completed their studies. Most tellingly, 65% of institutions cannot report what happens to their international graduates in the labor market and overall in the society after graduation, as they do not systematically monitor the data, which leads to fragmented available information (*Uni-Italia, 2024*). From existing after-study retention solutions the most present are universities career services and "awaiting employment" residence permit.

Italian universities have begun to develop more comprehensive career services tailored specifically for international students. These services are mainly job oriented, including job placement programs, career counselling, and networking opportunities designed to help international students navigate the Italian labour market. However, the availability of these services varies significantly across different universities. And unfortunately, the problem can not be fully solved by this due to the market specifications and labour procedures — companies still prefer Italian speakers, they hire internationals frequently on Partita IVA base to avoid high taxes, or simply do not choose to employ them on official contract base due to hard "nulla osta" applying process, which lies on company's shoulders in this case.

The “awaiting employment” residence permit plays an important role in Italian policies aimed at retaining international students in the country. This type of permit allows students who have completed a course of study in Italy to stay in the country for a maximum of 12 months, during which they can seek employment. This measure facilitates the integration of students into the Italian labour market and serves as a significant incentive for them to try remaining. Data displaying retention rates of post-graduates in one year is actually proving the statement, but, as we can logically conclude, this solution does not influence long-term retention.

**“Despite Italy’s long-standing academic tradition and its reputation as a centre for higher education, the country continues to face challenges in retaining international students’ post-graduation. Many of these students, who come to Italy seeking academic advancement, often leave the country due to a combination of limited job opportunities, administrative hurdles, and or linguistic barriers.”**

*Uni-Italia, "The Impact of International Students on the Job Market: Best Practises for Graduate Retention Policies 2024"*

These solutions, including also others possible — like more comprehensive language courses for international students or financial incentives (such as tax breaks) to companies that hire international graduates (*Uni-Italia, 2024*) — will be for sure useful and helpful, but not in isolation. The retaining barriers identified before — bureaucratic complexity, economic precarity, social isolation, cultural distance — are not random or disconnected. They can be perceived as parts of a single underlying issue — students' poor integration into the institutional, economic, and social fabric of the country. Integration, in migration context, is a multi-dimensional term, which mainly imply adaptation to a new host country's system and broader society, while simultaneously being accepted by that system. However, a person who cannot clearly understand and navigate the system, cannot achieve economic independence and cannot build meaningful social connections, finally, will leave — regardless of how much they want to stay.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Being a part of this marginalised community, I faced by myself issues related to navigating the Italian bureaucratic system, understanding the rules, building the connections and adapting both culturally and socially. Having the community around me of people with the same legal status, same beliefs and goals of staying, made me feel profound need of improvements. And this realization was not merely theoretical — it was grounded in the lived experiences, shared emotional challenges, and personal narratives of my peers. Topics of legalisation and transition were raised with me and around me so frequently regardless of the year of study, age and nationality, that I, being a PSSD student, heard a “call to action” or even “call for help” from my peers, colleagues and friends.

The goal of this thesis is to find possible solutions for non-EU students to remain in Italy via enhancing and supporting their integration experience. The necessity and possibility of doing so is apparent after the discussion of the previous chapters — the questions left are the way and the specific context. Therefore, in the next research parts I will try to answer three following questions to grab most suitable insights for designing solution:

- What are the key integration barriers that prevent Non-EU international students from being fully integrated into the Italian system?
- What existing national and local integration approaches and frameworks can inform the design of a support system?
- What is the current state of integration services available to Non-EU students?

The main methodological approach is Progressive Focusing, an approach in which the research problem, questions, and hypotheses are gradually refined during data collection rather than being fully set at the start. I will go from the big picture, narrowing into the local context, analysing specific experiences to identify issues and more suitable solutions. In addition, the academic framing of integration will be discussed to lead design flow and to choose a design approach. Before navigating integration, it is helpful to clarify what it actually means.

As a final methodological note, in this work non-EU students are seen as part of the broader migrant community, as they are frequently defined as “student migrants” or “temporary highly-skilled migrants” in sociology and public policy, facing the exact same structural mechanisms as any other legal migrant group. This is why all following studies and datasets mentioned are considered applicable to this cohort.

In this work  
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*Methodological note*

**The goal is to find possible solutions for non-EU students to remain in Italy via enhancing and supporting their integration experience**

# 1.2

## **What Does "Full Integration" Actually Mean?**

- i. Understanding Integration: Definitions, Roles and Service Design Perspective
- ii. Three Pillars of Integration: A Framework for Analysis and Design
- iii. Intercultural Integration Approach as Normative Design Framework

# Understanding Integration: Definitions, Roles, and Service Design Perspective

The concept of integration remains one of the most inconsistently defined and politically sensitive terms in the migration studies. Robinson (1998) has suggested that integration is a "chaotic concept: a word used by many but understood differently by most." And still, even today, integration is a highly debated and "contested" term because its meaning changes depending on who is using it, in what context and for what purpose.

**“Integration refers to a large spectrum of meanings, varying in time and space, according to the country that is considered, the historical-political contexts and the characters of the migratory phenomenon — this is why there are different integration models.”**

*Antonio Golini, Italian demographer*

## INTEGRATION DEFINITIONS

In academic literature researchers try to separate the word "integration" from its political background. Alba and Foner (2015), define full integration as implying "parity of life chances with members of the native majority group", viewing integration primarily as an outcome, measurable against the benchmark of the host population — successful result in this case is to be recognized as a legitimate part of the national community. Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016) shift the emphasis from outcome to process, defining integration as "the process of becoming an accepted part of society." Their focus falls on

the process of settlement, interaction and social change — not on the result of whether immigrants have "caught up" with natives. Spencer and Charsley (2021) deepen this further, arguing that integration is a multi-directional interactive process with spatial, transnational, and temporal dimensions. They highlight that the opposite of integration is not disintegration, but the absence of any processes of interaction, personal and social change.

In political discourse integration definitions are more concept based, reflecting structured categories policymakers can target, measure, and fund. For example IOM (The International Organization for Migration) defines integration as an "essential component of effective and comprehensive migration management", highlighting the importance of two-way process — mutual adaptation between migrants and the societies in which they live. The EU also positions integration as "a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of EU Member States." In 2020, it also adopted "integration and inclusion" as a paired concept of the same two-way process, with the ultimate goal of creating cohesive, resilient, and prosperous communities. This perspective positions integration as both a right and a duty for all parts of society. The EU integration framework identifies key areas — employment, education, health, housing — as domains where integration outcomes should be measured and supported. At the same time, the EU openly communicates its expectations for migrants regarding their quality, effort, and degree of adaptation to the realities of their new country of living.

Penninx rightly observes that the concept of integration has fundamentally different functions in research and policy. Researchers use the term more as a neutral tool to study what is actually happening in a society, rather than judging what should happen. While for policymakers integration always has a normative framing with concrete desired outcomes. Putting it simply, policymakers see integration as an outcome that can be measured, while academics state it is as a process that can be studied. What all definitions share is the recognition that integration is not a single event — it is a multidimensional, ongoing process that unfolds across legal, economic, social, and cultural dimensions simultaneously.

### INTEGRATION ROLES

As being multidimensional, integration is also a multi-actor dynamic that influences not only migrants, but every layer of society, including host communities, government bodies, local authorities, and the private sector. Generally speaking integration is important because it maximizes the socio-economic contribution of migrants while minimizing the risks of their social exclusion and structural inequality which may lead to the split society.

For the individual migrant, integration determines their life outcomes and achievements in the new country, critically influencing overall well-being. There are studies proving that lower linguistic and cultural integration highly influence successful use of public services and employment (*Cottini et al., 2024 and Ghio et al., 2023*). In the meantime, social and relational integration help migrants to feel a sense of togetherness, that is the basis for their mental health and

overall national solidarity (*Bierwiazzonek et al., 2025*).

For the host society, integration determines the level of social cohesion and mutual acceptance. Well-adapted immigrants have higher capacity to behaviorally and cognitively fit into the receiving culture, while more open and institutionally ready society can not just accept immigrants, but also change towards them. Cities with poor integration outcomes show higher levels of social tension, residential segregation, and mutual distrust between communities (*Consolazio et al., 2023*).

For the economy, integration determines whether immigration is a net positive or net negative fiscally. More integrated immigrants contribute to the economy by working, paying taxes, opening businesses and consuming goods. While non-integrated enough immigrants are more likely to depend on social help contributing much less through formal economic channels. This point is especially crucial for countries such as Italy, with a demand for labour and suspended economic growth.

**“The analysis shows that the costs for a migrant that is not properly integrated into the host society can be as high as 52,000€ per year for a single person. This reframes integration services not as expenses but as investments that can result, even, in a cost-saving for the government.”**

*European Union Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, "Joint Handbook on Migrants' Integration: a Service Design and Supply Perspective", Italian case*

For non-EU international students specifically, integration level determines whether they become the skilled workers in the host country or whether they leave, taking their education and potential with them. Empirical research identifies an "unequivocally negative correlation" (*Haas & Fokkema, 2011*) between sociocultural integration and return intentions. The more deeply a migrant is embedded in the social fabric of the receiving society—through friendships, language and general social life participation—the less likely they are to express a desire to return to their country of origin. And oppositely, migrants who remain socially isolated or experience high levels of discrimination have a higher likelihood of intending to return back home.

Given the importance of integration for various stakeholders and its direct correlation with international students' retention rates, countries should create a more supportive and inclusive environment for keeping the talent. And to do so, it is not enough to just acknowledge the



problem and understand WHAT to measure, how policy frameworks do, still acting as a valuable orientation point. It is important to also design HOW to support integration in practice, integration as a lived sequence of practical problems. And this is where service design, as a discipline, comes in.

### SERVICE DESIGN ROLE IN INTEGRATION

As established before, integration is a multidimensional and multi-actor process that is also hard to define precisely without considering the specific context. Hence, treating integration as a unified linear sequence of events is fundamentally wrong approach that is not taking into account the complexity of the process and its individuality for everyone — each person's integration trajectory is shaped by their legal status, language, social connections, cultural distance from the host country, relationship networks, economic situation, individual circumstances and the like. Service design, as a practical discipline, is built for this kind of complexity.

Firstly, there is a systemic vision. Service design moves the focus from isolated touchpoints to the orchestration of complex service ecosystems. In the context of integration, this means designing not just individual services (a help desk here, a language course there) but the connections between them, and designing those connections to work as a coherent system rather than a collection of fragments.

Secondly, there is a human-centered approach, widely adopted by service designers. It can help to understand the whole life situation of the integrating individuals, building a decent base for more personalized and contextually responsive solutions. And it is important, because for a non-EU student, integration is not just a set of bureaucratic rules to follow — it is a daily reality of uncertainty: where to register, how to find housing, whom to ask when something goes wrong, how to understand the culture, how to build bonds and other issues.

Given what is said above, by adopting the role of an orchestrator with a systemic thinking and human-centered approach, service design acts as a bridge between high-level policy strategy and the real lived experience of users. Its design tools help to make fragmented resources discoverable, navigable, and responsive to individual needs. And this orchestrating function is particularly relevant to integration, as one of the most frequently highlighted issues by any type of migrant is "navigating" in the host society. The problem is often not that support doesn't exist — it is that existing services remain invisible or inaccessible to the people who need them.

Service  
Design in this  
work takes  
the role of  
"orchestrator,"  
bridge between  
policy and real  
experience

*Methodological note*

However, to ground the service design approach, a structured analytical framework is needed — one that is academically informed but practically oriented. For this work I gathered information about different integration frameworks designed by scholars and policy-makers to represent its main domains. While perspectives vary in dimensions, there is a visible connected base between them, which may be applied to the future service design proposal, acting as its core, as pillars of possible value proposition. The following section examines this.

# Three Pillars of Integration: A Framework for Analysis and Design

As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, the study of integration has led to the development of a wide range of analytical and policy models. This chapter aims to consolidate these existing frameworks into a simplified, service-design-oriented model to create a strategic conceptual foundation that will inform the research phase and the following design development.

## AGER & STRANG FRAMEWORK

The most widely cited analytical framework for understanding integration comes from Ager and Strang, who in 2008 proposed a model organized around ten sectors across four domains. This framework has been influential, as authors created a conceptual structure for considering what the key components of “successful” integration are.

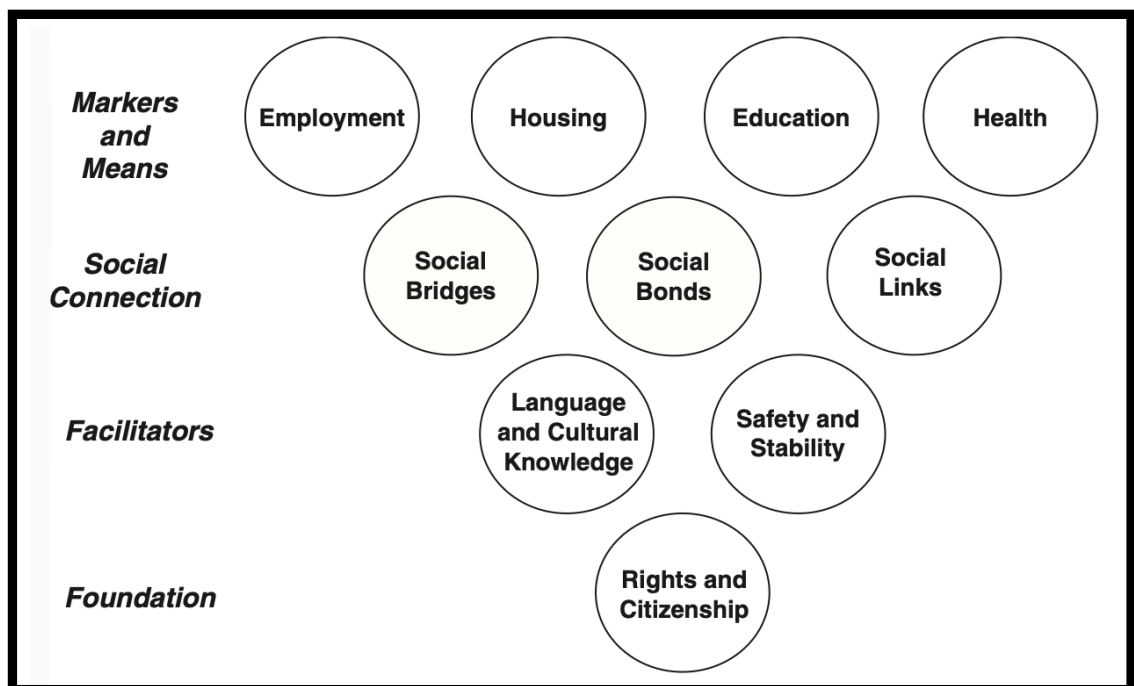


Figure 3: Ager & Strang Framework

It became an evidence-based tool for practitioners to plan and evaluate integration interventions in diverse contexts. The domains of this framework are:

- Markers and Means: the core structural dimensions (specifically employment, housing, education, and health) that act as tangible outcomes of settlement while actively facilitating the integration process;
- Foundation: adopted assumptions and practices regarding citizenship, rights and responsibilities;
- Social Connection: "connective tissue" between legal and socio-economic integration, including building bonds (connection with 'like-ethnic groups), bridges (connection between immigrants and host communities) and links (connection between individuals and structures of the state);
- Facilitators: linguistic and cultural competences of migrants paired with their sense of safety and stability, that collectively act as main settlement barriers removers.

While this framework is widely recognized as a foundational, I also analyzed more recent models and frameworks tailored specifically to the Italian context to gain a broader perspective.

#### PENNIX & GARCÉS-MASCAREÑAS FRAMEWORK

Penninx & Garcés-Mascreñas (2016) have proposed to reframe integration focusing more on its interactive, two-way dimensions.

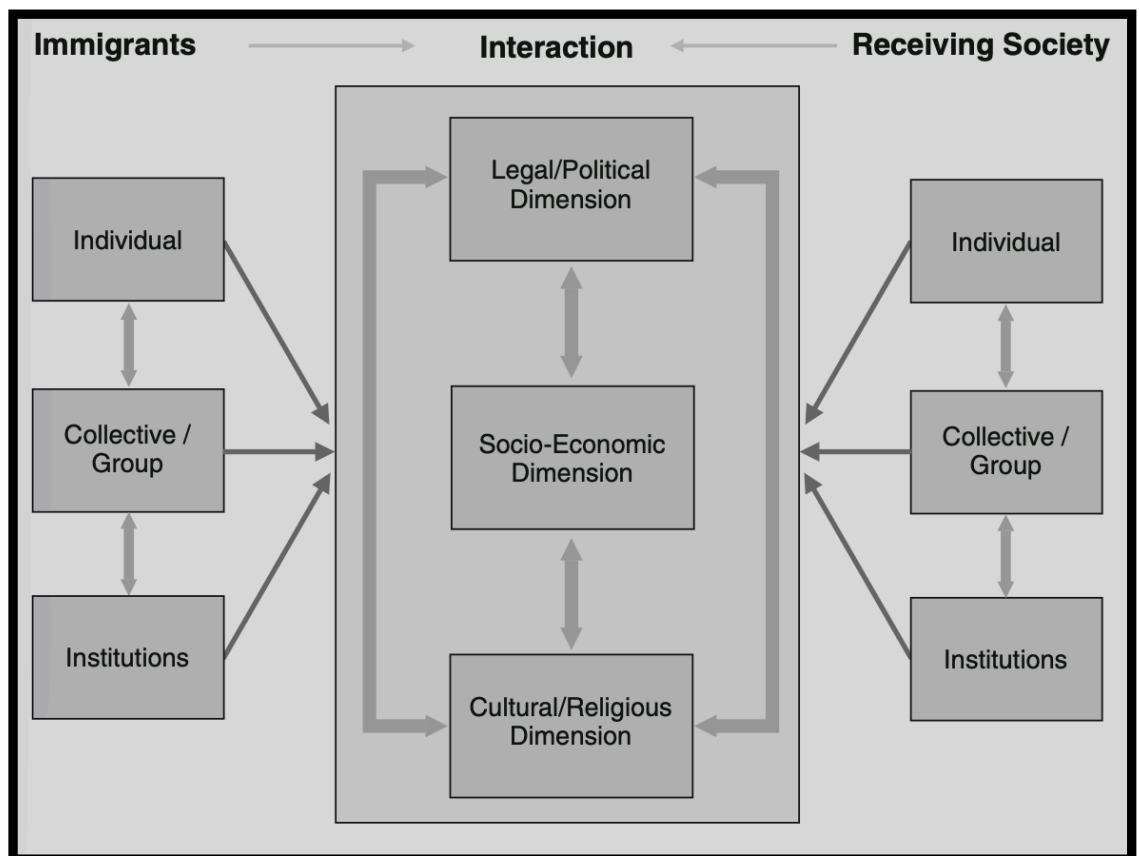


Figure 4: Penninx & Garcés-Mascreñas Framework

Due to them, there are two parties: immigrants themselves, with their varying characteristics, efforts, and degrees of adaptation and the receiving society, with its characteristics and reactions to newcomers.

Their interaction is operating within 3 main domains:

- Legal-Political: residence, political rights and statuses — whether and to what extent are immigrants considered as full members of the political community;
- Socio-Economic: social and economic position of residents, regardless of their national citizenship — level of access to and participation in domains that are crucial for any resident (work, housing, education, and health care);
- Cultural-Religious: cultural perceptions and practices of immigrants and the receiving society as well as their reciprocal reactions to difference and diversity — level of acceptance between hosts and immigrants.

Additionally, authors state that each of these domains correspond to the one of three main forces that interplay with immigration and integration processes: the state (Legal-Political ), the market (Socio-Economic ), and the nation (Cultural-Religious). Given a two-way relationship, the receiving society should adapt each force to immigrants' needs.

### SPENCER & CHARLSLEY FRAMEWORK

Spencer & Charsley (2021) conceptualize integration as an ongoing, non-linear process rather than a fixed state, mapping the interconnections between the immigrants and the host society. By adding

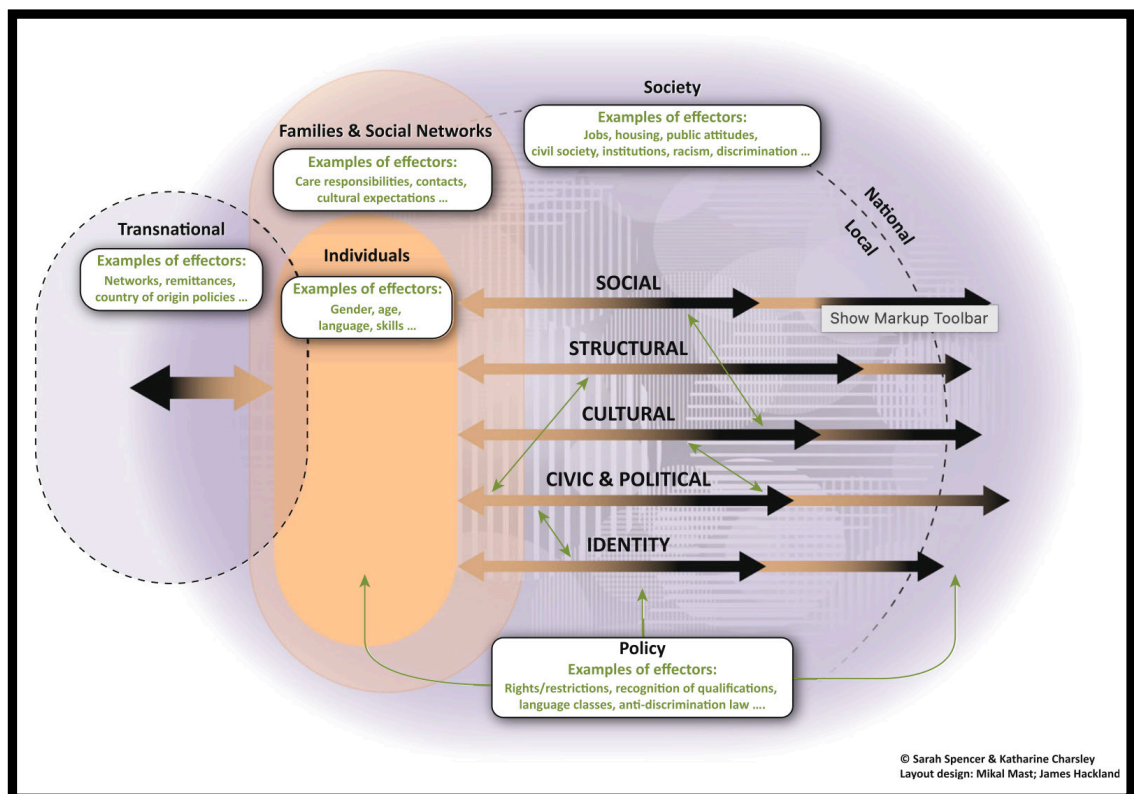


Figure 5: Spencer & Charsley Framework

so-called "effectors" they show how different forces (transnational, individuals, families & social network, society and policy) either "push" or "pull" the integration journey. By doing so they remove the "blame of poor integration" from the individual and place it on the entire system level. Due to them integration is a multi-way processes of change happening within five domains:

- Structural — labour, housing, education and health systems;
- Social — social interaction, relationships and networks;
- Cultural — values, attitudes, behaviour and lifestyle;
- Civic and political participation — community life and the democratic process;
- Identity — the own perception of belonging with the place, nation and communities.

Identity here becomes one of main domains, emphasizing the importance of individual migrants' context. Self-perception of integration is one of the points to take into account — as people can feel as "temporary guests" even if they have a stable job and a big community of people around.

## GOLINI FRAMEWORK

Professor Antonio Golini (2001) developed one of the earliest comprehensive frameworks for measuring immigrant integration in Italy. His work shows that Italy's academic tradition of integration thinking has been oriented toward an "indirect" model — delegating integration to civil society — since at least 2000. Additionally, while his framework formally recognizes integration as a "two-way process", it still treats it primarily as the immigrant's duty. By proposing that rights should expand gradually based on the length of stay, the model positions legal rights as a reward rather than a fundamental baseline. This makes Golini's framework stand alone, acting more as a policy rather than academically driven, deeply reflecting Italy's specific historical, cultural, and political context.

His report proposes a measurement framework organized around four general dimensions, each subdivided into 12 specific areas with corresponding indicators:

- Demographic, social, and territorial characteristics: "human capital and social capital" migrants bring, including age structure, family composition, duration of stay, and geographic distribution;
- Relations with the community of origin and the host community: measuring the tendency toward settlement (family reunification, mixed marriages, remittances) and interaction with the native population;
- Labor market integration and socio-professional mobility: employment, unemployment, occupational segregation, sectoral concentration, type of contracts, and progression over time;
- Conditions of daily life and active participation: housing conditions, health, education, political participation, criminality, and civic engagement.

Golini's model describes a system where the state mostly checks the "measures" while leaving the social heart of integration to third-sector stakeholders. It stresses how well the immigrant "fits"

the Italian demographic and economic needs.

Although Italian policymakers are currently moving towards more genuine “two-way” frameworks, Golini’s work remains a vital reference for understanding both the historical roots and the current reality of the Italian approach — a dynamic that is explored in greater detail in Chapter 3.

| DIMENSIONI                                                            | AMBITI SPECIFICI                                                               | MISURE E INDICATORI                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A. STRUTTURA DEMOGRAFICA, SOCIALE E TERRITORIALE                      | A.1. Struttura demografica e comportamento riproduttivo                        | A.1.1. Ammontare<br>A.1.2. Struttura per età<br>A.1.3. Struttura per sesso<br>A.1.4. Struttura per stato civile<br>A.1.5. Natalità/fecondità                                                                                       |
|                                                                       | A.2. Struttura sociale                                                         | A.2.1. Livello di istruzione                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                                                                       | A.3. Struttura territoriale                                                    | A.3. 1. Distribuzione della popolazione sul territorio                                                                                                                                                                             |
| B. RELAZIONI CON LA COMUNITA’ DI ORIGINE E CON QUELLA DI ACCOGLIMENTO | B.1. Relazioni con il paese di origine                                         | B.1.1. Rimesse<br>B.3.1. Ricongiungimenti familiari<br>B.1.2. Contatti con familiari in patria                                                                                                                                     |
|                                                                       | B.2. Relazioni con il gruppo etnico di origine e con gli altri gruppi          | B.2.1. Iscritti ad associazioni etniche<br>B.2.2. Matrimoni tra stranieri                                                                                                                                                          |
|                                                                       | B.3. Relazioni con il paese di accogliimento                                   | B.3.2. Uso della lingua italiana<br>B.3.3. Matrimoni misti<br>B.3.4. Naturalizzazioni e acquisizioni della cittadinanza                                                                                                            |
| C. INSERIMENTO LAVORATIVO E MOBILITA’ SOCIO-PROFESSIONALE             | C.1. Riuscita scolastica dei figli degli immigrati e della seconda generazione | C.1.1. Scolarizzazione<br>C.1.2. Insuccessi nella scuola dell’obbligo<br>C.1.3. Ritardi ed abbandoni                                                                                                                               |
|                                                                       | C.2. Inserimento lavorativo                                                    | C.2.1. Tasso di attività e partecipazione femminile<br>C.2.2. Tasso di disoccupazione<br>C.2.3. Settori di occupazione e qualifiche professionali<br>C.2.4. Lavoratori autonomi<br>C.2.5. Utilizzazione del capitale umano         |
| D. VITA NELLA SOCIETA’                                                | D.1. Alloggio                                                                  | D.1.1. Distribuzione sul territorio urbano (concentrazione geografica e segregazione)<br>D. 1.2. Tipo di sistemazione abitativa<br>D.1.3. Quota di proprietari di abitazioni<br>D. 1.4. Quota di senza casa<br>D.1.5. Affollamento |
|                                                                       | D.2. Consumi                                                                   | D.2.1. Quota di reddito consumato in beni non di prima necessità                                                                                                                                                                   |
|                                                                       | D.3. Salute                                                                    | D.3.1. Condizioni di salute<br>D.3.2. Abortività<br>D.3.3. Mortalità                                                                                                                                                               |
|                                                                       | D.4. Devianza                                                                  | D.4.1. Intensità dei comportamenti devianti rispetto ai nazionali                                                                                                                                                                  |

Figure 6: Golini Framework

## DESIGN-ORIENTED FRAMEWORK

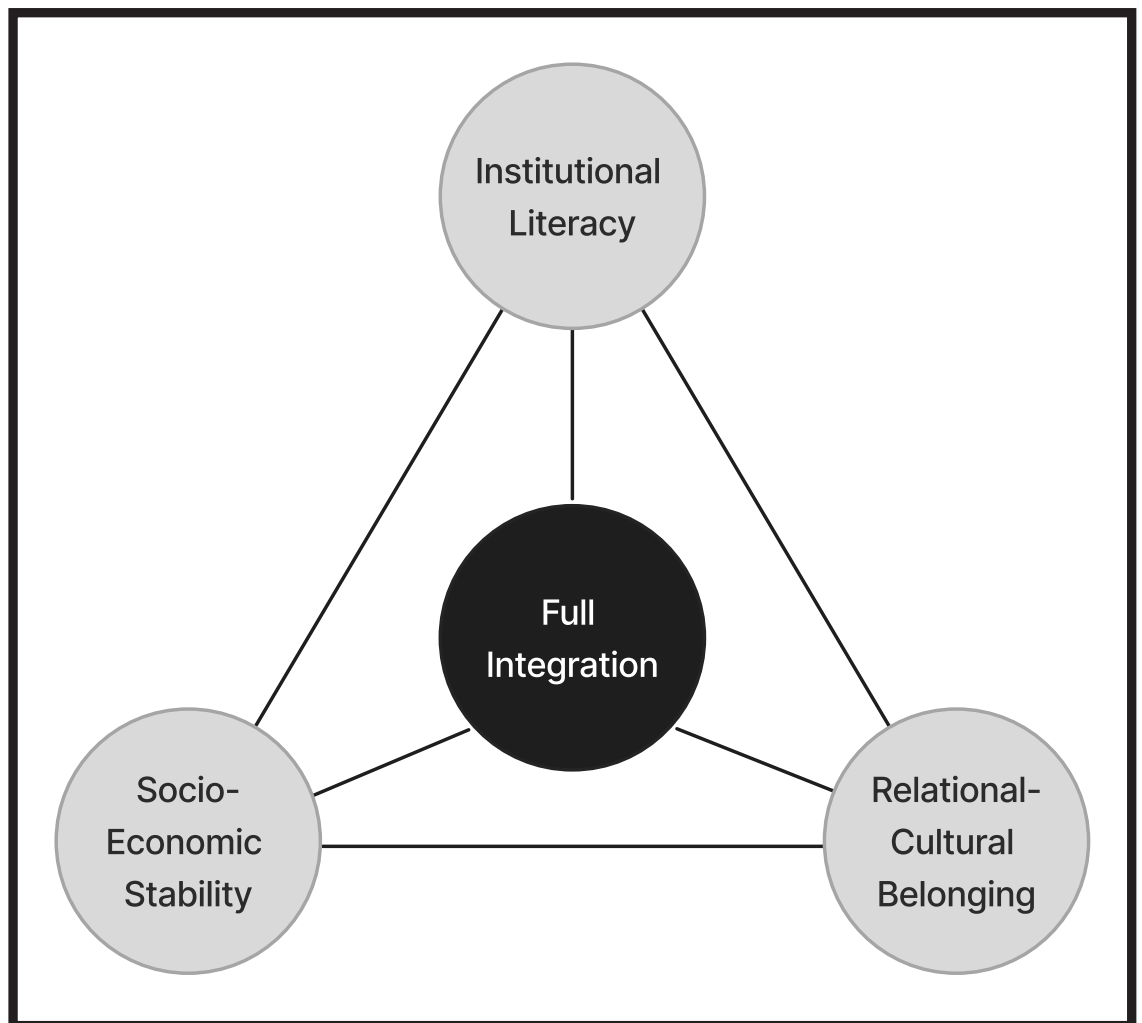
These frameworks reflect different times and contexts, differing significantly in their philosophical approach to responsibility, the role of rights, and the nature of the integration process itself. However still, there is a broader shared understanding that integration is a multi-



dimensional process, operating across fundamental areas. These areas are always represented by legal and political dimension (status of migrants, their rights, and their civic or political participation), social and economical dimension (mainly across essential socio-economic sectors of employment, housing, education, and health), cultural and relational dimension (language, values, attitudes, behaviour and networking as soft engines of integration).

Systems and processes like integration have a very complex nature. And service design as a discipline tends to use frameworks as tools to manage this complexity. The simpler and more fundamental the framework is, the easier it is to establish teamwork, speed up collaboration, and clarify communication. As practitioners in the field note, the main principles of framework design is understanding how things break down into their most essential, core components and the relationships between those things. We can't focus on everything — so we need to focus on a smaller set of things.

Hence, taking this thought further, I have framed a simplified approach to design for integration, based on fundamental dimensions common to both academic research and institutional policy. My work proposes three pillars of integration that will structure the entire analysis — from barrier identification to prototyping (*Figure 7*).



*Figure 7: Three Pillars of Integration: A Framework for Analysis and Design*

- Institutional Literacy: consolidates Ager and Strang's "foundation" and "facilitators" into a single dimension focused on the migrant's ability to understand and navigate the systems of the host country. The focus is not only on whether rights exist but on whether the individual can access and exercise them within different channels. For non-EU students specifically this means understanding how the legal system works, where to go, with whom to speak, which documents to bring and where to find reliable and comprehensive information;
- Socio-Economic Stability: corresponds directly to the Penninx and Garcés-Mascreñas's social and economic position of residents. The word "stability" is used to highlight the importance of stable access to and participation in work, housing, education, and health care domains. For a non-EU student, this means finding work that matches their qualifications rather than falling into random arrangements, securing stable housing beyond temporary student accommodation, and achieving a level of financial independence that makes staying in Italy enjoyable rather than a constant struggle;
- Relational-Cultural Belonging: expands Ager and Strang's "social connections" layer (bonds, bridges, and links) by adding the identity dimension of Spencer and Charsley. The word "belonging" takes understanding beyond networks and trust relationships adding a subjective sense of being recognized, welcomed, and "at home." For a non-EU student, this means having friendships and professional connections beyond the international student bubble, feeling confident in the language and cultural codes of daily life, and sensing that the host society sees them as a legitimate member — not a temporary guest.

These pillars are not independent. A student who cannot navigate bureaucracy cannot secure legal employment. A student without social networks lacks access to the informal knowledge that helps navigate institutions. A student in economic instability may have neither the time nor the psychological space to build meaningful relationships. Integration succeeds only when all three pillars are supported simultaneously.

The pillars define WHAT integration requires and WHERE design intervention can be directed. But there is also another dimension, shared by all articles mentioned above, — "two-way integration". It answers HOW integration should be pursued — through what philosophy, and with what expectations from both migrant and host society. This is the question the next section addresses.

Three  
integration  
pillars serve as  
a structural  
framework  
for the whole  
research and  
design process,  
defining "what"  
and "where"

*Methodological note*



# Intercultural Integration Approach as Normative Design Framework

## HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF INTEGRATION MODELS IN EUROPE

In recent history, European countries have adopted various philosophies for managing migration-related diversity. These philosophies represent diverse ways of building relationships between host society and immigrants — defining mutual expectations and the intended nature of the adaptation process. Three main fundamentally different approaches can be identified.

The historical foundation of European integration regarding immigration largely began with assimilation, a model primarily associated with the French Republican philosophy. Assimilation by definition is the process where individuals adopt language, attitudes, values, behaviours, manners of a dominant culture, often abandoning their original cultural heritage. The idea of this integration model is to convert migrants into part of society by changing them entirely, while society remains as it is. "Equality without diversity" — economic, civil, and social rights, but no cultural ones (*Bertossi, 2007*). This model was critiqued for erasing identity while actually failing to deliver the promised equality.

After assimilation failed to prevent racial tensions, multiculturalism appeared in the late 1970s and 1980s as the alternative view. Strongly associated with the UK and the Netherlands, it turned perception on 180 degrees, stating that cultural differences should be not just accepted but also celebrated. Cultural rights were granted alongside civil and economic ones, aiming to integrate minorities by providing them with a possibility to retain and express their own identities. However, the result turned out to look more like "diversity without inclusion", as communities were just acknowledging differences between them, without actual acceptance (*Bertossi, 2007*). In recent years, political leaders across Europe have claimed that multiculturalism has failed — as an example, Angela Merkel's 2010 statement that "multikulti has utterly failed" (*Weaver, 2010*). Tolerance without interaction, it turned out, did not produce cohesion, just encouraging social fragmentation.

In the 2000s, European institutions like the Council of Europe and the European Commission began shifting toward interculturalism as a "post-multiculturalist" model to handle cultural diversity (*García Agustín, 2012*). Interculturalism emphasizes active dialogue and interaction between cultures to promote mutual understanding and

collaboration. Diversity is viewed now more as a resource rather than a problem and should incentivize mutual integration — adaptation of both migrants and host society. It rejects assimilation — no one should have to erase their identity. But it also rejects passive coexistence — living in parallel is not enough. The goal is social cohesion through cross-cultural contact, dialogue, and mutual transformation. Nowadays this approach is institutionalized at the European level, as an urban policy condition.

## INTERCULTURALISM AS AN URBAN POLICY CONDITION

In 2008 The Council of Europe published the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, subtitled "Living together as equals with dignity". This document proposes intercultural dialogue as a distinct alternative for managing cultural diversity and provides guidance to political and administrative decision-makers, educators, media representatives, and civil society. The paper identifies core values — human rights, democracy, and the rule of law — and builds five basic requirements and policy approaches around them:

- Dialogue must be based on stated core values;
- Societies must move beyond viewing differences as a problem;
- Cities should promote active and equal participation in civic and political life for everyone;
- The host society must be prepared to acquire the necessary skills for cross-cultural understanding and communication;
- There must be physical and virtual spaces designed to facilitate interaction and dialogue across cultures.

Building on this, the Council of Europe created the Intercultural Cities programme — a capacity-building network that helps local authorities translate these philosophies into urban policy. It provides cities with a more precise analytical framework and assessment tools to develop and measure intercultural policies. The main goal is to motivate cities, as front faces of integration, encourage active mixing and enable broad participation for building a shared sense of belonging and ownership. Cities that join the programme are assessed through the Intercultural Cities Index — benchmarking evaluation too.

While interculturalism is established as an institutional framework also for Italian cities, the critical question remains whether these policies are implemented and functional in practice, requiring closer examination.

## FINALIZED DESIGN APPROACH

Intercultural philosophy is also criticized. Critics have noted that intercultural principles are vague rhetorical political myths that can be easier to state than to implement on the ground (*Wieviorka, 2012*). Good intentions without structural, systemic solutions are not enough to create a society capable of transformation. These critiques are worth acknowledging, but for the purposes of this design thesis, interculturalism is treated as an existing policy reality that aligns with Italy's stated integration philosophy. Hence its set of design principles should be followed, particularly when designing for a non-EU

Inter-culturalism serves as a normative framework for the whole research and design process, guiding "how"

*Methodological note*

student community that is highly diverse in its cultural and national backgrounds.

In summary, the three pillars analyzed in the previous chapter will serve as the structural framework for the research and proposed design solution — defining "what" the intervention will address and "where". While the principles of interculturalism will be adopted as the primary lens, normative framework, to guide "how" the primary research should be conducted and how" service and its interactions should be designed and delivered.

**“...intercultural dialogue is understood as a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups... It requires the freedom and ability to express oneself, as well as the willingness and capacity to listen to the views of others. Intercultural dialogue contributes to political, social, cultural and economic integration and the cohesion of culturally diverse societies.”**

*White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, "Living Together As Equals in Dignity"*

The following step is to understand the Italian national view on migration, as it shapes the integration structure for non-EU students as well, especially when they reach the work-transition period. As the existing Italian context of integration was partially discussed in previous chapters, it already can be stated that internationals are facing a whole range of bureaucratic, social, economic and cultural issues. Still, looking at current policy realities, mapping their causes and comparing them with institutionalised integration plans will help clarify the situation and determine the level at which the design work can be done. Hence, the next chapter reviews the historical, political, and cultural dynamics that have shaped integration in Italy, shedding light on the root causes of the problems frequently faced by international students as part of the broader migrant community.

# 1.3

## **Integration in Italy: A Conditional Welcome**

- i. The Roots of Italian Migration: History, Geography and Political Discourse
- ii. The Socio-Cultural Fabric of Integration: Law, Culture and Public Perception
- iii. Institutional Integration Frameworks: From EU Principles to National Implementation

# The Roots of Italian Migration: History, Geography, and Political Discourse

Italy's current integration framework can be characterised as a "conditional welcome" (Jussi P. Laine, 2018) — a highly pragmatic but restrictive approach to migration, caused by trials to find a balance between economic benefits, politico-social security anxieties and responsibilities towards others. It may be called "conditional" because migrant's acceptance, legal status, and integration into Italian society are not guaranteed as fundamental rights of residency, but are negotiated based on how much the migrant benefits the host or matches to local preferences.

To understand why the integration landscape was developed in this way, a closer look at historical factors and political realities driving it will be taken.

## HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHIC INFLUENCE

Almost directly after the unification of Italy in 1861, the nation was heavily shaped by mass emigration. Driven by economic struggles, agricultural crises and lack of manufacturing jobs, approximately 13 million Italians emigrated between 1880 and 1915, forming one of the largest voluntary emigrations in recorded Italian history (Scotto, 2017). This was followed by another significant emigration wave from 1946 to 1965 — after World War II. This heritage of emigration heavily influenced the country's national identity and citizenship law. However, this dynamic began to shift in the late 1970s. Following the post-World War II "economic miracle," Italy's industrial development created a demand for low-skilled labor, attracting a new wave of international immigrants mainly from Africa, Asia and Latin America (T. N. Nguyen & H. H. A. Nguyen, 2025). Consequently, Italy started its transformation into a primary destination for migrants.

This transformation is also deeply tied to Italy's geography. Positioned as a peninsula in the middle of the Mediterranean, Italy, as a result of a "geographical accident", became the first EU landing migration point. The country represented and still represents a logical passage for maritime arrivals, being a primarily Mediterranean gateway to Europe. And this was deeply felt during the migration crises.

After the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe thousands of people from Albania reached Italy on overcrowded boats.

This was followed by receiving around 335,000 irregular arrivals via the Mediterranean during 2015-16 and a recent flow of around 170,400 Ukrainian refugees (*Statista*, 2025).

Media representation of these events generated polarised public response among Italians: both solidarity and fear.

### POLITICAL DISCOURSE

As migration to Italy accelerated, the political discourse surrounding it underwent a profound transformation. In 2001 the general elections brought into power the center-right coalition of Silvio Berlusconi. This shifted the government's approach away from cultural pluralism towards a more restrictive assimilation. Therefore, since that time, immigration has been viewed mostly as a security problem, shifting from a non-political topic to a highly politicized security issue. This securitization process structured Italian border and migration management along three defining axes (*Mancini*, 2024):

- Emergency: reactive crisis-management framework, utilizing the hotspot approach and active externalization policies;
- Security: enhanced border policing and surveillance together with systematic data storage tracking;
- Criminality: strategic deployment of criminal law towards migrants.

More recently, this securitization has intensified under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's administration. Following the tragic shipwreck off the coast of Cutro in February 2023 the government declared a national migration state of emergency, viewing migration primarily as a criminal smuggling issue (*Torrise*, 2023). As a result, measures taken did not stop the migratory flow, but just criminalised it. Additionally, recent government decrees significantly restricting "special protection" statuses, along with complex activation procedures of working visas, may simply create a new wave of irregular migrants (*Torrise*, 2023).

This "emergency" rhetoric and the criminalization of migrants have spread anxiety in Italian society, leading to some xenophobic reactions, social exclusion, and welfare chauvinism.

### IMMIGRATION PARADOX

The clash of Italy's demographic reality, discussed in the first chapter, with its hostile political discourse, creates a kind of "Immigration Paradox" (*Figure 8*). While the state economically depends on foreign labour, politically it rejects or criminalises their presence, often limiting rights and integration. The situation is further aggravated by another historical peculiarity of Italy: Italy's legacy as a collection of independent city-states for over 1,300 years has left a tradition of regional fragmentation. Consequently, it is practically impossible to establish a single, uniform model of integration in Italy without considering characteristics of each region. This degree of decentralization means that the development of concrete integration policies is left on the shoulders of the local authorities. As a matter of fact, the Italian authorities have largely outsourced to the third-sector the job of

taking care of migrants' integration upon their arrival in the country.

Everything described above in turn leads to fragmented, localised and opaque administrative requirements. Combined with constantly shifting conditions for remaining in the country, the path to long-term residency is transformed into a structural obstacle rather than a clear service. Ultimately, finding a functional balance between the country's severe need for foreign human capital and the political resistance toward immigrants remains one of Italy's greatest challenges

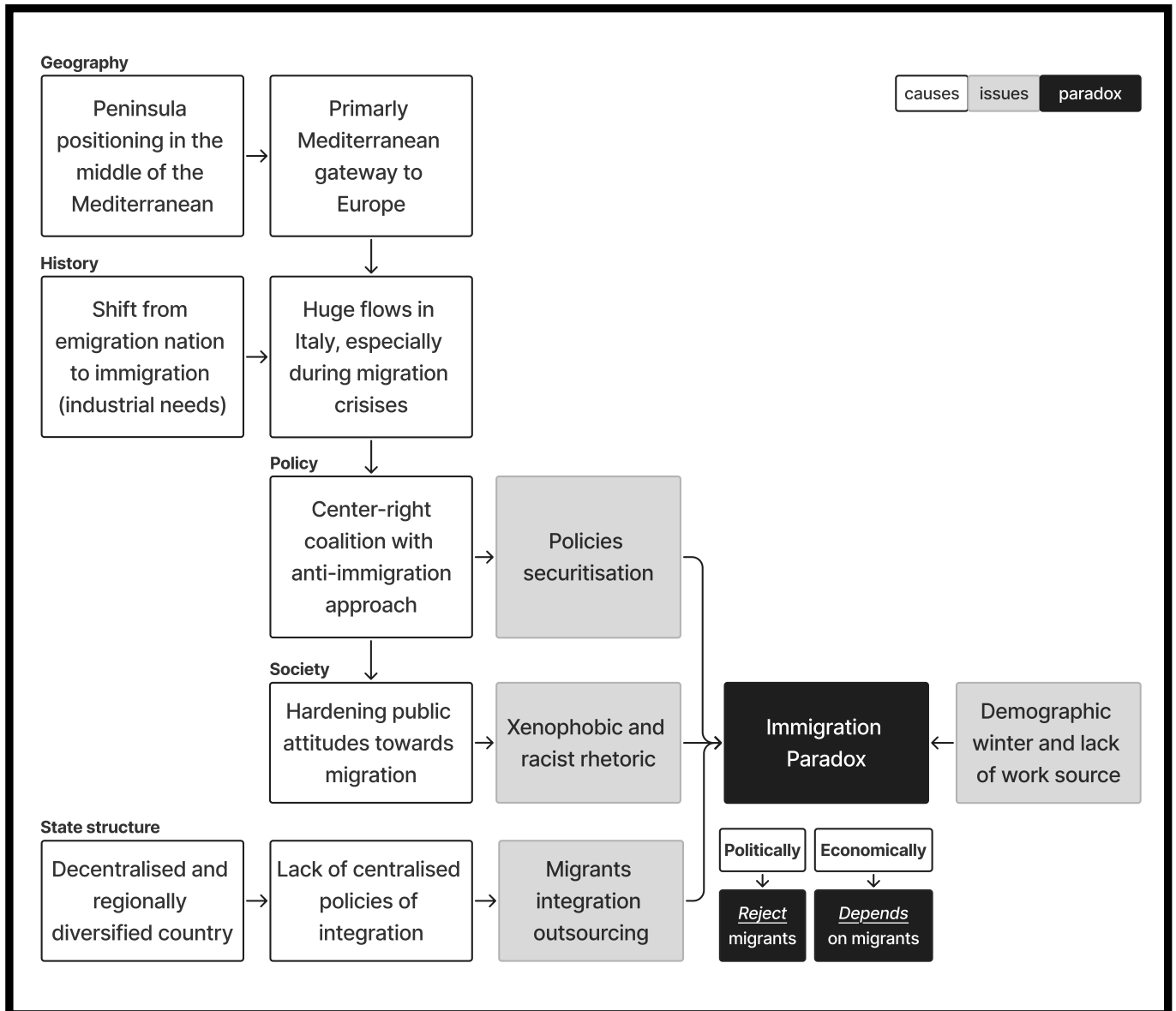


Figure 8: Immigration Paradox Causes

This analysis clarifies the root causes of the existing institutional problems. Still, a migrant's sense of integration and belonging is equally led by socio-cultural dynamics that were just briefly mentioned before. Clarifying this point deeply will provide an understanding of the overall social climate toward migration. Therefore, these dynamics will be discussed in the following section.

# The Socio-Cultural Fabric of Integration: Law, Culture, and Public Perception

Integration is not merely an administrative checkbox — it is a profound psychological and cultural transition where an individual must reconstruct own identity within a new society. Belonging acts as the necessary foundation for this process. The factors shaping these feelings of a new identity and belonging are tied to both the citizenship framework and the social climate towards migrations, as they reflect how a host society defines who belongs and who remains an outsider.

## BLOOD-BASED CITIZENSHIP

Unlike many European nations that have adopted citizenship by birthplace or through education, Italy's legal framework remains anchored in citizenship by bloodline. Under this law, people with Italian ancestry, even those who have never been in Italy, can obtain the passport, while children born and raised in Italy by migrant parents are forced to navigate legal battles to acquire the same rights.

This heritage-based framework dates back to laws from 1912, designed when Italy was a nation of emigrants. That time the government was seeking to maintain economic and cultural ties with its diaspora in America (T. N. Nguyen & H. H. A. Nguyen, 2025).

Despite Italy's evolution into an immigration destination, proposals to introduce *ius Soli* or *ius Scholae* have repeatedly been blocked in parliament due to arguments that such reforms would weaken the national identity. This framework ties citizenship to heritage. Such a heritage focus leads to legal and social discrimination, risk of statelessness and it structurally enforces a "homogeneity myth" in society, introducing the idea that true belonging is an inherited trait, not something acquired through participation in society. This in turn touches already also non-EU students, as this "treat as guest" leads to long-term legal precariousities and lost sense of belonging and identity.

## RESISTANCE TO FULL INTERCULTURALISM

This legal boundary of bloodline also additionally feeds the existing Italy's cultural resistance to interculturalism. Following the unification in 1861, the state forged a "unified" national identity out of highly



fragmented regional city-states to consolidate them. This narrative created a nostalgia for an uninterrupted, homogeneous "Italianness" (Kowalczyk & Popkewitz, 2005). Therefore, despite historical evidence of regional fragmentation and diversity, most Italians still see themselves as a culturally homogeneous society.

For this reason, even when the concept of a "new Italian" — diverse and inclusive — appeared, in reality it was hardly achievable. As discussed before, true interculturalism requires active dialogue and mutual change, also from the native population. However, the Italian cultural matrix frequently operates on a different principle: we let you in, but you should become like us; otherwise you stay in the zone of abjection — recognition of diversity, but refuse to fully accept it (Kowalczyk & Popkewitz, 2005).

Consequently, while Italy officially promotes a European narrative of social cohesion, underneath lies a system that manages diversity through cultural and emotional distance, perceiving interculturalism as a threat to the nation. This dynamic is confirmed by the prevailing public attitudes toward migrants and the broader social climate, however with some positive changes among the young generation.

## PUBLIC PERCEPTION

The general emotional climate in Italy toward immigration has overall become predominantly negative. According to the Autumn 2023 Eurobarometer, a clear majority of Italians explicitly express cultural rejection and fear of immigrants. Over 50% directly see migrants as a "threat to national identity and urban quality of life" and 80% demand much stronger EU external border controls. Furthermore, the latest data from Raporto Censis 2025, prove that this perception continues to grow over time. Specifically, 58.8% believe that "a neighbourhood degrades when many immigrants live there."

However, youth demographic reveals a different perceptual landscape. A 2024 UNICEF report surveying Italian youth (ages 15-24) found that Generation Z is far more open to diversity. Over 50% of young Italians report having friendships with peers from migrant backgrounds, and 85% view intercultural exchanges as enriching experiences that foster closer connections. Yet, these young people are highly aware of the existing inclusion and integration barriers — the majority (32%) identify "Italians' cultural closure" and the refusal to accept diversity as the main obstacle to the migrants' inclusion in Italy.

This generational awareness reveals the core issue: while personal, micro-level integration is actually occurring, the national system remains trapped in a cultural closure and political resistance. This reality is experienced with particular intensity by non-EU university students, who are dropped into this environment with a highly compressed timeline of just two- three years of study. Attempting to build local networks, a sense of belonging and transition into the workforce within a society with predominantly negative attitude towards you make genuine integration hardly achievable.

Still, Italy has official strategies to guide inclusion and integration despite existing ground issues. The next section reviews the European and national integration action plans, exploring how these theoretical policy benchmarks are translated into realities of local implementation.

# Institutional Integration Frameworks: From EU Principles to National Implementation

## THE EU BENCHMARK

To evaluate Italy's integration framework, it is first necessary to discuss the standard it is measured against: the European Union, specifically "The EU's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027)". This plan defines integration as a "societal process where the responsibility rests not with one particular group but rather with many: migrants, host communities, public authorities and institutions, highlighting the importance of "two-way" direction.

The European framework (*Figure 9*) advocates for "inclusion for all," emphasizing equal access to four foundational areas: housing, education, employment and healthcare. More precisely it means: recognition of qualifications and language learning, up- and reskilling opportunities, entrepreneurship support, better information and adapted support for healthcare, innovative housing solutions, fighting discrimination on the housing market, tackling segregation and other measures. Another practical focus is put on fostering participation and engagement of both migrants and the receiving society into the integration process. This means intercultural and interreligious exchanges, changing the narrative, raising awareness and including everyone into the decision-making process.

**“We will make sure that people who have the right to stay are integrated and made to feel welcome. They have a future to build — and skills, energy and talent.”**

*President von der Leyen, State of the Union Address 2020*

Crucially, the EU treats migration as a structural and manageable phenomenon — sometimes even calling it “opportunity” — essential for Europe’s labour markets and demographic balance, while remain-

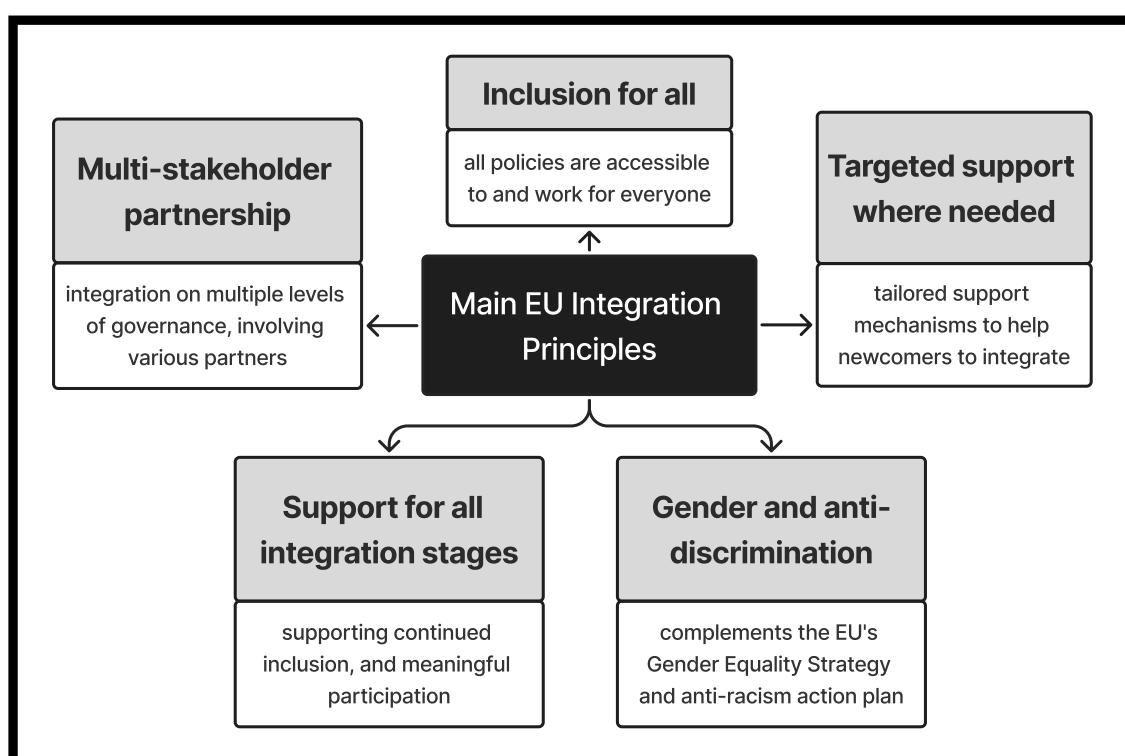


Figure 9: Main EU Integration Principles

ing aware of its political risks and security needs. However, as integration is grounded in the specific local places where it happens, this macro-level structural EU framework is translated by every individual member state into its own national Implementation Plan.

### ITALY'S NATIONAL INTEGRATION POLICIES

Italy, as a member of the EU, translates this European benchmark into national reality through the "2021-2027 Multiannual Agenda on Labour Integration and Social Inclusion". Adopted in January 2022 by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, it scales up the focus on labour and social inclusion for all vulnerable groups correlating with the main EU integration principles.

Its main priorities are mainly operational and include:

- Promoting decent work and labour-social integration: stopping illegal hiring networks, "black market" jobs, abuse and exploitation of migrant workers;
- Fostering skills and employment: teaching the language, digital, and professional skills of young and adult migrants to successfully qualify them for the labor market;
- Targeting vulnerable groups: prioritizing help for those who need it most;
- Multi-level cooperation: using "multi-stakeholder" and "multi-fund" strategy to force cooperation between central governments, decentralized regional authorities, private companies and NGOs to overcome fragmentation;

However, while the general rhetoric often mirrors EU principles, the legal and practical application in Italy demonstrates a different system.

In this work  
stated policy  
and lived  
implementation  
are analysed  
two distinct  
layers, to see  
if they match

Methodological note

Firstly, the Italian Implementation Plan concentrates mainly on labor integration due to existing structural labor shortage and the fact that legal residence permit is strictly tied to employment contracts (except for students, refugees and highly vulnerable groups). Secondly, this Implementation Plan works together with the "Integration Agreement" (Accordo di Integrazione) — the main administrative tool for general migrants integration. It functions as follows: upon receiving a residence permit, migrants must sign this agreement to participate in a points-based credit system — earning credits for “positive actions” (like learning language, completing civic education and maintaining lawful behavior) and losing them for “negative” ones with the risk of losing residence permit entirely.

As discussed before, beyond strict legal rules, the actual implementation of Italy's integration policies is profoundly fragmented. Even if the new Plan is paying attention to multi-level cooperation, legally integrated public services are working within the so-called "polycentric network of services" (*Ministero dell'Interno, 2017*). In practice it means that national authorities delegate the responsibility of integrating internationals to charities, private companies, cooperatives and NGOs. Officially named “rich presence of local identities and autonomy” in reality often leads to disbalance in practices between progressive municipalities and more small and conventional regions.

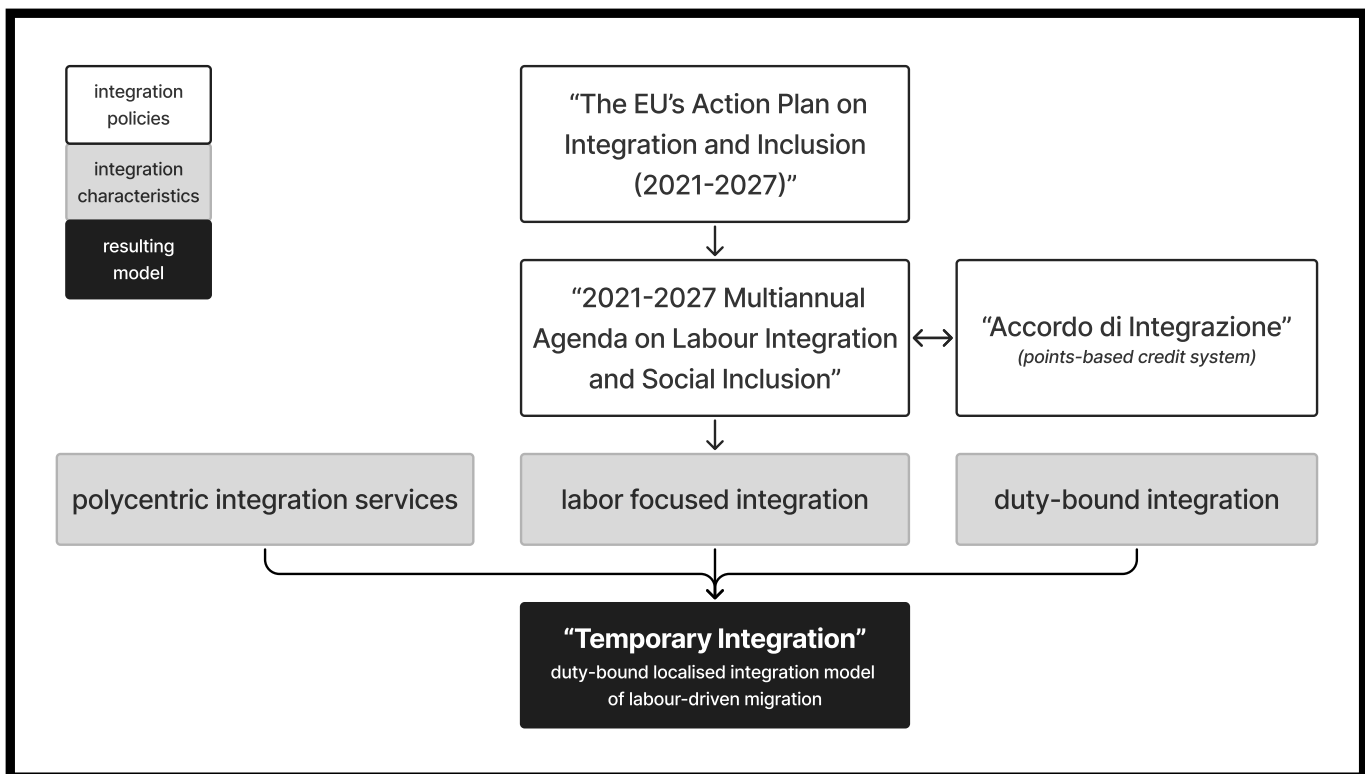


Figure 10: Italy's Integration Policy Architecture

Therefore, in this national context labor becomes the main gateway to any other form of integration, highlighting the duty-bound localised model of labour-driven migration Italy promotes (Figure 10). This brings us to the main problem non-EU international students face, especially when they transition from academia to the Italian workforce.

# **“The country’s “Temporary Integration” approach promotes the idea that immigrants should be treated as equals but ultimately still seen as foreigners rather than full members of society.”**

*Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), 2025*

## **STATING THE PROBLEM**

How can these integration models and policies influence non-EU students, if they are more tight to the workers? Quite directly. Firstly, as the workplace becomes the main gateway for official integration, students remain almost invisible to the state’s integration support structure. For instance, the national health card, Tesserà Sanitaria, — which grants access to public healthcare — is guaranteed automatically for workers. In contrast, international students must pay a fee of 700 euros per year to obtain it. This financial requirement creates a barrier to fair healthcare access. Secondly, even if initially students skip heavy bureaucratic barriers related to strict work-contract requirements, they are profoundly impacted by this system as soon as they graduate and transit into the Italian workforce. As the national system strictly controls the issuance of work permits to non-EU citizens, the process of hiring an international graduate remains incredibly complex, for both companies and former students. In the end, graduates are more frequently trapped into “brain waste” or moving away from Italy for the inability to receive a legal work.

Meanwhile, as the integration system lacks a centralized approach and relies so heavily on local implementation, a non-EU student's ability to achieve full integration is essentially tied to a geographic “lottery”. Integration progress and success depend less on a unified national strategy and more on the specific municipality and public entities operating there. Navigating this decentralised landscape alone is challenging. When combined with the securitisation policies and existing socio-cultural resistance towards migrants, this structural fragmentation fuels failures in integration and settlement.

Due to this conditional, fragmented, duty-bound framework the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) ranks Italy with a score of 58/100 (“halfway favourable”), classifying its model as “Temporary Integration” (*Migrant Integration Policy Index, 2025*). Within this paradigm, non-EU citizens are seen as functional economic instruments but structurally rejected as permanent members of civil society.

Thus, it can be stated that the practical work of inclusion in Italy actually takes place at the municipal scale. Overall, across the European Union, there is a growing trend recognizing that integration actually happens on city streets and public places. To understand how integration services should be designed and delivered, the following chapters shift focus from national decrees to the urban ecosystems.

# 1.4

## **Cities as Integration Frontlines**

- i. The Local Turn: Why Integration Happens in Cities?
- ii. From Local Turn to Local Strategy: How Cities Design Integration?

# The Local Turn: Why Integration Happens in Cities?

The existing growing trend on shifting integration to the local level is tied to the practical reality — while immigration policy (such as visas, border control, and legal admission) is written in national parliaments, the practical realities of integration actually happen on the ground: in workplaces, neighborhoods, schools, and public spaces. Scholars conceptualize and theorize this shift as “local turn”, highlighting its causes, advantages and disadvantages influencing migrants and host societies.

## THE LOCAL TURN IN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE

The term “local turn” appeared within the Multi-Level Governance (MLG) framework that refers to the decision-making process that engages both public and private actors across different levels of territorial aggregation without a defined hierarchy of political authority (*Schmitter, 2004*). The “local turn” in this case describes the phenomenon where local governments, particularly cities and regions, have become increasingly active and entrepreneurial in managing migrant integration (*Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017*). Instead of passively implementing national models, municipalities are drawing up their own agendas, policy strategies, and solutions to address integration and diversity. As cities are influenced a lot by people and cultures that are arriving and settling there, each local authority tries to advocate for their own concerns and address the super-diverse populations they have. To do so they manage two types of interrelations: horizontal — between local governments and other public, private, and social actors — and vertical — between local governments and higher national and European institutions (*Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017*). This means integration relies on continuous negotiation between local, regional, national, and supranational authorities rather than a stable, top-down hierarchy.

This approach has both advantages and disadvantages influencing the system. Regarding the advantages, firstly, working closely with society gives the possibility to use pragmatic problem solving approaches — designing place-based solutions tailored to the specific demographics of the residents (*Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017*). Secondly, horizontal cooperation with NGOs, civil society, businesses, and mi-

This work follows the “local turn” by focusing on city-scale interventions, where true integration occurs

*Methodological note*

grant associations strengthen their partnerships and co-production (OECD, 2018). Thirdly, this approach gives an agility for bottom-up innovation — experimenting with new welfare models, co-design service delivery and implementing early-intervention programs much faster than national government.

However, this reliance on local actors comes with a significant cost. As already mentioned before, giving integration competencies to regional and municipal levels often produces a fragmented and unequal landscape. The process becomes fragmented if participants are not coordinated well enough. This in turn creates policy silos — different municipal departments may fail to coordinate with one another, resulting in administrative loopholes and delayed access to services for migrants (OECD, 2018). Regarding inequality, different municipalities have different finance resources, frequently lacking local tax-raising capacities. This means that the level of integration programs vary a lot from city to city. Additionally, the local sphere is also highly contradictory — it forces actors with conflicting interests and diverse ideologies to interact closely, which can breed local social tensions and an anti-migrant social climate.

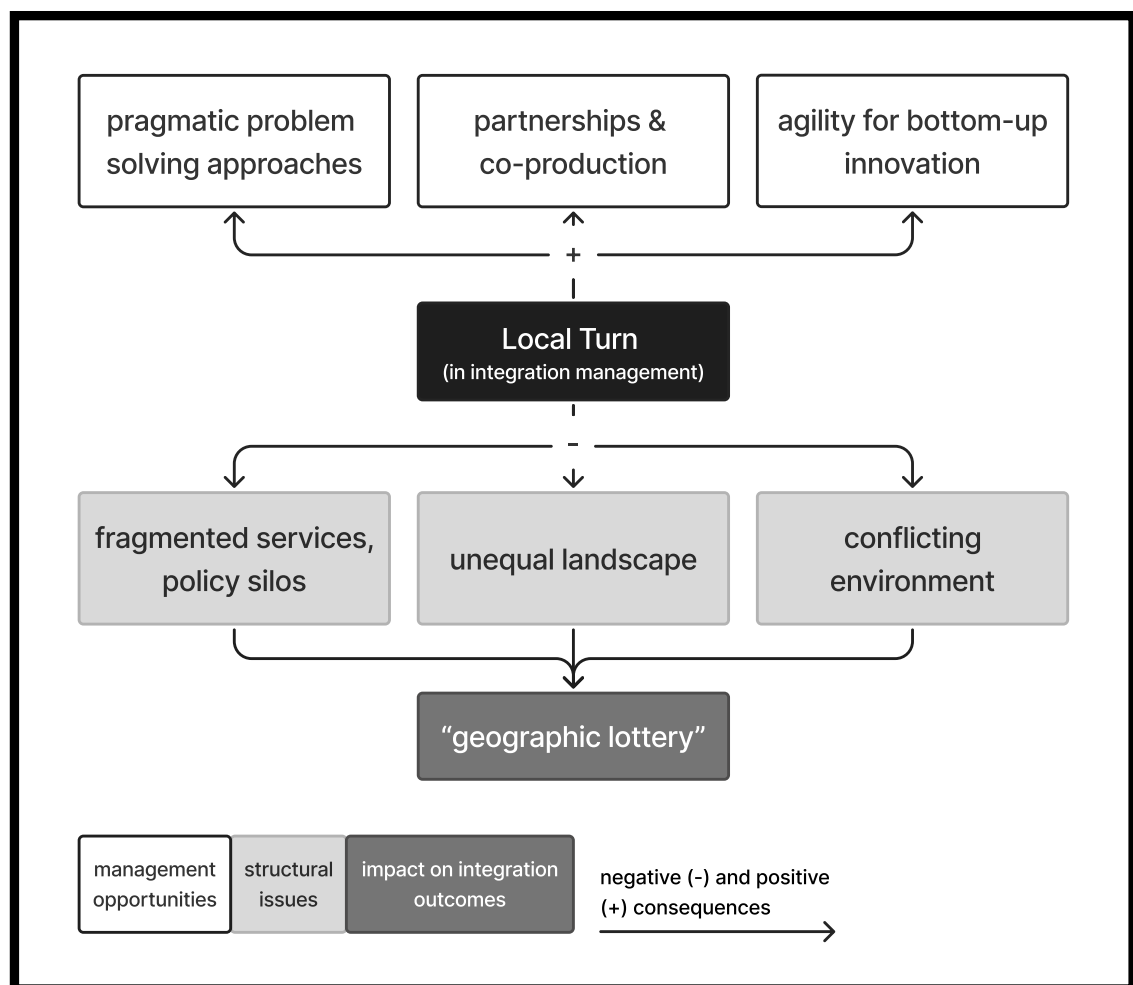


Figure 11: The Local Turn Negative and Positive Consequences

Consequently, already mentioned before "geographic lottery" (Figure 11) becomes the main stumbling block for integration, as its quality



and availability depend heavily on the varying financial capacities, political will, and independent frameworks of specific municipalities.

To overcome the lack of centralized coordination, local governments are engaging in horizontal, city-to-city relations.

## CITY-TO-CITY NETWORKS

City-to-city networks are collaborative platforms that connect municipal governments to share knowledge, resources and collaboratively address common urban challenges, such as the reception and integration of migrants. They act as a unified voice to elevate local concerns to supranational levels (OECD, 2018). Several prominent transnational networks have been established to facilitate cooperation among local governments. These include:

- Eurocities: a network of major European cities that advocates for city-led integration, brings mayors' voices to supranational institutions, and focuses on innovative policies;
- The Intercultural Cities (ICC) network: founded by the Council of Europe, this capacity-building network helps local authorities translate diversity into urban policy and move beyond traditional assimilationist models;
- The Mediterranean City-to-City Migration Project (MC2CM): a network bringing together cities from both sides of the Mediterranean to establish open dialogue on migration governance;
- The URBACT Arrival Cities Project: fosters migrants' social inclusion by sharing good practices between project partners;
- The Global Mayoral Forum and the Champion Mayors for Inclusive Growth (OECD): initiatives that provide spaces for local leaders to share solutions for inclusive urban economic growth and to influence international decision-making.

**“Cities are not merely places where migrants settle, but dynamic laboratories of inclusion, where communities co-create vibrant societies.”**

*Rutger Groot Wassink, Deputy Mayor of Amsterdam*

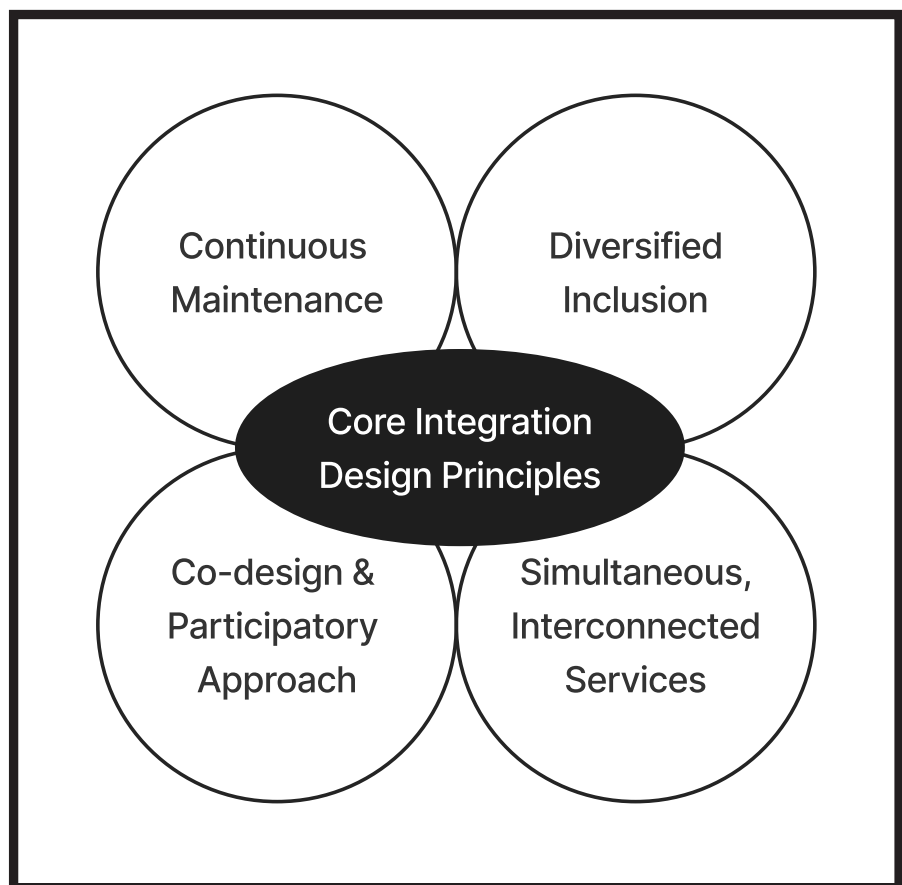
These networks prove that the "local turn" is a widespread, documented European trend. Leading municipalities are actively advocating for knowledge-sharing and mutual learning, direct urban funding, accessible tools and frameworks for policy-building and other initiatives. The main goal of these networks is to encourage active mixing and enable broad participation for building a shared sense of belonging and ownership (OECD, 2018).

To ground these claims, the OECD reports several concrete examples. Amsterdam has developed the "Amsterdam Approach" — an intensive, early-integration model. Rather than waiting for bureaucratic processes to conclude, the city assigns refugees a "case manager"

and a "job hunter" from day one to simultaneously address language acquisition, education, and labor market participation. Athens has established the Athens Coordination Centre for Migrant and Refugee Issues (ACCMR) — a collaborative platform collecting together over 70 national and international NGOs, migrant forums, and the private sector to map existing integration services easing navigation for migrants. Barcelona implemented a highly innovative "Anti-Rumour Policy," which trains municipal staff and civil society members to act as "anti-rumour agents" to combat stereotypes and xenophobia in everyday interactions.

Italy also is a part of these networks. It has as well established the "Città del Dialogo" (own Network of Intercultural Cities), which consists of 32 member cities working to build pragmatic, intercultural integration policies from the bottom up approach. Therefore, there is a visible intention for better changes, despite all existing issues, as minimum on municipal levels.

Every city intends to create its own approach considering local peculiarities and demographic dimensions. However, there are still some shared trends, based on mutual learning of best practices (*Figure 12*). These are exactly the trends that guide modern service design approaches to intercultural integration.



*Figure 12: Core Service-Design Integration Principles Established by City Networks*

## From Local Turn to Local Strategy: How Cities Design Integration?

As discussed at the beginning of this work, in recent years interculturalism became a new primary paradigm in integration policy formulation. A key factor for this shift is the evolution of diversity in most European countries — nowadays, there are so many different socio-cultural migrant groups that societies have become super-diverse, increasing the complexity of urban populations (*Vertovec, 2007*). To operationalize this intercultural shift, local authorities are adopting new service-design principles tailored to new, super-diverse urban environments.

**“The most important message is to move from emergency responses to strategic thinking.”**

*Małgorzata Zmysłowska, Senior Specialist in Lublin*

### CORE SERVICE-DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR URBAN INTEGRATION

Drawing from the collective evidence-based guidance of global networks like Eurocities, OECD and "Integrating Cities Report 2024", modern municipal service architecture has four core design principles to follow (*Scheme 8*):

- From "one-time process" to continuous maintenance: there is a transition from one-time reception upon arrival — onboarding — to the continuous lifelong process, needing permanent support. In terms of service design this means creating repeatable service touchpoints that adjust as a migrant transitions through different life stages. Multifunctional one-stop shops — centralised hubs collecting all municipal migrants related services under one roof to fight fragmentation — also became a common solution for providing continuous-help;
- From "one-size-fits-all" to diversified inclusion: there is a trend of moving from just integration to also inclusion, meaning actively modifying systems and practices to ensure everyone can fully participate and is supported. For this data-driven

- personalisation and customisation are frequently used as tools to map specific needs and customize services accordingly;
- Co-design and participatory approach: there is a shift from a top-down delivery model to a co-production, meaning policies are designed with migrant communities rather than merely for them. Diagnostic tools, such as "customer journeys," "life event scans," and observed "process walks", now work as decent ways to evaluate public services through the eyes of the migrants themselves. Additionally, advocacy for direct migrants participation in audit panels and policy building is beginning to take place;
  - Simultaneous, interconnected service models: there is a move from traditional integration programs that relied on a slow, sequential model (e.g., newcomers need to master the host-country language before allowing them to access higher education or labor markets) to "from day-one" simultaneous integration interventions and help. For example, to remove everyday obstacles, cities pack different types of help into a single package.

While cities design these inclusive, human-centered, agile services, they often conflict with the political agendas of their national governments. In some countries, such as Italy, this structural friction between progressive municipal practices and rigid, securitized state-level policies introduces a phenomenon of decoupling.

### POLICY DECOUPLING

Decoupling, as a public administration term, refers to a process when policy-making at the national and local levels becomes highly disconnected from one another, resulting in deep contradictions and even ideological conflicts between the city and the state (*Zapata-Barbero et al., 2017*). Many Italian regions and municipalities have found themselves caught in exactly this type of disconnected landscape, driven by a visible mismatch in policy priorities and different perceptions of migration across administrative levels.

As previously noted, nationally, Italy's approach to migration is largely assimilationist and securitized, characterized by political discourse of "emergency" narrative. However, there are some cities with a predominantly opposite view on the situation, that are forced to manage the long-term, practical realities of super-diversity in their neighborhoods. Milan is one of those, deliberately positioning itself as the intercultural exception to this national baseline. As the economic engine of Italy and a historical gateway city, Milan treats migration not as a security threat, but as a structural opportunity for social innovation (*Costa, 2020*).

The following chapter focuses specifically on the city of Milan and its localised integration model. This choice of focus is not accidental. There are also other cities in Italy that are decoupling from the national baseline, but Milan has a more standout strategy rooted in existing capacity, leverage and local needs the city has. The following sections examine what makes Milan integration model outstanding, how it was built and whether it is truly moving into lived practices.

# 1.5

## **Milan as a Laboratory for Intercultural Integration**

- i. The Roots of Milan's Integration Approach:  
Historical, Political, Economic, and Demographic Conditions
- ii. Milan's Model: Integration as Civic Opportunity
- iii. The Model in Practice: Programs, Gaps and Their Relations to Non-EU Students

## The Roots of Milan's Integration Approach: Political, Economic, and Demographic Conditions

As stated before, Milan's integration model is rooted in capacity, leverage and local needs the city has. This means that it did not emerge from a single policy reform, but was built incrementally, through a specific combination of historical experience, political culture, economic position, and demographic condition. All together they produced the conditions that made inclusive, participative, co-governed integration both possible and necessary in this city, standing against the national narrative towards migration.

**“Milan is and wants to be an open city — open to the world and to change. This idea of Europe as a fortress that is closing is pointless because people find ways to enter anyway.”**

*Lamberto Bertolé, Milan's commissioner for health and welfare*

### MILAN'S MIGRATION HISTORY

Nowadays Milan has a pretty internationally diverse population — in 2025 from 1.399.079 citizens 21% were foreigners (*Comune di Milano, 2025*). The demographic pluralism is proved by the fact that Milan hosts migrants from over 150 countries dominated by 15 largest nationalities from North Africa, East and Southeast Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe (*Comune di Milano, 2025*). This urban fabric was shaped by the historical layer of population movements — two massive, distinct waves of immigration.

The first wave was internal. Between 1951 and 1961, approximately 300,000 individuals relocated to Milan from other parts of Italy, attracted by a growth of employment opportunities in heavy industries (*Foot, 2006*). The second wave was external, with a significant influx of non-Italian migrants in the 1980s. This wave unfolded against a different economic situation, as Milan had transitioned from a traditional

manufacturing hub to a post-industrial, service-based economy (Foot, 2006). Consequently, foreign immigrants were mainly funneled into the low-level service sector, working as domestic helpers, cleaners, maids, and restaurant staff to sustain the city's wealth. This wave did not receive enough support from the state, which led to housing crises, spatial segregation, and the use of ghettoized structures.

Ultimately, Milan received a comprehensive experience in absorbing newcomers, leading to structural changes. The state's failure to support foreign arrivals created crises and social marginalization, but also produced an institutional response. The gap was partly filled by an appeared network of associations, NGOs, and volunteer organizations, building a grassroots reception infrastructure that would later become the foundation of the city's co-governed model. The realization that Milan could no longer afford to leave its newest residents outside the integration system gradually translated into new forms of progressive, inclusive governance.

### PROGRESSIVE GOVERNANCE AND LOCAL AUTONOMY

Milan's progressive governance model emerged from a decisive "historical turn" in 2011 with the election of Giuliano Pisapia's center-left coalition, ending nearly two decades of right-wing administrations that had treated migration primarily as a public order and security threat (Marzorati & Quassoli, 2015). The Pisapia administration (2011-2016) has been emphasising how crucial civil rights and urban diversity are, especially with LGBTQ+ and migrant minorities. Continued under current Mayor Giuseppe Sala, this progressive administration deliberately reframed the local migration narrative, moving away from an "emergency" mindset to viewing diversity as a civic opportunity. Demographic pluralism became a part of city identity, stating Milan as a multicultural city de facto.

A defining characteristic of this progressive governance is the city's exercise in local autonomy, which often results in a "policy decoupling" from national and supranational frameworks. And this autonomy is not abstract. The Milano Welcome Centre ("one-stop shop" welcome desk), for instance, provides integration services to asylum seekers who are formally excluded from the national SAI reception system. Additionally, the city's active participation in European and global city networks — Eurocities, the Intercultural Cities programme, the Mayors Migration Council — further reinforces this autonomy, giving Milan both external legitimacy and access to shared knowledge that strengthens its independent position. The clearest illustration of this autonomy was Milan's response to the 2013 migration crisis. As large numbers of migrants transited through the city, Milan set up an aid service at the Central Station, where NGO volunteers provided food, clothing, psychological support, and practical advice. The initiative was significant not only for its humanity but for its legal creativity: under the Dublin Regulation — the EU rule requiring asylum seekers to claim protection in the first member state where they are fingerprinted — Milan used the short transit window before fingerprinting to let migrants decide whether to stay and apply for refugee status in Italy or continue their journey (Costa, 2020). In doing so, the city turned a procedural gap into a pragmatic, dignified solution that respected

Milan is chosen  
as the design  
context for  
the conditions  
that make it  
Italy's natural  
laboratory for  
integration  
innovation

Methodological note



migrants' autonomy.

Besides this political culture Milan also has other social and economic peculiarities that enable a more open integration model rooted in seeing diversity as a competitive advantage.

**“Milan is a community of peace and tolerance, seeking to become a capital of freedom where the responsibility to welcome and include migrants is a top priority.”**

*Giuseppe Sala, Mayor of Milan, Moving Cities 2021*

### THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ENGINE

Almost all these integration initiatives are possible to bring to life thanks to cooperation between progressive municipality and Third Sector Organisations — value-driven, non-governmental entities working on social, environmental, or cultural objectives. As already visible at the historical level, civic and religious traditions of solidarity and social assistance have existed in Milan for centuries. It is sustained by a dense and varied social fabric of associations, foundations, cooperatives, and volunteer groups. 52 Organisations are officially registered in Milan as a local network to provide different types of help for migrants and overcome inclusion barriers. "Welfare Collaborativo" principle presented in "Welfare Development Plan" 2022, legally justifies this sharing governance between the municipality and Milan's historically rich fabric of civil society, Catholic charities, and NGOs.

Additionally, this innovative approach would not be possible without financial resources. Milan acts as an important node for Italy linking its major regions to the global economy, being principal financial, productive and service national engine. The city generates around 11% of national GDP (*Assolombarda, 2024*) and concentrates the country's largest business and service sector. Thanks to this fact, the last two left-leaning administrations were able to invest in a range of social and economic policies directed at supporting migrant and refugee inclusion. Moreover, Milan actively supplements its local budget by capturing competitive national and EU funding to pilot and sustain large-scale integration programs.

### INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS CONCENTRATION

These, all discussed above conditions, become especially significant when considering who actually populates Milan today. Beyond its diverse migrant communities, the city hosts the largest concentration of international students in Italy — Lombardy alone gathered over 22,800 of them (*Assolombarda, 2025*) — across Politecnico, Bocco-



ni, Cattolica, Statale, Bicocca and other universities. As established in the previous chapters, these students — predominantly non-EU, studying in shortage fields, and actively seeking to enter the labor market — represent exactly the skilled human capital Italy struggles to retain. Their density in Milan transforms a national labour shortage challenge into a concrete local opportunity.

Taken together, there is a Milan's combination (*Figure 13*):

- The progressive political leadership willing to act and the deep-rooted civic infrastructure ready to deliver establish Milan's capacity for inclusive integration;
- The financial and administrative autonomy that enables the city to act, alongside its position as the country's largest business and service hub, provides the leverage;
- The high concentration of non-EU students and the labour demand in skilled graduates establishes the need.

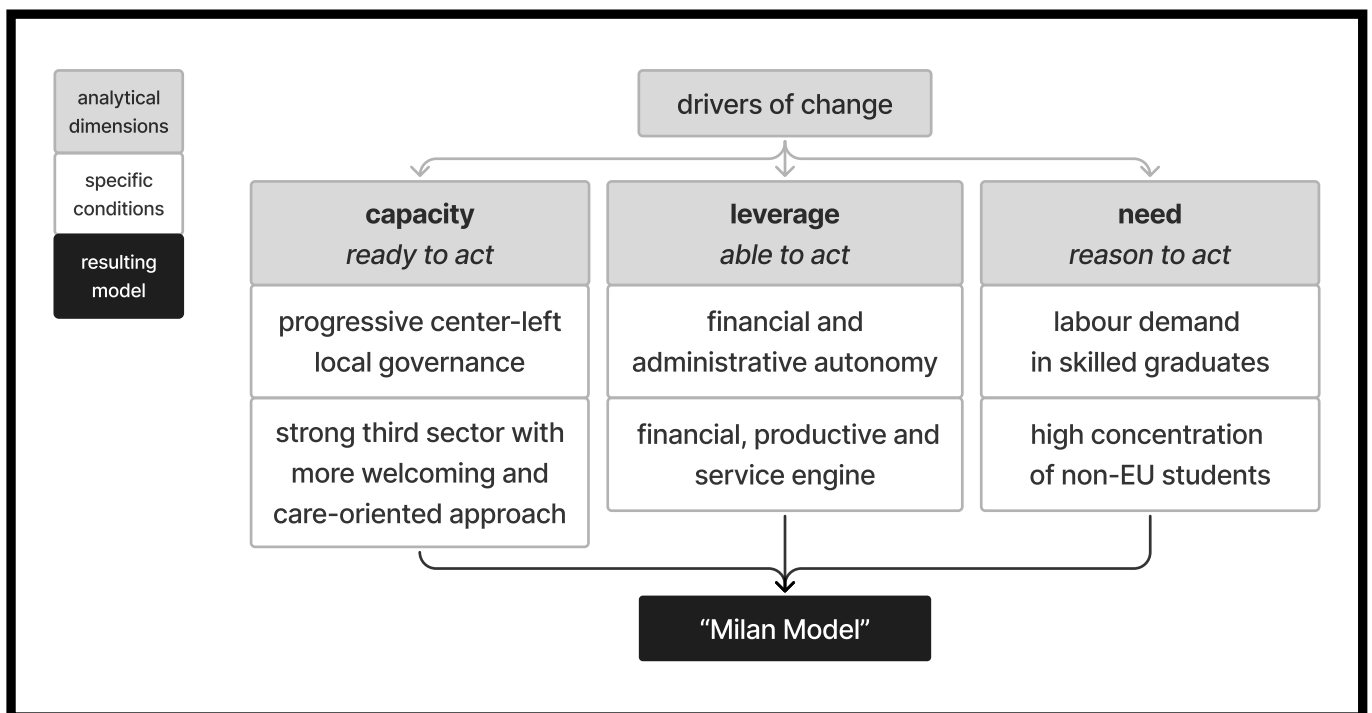


Figure 13: Milan's Conditions Behind the Integration Model

It is this combination of capacity, leverage, and need, forming so-called "drivers of change" (internal or external forces that initiate transformation within societies, markets, or organizations), that distinguishes Milan from other Italian cities and makes it the natural laboratory for designing innovative integration approaches. Having established why Milan developed differently, the following section turns to what that difference actually looks like — the integration model the city has built.

## Milan's Model: Integration as Civic Opportunity

While nationally, Italy remains largely assimilationist and securitized, with intercultural rhetoric at the margins, Milan treats migration as an urban and civic phenomenon of coexistence and opportunity — focusing on inclusion, participation, and shared governance.

**“Despite the increasingly hostile approach to immigration at national level, Milan is determined to keep playing a positive role in the management of migrant flows and protection challenges, by promoting an inclusive approach to access to services and participation in the city life.”**

*Milan's Pledge to the European Pillar of Social Rights, 2019*

### THE "CITTÀ MONDO" NARRATIVE

The ideological engine driving inclusive policy is the "Città Mondo" narrative, which appeared after the election of a new municipal administration in 2011. This narrative reimagines Milan's demographic pluralism and super-diversity not as a burden, but as a pillar of the city's identity and a competitive civic resource (Marzorati & Quassoli, 2015). It shifts the perspective of migrants from being passive recipients to active new citizens contributing to a cosmopolitan metropolis of Milan.

To translate this vision into reality, the municipality and its partners launched specific platforms aimed at giving migrant communities a voice and a stage. First, Forum della Città Mondo — assembly bringing together representatives from over 600 migrant and ethnic associa-

tions to move beyond isolated enclaves, giving foreign communities an active, political voice. Second, The Milano Città Mondo Project, born in collaboration with MUDEC (Museum of Cultures) — platform to celebrate Milan's multi-ethnic complexity by hosting exhibitions, lectures, and intercultural laboratories.

Despite its ambitious goals, the "Città Mondo" narrative has faced significant practical execution challenge. While the Department of Culture launched the MWCF as a pluralistic policy recognizing diversity and active participation of everyone, the Department of Social Policies often maintained a more traditional approach, framing immigrants primarily as vulnerable service users. This revealed existing conflicting views on migration within Milan's own local government, highlighting the hardness of implementing such initiatives within a political environment still heavily defined by bureaucratic fragmentation.

### THE "MILAN MODEL"

The main challenge for Milan in terms of migration policies has been transitioning from temporary crisis management to durable, long-term inclusion. To solve this problem, the city created its own unique approach known as the "Milan model" — more flexible, open, and welcoming system than the strict, rigid system run by the national government (Costa, 2020). Overall this model can be characterised by 3 main policy principles (Colini & Furri, 2021):

- Immediate "stop-and-go" approach: respond to the emergency of newcomers in case of need as main humanitarian principle even if they do not intend to settle in the city;
- Institutional readiness for long-term integration: this principle includes a set of ready-to-use integration services from the outset, including professional vocational training, volunteering activities and unique agreements that allow the municipal government to actively manage and improve local reception centers by themselves;
- Multi-stakeholder co-production: thanks to these structured collaborations with local NGOs, civil society actors, and the private sector, municipalities can address the whole population rather than isolated target groups, based on unified concepts of vulnerability and inclusion.

Generally speaking, the model's principles are — the shift from emergency management to long-term inclusion, from top-down service delivery to multi-stakeholder co-production, and from tolerance of diversity to its active celebration (*Scheme 10*). It places Milan among the progressive urban integration models in Europe, as consistently recognized by Eurocities and the Mayors Migration Council reports (2024–2025).

However, as a part of a fragmented national system with conflicting visions between different, even local, actors, "Milan Model" also has structural gaps between principles and practice, acknowledged by the city itself (*Scheme 10*). Hence, the next section will focus on specific existing Milan integration programs and their gaps to compare stated vision with lived reality.

## The Model in Practice: Programs, Gaps and Their Relations to Non-EU Students

To emphasise its own model of urban inclusion in a super-diverse context Milan adapts national policies through municipal programs and collaborations with other European cities.

### MILAN INTEGRATION POLICY FRAMEWORK

The operational framework of the Milan model is built on several key strategic commitments that align the city with global migration standards.

First, in January 2019, Milan became the 19th city to sign a pledge to the European Pillar of Social Rights to anchor the city's approach to equal opportunities for all people. This pledge officially aims to foster inclusive economies within a super-diverse context, ensuring equal access to social rights, services and opportunities for all. It funds assistance to newly reunited families in Milan, coordination of Italian language courses and training opportunities, dedicated mental health with ethno-psychiatry service and the creation of one-stop shops — the one, Milano Welcome Centre, was actually opened in 2024. Complementing this is Milan's Call to Local Action on Migration 2020, which represents the city's concrete response to implementing the UN Global Compact for Migration. This initiative focuses on improving multi-level governance, enhancing economic and social integration, and protecting the most vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied migrant minors. This document is more precise, detailing the 2019 Pledge with a list of specific actions to take towards each goal and expected results.

Second, in 2023, for Milan's 2024–2026 Welfare and Integration Plan, a participatory planning process aimed at redefining Milan's reception and integration system was held. The document titled "AL-LEGATO 6 — Documento conclusivo percorso di coprogettazione" serves as the final document of this co-design process. Its main focus is a transition to a "collaborative welfare" model — the model in which Third Sector is not threatened anymore just as a service provider, but as a partner participating in administration and participatory planning. The document identifies four main areas of work and specific ideas and actions to address them. Key strategic actions include promoting a positive migration narrative, developing coordinated operational

models to handle sudden influxes of migrants, creating viable pathways for housing and professional integration and instituting MEAL (Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning) system to assess outcomes and learn dynamically.

It is also precisely this document that outlines the structural gaps across identified four general areas. Analysing them will help to clarify whether Milan's integration implementation strategy has successfully bypassed national issues and "local turn" negative consequences, or if significant work still remains to fully align reality with progressive vision.

### THE EXISTING GAPS IN MILAN INTEGRATION PROCESS

Through the participatory evaluations documented in ALLEGATO 6, the municipality and its Third Sector partners (43 organisations) openly admit serious systemic issues across general areas (Figure 14):

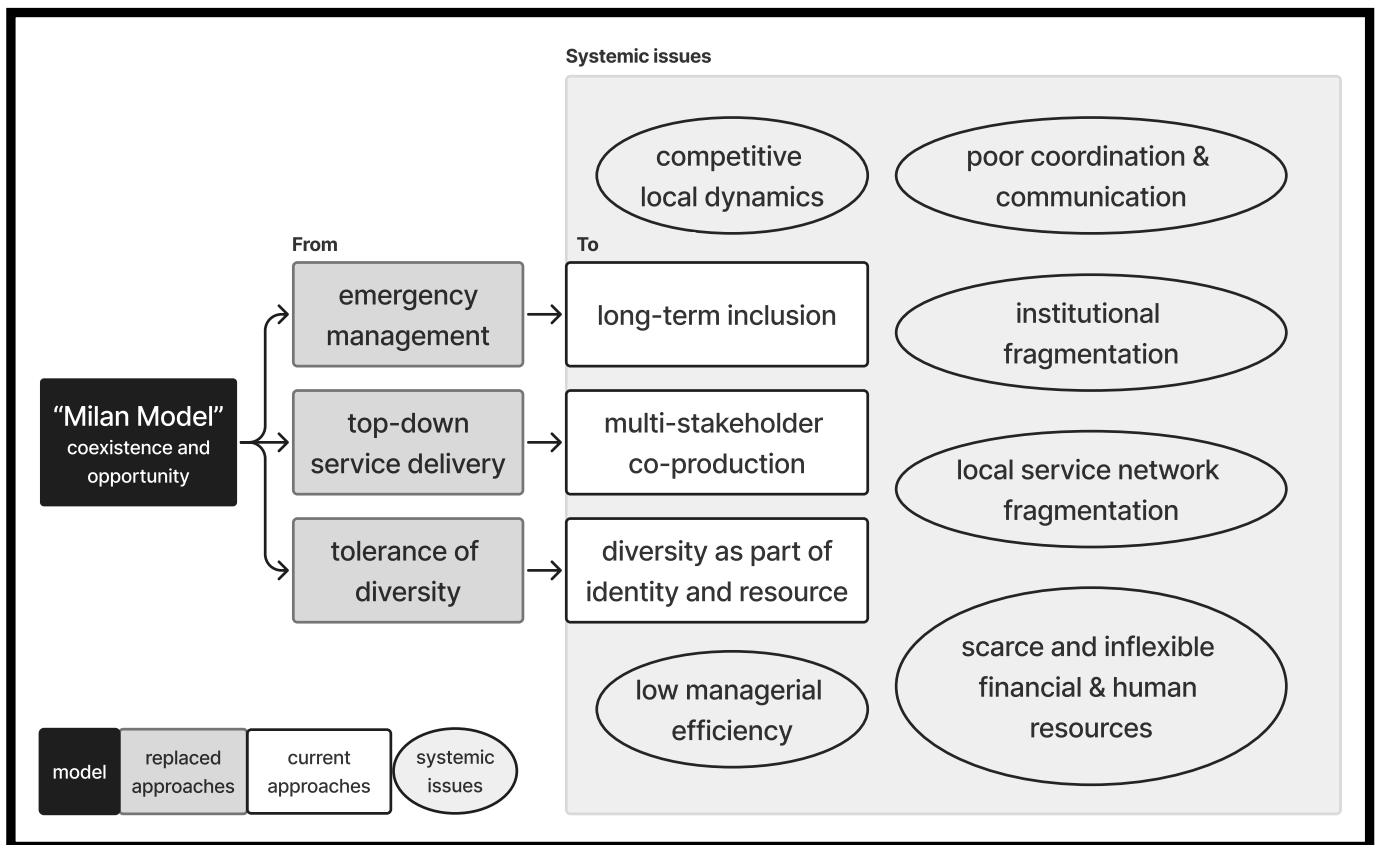


Figure 14: Milan's Integration Model Aspirations (left) and Systemic Challenges in Implementation (right)

- **Territory:** The territorial service system is highly complex and suffers from competitive dynamics (one of "local turn" negative consequences) among the many actors involved, making coordinated action difficult. This issue requires more network devices to connect professionals and community-of-practice tables to exchange territorial data. Additionally, achieving true integration at the neighborhood level will be not possible with-

out “symbolic places” of hospitality that could foster civic participation and counter biased narratives.

- Services: The current service network is highly fragmented (polycentric governance consequence), struggling to identify specific needs within society. Critical gaps include a lack of cultural competence and specific training among service operators, as well as a systemic inability to handle “emergencies” without collapsing the standard chain of integration services. To fight this shared service standards and procedures are needed together with strengthening coordination with universities for profound topic-oriented research.
- Governance: Institutional fragmentation remains a narrowest bottleneck, severely limiting effective dialogue. This lack of communication exists not only between public institutions and social actors but also internally, between the different administrative departments of the Municipality itself. There is also a recognized need to strengthen the direct representation and voices of migrant networks in decision-making processes. Shared communication tools and social media with renewed collegial governance system are considered as possible solutions to overcome the problem.
- Sustainability: The entire model faces severe threats to its long-term sustainability due to low managerial efficiency and a disconnect between legal frameworks and the reality of producing services on the ground. Financial and human resources are often scarce or inflexible, leading to the systemic instability of social work, which undermines the quality of services provided to migrants. Clear evaluation criterias, systemic engagement of private and academic sector and clearer coordination tables are noted as general objectives within this area

In conclusion, it is visible that Milan is suffering from the same systemic issues of fragmentation, poor coordination and lack of process harmony (Scheme 10). Overcoming the negative consequences of the “local turn” under the pressure or existing national “Temporary Integration” approach and general rigid political and social sentiments towards migrants is a huge and complicated work to do. Even the most progressive municipal model in Italy cannot fully escape the contradictions of the national system it operates within. However, Milan’s authorities are working together with other actors on acknowledging these problems — which is already a meaningful step toward systemic improvement.

Milan's integration model is ambitious, well-documented, and institutionally supported. But its own diagnostic processes reveal gaps between policy aspiration and lived reality. And these systemic gaps influence all types of migrants including non-EU students. Coming back to their problems identified in the previous chapters — even if non-EU students “have won geographic lottery” by being in the city with progressive approaches towards migration, and one with capacity, leverage and need of building an accessible integration system — it does not guarantee their settlement, as position of non-EU student in integration system of Milan is also ambiguous.

This work highlights a paradox: non-EU students are visible as talent to capture, but invisible as residents to integrate

*Methodological note*

## NON-EU STUDENTS IN MILAN'S INTEGRATION ARCHITECTURE

In Milan's policy documents discussed before the target populations named are consistently: asylum seekers, refugees, protection holders, vulnerable groups, women, minors, victims of labour exploitation, reunited families and the homeless. It implies that Milan's integration system, unlike national one, is primarily designed around humanitarian and reception pathways for vulnerable groups, still touching labour- and family-reunification migration. However, international students are essentially absent as a named target group in these documents.

In fact, Milan is not totally indifferent to international students, but it serves them through a logic of attraction rather than integration. There is a city's dedicated student initiative — "Study in Milan," operating under YesMilano, the brand of Milano & Partners — the municipality's international promotion agency. Backed by a formal protocol between the Chamber of Commerce, the Comune di Milano, the Revenue Agency, and twelve Milanese universities, it offers a genuinely useful onboarding and welcoming layer: a physical and virtual One-Stop Shop for tax codes and residence permits, simplified procedures with the Questura, and a digital students card for cultural discounts. Yet its explicit purpose is to attract "young talents" and turn them into "ambassadors" of the city — a promotional framing rather than an integrative one.

**“Milan has once again become attractive for international students. A positive trend that must be supported with targeted actions and dedicated tools... with the aim of attracting young talents from all over the world and fully welcome them into our social, cultural and economic fabric and make them, in this way, the first ambassadors of our city...”**

*Elena Vasco, General Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce of Milan, Monza, Brianza, Lodi*

YesMilano is not a social service, a welfare organization, or an integration body — it is a city marketing and economic development agency. Students and their talents are targeted by them to make Milan more attractive and economically competitive globally. The information and services they provide are unconditionally useful, but their logic is explicitly promotional and economic, not social or integrative. This framing can be useful to “catch the talent”, but it might be unhelpful in retaining it, as it is not promoting genius inclusion into society and does not fight existing structural integration issues.



The integration pathway of students also relies on universities. But they may address just academic and partly employment needs, not the broader bureaucratic, social, and cultural dimensions of integration.

The result is that non-EU students' integration in Milan falls between two parallel, disconnected systems (*Figure 15*).

- The integration system — third-sector welfare and municipality network designed around vulnerability and reception, targeting mainly refugees, asylum seekers, and labour migrants;
- The attraction welcoming system — YesMilano and universities' own onboarding services designed around talent attraction and city marketing, targeting specifically international students.

Both systems have some impact on non-EU students' integration, but neither is designed for their integration journey in its full sense.

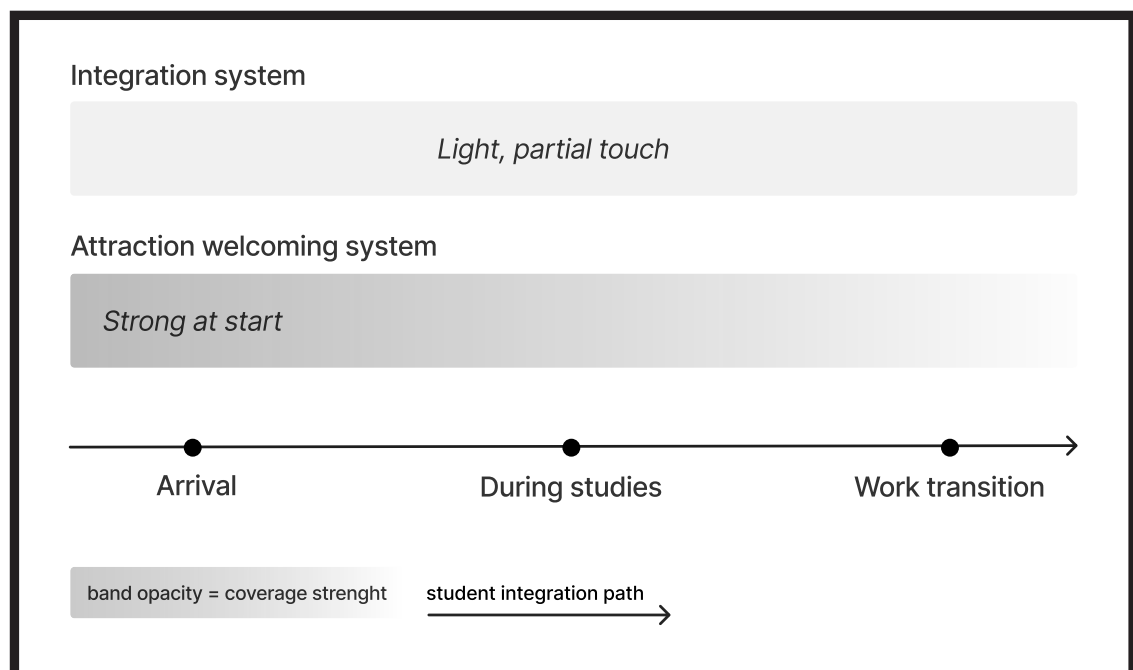


Figure 15: Coverage of the Non-EU Students Integration Path

Students are therefore highly visible as talent to be captured and nearly invisible as residents to be integrated. They take all the systemic gaps the municipality openly acknowledges in its own diagnostic documents, while also lacking the basic recognition as a population the integration system is structurally responsible for. This is precisely why the retention crisis identified in the opening chapters exists.

The following chapters turn to primary research to understand how these barriers are experienced in practice through the direct voices of non-EU students navigating it, to identify the design opportunities these gaps create.



# 2

**PRIMARY  
RESEARCH**

"I felt that Italians, the Italian government, have also become a little bit anti... They need immigrants, but deep down inside they don't need immigrants. They need immigrants for some purposes, but they actually don't want us. This was a big shock for me when I realized this thing."

*Respondent's Quote From In-Depth Interview*

# 2.1

## Non-EU Students Survey

- i. Survey: Methodology, Design and Limitations
- ii. Average Respondent Profile
- iii. Key Findings and Insights

# Survey: Methodology, Design and Limitations

The background research established the structural conditions that produce the Non-EU students retention crisis. What it could not establish is how these conditions are actually experienced on the ground: which barriers feel most rigid, how they distribute across different profiles of students, and which areas carry the highest design potential for intervention. To answer these questions I moved from desk research to primary data, and the first instrument for doing so was a quantitative survey.

## SURVEY GOALS AND HYPOTHESES

The survey was built around integration process pathway for non-EU students in Italy with the central goal to map their experience at scale — across nationalities, study levels, fields, and years of residence — to identify patterns and main barriers for integration within 3 main pillars, identified before as main structural framework: institutional, socio-economic and relational-cultural (*Figure 16*). Specifically, it pursued five objectives:

- Understand the perceived level of respondents' integration together with their retention intentions;
- Validate the barriers identified in background research against the direct self-reported experience of students;
- Identify which area and stage of integration generate the most friction and emotional weight;
- Understand how students currently navigate these barriers and what sources they trust;
- Identify the features and principles that should guide a possible future design response.

Based on these objectives, 16 hypotheses were developed, which served as the basis for the survey structure and specific questions. These hypotheses were meant to be confirmed, rejected or refined to move towards more clear, supported by data design decisions. The primary hypotheses concerned:

- The central role of bureaucratic difficulties as a dominant factor causing stress during integration;
- The informational fragmentation students experience when trying to navigate the system;

The survey base is a three-pillar framework established in the background research

*Methodological note*

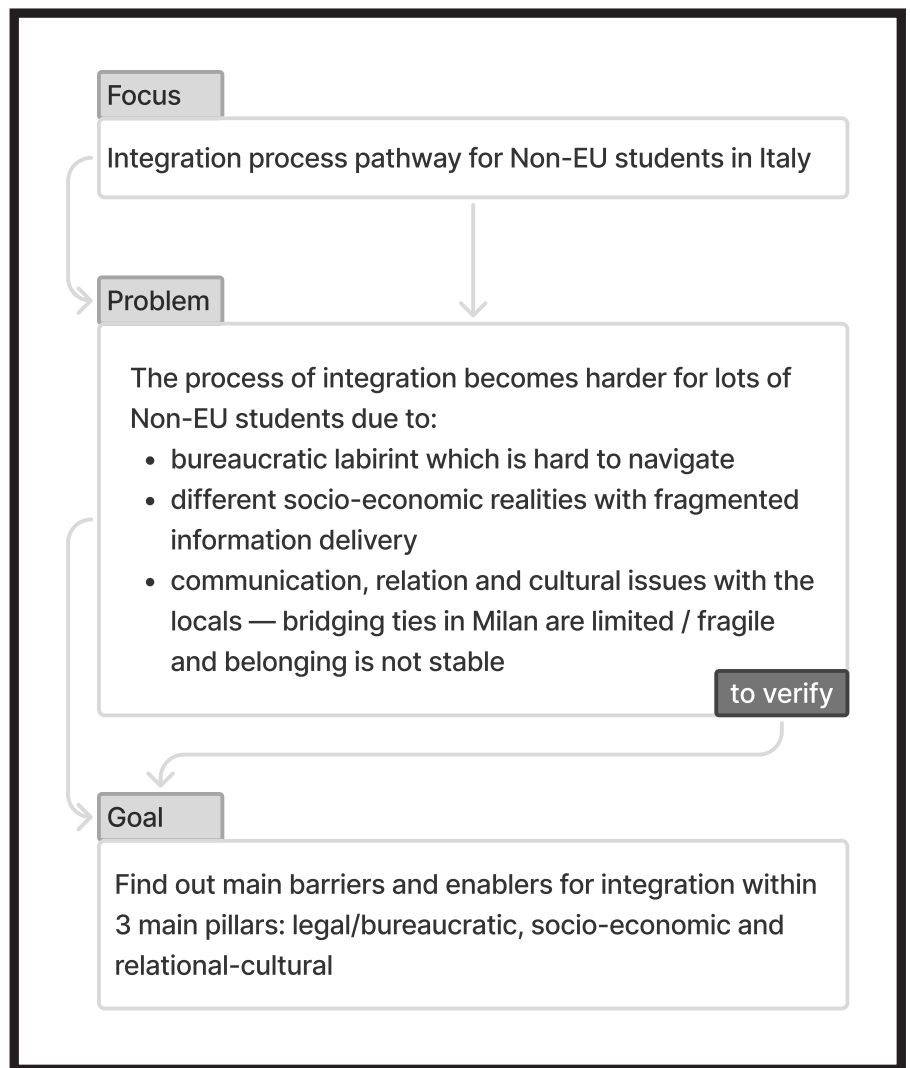


Figure 16: Conceptual Framework of the Survey Conducted

- Emotional consequences arising from the friction;
- The low trust in official sources alongside high reliance on peer knowledge;
- The gap between what students feel they know before arrival and what the reality of living in Italy turns out to require.

These conceptual pillars were then supported by methodology so that everything could be translated into specific survey questions.

## METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, survey aimed for breadth over depth — reaching a sufficient number and diversity of respondents to allow cross-group comparisons and better patterns identification. Goal was to reach 60–100 valid responses, as below 60 the cross-tabs results become too thin, while above 100 was just not considered realistically possible due to time and chanel limitations. In practice, distribution exceeded expectations and the survey collected 117 valid responses, strengthening the basis for cross-group analysis.

Sample strategy was the following: to target international non-EU students who are currently in Italy or just left it within last year. Additionally, respondents needed to have been in Italy for at least three months, past the initial "arrival shock". Also, the sample included various university experience — recently arrived, mid-studies, and recent post-graduates — to capture how perceptions and barriers shift across the integration journey rather than at a single moment.

The strategy prioritised maximum variability possible across profiling parameters. For this reason, the survey was not restricted to Milan-based students: the goal at this stage was to capture general issues produced by the Italian system and their influence on retention, rather than city-specific dynamics.

Distribution combined lower-effort and higher-effort channels. The most productive were international-student Telegram and WhatsApp groups and word-of-mouth through friends-of-friends and the PSSD programme network. Notably, "cold" recruitment via posters placed around universities also produced responses.

The survey was not restricted to Milan-based students

*Methodological note*



Figure 17: Photos of Posters Hung Around Universities

The survey was fully anonymous and informed consent was taken — serving both GDPR requirements and the principles of honesty, allowing necessary data processing while protecting personal data.

## SURVEY DESIGN

The survey was an online, self-administered questionnaire, designed to be completed in ten to twelve minutes as maximum. It was written in English, since the target population is dominated by students enrolled in English-taught programmes.

Types of questions varied among five-point Likert scales, multiple-choices and a small number of open-ended questions. The questionnaire was organised into nine short sections:

- Profiling — to gather the profiling dimensions;

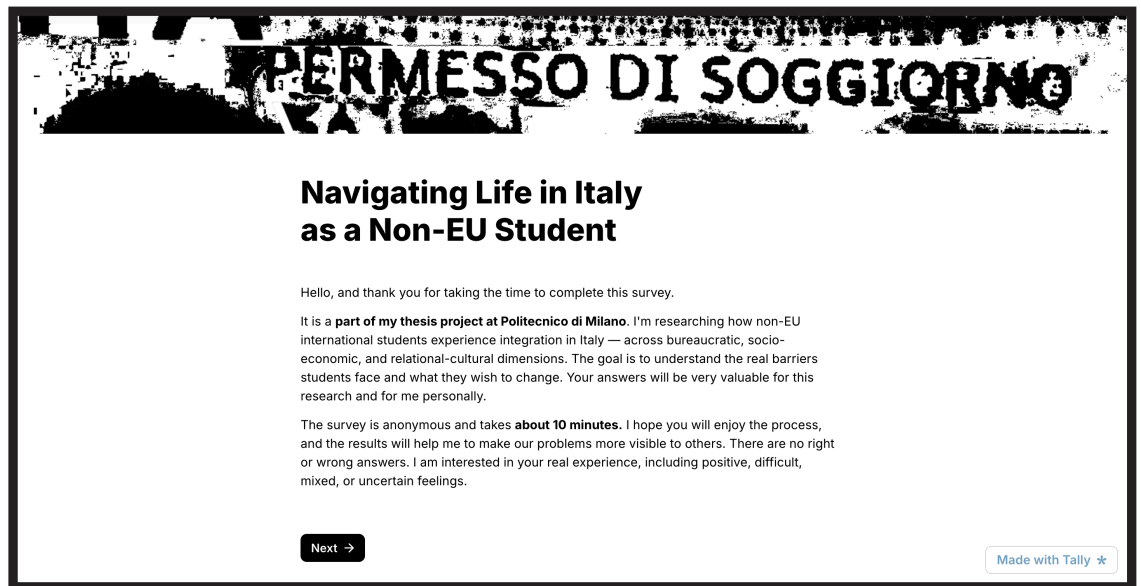


Figure 18: Screenshot of the Survey

- Expectation VS Reality — to measure how closely Italian reality matched initial expectations;
- Retention Intentions — to capture each student's current intention to stay in Ital, and to test whether the desire to stay erodes the longer they live in Italy;
- Integration — to assess how integrated students feel and how often the difficulties they face translate emotional weight;
- Dealing with Bureaucratic Process — to rate the bureaucratic experience and to identify which moments feel most stressful;
- Using Public Services — to evaluate the difficulty of using public services and to surface experiences of unequal treatment;
- Building Social Circle — to understand the composition of students' social networks and how language and cultural norms shape acceptance and friendship with locals;
- Services Ecosystem — to mapp which services students know, use and which information channels they rely on and trust;
- Desired Solution — to surface what students feel they need.

This structure was designed to mirror the logic of the thesis itself — beginning with who the students are, moving through what they experience and where the system fails them, ending with what design solution should address.

## LIMITATIONS

Before reflecting on the final data, several interconnected limitations must be acknowledged:

The survey results reveal a network bias driven by a compressed three-week collection window and my own positionality, resulting in a concentration of Master's students (61.5%), Politecnico di Milano attendees (47%), and Russian nationals (40%). Furthermore, all insights must be interpreted in the context of an unstable global geopolitical environment, which significantly influences current migration flows and long-term retention intentions.

## Average Respondent Profile

The survey collected 117 valid responses from non-EU international students and recent graduates living in Italy or already moved away, representing 25 nationalities and 15+ universities. Before turning to what they experienced, it is worth pausing to understand who they are — because the profile of the sample shapes how the findings should be read.

The picture that emerges is remarkably consistent. The typical respondent is a young person in mid-twenties, pursuing a Master's degree, who arrived in Italy within the last two years and is still very much in the process of figuring out how to live here. Mostly respondents speak little Italian — describing their level as a beginner or basic — and majority has not yet decided whether to stay or to leave after graduation. The average respondent, in other words, precisely the kind of person this work is about: educated, young, present in Italy by deliberate choice, but not yet settled.

### REPRESENTATION IN NUMBERS

Looking at the numbers more closely: 64.1% of respondents fall into the 23–27 age bracket, the same proportion identify as female, and 61.5% are enrolled in Master's programmes. In terms of time spent in Italy, 41% have been here for one to two years and another 19.7% for less than a year — meaning that roughly six out of ten respondents are in the early-to-mid adjustment phase, when the bureaucratic and social friction is typically at its most peak. Italian language proficiency sits heavily at the lower end of the scale: 25.6% describe themselves as beginners and 37.6% as basic users, which means that for more than six in ten respondents, language is not just a communication challenge but a structural barrier running across every other domain of integration simultaneously.

On retention intentions the data already points to the retention crisis described in the background chapters. Only 7.7% say they definitely plan to settle in Italy. The largest group, 34.2%, describe themselves as "staying a few years and then deciding". Another 24.8% are already leaning toward moving elsewhere in Europe, and 17.9% simply do not know. This means that roughly 75% of respondents are either undecided or already considering leaving — a striking signal in itself.



## NON-EU STUDENTS SURVEY

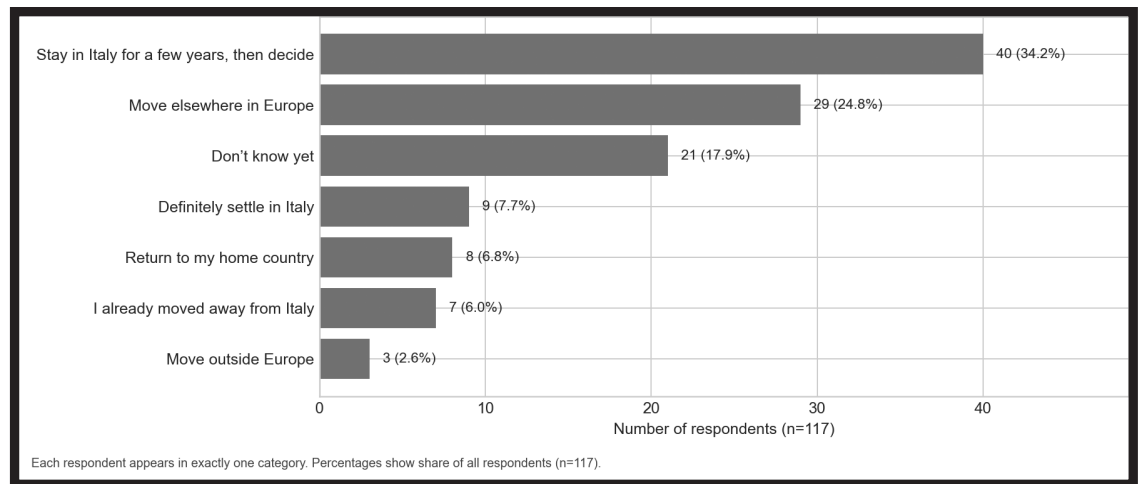


Figure 19: Respondent Profile: Future Intention to Stay

The geographic and institutional composition of the sample requires an honest note. Russia is the most represented country of origin at 40.2%, followed by China and Turkey at 8.5% each and India at 7.7% — but China, Turkey, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Kazakhstan together represent another 40%, which gives the sample meaningful diversity beyond the Russian overrepresentation. Institutionally, 47% of respondents study at Politecnico di Milano, which reflects the main distribution channels used. The University of Padua and the University of Bologna follow at some distance. These results are worth acknowledging to frame findings correctly.

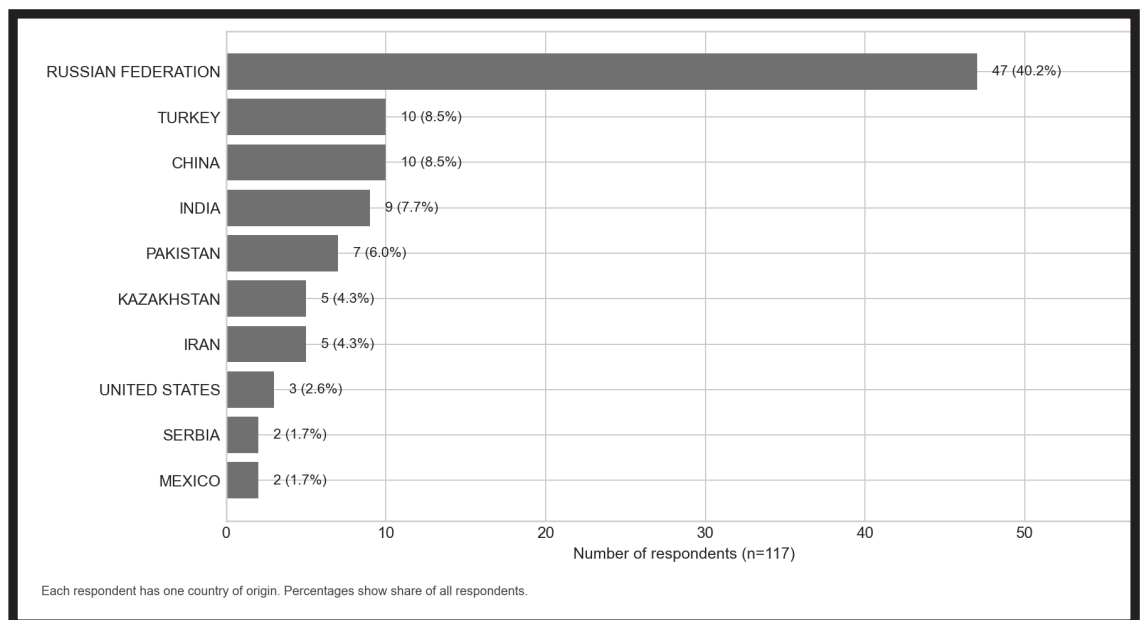


Figure 20: Respondent Profile: Top Countries of Origin

Considering that the sample is not nationally representative — as it was initially intended to be an exploratory, service-design-oriented snapshot — the patterns that emerge from the responses still carry real diagnostic weight, even within all present limits. Following chapter will dive deeper into key survey findings and insights formed.

# Key Findings and Insights

## SURVEY ANALYSIS

Before coming to the results, there is a note of how the analysis process was structured:

- Step 1 — collection of 117 valid responses in CSV file;
- Step 2 — the dataset cleaning and preparation for analysis: personal information was excluded, answers were standardized, multi-select responses were parsed, and Likert-scale variables were organized for comparison;
- Step 3 — AI tool use (Cursor) as analytical support: to help structure the dataset, generate summaries, identify recurring patterns, support hypothesis evaluation, and draft interpretive explanations.
- Step 4 — personal validation of AI results via checking against the actual survey data and their refining through the framework.
- Step 5 — key findings schematic visualisation.

This survey provides a picture of how non-EU international students experience integration in Italy across bureaucratic, socio-economic, and relational-cultural dimensions. This section will present only the conclusions that can already be formulated based on the quantitative results of it, without in-depth qualitative analysis. Read as a whole, the responses tell a coherent story, that can be perceived as a confirmation of the thesis's opening argument: Italy is good at attracting international students and poor at retaining them, because the system erodes people gradually rather than rejecting them right away.

The results were divided into two categories: problem-confirming findings, that justify the project, showing that integration barriers are real, recurring, and meaningful enough to address, and design-directive findings, that shape the project, explaining what kind of support would actually close the existing integration gap.

## PROBLEM-CONFIRMING FINDINGS

First — Italy attracts through education system and affordability, not career, career prospects were selected by only a small fraction

(9.4%). This suggests that Italy's appeal is strong, but not necessarily connected to a long-term settlement. Students tend to choose Italy as destination due to well-developed "pull factors", drawn by the idea of living and studying here rather than by a clear plan for the future.

This, in turn, leads to the second finding — existing expectation-reality gap, which appears just after arrival, as students arrive under-informed. Self-assessed pre-arrival knowledge across bureaucracy, public services, the job market, and social climate averaged just 2.37 out of 5 — meaning most students felt they understood very little of what they were walking into. The gap between the imagined Italy and the lived one is not a minor one — it is the opening condition of the whole integration experience, and it sets up the disillusionment that later responses make visible.

Third — bureaucracy and work transition are the sharpest pain points — the two clear peaks across all areas of difficulty (77 and 74 reports respectively). Crucially, the survey already hints that this is not simply a matter of missing information: students rate official information as fragmented, unstructured, hard to navigate and depending a lot on the human factor (e.g., the mood of a particular officer).

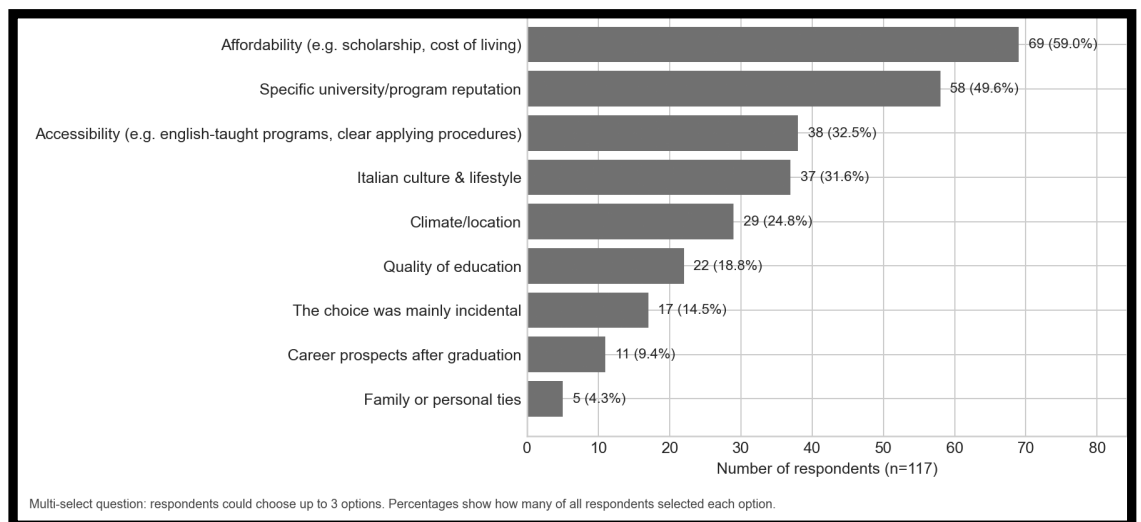


Figure 21: Top Reasons for Choosing Italy

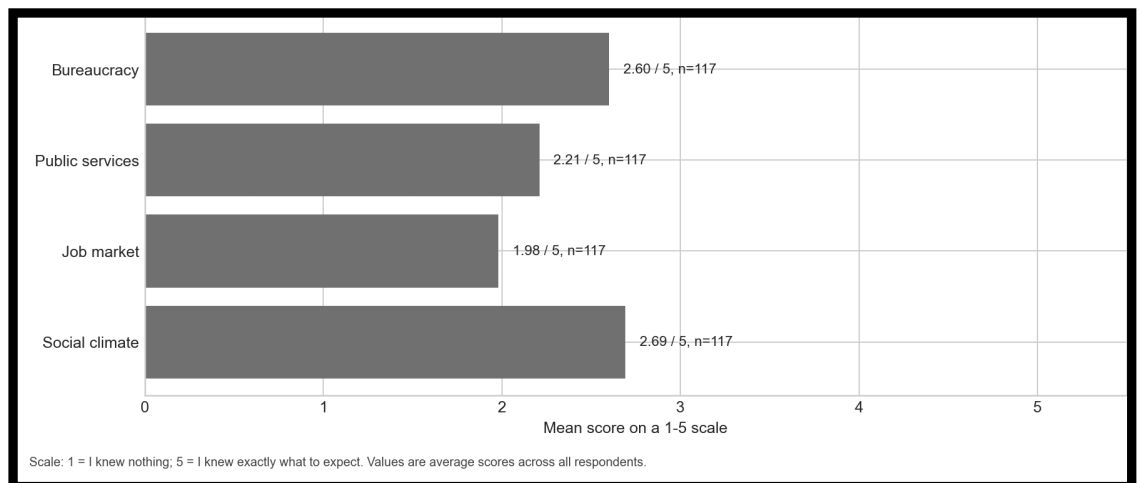


Figure 22: Pre-Arrival Knowledge by Area

## PRIMARY RESEARCH

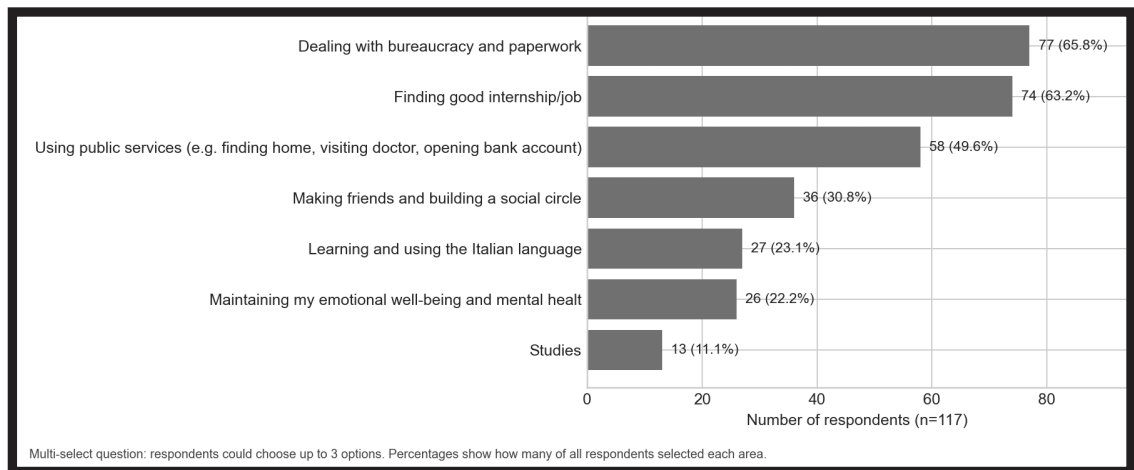


Figure 23: Most Difficult or Stressful Area

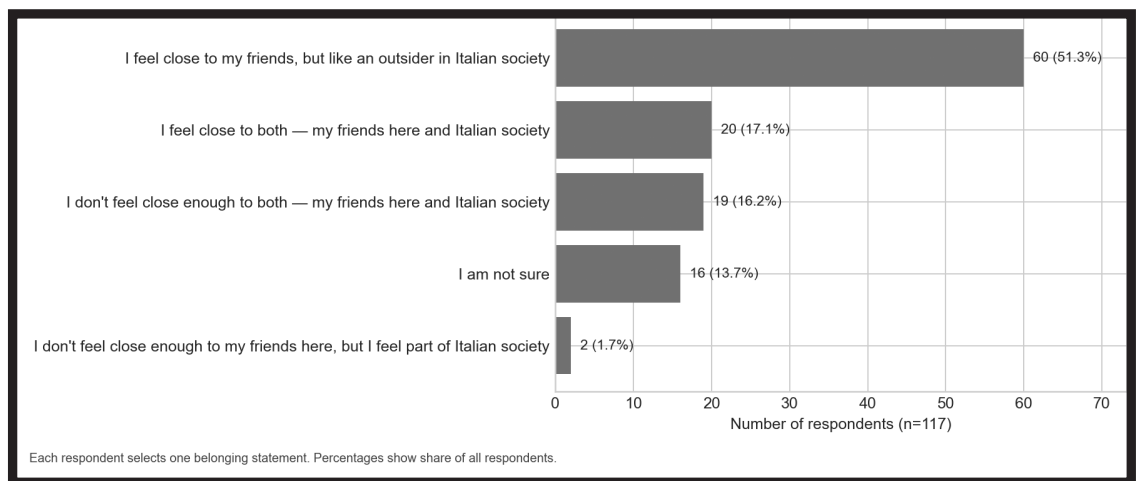


Figure 24: Sense of Belonging in Italy

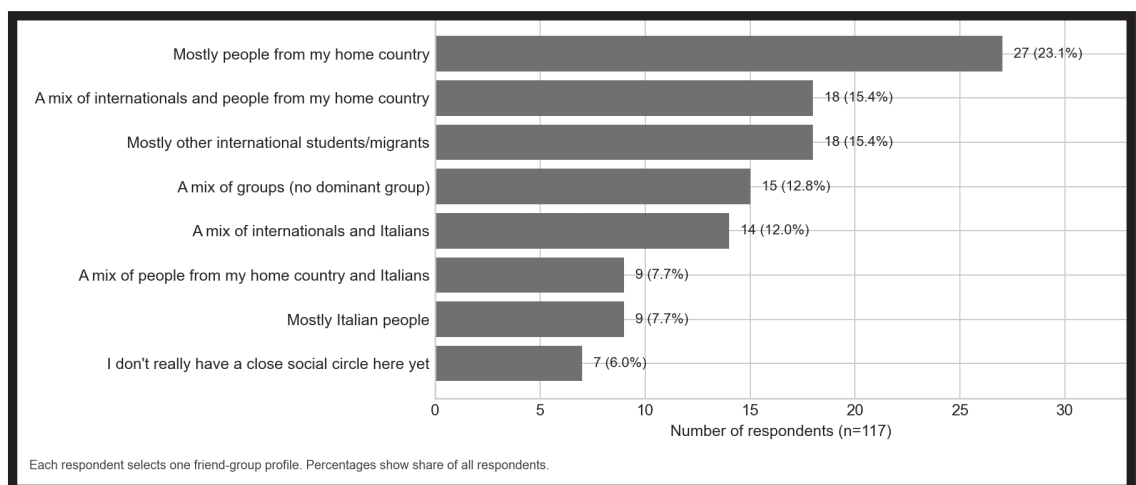


Figure 25: Main Friends Group Composition

Fourth, belonging is partial, localised, and reveals a bonding-bridging gap (having more connections with co-nationals and other internationals rather than with the host-society). Over half of respondents

(51.3%) reported feeling close to their friends yet still like outsiders in Italian society, and only 27.4% have Italians in their close circle of friends. Students lean heavily on co-national and international networks while durable ties with the host society remain hard to build. Language reinforces this: agreement that speaking Italian makes one feel more accepted reached 3.9/5.

Fifth, the burden is emotional, not only practical. The emotional weight of these frictions averaged 3.75 out of 5, and 59.8% said the difficulties had made them seriously think about leaving. This is the finding that elevates integration from an administrative inconvenience to a retention issue: loneliness, exhaustion, and anxiety are not side effects of the barriers, they are part of how the barriers are experienced — and they feed directly into the decision to stay or go.

Finally, retention is fragile and uncertain. Only 9 of 117 respondents said they definitely want to settle in Italy, while 92 had at some point considered leaving. Still there is a glimmer of hope — the largest group is "staying a few years, then deciding", meaning there is an opportunity to change the situation and influence the final decision leaning it more towards settling.

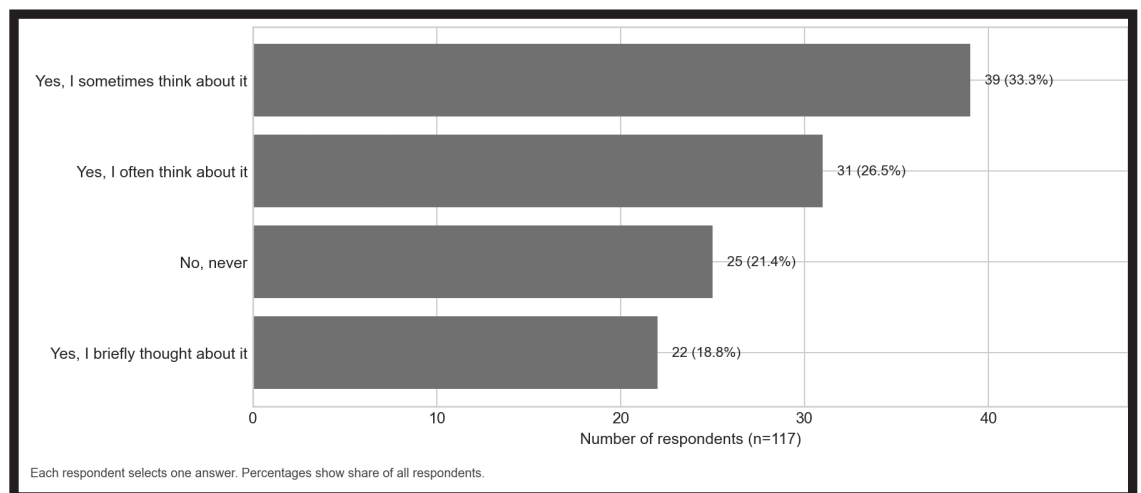


Figure 26: Considering Leaving due to High Emotional Weight of Integration Issues

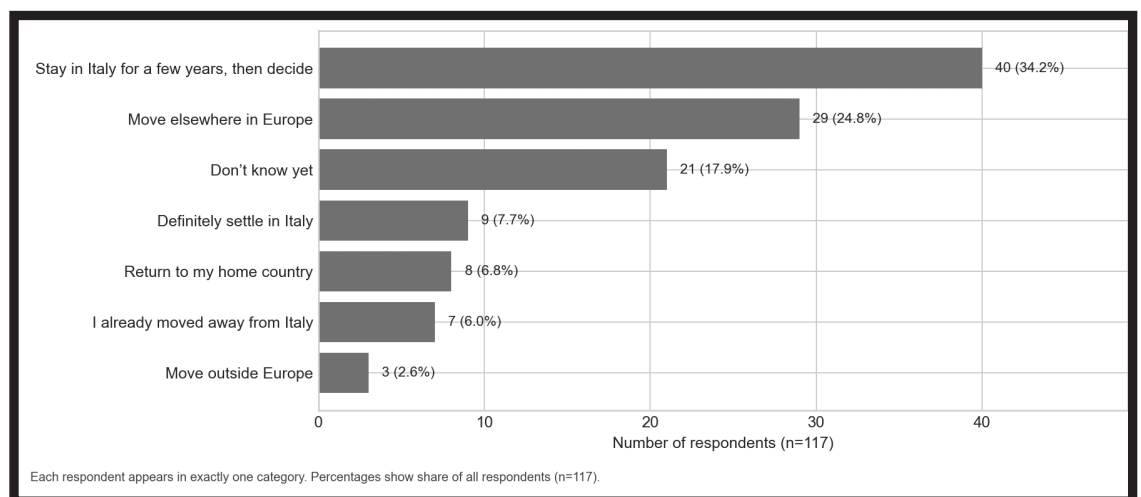


Figure 27: Retention Intention

## DESIGN-DIRECTIVE FINDINGS

First most noticable finding is that students mostly navigate through peers and AI, not official channels. When asked where they turn for information, friends or classmates (64.1%) and AI tools (54.7%) far outweighed official websites (23.1%). Peer advice was rated more helpful than official guides (4.35/5). Yet, trust is inconsistent with tools used: AI is the second most-used resource, but students trust it noticeably less than they rely on it, while overall trust in official sources (university, municipality combined) sits at 42%. At the same time, friends and colleagues remain sources of high level of trust. This tension — high use, conditional trust (or vice versa) — is one of the survey's most design-relevant findings. It points directly at the need for a connector between convenient peer knowledge, AI ease of use and reliable validation of any information provided.

Second, awareness of formal support is low. Awareness of public services that exist to help international residents averaged 2.03 out of 5. In other words, even if help exists, it does not always reach students in a usable, visible form. University support, meanwhile, was felt most strongly at the social life level, but rated as a significant gap in the broader bureaucratic and public domain.

Third, the design-directed questions show a remarkably consistent preference — respondents do not imagine a static information page, they describe a personalised digital navigation system that connects official information, lived peer experience, AI support and human help for complex cases. Among the most frequent suggestions were:

- One digital, reliable, structured source of information (36.1%);
- Profile-based personalisation (27.8%);
- Peer/community-knowledge system (25.0%);
- AI search support (13.9%);
- Hybrid model that combines digital tools with human support in case of escalation need (13.9%).

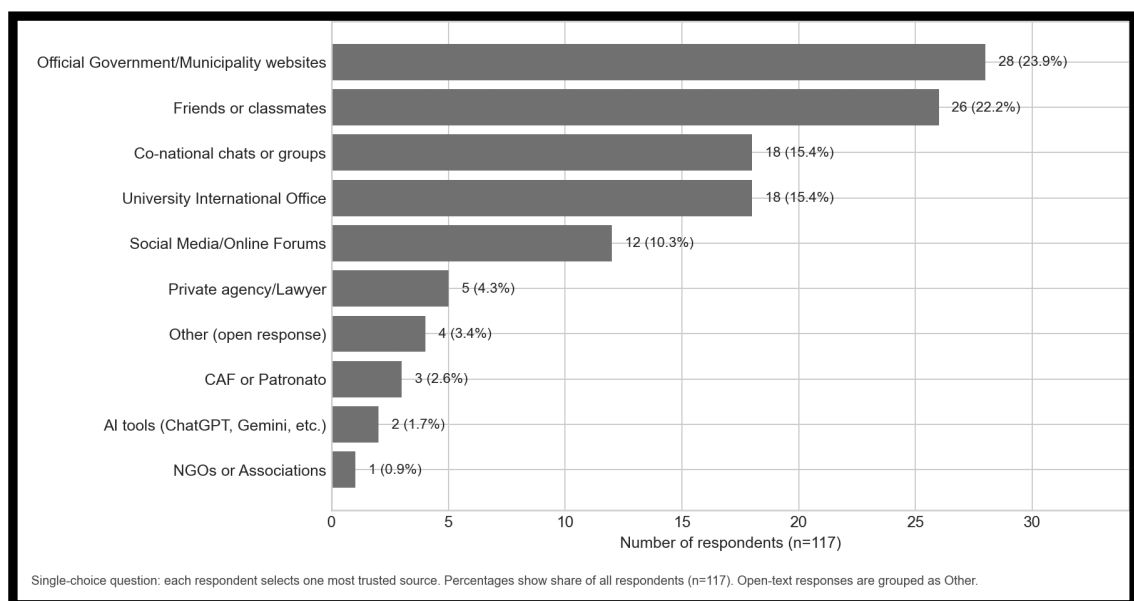


Figure 28: Most Trusted Source for Accurate Information

## NON-EU STUDENTS SURVEY

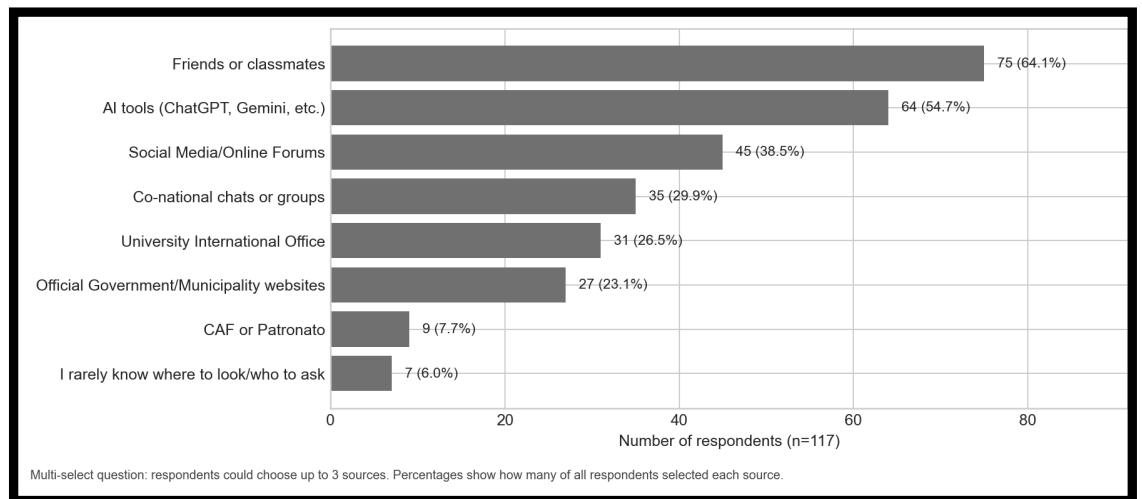


Figure 29: Main Information Sources Used

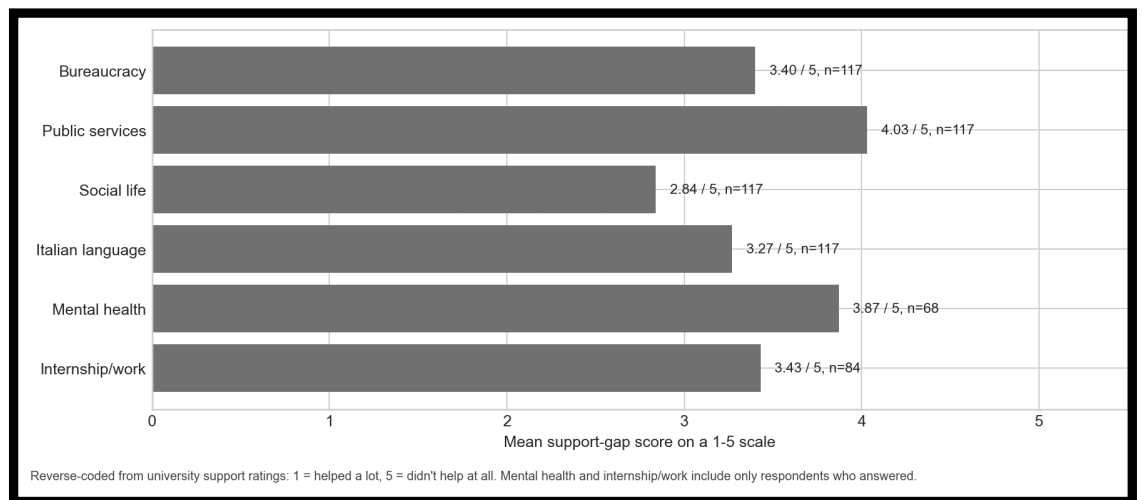


Figure 30: University Support Gaps

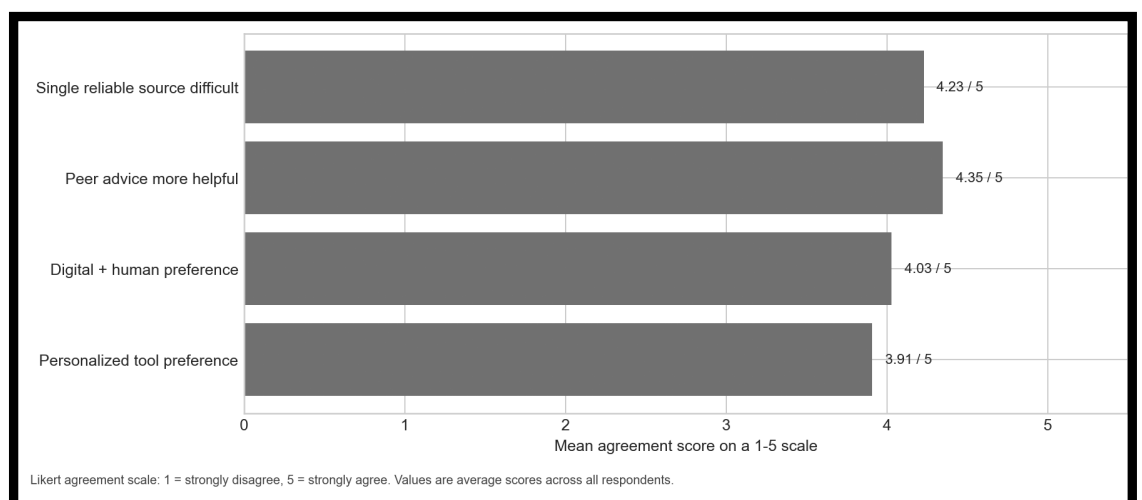


Figure 31: Future Support Preferences

Taken together, survey results deliver a following message: integration is not a single problem, but an accumulation of practical, emotional, social and cultural frictions that compound one another and feed the decision to leave. Official information exists but is not navigable; peer and AI channels are where students actually go, but trust in them is uneven; formal support is largely invisible; belonging is fragile and the emotional weight is real enough to threaten retention.

The survey answers *what* is happening and how widely. What it cannot answer is *why*, and for some findings why domain is highly important to understand how exactly design the solution. For this reason the follow up interviews were taken with some survey participants to find more deep qualitative answers. The interviews also opened a dimension the survey could not reach at all: the institutional voice. The following chapter turns to these interviews: first the students whose personal stories explain deeper some survey patterns, then the institutional stakeholder whose perspective defines the boundaries any solution must work within.

**“I like Italian culture and the people.  
As a person who studied here, I’m keen  
on making Italy great even if it’s not  
my mother country. Just wanna say  
please pay tribute to each other and  
accept others as a human. Vi Amo!”**

*Quote From One of the Survey Participants, Answer from the Open-Question*



# 2.2

## Interviews

- i. Non-EU Students Interviews: Methodology, Design and Interviewees
- ii. Non-EU Students Interviews: Insights
- iii. Stakeholder Interview: Methodology, Design and Limitations
- iv. Stakeholder Interview: Insights

# Non-EU Students Interviews: Methodology, Design and Interviewees

The survey mapped main frictions, needs and desires. However, a map is not the same as an understanding of them. Knowing that bureaucracy stresses most students does not explain what kind of stress it is; knowing that students trust peers over official sources does not explain why a stranger in a chat group becomes more credible than a government website. To move from patterns to mechanisms — and from diagnosis to design direction — the research turned to qualitative interviews with non-EU students.

## INTERVIEWS GOALS

The main goal was to explain, contextualize, and deepen the survey findings by walking through the lived journey: the specific moments where difficulty actually appears and where a design intervention would help. The conversations were organised around the same three integration pillars that structure the whole thesis, but with attention to two dimensions the survey could not cover fully: the emotional weight students carry, and the specific human and institutional actors who appear (or fail to appear) at each turning point of the journey.

Several survey patterns were carried into the interviews as hypotheses to test more deeply:

- The nature of bureaucratic difficulty — whether the real problem is just complexity, or something deeper;
- The fact that peer knowledge outranks official information — whether peer channels work because they translate abstract rules into lived experience and whether their value is both emotional and practical;
- The fragility of belonging — how language, arrival timing and the host society's openness either build or block durable ties;
- The limits of self-service and AI — where convenient digital tools stop being enough and a real person becomes necessary;
- The shape of a desired solution — testing, via interviewees' own reactions, in a way of brainstorming, which specific features they feel students may want and need.

These hypotheses guided the conversations without constraining them — there always was a deliberate room to follow whatever was emotionally alive for each respondent.

## METHODOLOGY

The interview sample is drawn from the survey respondents who self-identify for follow-up

*Methodological note*

The interview sample was drawn from survey respondents who had self-identified for a follow-up, ensuring every interviewee already fit the study's target profile and had context the survey had captured. The target was approximately ten interviews — consistent with the conventional saturation range for thematic analysis on a reasonably homogeneous population (*Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006*), where most recurring meta-themes tend to emerge within the first six conversations. A migrant population is, of course, never truly homogeneous given the variety of cultural and social backgrounds it contains; however, because these students share the same legal status, the same context and broadly the same set of structural obstacles, a degree of unification was justified.

Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent for the future analysis. Also participants were acknowledged about the right to withdraw and the use of information for this thesis only. No incentives were offered.

## INTERVIEWS DESIGN

The interviews were semi-structured — flexible enough to let students tell their own stories, but consistent enough to allow comparison across conversations. Each ran roughly 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted mainly in English, with the option to switch to Russian for Russian-speaking respondents, since storytelling is richer and more emotionally precise in a first language. A discussion guide built around the priority goals kept the conversations comparable and consistent, while permission to follow what mattered most to each respondent kept them human.

Four core techniques shaped each conversation:

- Direct questions were useful to have an idea of general opinions on hypothetical or theoretical questions;
- The Critical Incident Technique formed the analytical heart of the interviews: I was asking people to describe in details specific, significant lived incidents (e.g., a particular day at the Questura) to gather lived experiences and behavioural patterns from real events rather than abstractions.
- Timeline exercise helped to visualise the emotional journey of integration and to unlock stories behind each peak and trough. It was designed as a blank sheet marked "arrived in Italy" on the left and "now" on the right. Interviewees were asked to draw their emotional graph throughout their stay in Italy (*Figure 33*).
- Short co-creation segment presented a fragment of a possible solution to gather reactions and add a participatory dimension.

## LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be disclosed. The most significant is my own positionality: being a member of the studied population granted me higher trust and the ability to interpret information, but also introduced the risk of projecting my own experience onto others'

accounts. I tried to address this risk through reflexivity, tracking the moments where personal experience might be shaping interpretation. Beyond this, the roughly three-week data-collection window limited the opportunity for second-round follow-ups that might have deepened individual cases. The wider geopolitical situation, which strongly shapes migration intentions and the decision to settle abroad, inevitably shapes how some respondents speak about staying in Italy or leaving it. And, as in any voluntary study, a number of invited respondents simply did not reply to the interview invitation, shaping who ended up in the final set.

## SAMPLE OF RESPONDENTS

19 people left their contacts for the follow-up interview. The goal was to provide maximum variability possible, considering limitations (40% of respondents are Russian and 64% are female) to ensure that design solution will not be built on a single demographic's experience. For this purpose the Stratification Matrix (*Figure 32*) systematically mapped each candidate across seven critical qualitative dimensions: journey stage, nationality, integration self-perception, future intentions, standout experience, Italian language level, university of study in Italy. By cross-referencing these variables, the matrix allowed for selection of profiles that maximize demographic and experiential diversity.

Out of international students who left their contact details, a final pool of 8 deep interviews was completed. The progression from the initial contact list to the final sample was shaped by (*Figure 32*):

- Unreachable candidates: 5 individuals did not reply to the welcoming and invitation emails;
- Strategic exclusions: 6 individuals were initially excluded from the active interview sample. They were set aside due to repetitions in nationality, highly similar experiences, or overlapping universities — that was allowed just for Politecnico di Milano, as the main possible future stakeholder.

As a result, the final sample contains just one repetition of nationality. The diversity points covered by the final respondents are:

- Journey Stage — the sample captures the full lifecycle of an international student in Italy. It includes 2 newcomers; 4 mid-term residents and 2 leavers who already expatriated back to the motherland;
- Geopolitical Diversity — the final group spans diverse regions including Eastern Europe, South Asia, East Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and North America (covering countries like Russia, Pakistan, China, Serbia, Cuba, Iran, Mexico, Turkey, and Indonesia);
- Academic Diversity — by covering Bachelors, Masters, PhD and Graduates tracks across technical universities (Polimi), major public research universities (Padua, Bologna, Trento) and private creative academies (NABA), the final sample reflects how different academic workloads and institutional support frameworks impact a student's integration capabilities. Still Master students, as main target group, outweigh in the sample.
- Integration Trajectories — the sample covers spectrum of integration self-perceptions, ranging from extreme alienation (3

## INTERVIEWS

|                                | Journey Stage | Nationality | Integration self-perception | Future intentions                          | Standout experience                                                                         | Italian level | Uni                                          |
|--------------------------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|----------------------------------------------|
| <b>Respondent 1</b><br>female  | Newcomer      | Russia      | 2                           | Don't know yet                             | Sudden collapse of romanticized expectations due to bureaucratic issues                     | Beginner      | University of Padua (Bach)                   |
| <b>Respondent 2</b><br>female  | 3-5 years     | Pakistan    | 1                           | Move elsewhere in Europe                   | Cultural mismatch with people + cultural and linguistic exclusion + self-isolation          | Beginner      | University of Trento (PhD)                   |
| <b>Respondent 3</b><br>female  | 1-2 years     | Russian     | 1                           | Move elsewhere in Europe                   | Mismatch between satisfied expectations and emigration intent                               | Beginner      | University of Padua (Bach)                   |
| <b>Respondent 4</b><br>male    | 3-5 years     | Serbia      | 4                           | Stay in Italy for a few years, then decide | Can be an example of overall good experience in Italy                                       | Intermediate  | Milano, Polimi (Master)                      |
| <b>Respondent 5</b><br>female  | Newcomer      | Pakistan    | 3                           | Move elsewhere in Europe                   | Own feeling of isolation despite of bridging ties with host society                         | Beginner      | Milano, Bicocca (PhD)                        |
| <b>Respondent 6</b><br>female  | Newcomer      | China       | 3                           | Stay in Italy for a few years, then decide | Can be an example of high level help from University                                        | Beginner      | L'Aquila, Gran Sasso Science Institute (PhD) |
| <b>Respondent 7</b><br>female  | 3-5 years     | Cuba        | 4                           | Stay in Italy for a few years, then decide | Social mismatch with discrimination                                                         | Intermediate  | Milano, Polimi (PhD)                         |
| <b>Respondent 8</b><br>female  | 1-2 years     | Iran        | 3                           | Don't know yet                             | Politically vulnerable context + house discrimination                                       | Basic         | Milano, Polimi (Master)                      |
| <b>Respondent 9</b><br>female  | Newcomer      | Russia      | 2                           | Move elsewhere in Europe                   | Can be an example of being prepared before arrival and finding own ways to deal with things | Basic         | The University of Bologna (Master)           |
| <b>Respondent 10</b><br>female | 1-2 years     | Russia      | 4                           | Stay in Italy for a few years, then decide | Can be an example of "what works" path                                                      | Beginner      | Milano, Polimi (Master)                      |
| <b>Respondent 11</b><br>female | Newcomer      | Russia      | 1                           | Don't know yet                             | University as the main help source                                                          | Beginner      | The University of Bologna (Master)           |
| <b>Respondent 12</b><br>female | 1-2 years     | Turkey      | 3                           | I already moved away from Italy            | Italian lover who still left Italy                                                          | Intermediate  | Milano, Polimi (Master)                      |
| <b>Respondent 13</b><br>male   | 1-2 years     | USA         | 2                           | Don't know yet                             | Discriminative experience                                                                   | Basic         | Milano, Polimi (Master)                      |
| <b>Respondent 14</b><br>male   | 1-2 years     | Mexico      | 3                           | Stay in Italy for a few years, then decide | Can be an example of "what works" path                                                      | Basic         | Milano, Polimi (Master)                      |
| <b>Respondent 15</b><br>male   | 1-2 years     | China       | 3                           | I already moved away from Italy            | Wanted to leave, had big bureaucratic problem                                               | Intermediate  | Milano, Polimi (recently graduated, working) |
| <b>Respondent 16</b><br>male   | Newcomer      | India       | 3                           | Stay in Italy for a few years, then decide | Think nothing will help this system                                                         | Basic         | Milano, Polimi (Master)                      |
| <b>Respondent 17</b><br>Female | 5+ years      | Russia      | 4                           | Stay in Italy for a few years, then decide | People communication is hard to deal with despite the high Italian level                    | Advanced      | L'Aquila, Gran Sasso Science Institute (PhD) |
| <b>Respondent 18</b><br>female | 3-5 years     | Indonesia   | 4                           | Stay in Italy for a few years, then decide | Choose Italy for Career prospects after graduation, built a "second home" here              | Basic         | Milano, NABA (recently graduated, working)   |
| <b>Respondent 19</b><br>Female | 1-2 years     | Turkey      | 2                           | Stay in Italy for a few years, then decide | Loose of identity<br>Acting randomly for resolving issues                                   | Basic         | University of Padua (Bach)                   |

interview taken
no answer received
deliberately not chosen

Figure 32: Stratification Matrix

- people with Score 1/2) to medium adaptation (5 people with Score 3/4). It also includes diverse retention outlooks: 2 undecided, 2 stayers, 2 potential leavers and 2 already left people.
- Language Proficiency — the respondents vary from absolute beginners (2), basic daily speakers (4) and intermediate speakers (2). This variance allows to analyze how much language proficiency actually mitigates systemic stress.

## Non-EU Students Interviews: Insights

If the survey gave numbers to a problem, the interviews gave it a face. Across these eight conversations, each lasting around 60 minutes, something unexpected kept happening: people did not want to stop talking, being pretty emotional during the interviews. Several interviewees said, that this was the first time anyone had asked them about these experiences. Some described our conversation as a therapy to them. Almost everyone, at the end, asked to be updated if anything came of the research.

The conversations were not easy to conduct and to listen to. Some stories were painful, including different emotions like anger, disappointment, shock, loneliness, exhaustion and others. Even respondents with the more positive experience and a generally positive attitude towards everything, always had some problematic stories to tell.

The quality of what emerged from these conversations — the specificity, the emotional texture, the clarity with which people could describe not only what was wrong but what they imagined could be different — reflects how urgently these students had been waiting for someone to ask and how invisible they have felt inside a system they were invited into but never truly welcomed by.

**“... Yes, because moving abroad is painful. It’s supposed to be painful. And I think this is what we have in common with most non-European students right here, right now — pain.”**

*Quote From One of the Interview Participants (Speaking About Moving Abroad)*

What follows is a analytical framework and synthesis of the main insights. Every quote has been preserved as closely as possible to how it was spoken, because in this material the wording is the evidence.

## INTERVIEWS ANALYSIS

Before coming to the results, there is a note of how the analysis process was structured:

- Step 1 — preparation of input data for each interview based on survey answers including the respondent's context, key themes, hypotheses and specific research questions;
- Step 2 — audio transcription and organization into a strict dialogue that preserved the flow of the conversation, the respondent's wording and unclear fragments where audio had rumour;
- Step 3 — turning input material and transcribed dialogues into an analytical prompt for AI. Cursor was used as an assistant that helped structure the material, identify insights, test hypotheses, and produce a draft analysis grounded in quotes;
- Step 4 — reviewing all findings, validating quotes against the dialogue for verbatim accuracy and identifying final most appropriate insights with the evidence strength and relevance.

## INSIGHTS

Every quote has been preserved as closely as possible to how it was spoken

*Methodological note*

First cross-interview insight is related to the nature of bureaucratic difficulty. The interviews made clear that bureaucracy is not hard because it is complex — it is hard because it is unpredictable and nonunified. Students described the system more as a *"closed, broken loop"*, where one document cannot be obtained without another that in turn requires the first. The deepest frustration is not the volume of steps but the absence of stable rules and their fragmentation and outdated, which ultimately makes the process more like a *"collecting parts"*, as of the puzzle. Outcomes were described as they *"differ from city to city, but they also, f\*\*\*, depend on the mood of the official"*. Because the system behaves inconsistently, official information feels permanently incomplete — it can state the rule, but never the way the rule will actually be applied in a specific Questura on a specific morning. Bureaucracy, in other words, is experienced as a system-navigation problem rooted in human-dependent, fragmented processes — which is why simply publishing more official information will not solve it.

Second insight is about why peer knowledge outranks official information. The interviews confirmed that students rely on peers, chats, and co-national groups not out of preference but because these channels do something official sources cannot: they translate abstract rules into lived implementation and experience-based knowledge. The most credible source, repeatedly, was *"someone who has been through the same thing."* Peer channels carry the situational truth official guides lack (*"like if you're trying to open a bank account and you're Russian: go to this bank, bring the big guns"* — was a joke related to hardness of opening bank accounts for Russians in Italy now). Additionally, the interviews revealed that this value is emotional as much as practical. Telegram and WhatsApp groups function as emotional infrastructures: the same difficulty *"feels less crushing if you're not facing it alone."* Peer knowledge, then, works on two axes at once — it fills the information gap and provides the recognition and companionship that make the journey bearable.



**“I feel like we are not wanted to be here, because that's why they're making it super f\*\*\*ing difficult for us to stay... It's like they really want to make your life difficult. And they're like, “okay, what you don't have — we will ask exactly for what you don't have”.**

*Quote From One of the Interview Participants (Speaking About Bureaucracy)*

Third insight is related to the fragility of belonging. The interviews showed belonging to be partial, localised and shaped by several forces. Language emerged as both the main enabler and the primary vector of exclusion: speaking Italian brings operational comfort and acceptance, while not speaking it, or even speaking it “*not good enough*”, leads directly to marginalisation and, in housing especially, open discrimination — landlords using language as an explicit reason to refuse a foreigner (“*One of the ladies told me: “I'm so sorry, but if you're not from the same culture, you can't speak the same language, it's gonna be a problem.”*”). Arrival timing turned out to be a decisive factor: students, who arrived late due to visa delays, entered after peer groups had already formed and missed onboarding process — “*nobody took me on board... I was a latecomer.*” And the host society's openness shaped whether bridging ties could form at all. Interviewees mainly lean on co-national and international circles because durable ties with Italians remained hard to build. “*It's not that Italians are bad or anything...But I think it is international environment — not everyone fits there.*” In the end, the main idea delivered is that genious belonging needs reciprocity — being recognised and included, not merely adapting to host society norms.

In terms of help availability and tools used, few insights also emerged. Firstly, regardless of university, everyone agreed that its support fades after arrival and is actually available just for on-time arrived students. Weak services communication is another problem: sometimes people just don't know that help exists (“*That could possibly solve some issues for those who, of course, discover that community, because trying to find it is also a systematic challenge*”). Secondly, it became clear that students value digital tools and use AI heavily — but the interviews located precisely where self-service stops being enough. AI and fixed information handle common, generic cases well, but they “cannot be accurate for specific cases”. In particular, real risk point is not to find a correct information, is face-to-face human contact where confidence and language matter more. This is where the need for human escalation appears — a translator to come to the Questura, a confident companion or an expert for a category-specific question. The interviews drew a clear line: digital



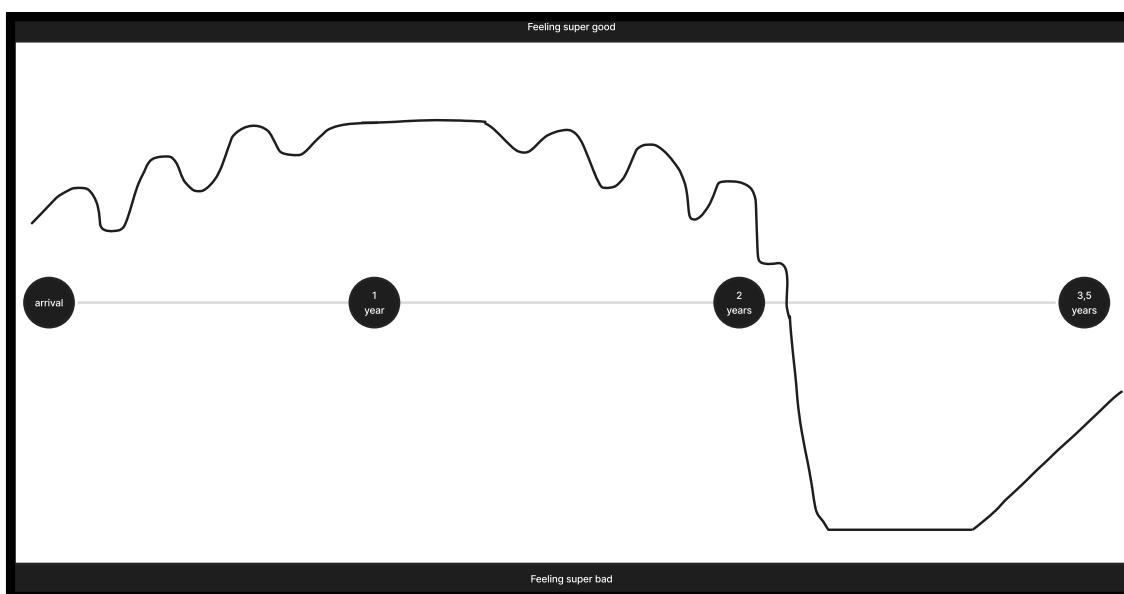
**“Even when we try to explain in Italian, things become harder because we speak broken Italian and official workers don't have that patience. To put it simple — we cannot communicate”.**

*Quote From One of the Interview Participants (Speaking About Communication with Officials)*

tools for orientation and the whole picture; a real person for the moments that are ambiguous, stressful or simply cannot be solved alone.

By combining all the inputs, people often came to the same conclusion, supporting survey results, — navigation system with reliable official information and lived peer experiences is needed. Everyone proposed its own vision based on specific features, among which the most common was a Reddit-like archive of past questions and real cases, (“you can search “ospitalità” and find what people asked before, or start a new chat”), explicitly because crowdsourced content is more likely to be up-to-date and “up-to-reality” than official text.

These interviews served as an enormous resource of valuable insights. However, to design within that system rather than around it, one more perspective was needed: the institutional one. Students described a university that is helpful at arrival and largely absent after, that explains but does not solve. Understanding why the university behaves this way required speaking to someone inside the institution itself. The following chapter turns to that conversation.



*Figure 33: Example of the Emotional Timeline Exercise Used During the Interviews*

# Stakeholder Interview: Goal, Methodology and Limitations

The stakeholder interview was conducted with Politecnico di Milano worker, who works within Campus Life division, in the Community Life, Welcome and Integration unit, with a focus specifically on integration and welcome activities for international students. She was an interview fit not only because of her role, but also because she was one of the initiators of Polimi's two flagship welcoming programmes — the Welcome Week and the Buddy Program — placing her at the exact intersection of student integration and institutional practice.

## GOAL AND HYPOTHESES

The central focus of this interview was the role Politecnico plays in the whole integration process of its non-EU students. This was prompted by a specific tension surfaced in the survey: students do not see the university as a trustworthy source of accurate information on bureaucratic and social matters and rated its help in these areas low. The goal was to understand why that gap exists, testing several competing explanations: whether the relevant services simply do not exist, whether they exist but fail to reach students, whether the university does not see these issues as its responsibility, or whether it is simply unaware of the problem (*Figure 34*).

Several hypotheses guided the conversation:

- Polimi's integration services are designed for arrival rather than the full journey — that Campus Life conceptualises integration as an onboarding problem rather than a multi-year process;
- University draws a boundary between "academic integration" and "life integration", treating the last as outside its mandate.
- University has a connector role — it is responsible for the university-side pipeline and for the partnerships that should link students outward;
- University may be unaware of the scale of the problems students face beyond its walls and how those problems affect study, wellbeing and retention;
- University events build ties mainly within the international community rather than bridging it to the host society.

These formulated hypothesis acted as a base for the guide to then be confirmed or not during the interview.

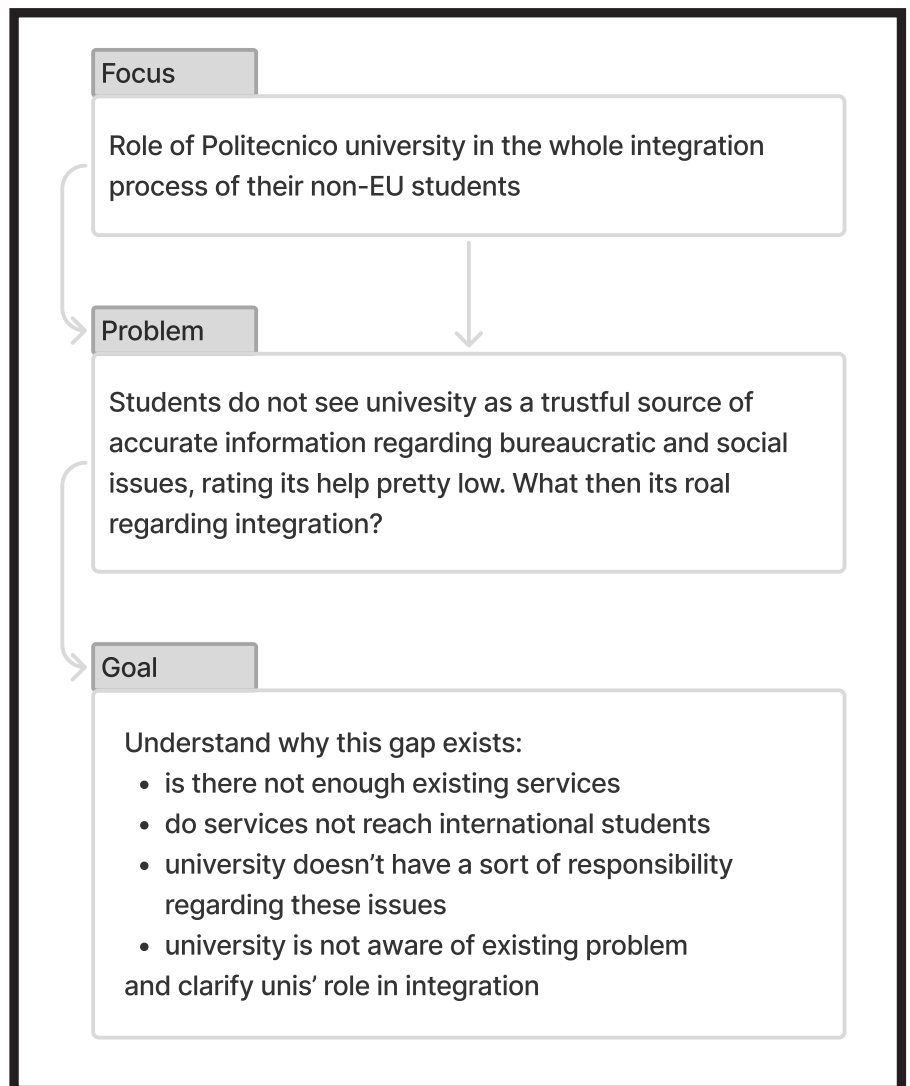


Figure 34: Conceptual Framework of the Stakeholder Interview

## METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

The overall approach to interview creation, conduction and analysis was same to students interviews. Major differences considering institutional direction are related to:

- Tone of voice, which was less empathetic and diagnostic, but more collegial and curious;
- More structured following of initially prepared guideline to touch all hypothesis built.

This interview required deeping in the university context to understand interviewee's field of work together with preparing Polimi related survey results, to use them as a base for hypothesis building.

The principal limitation of this phase is that only one stakeholder interview was conducted, constrained by the short data-collection window that bounded the rest of the primary research. Definitely one voice can not represent the whole system. Hence, the insights drawn from it are treated as illuminating and directional rather than conclusive — they would benefit from a confirmation from a larger sample.

## Stakeholder Interview: Insights

This conversation did not produce surprises so much as confirmations — but very important institutional confirmations. What students described as a system that helps at the start and fades after, stakeholder described from the other side: an institution that knows the arrival moment well, that is genuinely committed to its students' wellbeing, but that operates within structural limits it cannot override.

To answer first, the main university roles within integration are onboarding and connection. Yes, Polimi's integration work is strongly anchored to the arrival moment. Welcome Week, orientation sessions, the Buddy Program, and the practical information sessions are all concentrated at the beginning of the student's time in Italy. This has a reason — participation in activities drops sharply once lessons start, and attempts to extend programming beyond the arrival window have consistently failed to hold students' attention. Problem of meeting late arrivals needs is also connected to this issues. Second role, connector, is related to the Polimi acting as a distributor/referrer for public information (YesMilano, Student associations, etc).

Following from the previous fact, the university's help has official limits, restricted to academic matters. Interviewee described the university help as an *"explanation model of integration support"*: it can explain how to apply for a residence permit or how to register for healthcare, but it cannot guarantee any outcome outside its own walls. It is a reputational and institutional self-protection mechanism: if Polimi publishes detailed information about an external office or process, students assume the university understands and owns that process, which it does not. The result is that the university deliberately keeps its published guidance at a high level of abstraction, even when students need the situated, specific knowledge that only lived experience provides. Importantly, stakeholder acknowledged that individual staff members sometimes go further, beyond official limits, as a personal act of care (*"Sometimes the limit, it's about you, you know, what can you do. Because if you follow the official limit, then you have to stop exactly with the university issues"*).

Alongside the diagnostic insights, interviewee pointed toward three things she considers both necessary and credible. The first is the priority of practical settlement: in her view, the first need is always practical — where to live, how to manage the permit, how to get the health card — and social integration can only follow once those

**“But I can also see that international students, they really want to be part... They really want to be part of society and you can feel it. I don't have any data about this, but if you work with them, if you know them — you can feel that they really want to integrate. But unfortunately, it's not easy.”**

*Quote From Stakeholder Interview*

foundations are in place. The second is that peer-to-peer support is institutionally credible, particularly when it comes from internationals who have already navigated the same system. The Buddy Program's WhatsApp group model is the existing version of this — informal, experience-based, student-to-student — but she acknowledged it tends to go silent without active maintenance. The third is routing rather than owning: even if Polimi cannot publish everything or solve external problems, telling students where to go is already something valuable. The university can point outward, while being transparent about where its own responsibility ends. *“Even if you just tell them where to go, it's something, because otherwise you get lost in our bureaucracy.”*

Taken together, this interview confirms that university can not be asked to own the information or the outcome, even being the first point of touch for international students. But it can host, distribute, and lend credibility to a tool that connects students to the information, experience, and human support it cannot directly provide. The gap between what Polimi offers and what students need is not a gap of care or of resources alone: it is a structural gap between the university's institutional limits and the messy, external, often unpredictable reality students actually have to navigate. That is the gap the design can fill.

# 2.3

## **Primary Research Sum-Up**

The findings show that integration is not a single problem, but an accumulation of practical, emotional, and social frictions that shape students' willingness to stay. It is not limited to bureaucracy or social life alone — it includes institutional, socio-economic, relational-cultural, and emotional dimensions.

The strongest behavioural pattern is a tension between Italy's attractiveness and the difficulty of settling into its systems — the direct proof of initial "background research" thesis statement. Students are drawn by affordability, education, accessibility, and lifestyle, but many arrive with limited knowledge of bureaucracy, services, and the job market. Over time, this gap becomes more than an inconvenience: it affects emotional well-being and retention intention.

The strongest problem-related cross-case finding is that integration issues are not caused only by missing information. They emerge when students must navigate fragmented bureaucratic, linguistic, social, and institutional systems by themselves. Official information often exists, but it does not explain how rules are implemented in a specific Questura, office, city, housing market, university unit or face-to-face encounter. This is why peer communities become the real infrastructure of integration: Telegram, WhatsApp, Red Note, friends, co-national groups and translate formal rules into lived implementation. At the same time, peer knowledge alone is not enough. Several cases show moments where students need real life in-person escalation: a translator, a confident companion, a lawyer, a professor, a higher office, a call centre or an expert. The missing layer is therefore not just a better information portal, but a trusted connector between official rules, lived student experience and human escalation.

The strongest solution pattern is that students do not imagine the it as a simple static information page. They repeatedly describe a need for a personalised digital navigation system that connects official information, lived peer experience, AI support and human help for complex cases.

The stakeholder interview added the institutional dimension. University integration support is genuine but structurally bounded: concentrated at arrival, social cohesion and deliberately thin on external information, because publishing details about processes outside the university makes students assume the university owns them — which it does not. Therefore, even if university staff want to be helpful, they can not cross the official limits.

All insights discussed above in a deep, comprehensive way will be lately transformed into the shorten "Gaps to Meet" scheme, which will guide the project development process (*Figure 61*). Before moving on to this framework, another type of analysis is necessary — a contextual analysis of existing case studies, stakeholders, and systems — to gain greater understanding and inspiration before ideation phase.

Synthesizing  
official  
information,  
peer knowledge,  
AI assistance  
and human help  
directly shaped  
the project's  
next phases

Methodological note

# 3

## CONTEXT ANALYSIS



"I cannot say I felt integrated because for me integration is also about the place. For example, I have no idea what the votings here are for... I don't know what are their problems, day-to-day problems... I have some clues, but I don't feel like I'm integrated into the community. No. I made my own community, which is like a bubble. We live in a bubble in Milan."

*Respondent's Quote From In-Depth Interview*

# 3.1

## Case Studies

- i. Structure of Selection and Analysis
- ii. Integreat, Germany
- iii. Welcome to Canada
- iv. Gosuslugi, Russia
- v. Handbook Germany: Together
- vi. MICADO, Europe
- vii. Transferable Models and Local Limitations

# Structure of Selection and Analysis

Before examining the specific Italian and Milanese context, it was important for me to look outward — at what has already been tried, built and learned elsewhere. Integration is a global challenge, different tools and services have been already developed across different countries and contexts to support migrants and newcomers in navigating their host societies.

Studying these precedents serves two purposes: it prevents reinventing what already works, being while inspired by the good practices, and it sharpens the ability to identify what is missing. Cases were selected already based on the results of primary research with the rough understanding of what should be included and in which formats. Hence, main choice requirements were:

- To share the same topic: integration of internationals into the host country system. This constraint matters because integration solutions operate within specific policy environments and legal limitations that generic products would not reflect;
- To be designed in the format of digital platform (either a webpage or application), as the most accessible medium for youngsters to both search for information and communicate. Still, emphasis was also placed on how these digital tools connect users to real-world services;
- To have at least one of the core features identified through primary research (in any format): profile-based personalisation, centralized official information sourcing, crowdsourced knowledge and/or AI-driven support and navigation.

Each case was then analysed using a consistent eight-point framework: context and origin (who built it, where, when, and why); target audience (for whom is it designed); problems addressed (to which specific challenge does it responds to); value proposition (what makes it different on the market); features and mechanisms (what does it concretely do, and how); innovation drivers (what makes it innovative on the market); stakeholders ecosystem (who collaborates and for what) and economics (who funds it, what is the business model).

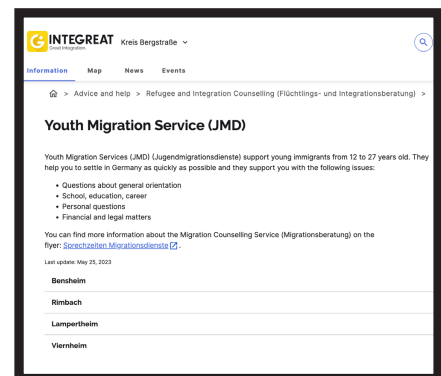
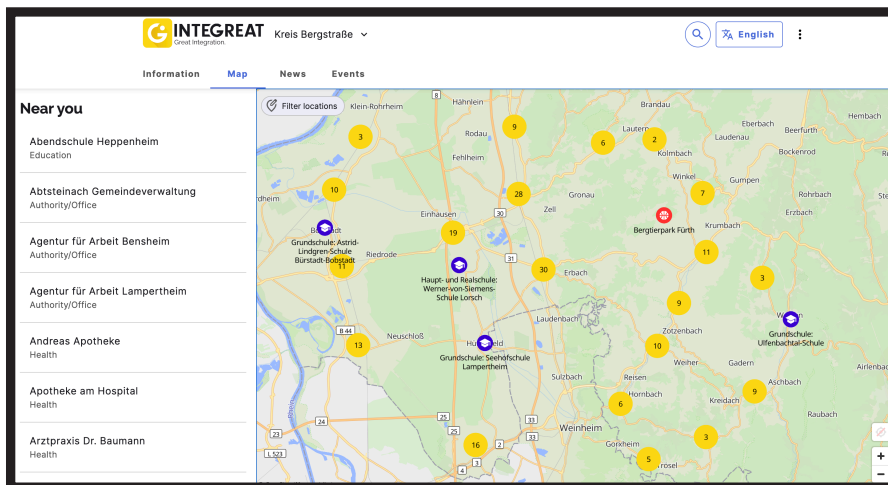
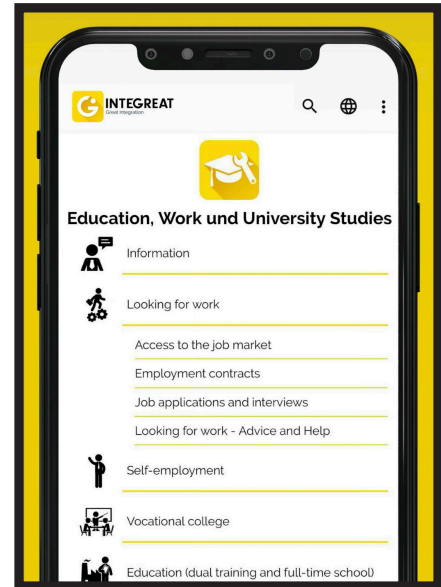
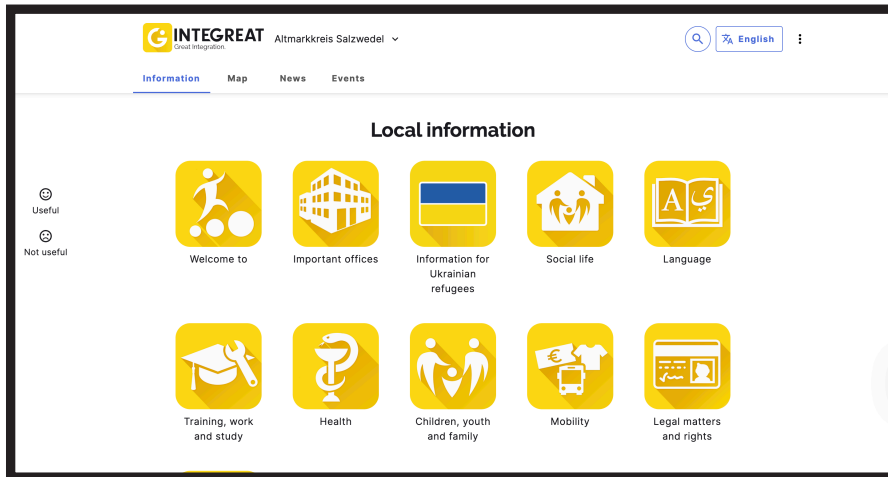
All analysis closes with a general summary of transferable design insights in the end — what can be borrowed or adapted for the specific context of my project (Milan, Italy, international non-EU students) — and, where relevant, the limitations that prevent direct replication in the local context.

Cases selection  
was directly  
informed  
by primary  
research  
design-directive  
insights

*Methodological note*

# Integreat, Germany

Free digital platform providing multilingual local information for newcomers to Germany



## KEY WORDS

local info search tool;  
location-first;  
crowdsourced content

Who: Tür an Tür, a non-profit digital organization;

Where: Germany, launched in Augsburg;

When: 2015, developed during the Syrian refugee crisis;

How it started: The Augsburg association "Tür an Tür" had published a brochure called "First Steps" since 1997, answering local everyday questions. Since addresses and contact persons change quickly, some information was already outdated after a few weeks. Students of business informatics at the Technical University of Munich then developed the digital version in collaboration with the association and the city of Augsburg's social department.

Target: Newcomers, especially those with limited German language skills. Initially designed for refugees and asylum seekers, following the success of the platform, the focus shifted to anyone arriving in Germany and moving across the country.

**VALUE PROPOSITION**

*One platform,  
many municipalities*

Federated content management principle — centralized technology but decentralized content. Integreat provides a shared infrastructure where each municipality populates its localized content within a common structure.

**PROBLEMS ADDRESSED**

- local information poverty;
- information fragmentation;
- social exclusion and unequal opportunities;
- lack of access to reliable and understandable info;
- language barrier;
- high-threshold communication.

**STAKEHOLDERS ECOSYSTEM**

- Tür an Tür — acts as the orchestrator; run onboarding for new municipalities; provides technical support, training, and networking; facilitate knowledge sharing between cities
- Municipalities and NGOs — produce and maintain content
- Academics — Technical University of Munich (research partner since the beginning)

**ECONOMICS**

Each municipality pays a contract fee, the platform team secures grants, and the open-source model reduces development costs. Additional funding is coming from public grants (e.g., 'Demokratie Leben!'), Google.org and EU AMIF co-financing, and open-source plus volunteer contributions.

**INNOVATION DRIVERS**

- Open-source — architecture & code are publicly accessible;
- Offline-first design — local data access without an internet;
- Privacy-first — doesn't collect any data about you;
- AI-powered machine translation (DeepL/Google Translate).

**FEATURES & MECHANISMS**For the newcomer (user):

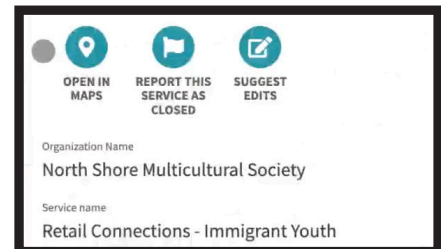
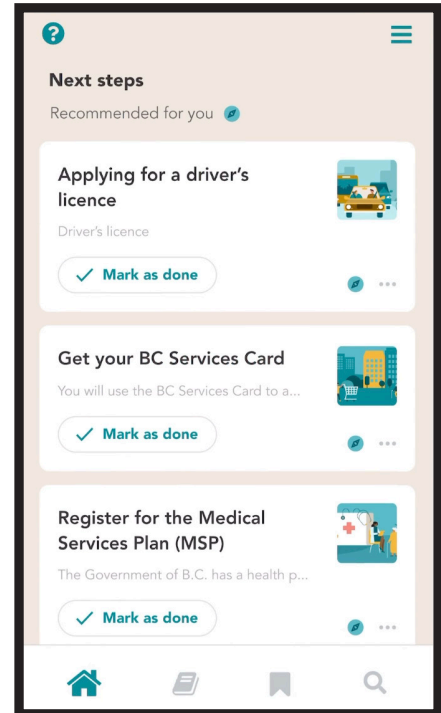
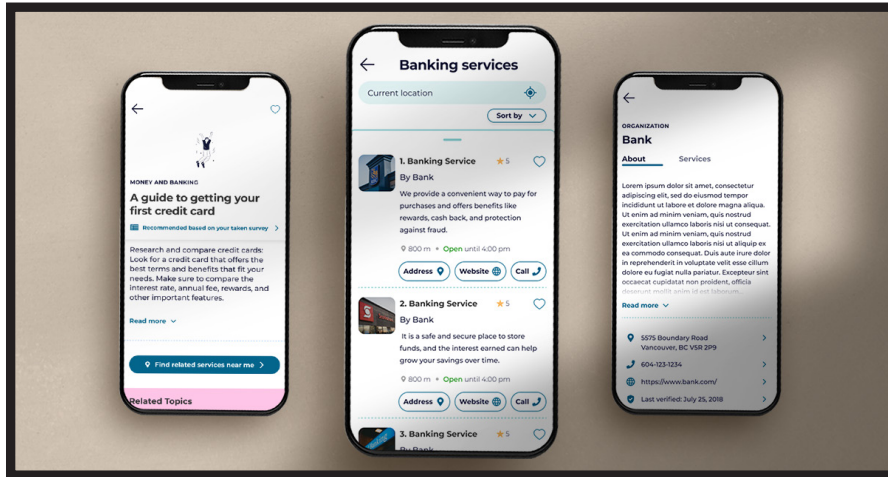
- Select your city → see only locally relevant information;
- Select your language → content appears in that language (machine-translated);
- Search function across all local content;
- View local events in calendar;
- View counseling centers on the map;
- Access content offline (download to device);
- Text-to-speech for content readback;
- Push notifications for chosen important local updates;
- Share content with friends.

For the municipality (content manager):

- Central editorial CMS (Content Management System);
- Content templates shared across registered municipalities
- Built-in machine translation;
- Page-level analytics per language;
- Creative Commons Licensing (public permission to use work in specified context while retaining copyright);
- iFrame embedding to integrate Integreat content into municipal websites;
- Calendar import from external systems;
- Contact module for managing local municipal institutions.

# Welcome to Canada

Co-designed free mobile platform connecting newcomers with immigrant services



## KEY WORDS

guidance tool;  
profile-first;  
partner-sourced content

**Who:** PeaceGeeks, a Vancouver-based non-profit that builds digital tools to empower communities in settlement sector;

**Where:** Canada, initially British Columbia, now 5 provinces;

**When:** Started 2017, launched 2019, rebranded 2021;

**How it started:** In response to the Syrian refugee crisis, Metro Vancouver settlement organizations (non-profit agencies that provide essential services to immigrants and refugees) approached PeaceGeeks to create a digital solution bridging this gap. In 2017 PeaceGeeks won the Google.org Impact Challenge Canada grant, which funded 18 months of co-design, development, and testing with newcomer advisory committees, settlement partners, and local government.

**Target:** Initially — refugees and immigrants settling in British Columbia, Canada. Now — broadened to all newcomers to Canada across 5 provinces.

**VALUE PROPOSITION**

*Right information, for your specific situation*

Questionnaire-based recommendations — rather than giving everyone the same directory, the app uses a questionnaire to understand who you are and where you are in your process, to then surface personalized next steps with links to relevant services nearby.

**PROBLEMS ADDRESSED**

- poor awareness about existing, government-funded services;
- disparate information from government;
- fragmented and outdated service information;
- privacy concerns and language barrier;
- newcomers often do not know what to search for.

**STAKEHOLDERS ECOSYSTEM**

- PeaceGeeks — acts as neutral convener (technology, design, project management, research);
- Settlement partner organizations — review and validate content;
- BC21 (non-profit organization) — share info about services;
- Minister of Immigration in Canada — policy consultation;
- Newcomers, settlement workers, organizational leaders — act as an advisory groups for co-design and User Testing.

**ECONOMICS**

The funding model is grant-dependent: initial Google.org Impact Challenge grant (\$750K, 2017), then provincial government funding for BC expansion, then IRCC (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada) federal funding for national scaling.

**INNOVATION DRIVERS**

- Guidance over search — firstly help in “what do” not “how”;
- Offline-first design — local data access without an internet;
- Privacy-first — doesn’t collect any data about you;
- Crowdsourcing data — users can flag outdated service info.

**FEATURES & MECHANISMS**

For the newcomer (user):

- Province/city selection → localized content;
- Optional questionnaire → generates personalized recommendations (the app matches profile against tag taxonomy and surfaces only the relevant content);
- "Next steps" checklist → stage guidance;
- Service finder → 4,000+ services searchable by topic, with map integration and navigation;
- Multilingual content → BC has 10 languages;
- Offline access → content downloadable for use without internet;
- "Suggest an update" → users can flag outdated service listings;
- Skip questionnaire → who don't want to share personal details still get default content.

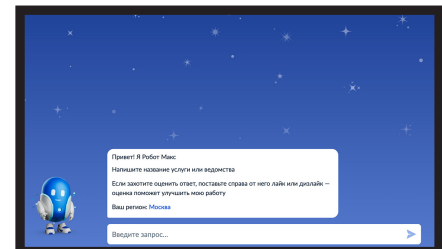
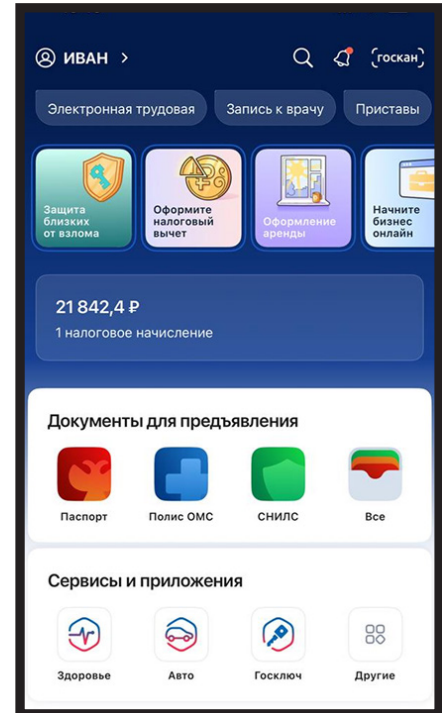
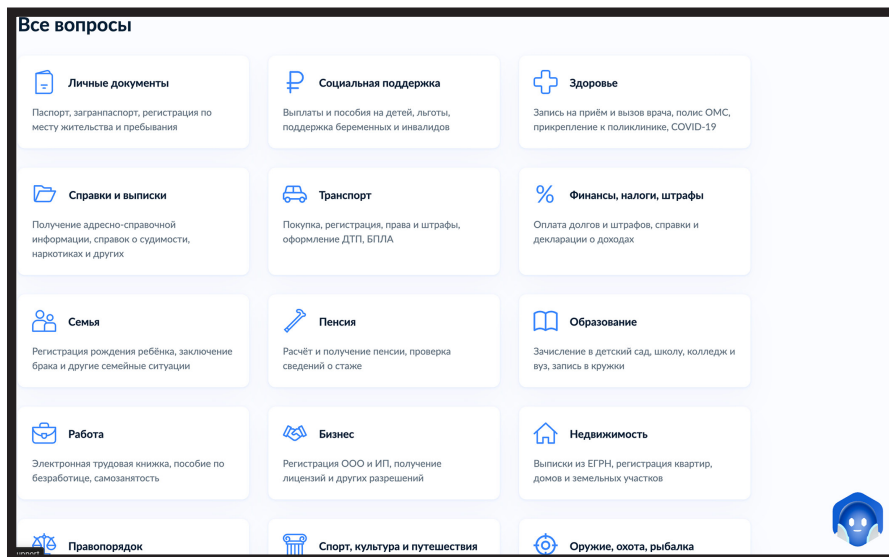
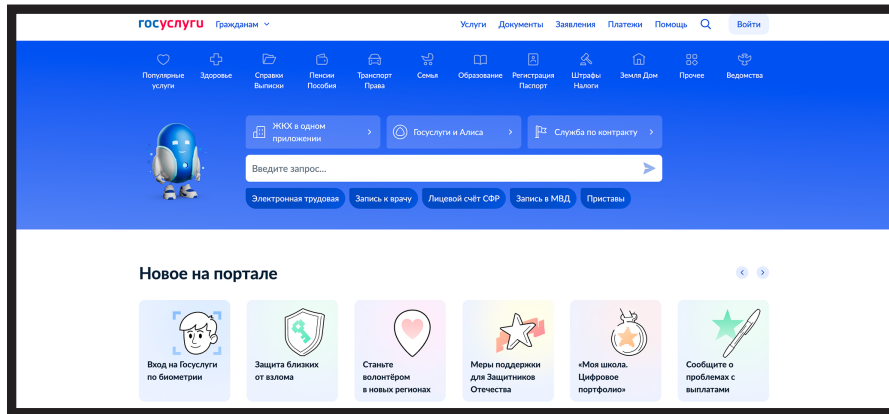
For the organization (partner):

- Content management through partner network (not a self-serve CMS — PeaceGeeks coordinates using government documents are the source material);
- Existing services data sourced from BC21 (a provincial community services directory);
- Advisory committee structure for content governance;
- Analytics on usage patterns by language, topic, and province.



# Gosuslugi, Russia

Federal portal through which citizens, organizations, and public authorities access state and municipal services in electronic form



## KEY WORDS

unified state portal;  
account-first;  
official content

**Who:** The portal was operated by Rosetelecom (Russia's largest provider of digital services) and designed as a part of Russia's state e-government infrastructure;

**Where:** Russia, combining federal, regional, and municipal services;

**When:** Launched in live operation on December 15, 2009;

**How it started:** Gosuslugi was launched in 2009 as part of Russia's early e-government infrastructure to move public services online and reduce in-person bureaucracy. The first version included 108 federal and 200+ regional and municipal services.

**Target:** Initially — citizens in Russia needing access to federal, regional, and municipal services online. Now — broadened to a mass public-service platform for citizens, foreign citizens, legal entities, individual entrepreneurs, public authorities, and local governments. By 2024 it reached 112 million users.



**VALUE PROPOSITION**

*One account, many public services*

Unified public service platform — Gosuslugi provides a shared digital infrastructure where users access services through one personal account, while different government bodies (federal, regional, and municipal) remain responsible for their own services and data.

**PROBLEMS ADDRESSED**

- limited access to reliable service information and fragmentation;
- high-threshold bureaucracy and administrative burden;
- uneven quality of regional digital services;
- geographic and time barriers.

**STAKEHOLDERS ECOSYSTEM**

- The Government and Ministry of Digital Development — sets digital policy, the regulatory framework and security requirements plus being state customer for EPGU's shared services;
- Federal, regional, and municipal authorities — populate the portal with services and remain responsible for delivering them;
- Rostelecom — technological participant and project operator;
- RT Labs — a key contractor engaged in the development and support of the portal's infrastructure.

**ECONOMICS**

Gosuslugi as a state digital infrastructure is supported by federal funding. Using the unified portal services allows regional budgets to reduce costs and maintain consistent quality of electronic services.

**INNOVATION DRIVERS**

- Unified identity layer — ESIA account as the access base;
- Role-based navigation — tailored service catalog to user status;
- Payment integration — fees and charges linked via GIS GMP;
- Multiregional platform — all service levels on one infrastructure;
- Deadline-tracking — reminding deadlines, documents updates.

**FEATURES & MECHANISMS**

For the newcomer (user):

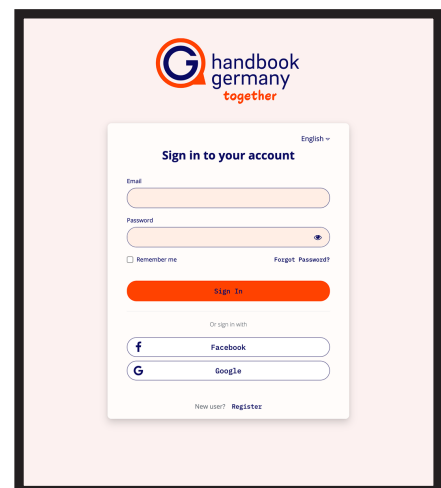
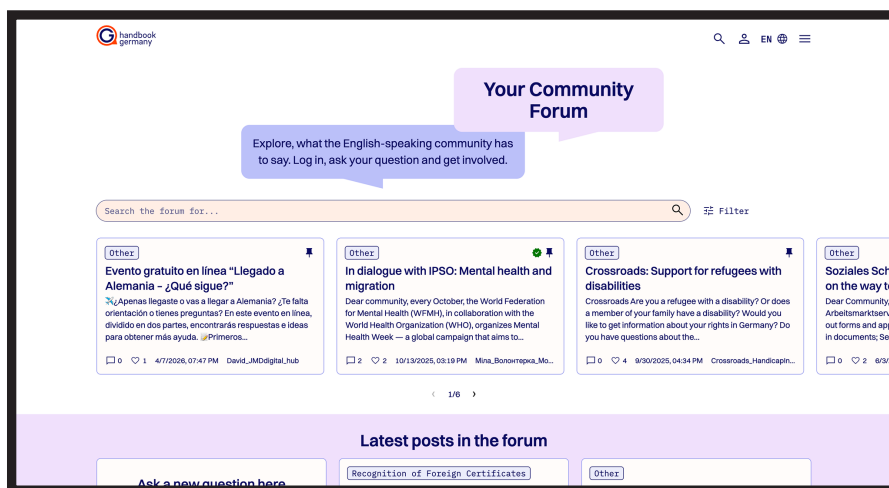
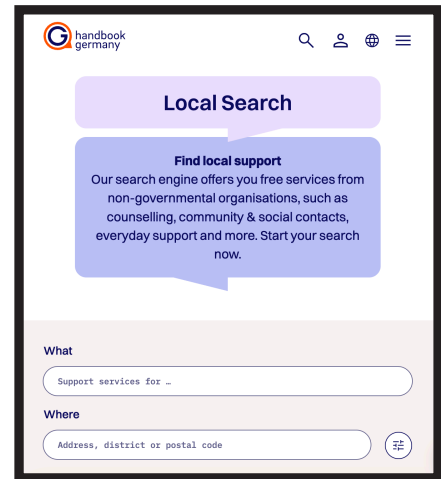
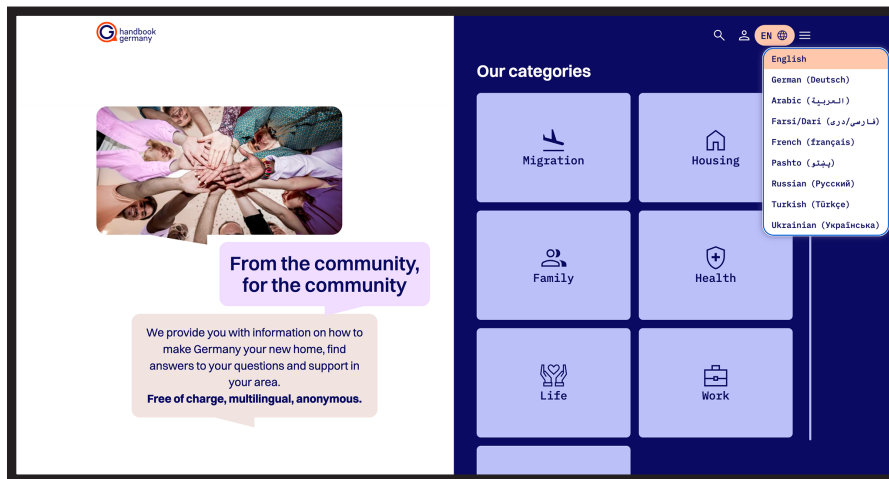
- Sign in with one ESIA account → access public services via unified personal account;
- Service finder → find federal, regional and municipal services in one place;
- Submit an application online → send requests and documents without visiting an office;
- Track application status → see progress and updates in the personal account;
- Receive service results online → get digital outcomes where the service supports it;
- Pay state fees and charges → use integrated government payment infrastructure;
- Ask Robot Max or support → get help navigating services and common issues;
- Send feedback or complaints.

For the government bodies (partner):

- Connect agency systems → process services through shared federal infrastructure;
- Use shared service templates → publish federal, regional and municipal services on one platform;
- Process interagency requests → exchange data between authorities without making users collect documents manually;
- Use payment integration → connect fees, charges and payment status;
- Provide support and appeals → route user questions, complaints, and pre-trial appeals through unified channels.

# Handbook Germany: Together

Free multilingual editorial platform on life in Germany from journalists with migrant past



## KEY WORDS

editorial platform;  
trust-first;  
lived-experience content

**Who:** Neue deutsche Medienmacherinnen e.V. — a nationwide independent association of journalists with migration backgrounds;  
**Where:** Germany, federal level — content covers the whole country;  
**When:** First website went online in 2017. The platform now is three integrated products that were merged into one in November 2024;  
**How it started:** In the outcome of the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis social media was full of fake news and confusing rumours. Team saw a journalistic gap and built an editorial information platform to fill it. After, initial community platform "Together in Germany" was merged with informational pages and further developed within the ongoing project "Handbook Germany : Together"

**Target:** Refugees, asylum seekers, family reunification migrants, skilled workers, and students not from the EU/EEA with a perspective to stay in Germany.

**VALUE PROPOSITION**

*Your digital relative*

Editorial information platform with forum — a trusted voice that speaks your language, understands your situation and gives you verified, clear, actionable information, collected, checked and validated by people with the same migrant experience.

**PROBLEMS ADDRESSED**

- disinformation and low trust in official channels/social media;
- questions evolve over time but the system doesn't follow;
- knowledge fragmentation;
- high-threshold communication and language barrier.

**STAKEHOLDERS ECOSYSTEM**

- Handbook Germany gGmbH — core editorial team;
- Deutsche Telekom — maintains technical infrastructure;
- Adobe — provides Experience Manager (CMS) and Analytics;
- Lawyers, social workers, and counselling professionals — answer questions in the community forum alongside dedicated community managers;
- Topic related organisations — part of local search.

**ECONOMICS**

Non-profit project model with a grant-based funding with defined project periods. 90% is co-financed by the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF) of the EU, as well as by the Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI), Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees, and Integration, who is also the Federal Government Commissioner for Antiracism, and the International Rescue Committee.

**INNOVATION DRIVERS**

- Trust architecture — done by people with same experience;
- Native multilingual production — not machine translation;
- Articles question framing — not bureaucratic categories;
- Social media as primary distribution channel.

**FEATURES & MECHANISMS**Information Platform:

- 160+ topic pages in nine languages, organized into eight categories: Living, Housing, Work, Education, Language, Migration, Family, Health;
- Long-form editorial article combining explanatory text, videos, infographics, and links to official sources;
- Content is professionally researched, fact-checked, and continuously updated by the editorial team;
- Texts are produced in nine languages from natives — not translation;
- Social media cross-posting → daily content distributed via Instagram, YouTube, TikTok.

Community Forum:

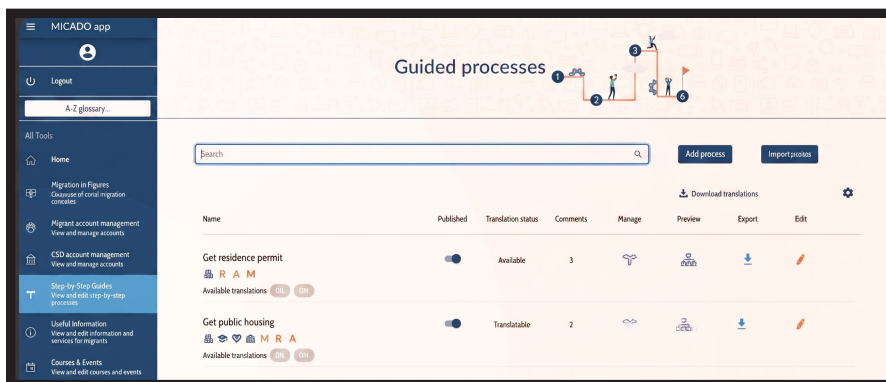
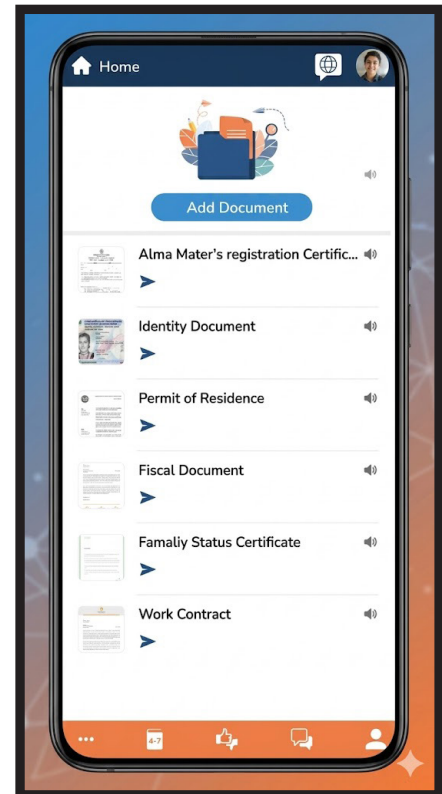
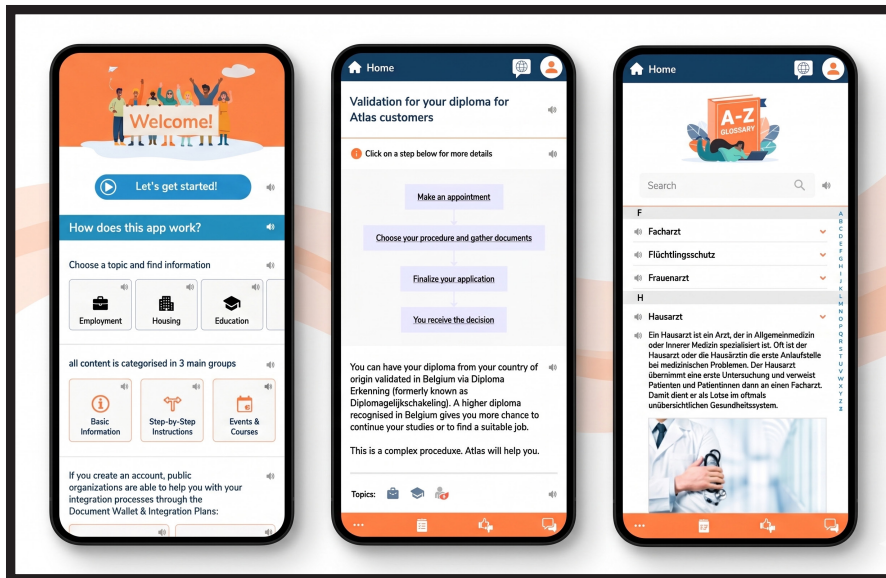
- Registration (anonymously possible);
- Questions posting and tagging;
- Possibility to report on answer/question;
- Moderation by dedicated managers;
- Questions are answered by community managers, external expert advisors (lawyers, social workers), and other community members.

Local Search:

- Official offers & network partners' search engines by city or topic ("connection to real world" feature);
- Filtering by proximity, offer type (online, on-site), topic, your status, language

# MICADO, Europe

The open access digital "one-stop-shop" for migrants, PAs and CSOs to facilitate easy access to relevant information and services



## KEY WORDS

digital "one-stop-shop";  
personalisation-first;  
official/crowdsourced content

**Who:** A consortium of 15 partners from five EU countries, coordinated by the Digital City Science group at HafenCity University Hamburg;  
**Where:** Piloted in four European cities: Hamburg (Germany), Bologna (Italy), Antwerp (Belgium), Madrid (Spain);

**When:** Ran from January 2019 to June 2022, not finished;

**How it started:** After the European refugee crisis each city had its own scattered tools, paper-based processes and no shared data infrastructure. Researchers at HafenCity University saw this as a solvable coordination problem and proposed a cross-city digital platform.

**Target:** Public Authorities in charge of the administrative and legal processes concerning migrant integration; Civil Society Organisations like associations and citizens' initiatives actively engaged with migrants' integration; Migrants, especially non-EU country nationals and EU migrants who were not born in the country of residence.

**VALUE PROPOSITION**

*One platform, three interfaces*

Cross-city platform — working within employment, education, housing and health domains, connecting public authorities, civil society and migrants into a shared digital ecosystem for integration management.

**PROBLEMS ADDRESSED**

- lack of coordination between public authorities and civil society organizations — insufficient data linkage between institutions;
- no unified view of migration data;
- poor information access for migrants;
- low promotion of CSOs' services via official channels.

**STAKEHOLDERS ECOSYSTEM**

- HafenCity University Hamburg, Digital City Science — project coordinator, technical architecture, research;
- CSI Piemonte — leader of technical design and development work package, requirements collection, pilot monitoring;
- City-level implementation teams (for each pilot city);
- LESC — Local Empowerment and Stakeholder Committees which each city formed for co-designing.

**ECONOMICS**

Project was funded within Horizon 2020 Innovation Action "DT-MIGRATION-06-2018: Addressing the challenge of migrant integration through ICT-enabled solutions" with €4.3M. After grant end pilot cities supposed to adopt and self-fund the solution. The EU pays for R&D — cities pay for operations. However, just Bologna partially adopted it.

**INNOVATION DRIVERS**

- Federated model — centralized platform, decentralized implementation, three-sided platform, feature activation/deactivation;
- Data dashboards & cockpits — interactive information displays;
- Modular containers — individually replaceable components;

**FEATURES & MECHANISMS**For the migrant (user):

- Info-portal → browse information organized by four domains: housing, health, education, employment;
- Step-by-step guides → to navigate bureaucratic procedures;
- View events and courses nearby;
- Personal Portal → create an account and access an individual integration task monitor;
- Document Wallet → to store documents;
- Glossary of key institutional terms;
- Chatbot for navigation assistance;
- Voice-over function for users with limited literacy;
- Content in 11 languages, locally adapted.

For the public administration:

- Access and share migration statistics through an interactive dashboard;
- Create and edit own step-by-step guides for integration procedures;
- Disseminate information and services;
- Promote events and courses;
- View analytics on platform usage

For civil society organizations:

- Promote own services to migrants;
- Share information on local processes;
- Advertise courses and events;
- View step-by-step guides created by PAs;
- Manage CSO users within their organization.

# Transferable Models and Local Limitations

Five cases were analysed to see the range of existing solutions a tool could inhabit. Integreat and Handbook Germany represent the information-and-community crowdsourced systems; Welcome to Canada represents guided, personalised onboarding; Gosuslugi represents the fully transactional state portal; MICADO represents the modular, multi-city research platform. Together they cover the main formats relevant to this project and the main features worth learning from: personalisation, AI assistance, multilingual access, crowdsourced quality control and digital-to-physical connection. None of them is a model to copy fully — each, instead, contributes a few proven mechanisms and reveals a few constraintst.

## WHAT CAN BE TRANSFERRED

There are several patterns and elements that closely align with the student needs identified in the primary research:

- A layered architecture moving from information to community to connection. Three-layer logic from Handbook Germany—Inform, Discuss, Connect — maps almost directly main needs of international students in Italy: verified information they can trust (inform), peer experience they can learn from (discuss), and connection to the people and services that can actually help (connect). A layered structure is what lets a single tool serve the whole journey rather than one slice of it.
- Guidance over search, and personalisation by profile. Welcome to Canada's core insight — that newcomers do not know what to search for, so the tool should guide rather than wait to be asked — answers the question of what to give to the students who arrive under-informed. Profile-based personalisation (in the format of a short questionnaire and tagging taxonomy that surfaces only what applies) covers also a navigating need.
- Trust built through lived experience, framed as questions. Handbook Germany's combination of lived-experience content and question-first framing speaks to the strongest finding of the research: students trust peers because peer knowledge translates abstract rules into situated reality. Designing official content around verified peer experience is how the platform



earns the trust.

- Crowdsourced quality control and feedback loops. Both Welcome to Canada and Integreat let users flag outdated information. This is essential in a context where, as students repeatedly reported, the deepest bureaucratic frustration is that rules change unpredictably and official text goes outdated. User flagging turns the community into the maintenance mechanism.
- AI as a main assistant; platform that helps "do," not only "read." Firstly, Gosuslugi's own AI assistant, which is connected just to the structured, verified service data underneath the platform, gives smooth navigation around already verified information. Secondly, Gosuslugi's capacity to actually move tasks forward — pre-filled templates, checklists, deadline tracking, the document wallet — points toward real help and not just guidance.
- Modular content model. Integreat's federated approach (each stakeholder maintains its own content domain) and MICADO's universal-to-local adaptation with feature activation/deactivation together makes the system both scalable and realistic to launch, covering interests of several actors and not just users.

## GENERAL LIMITATIONS

Just as important as what transfers is what does not — several limitations structural to the Italian and Milanese context.

- A unified state portal like Gosuslugi is impossible in Italy — Italy's integration governance is fragmented and decentralised, responsibility is outsourced to the third sector, there is no shared cross-agency protocol that would let a single portal transact across offices and there is no such a federal funding.
- It is not realistic to publish just definitive answers — as these definitive answers just simply do not always exist in Italian system due to its fragmentation and situationality. Relying on municipality level, as Integreat do, for providing final verified information is also impossible with Milan's third-sector-dependent model for integration. However, complete dependence on the third sector is also dangerous, as they may not provide information in a timely manner, thereby failing to meet the strict timeframes that students have. Hence, community-maintained, flaggable content is more reliable rather than partners support.
- Sustainability and editorial capacity are the real constraints. MICADO's central lesson is that building the technology is the easy part — sustaining it after funding ends is the hard part. Handbook Germany shows the same: editorial capacity is a permanent constraint for a small team. Therefore, the design should somehow reduce its own maintenance burden.

These cases establish what is possible and what is proven elsewhere. But, integration, as we already stated, is always local, and a borrowed mechanism only becomes a usable solution once it is tested against the specific actors, services, and limitations. The next part therefore turns to the Milan context itself.

# 3.2

## **Italian Actors of Integration Process**

- i. The Governance of Integration in Italy: A Multi-Level Framework
- ii. Mapping the Actors: Who Does What in Integration Process



## The Governance of Integration in Italy: A Multi-Level Framework

**“In fact, a well-structured national strategy cannot but involve all the levels of government.”**

*National Integration Plan for Persons Entitled to International Protection, 2017*

Before zooming into Milan, it was decided to have a broader look at the ecosystem of integration actors in Italy in order to accurately understand its structure and the relationships within it.

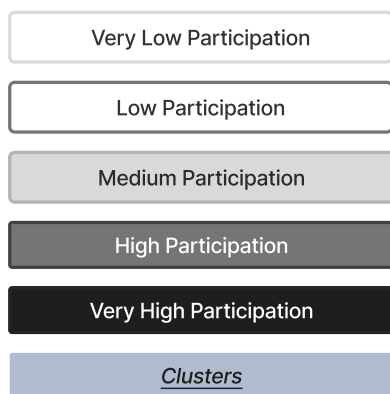
As we already know, the defining feature of the Italian system is that integration is not run centrally. A constitutional reform passed in 2001 assigned full autonomy over social policy to the regions. Now, integration largely falls under the competences of regional governments, which enjoy full autonomy in policy planning and implementation, resulting in a multi-level governance framework. The consequence is significant: integration strategies vary widely across regions, despite efforts to preserve uniform strategy.

Within this structure, the division of roles is following: the central level provides overall direction and coordination, while regions and local authorities plan and implement the policies related to migrants' inclusion. Italy's main national strategy document, the 2017 National Integration Plan, makes this explicit: *"This approach designs a systematic multi-level and multi-sectoral action to which regional governments, local authorities and civil society have to contribute to"* (Ministero dell'Interno, 2017).

At regional level two parties take main actions. The first is the municipality, as integration policy becomes a service a person can use exactly at the city level. The second is the third sector, that handles much of the concrete delivery. Associations, foundations and co-operatives work on the protection and promotion of migrants' rights operating alongside the public administration. In Milan in particular, with its progressive approach, migrant-led organisations and the diaspora are now also included in the integration facilitation process.

As shown, actors ecosystem is wide. Therefore, this project cannot treat integration as something a single institution owns, but must instead understand the full web of actors involved.

# Mapping the Actors: Who Does What in Integration Process



Actors' Maps Legend

The maps below organises actors by what they do in the integration process, rather than by their influence level. A participation-level legend, running from low (indirect involvement through funding, research, or monitoring) to high (daily involvement in integration activities with migrants), shows at a glance where the real, hands-on integration work is concentrated. The actors fall into the following clusters:

- Framework Creators — set policy frameworks and guidelines;
- Policy Makers and Legislators — create concrete national policies and legislation;
- Regional Policy Adapters — translate national policy to the regional context;
- Local Policy Implementers and Service Coordinators — implement and coordinate integration services at the municipal level;
- Program Designers and Operators — design and run specific integration programmes;
- Direct Participants in Integration — the migrants communities;
- Support and Enabling Actors — contribute indirectly through funding, research, monitoring, and advocacy.

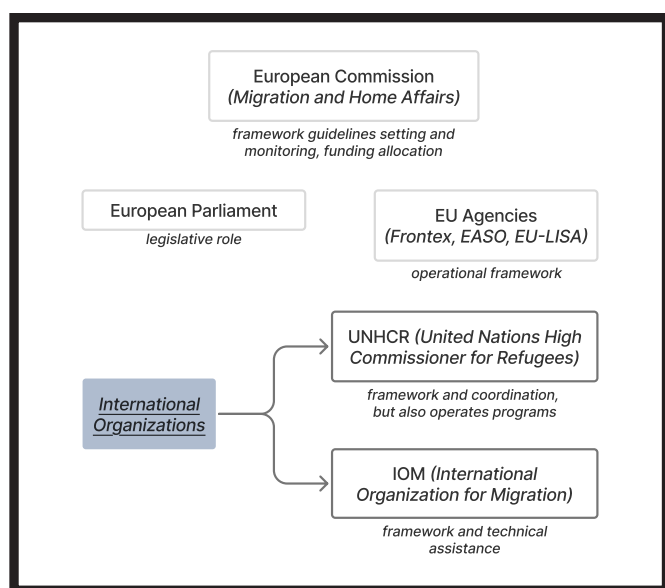


Figure 35: Framework Creators

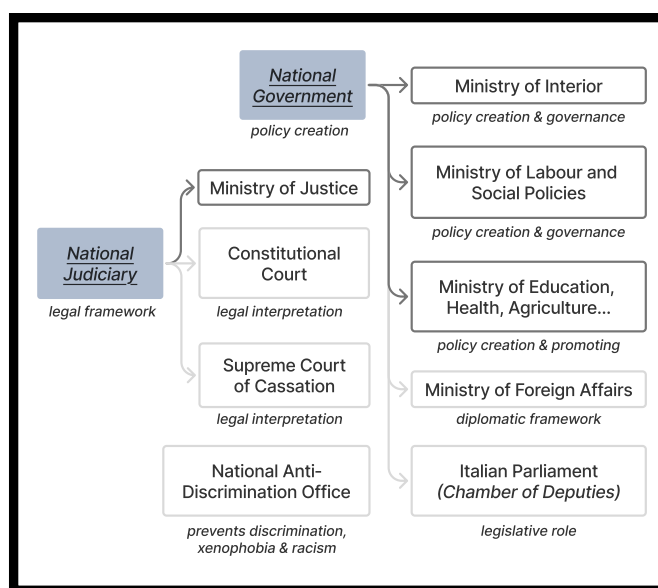


Figure 36: Policy Makers and Legislators

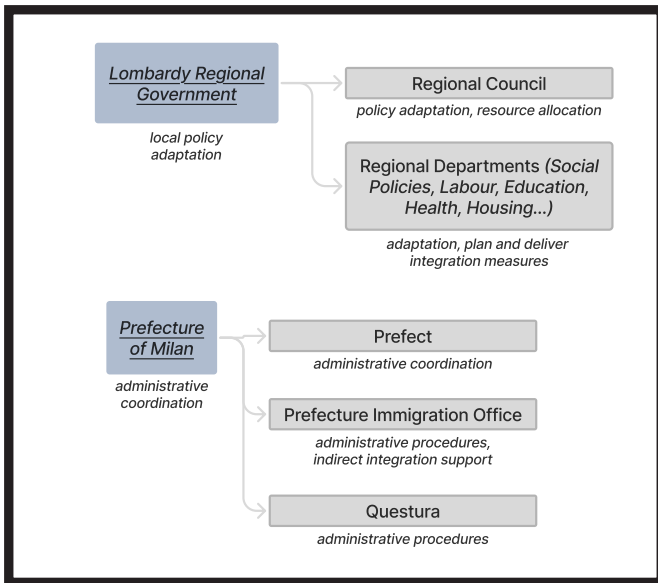


Figure 37: Regional Policy Adapters

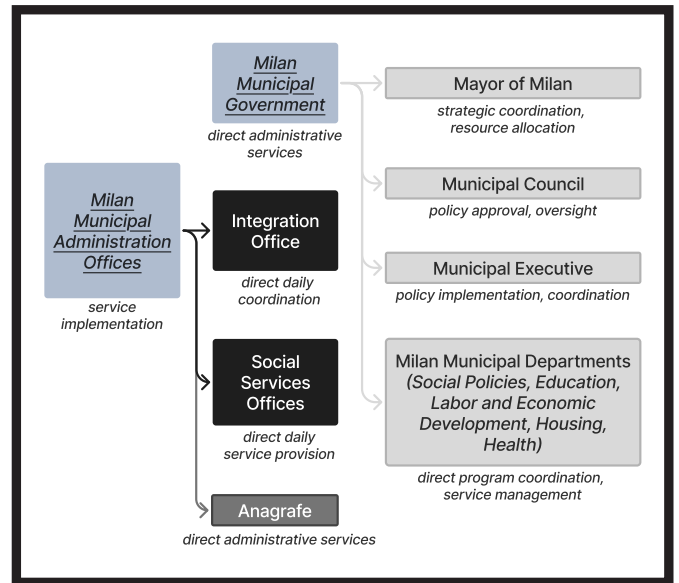


Figure 38: Local Policy Implementers

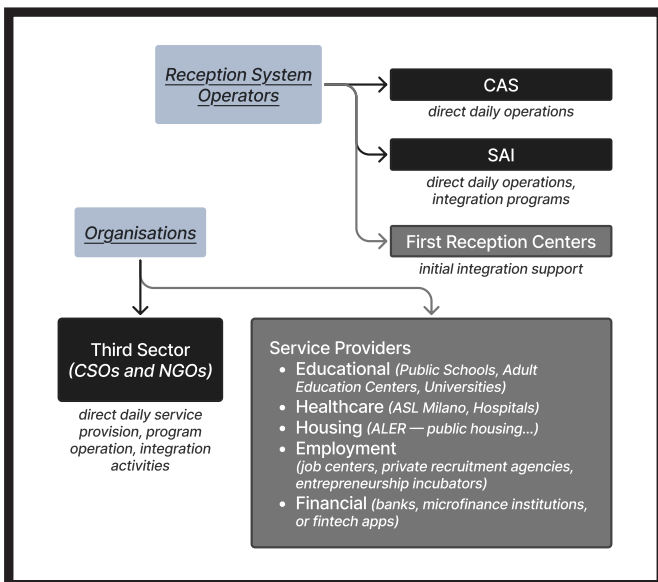


Figure 39: Program Designers and Operators

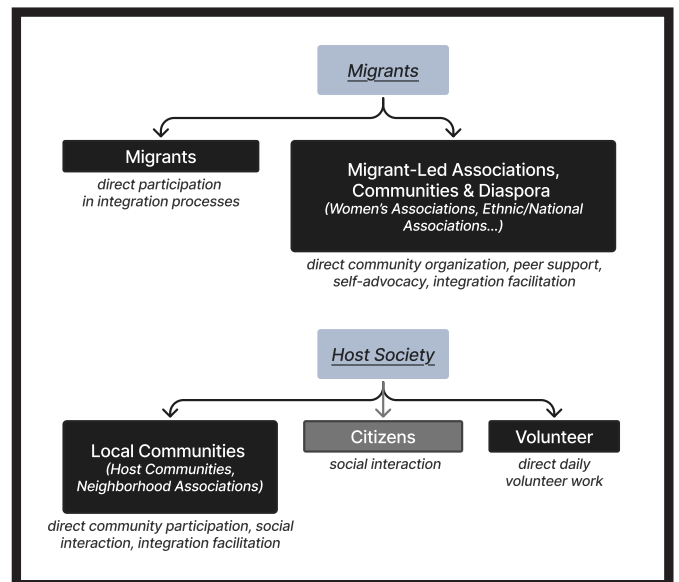


Figure 40: Direct Participants in Integration

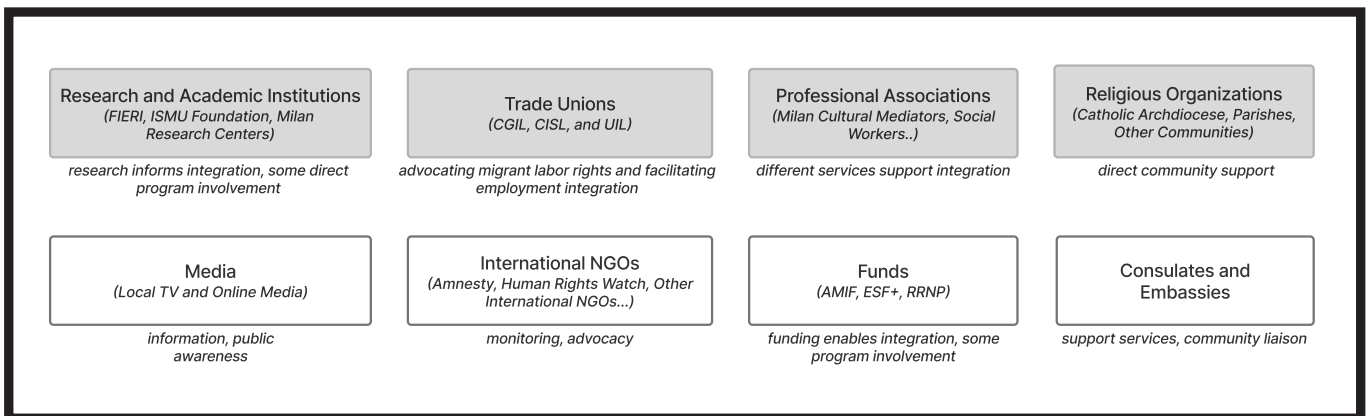


Figure 41: Support and Enabling Actors

# 3.3

## Milan's Integration Services Audit

- i. City-Level Services: The Comune di Milano and Its Partners
- ii. Third Sector Services
- iii. University Services (Politecnico di Milano)
- iv. Migrant Community-Led Help

# City-Level Services: The Comune di Milano and Its Partners

This chapter  
maps services  
as officially  
documented,  
not evaluating  
their quality  
in practice

*Methodological note*

The previous chapter mapped integration governance at a system level — who is supposed to do what and at which level of the state. This chapter makes the question concrete: what actually exists here, in Milan, for integration provision? The question matters because this work's central argument is not that support is absent but that it is fragmented, poorly communicated and not designed around the student's specific situation. To test that argument, rather than simply take it for granted, I took a look at the landscape — what is there, who owns it, what it is built for and where the gaps are.

The follow-up audit is deliberately limited in scope. It covers four layers of existing provision: the city level, where the Comune di Milano and its partners offer services to migrants and internationals; the third sector, where 52 officially registered organisations operate across Milan's integration ecosystem; the university level, where Politecnico di Milano itself offers programmes and information to its own international students; and migrants communities and diasporas that share information to their members in chats and provide various, also private, services to each other.

One clarification before beginning — this chapter describes services as they are publicly documented and originally framed. It does not evaluate their quality in practice, as decent practical voices were already received from primary research. What this chapter contributes is a map of what officially exists, which is the necessary for understanding what is officially missing.

## MILANO WELCOME CENTRE

Opened in November 2024 in a renovated municipal building, the Milano Welcome Centre became the city's most significant recent investment in integration infrastructure. It represents a deliberate shift in Milan's approach to migrant inclusion — away from fragmented, hard-to-navigate services and toward a single, centralised point of access built on a "one-stop shop" logic.

The Centre operates as a public-private collaboration under strong municipal coordination, running together with the IOM, the Prefecture and UNHCR. Its office offers real-time orientation and consultation services in a help-desk format. Questions can be on legal and im-

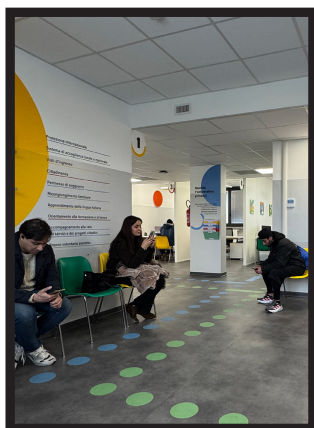
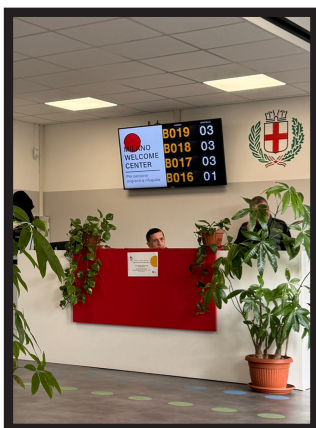
**“... the key to inclusion lies in quality integration programs that, taking into account cultural differences and origins, are designed to guide individuals or families toward true independence. Easing access to services by concentrating them in a single location is the first step in this direction.”**

*Giuseppe Sala, the Mayor of Milan, at the Opening of Milano Welcome Centre, 2024*

migration matters, social services, employment orientation and job placement, recognition of foreign qualifications, health and psychological issues, enrolment in Italian-language classes and protection or voluntary return issues. The model is built on three principles:

- Lowering linguistic and bureaucratic barriers for newcomers by offering multilingual support and cultural mediation (in partnership with Progetto Integrazione);
- Strengthening coordination between public, private and international actors through a shared-administration approach;
- Delivering a personalised, case-based experience rather than a generic information counter.

This service is interesting as recent precedent — it confirms that the one-stop-shop model is now institutionally validated at the city level. This implies that, Comune di Milano considers coordination between public and private actors the right structural answer to the fragmentation students also describe. The critical note, in this work's context, is that Centre is mainly designed around vulnerability and reception pathways, not including international university students into main target. Anyway, a student struggling with a permit renewal or a banking refusal could walk through its doors (I've verified this myself). The problem is that neither the center's design, nor its communications, nor its staff training are specifically student-focused. As a result, students are largely unaware of this service.



Figures 42: Milano Welcome Centre Office



Figure 43: WeMi Welcome Kit Page

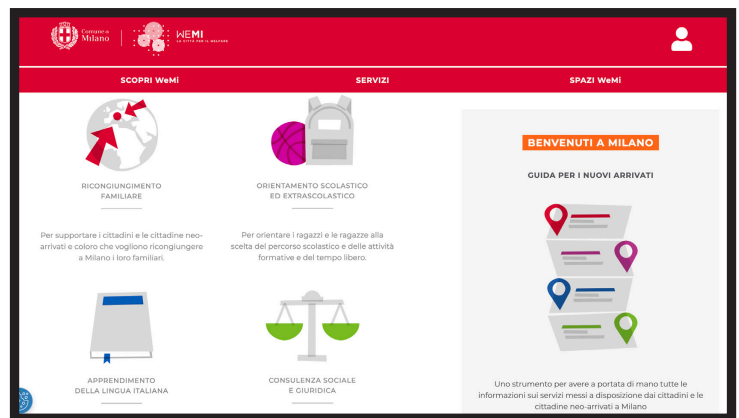


Figure 44: WeMi Web-Platform

## WEMI

Launched by the Comune di Milano in 2019, WeMi (Welfare Milano) — is the city's digital platform for connecting all residents to welfare and social services. Beyond the digital platform, WeMi also operates a network of physical WeMi Spaces distributed across Milan's neighbourhoods, staffed by operators who can provide in-person orientation to city services.

One of WeMi's most practically useful outputs for newcomers is its Welcome Kit — a comprehensive PDF guide covering what a newly arrived resident in Milan needs to know, structured around topics like: arrival checklist, permits and authorisations, employment, Italian language, health and medical assistance, housing and banking and social assistance. The guide is detailed, step-by-step and free, however, already a bit outdated, providing information verified in 2019 without new updates. Still, it provides valuable information with links needed to find specific services and up-to-date news. Additionally, platform connects international users with orientation and consultation services on social and legal advice, learning Italian, family reunification and educational-extracurricular guidance.

However, WeMi is designed for Milan residents broadly and its digital platform and in-person spaces operate almost entirely in Italian language, what makes it inaccessible to majority of international students. The Welcome Kit remains a useful reference if a student can find it and read it — but finding it requires knowing it exists.

Thus, in the context of this work, WeMi is best understood as an example of a structured, comprehensive, city-level information architecture that exists in Milan, to which students have almost no access because it has never been designed for them.

## CAF AND PATRONATI

CAF and Patronati are important services in the Milan integration landscape as they handle the bureaucratic procedures that cause the most friction. CAF (Centri di Assistenza Fiscale) are fiscal assistance centres, run by trade unions or professional associations, providing free help with tax declarations and income-related certifications. Pa-



tronati are free assistance offices, also established by Italian trade unions and workers' associations, created originally to help workers and their families navigate the Italian welfare and social security system. Both operate under national law and are funded by the state — which is why all their services are free. In Milan there are 170 CAF and Patronato centres, offering free services. The network is geographically distributed across all city neighbourhoods, which means in practice there is almost always a centre within reasonable distance.

For international students specifically, both CAF and Patronati cover several of the most critical and stressful procedures the primary research identified. Patronati handle residence permit applications and renewals, registration with the national health service and initial support with work permit transitions and INPS contributions. CAF handle the ISEE certification — the income indicator that determines the DSU scholarship, reduced university fees and social housing. For a non-EU student whose scholarship depends on annual ISEE renewal, the CAF is not optional — it is a mandatory step in the academic year cycle.



Figure 45: Centro Servizi CAF and Patronato

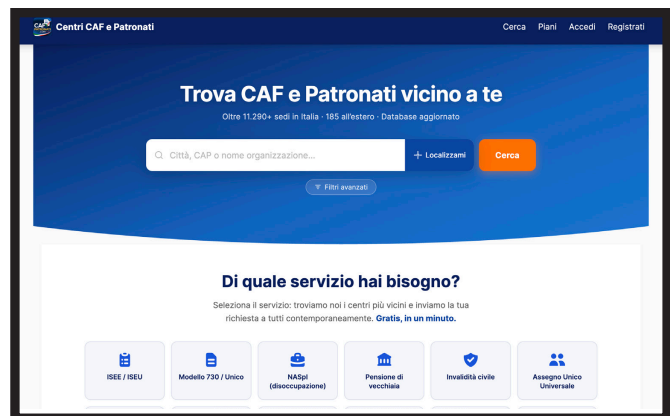


Figure 46: Service Helping to Find Suitable CAF

Overall, these services are free, geographically well-distributed, highly controlled and regulated, that makes them pretty reliable and accessible. Anyway, there are some limitations, especially for students. First, Patronati and CAF were not designed for international students and operate almost entirely in Italian — english-speaking operators are rare and uneven across centres. Second, the service model assumes the user already understands the Italian social-security and tax system well enough to identify which office and which procedure they need. Third, offices are frequently under-resourced, leading to massive backlogs and delays for essential services. Forth, due to existing misinformation people still may become a victim to scams or unofficial agencies that charge fees for simple immigration or tax tasks. Therefore, the main barrier of use is knowledge, not location or cost.

## YESMILANO

As already noted in the background chapter YesMilano is the city's international promotion and talent-attraction agency. Its Study & Work platform, built around a formal protocol between the Chamber of Commerce, the Comune di Milano, the Revenue Agency and twelve



Milanese universities, is the most student-oriented initiative the city has. The platform offers practical support and information provision:

- Its informative how-to guide library — the core of the platform — includes step-by-step articles on obtaining the codice fiscale, registering a residence permit, accessing healthcare, opening a bank account, renting accommodation, getting a transport pass and converting a student permit to a work permit;
- Beyond written guides, YesMilano is present during Welcome Days at multiple universities, hosting orientation events to deliver "First Steps to Relocating in Milan" seminars;
- Additional webinars on specific topics complement sessions;
- For direct personal support, the YesMilano International Student Desk operates by email and through a bookable appointment, offering support and consulting for those who did not find needed information in guides;
- It also offers a virtual student card — a free, digital card that provides students with deals and discounts.

The primary limitation is one already established in the background chapters: YesMilano's logic is attraction and promotion, not integration in the full sense. The information and help they provide is truly useful, but it is static, based just on the official resources which is important, but limited. The gap between what YesMilano provides — accessible official information in English — and what students described needing in the interviews — personalised navigation, peer knowledge and human escalation for complex cases — is precisely the gap this work is designed to fill. Therefore, YesMilano is not seen as a competitor to the proposed tool, but as a natural partner. For now it is the most visible entry point students currently have to city-level information, and connecting to its online content and Help Desk is exactly the collaboration the platform with orientational, referring model depends on.

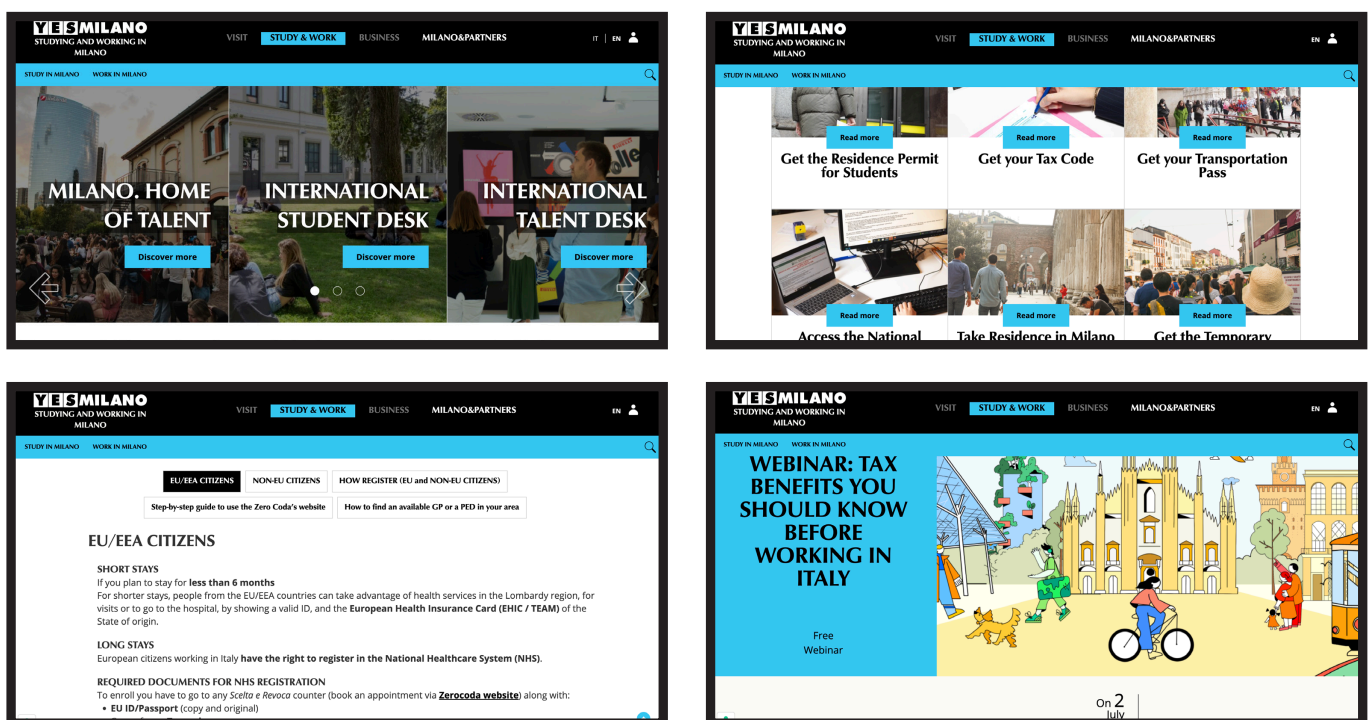


Figure 47: YesMilano Study & Work Platform

# Third Sector Services

The city of Milan has a long tradition of civil-society engagement in social services and, as described in the governance chapter, the municipality deliberately delegates much of the practical work of integration to the network of associations, foundations and cooperatives that operate across Milan neighbourhoods. To understand what third sector actually offers, this chapter maps all 52 organisations formally registered in Milan under the national integration-services for migrants registry (*Dipartimento per le politiche sociali, del terzo settore e migratorie, 2025*) and asks a single question: how relevant is each one to the specific barriers international students face?

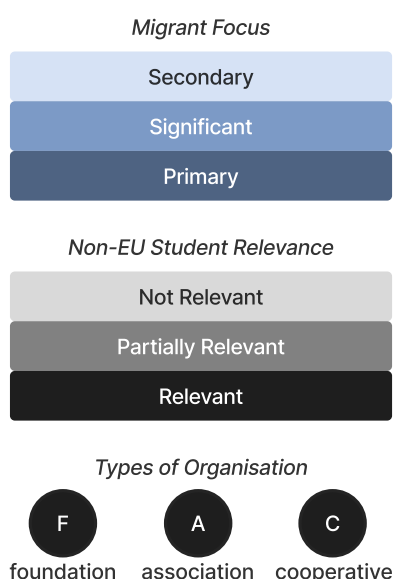
## CATEGORIZATION METHODOLOGY

The mapping was built in two layers. The first layer classifies each organisation by its migrants focus: whether migrants are a secondary subgroup within a broader vulnerable-population, a significant recurring group though not the defining one, or the primary mission-defining target. The second layer is a student-relevance level:

- High relevance — the organisation's core work addresses student barriers (if they ask for the help they will most probably receive it), or organisation can become a potential research partner for the designed service;
- Medium — at least one student-relevant service exists but the primary orientation lies elsewhere (if they ask for the help they might receive it, but not for sure), or there is a possibility for research collaboration, but not defined one;
- Low — the organisation's mission is built entirely around vulnerability and reception, making an international university student structurally ineligible.

Additionally, 21 areas of work were identified to categorize types of help organisations provide, highlighting core and additional ones. The organizations themselves were ranked in order of popularity based on the number of followers on Instagram or Facebook and organic website traffic (monthly estimated visits from search engines).

Importantly, this relevance scheme does not evaluate quality or importance — it measures fit, not value. Many of the low-relevance organisations are excellent and do essential work.



*Third Sector Organisations  
Classification Legend*

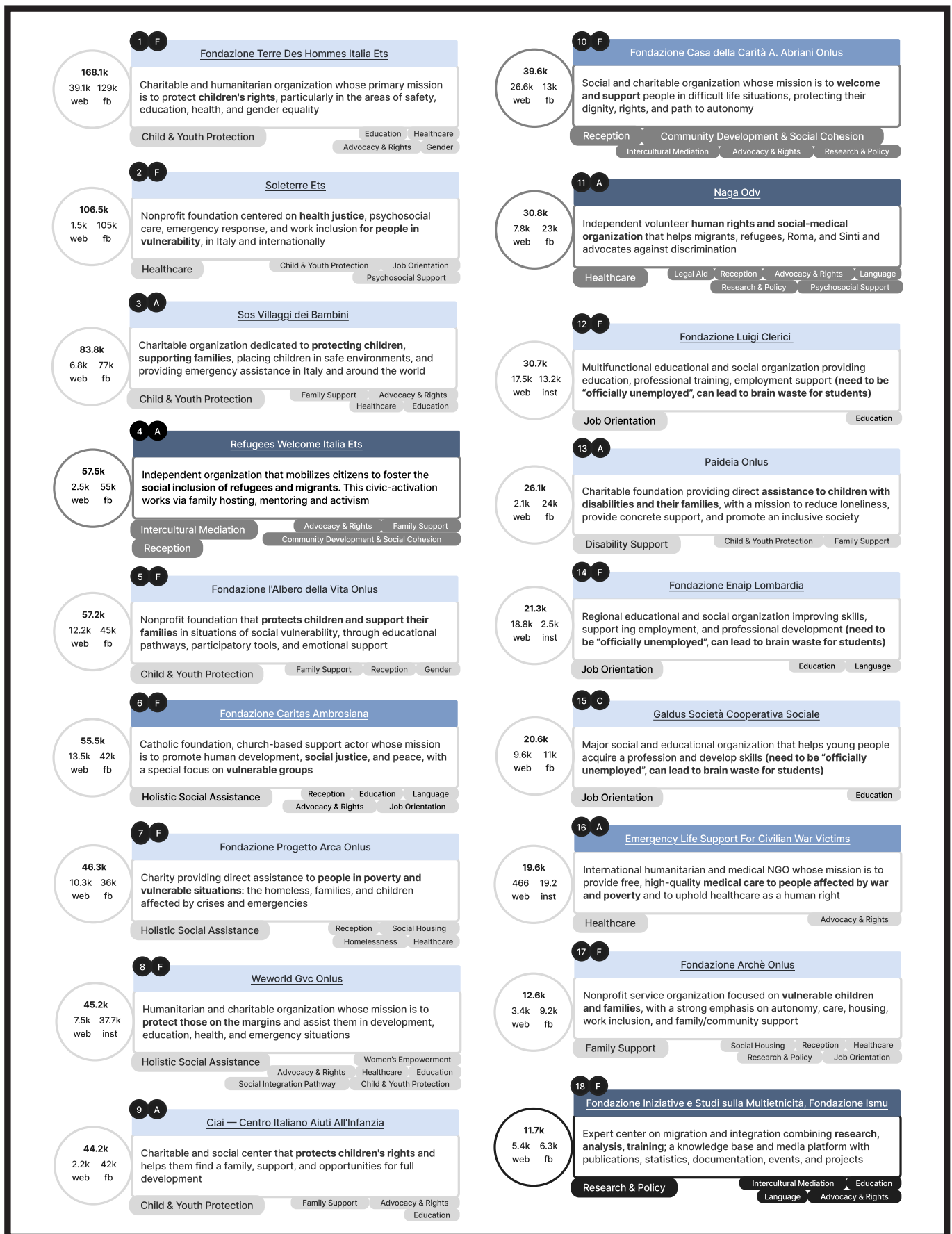


Figure 48: Third Sector Organisations Classification

## CONTEXT ANALYSIS

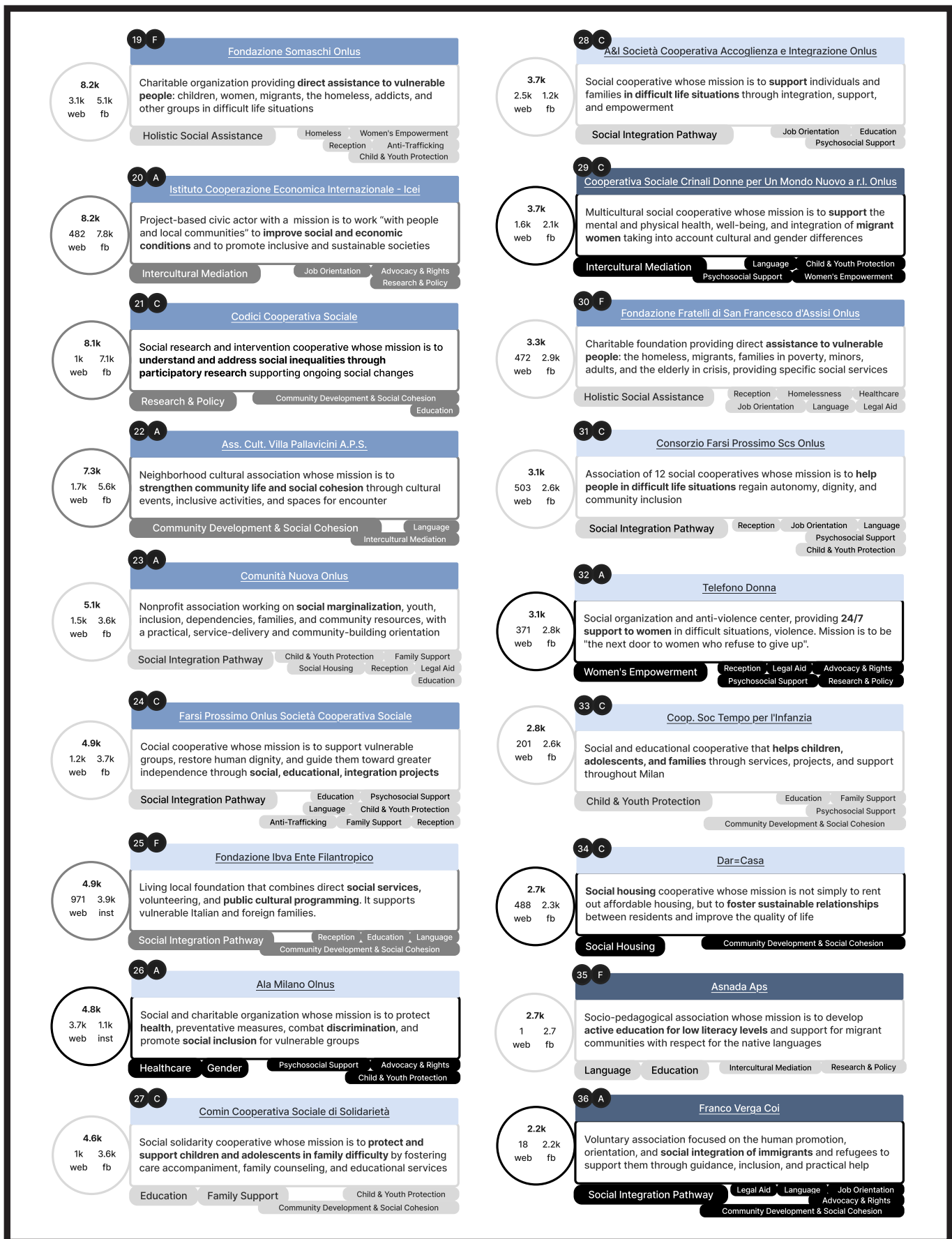


Figure 48: Third Sector Organisations Classification

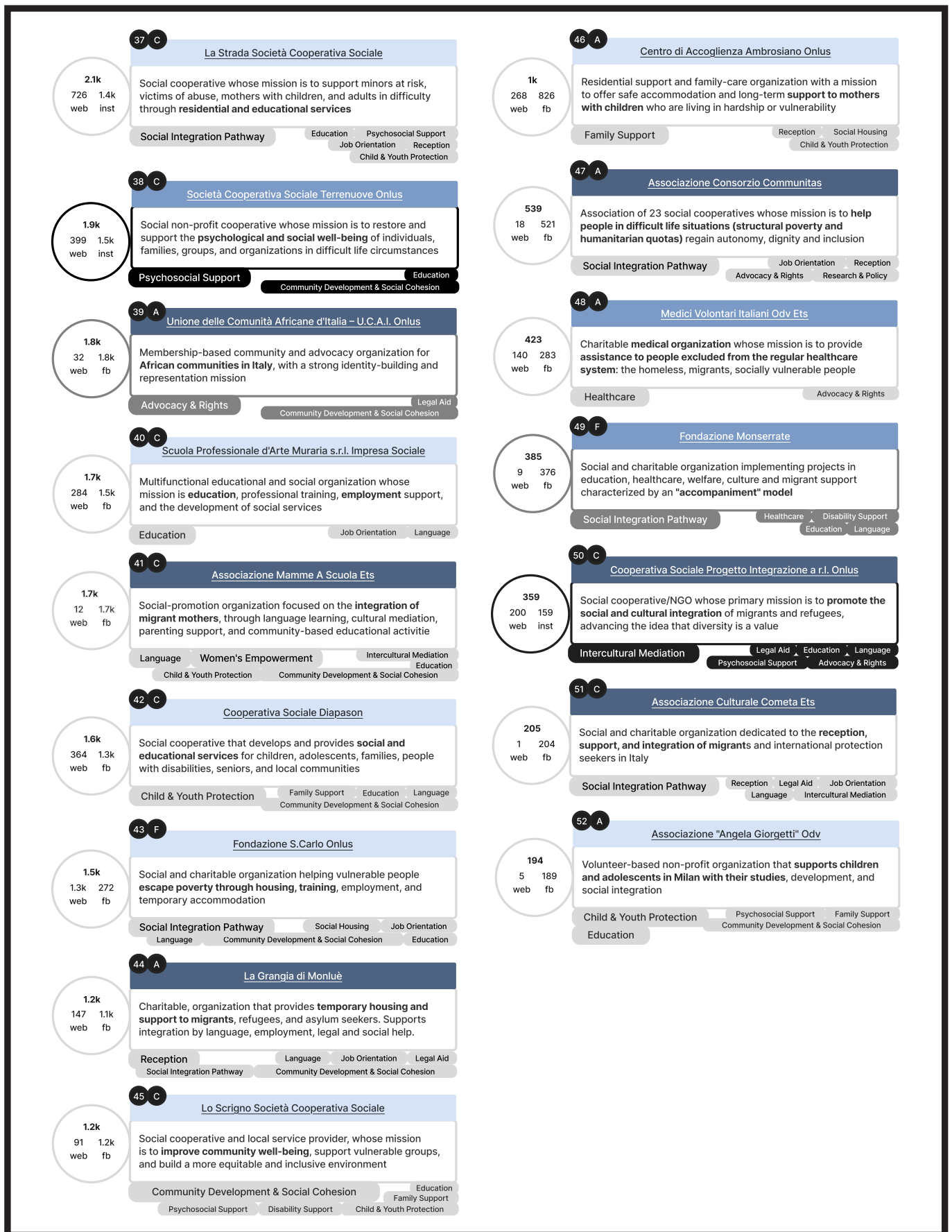


Figure 48: Third Sector Organisations Classification



## GENERAL FINDINGS

Classification presented is approximate and is more of a guideline than a clear definition

*Methodological note*

The first note to make before coming to the results — the classification presented here is approximate. Each organisation was assessed on the basis of publicly available information — primarily its website and social media presence — without direct contact, internal documentation review or first-hand observation of its actual service delivery. This mapping is therefore best read as a direction — a starting point for identifying potential partners and understanding the overall shape of the ecosystem — rather than as a definitive audit. Verification through direct engagement with the organisations themselves would be the necessary before building any formal partnerships.

Coming to the result, it is the following: more than half of the 52 registered organisations (27) are low-relevance for students. They are built solely for vulnerable populations: children without families, homeless adults, trafficking victims, abused women, people with disabilities, asylum seekers in emergency reception. A non-EU university student is not their client and is structurally ineligible for their services, as within Italian welfare and integration systems students are classified as autonomous — capable of managing their own situation.

What emerges from the mapping is that Milan does not lack integration infrastructure. The city has world-class research institutes, a sophisticated vocational training system, deep humanitarian safety nets and a rich tradition of community-based social support. But this entire ecosystem is targeting two main archetypes: the ultra-vulnerable or refugee, and the officially unemployed or low-skilled worker. The high-skill international student occupies a structural "blind spot" — they are not named as a target group in any of the 52 registered organisations' official missions.

Only 8 organisations — roughly 15% of the registry — can be named as "relevant". Some language schools, neighbourhood intercultural association, psychology-oriented organisations and integration-pathway cooperatives cover at least one dimension of what a student may need. Still, their primary audiences lie elsewhere and a student would be perceived as an special case, not guaranteeing help at 100%. Some organisation from this list also could serve as a research and credibility partner for the designed service. What unites this group is that their target population is broad enough not to require a specifically vulnerable or protected legal status, which is what makes them more accessible to international students.

## ORGANISATIONS RELEVANT TO STUDENTS

Fondazione ISMU (#18) is the leading research and knowledge centre on migration and integration in Italy, producing publications, statistics, training and intercultural-mediation expertise. Its relevance to students is less as a front-line service and more as a potential research and content partner: it provides the verified, authoritative knowledge base that could give a student-facing platform institutional credibility and reliable, research-backed information.

ALA Milano (#26) works on health protection, prevention, anti-discrimination and social inclusion. Its broad, inclusion-oriented mission and its anti-discrimination focus make it potentially useful to students

facing discriminatory and racism treatment.

Cooperativa Crinali (#29) focuses on the health, wellbeing and integration of migrant women, with strong intercultural-mediation and language capacity. For female international students specifically, Crinali is a relevant resource — its services around integration, psychosocial support and cultural-gender sensitivity are accessible to migrant women broadly, not only those in acute vulnerability.

Telefono Donna (#32) is an anti-violence centre offering 24/7 support to women in difficult situations, including legal aid and psychosocial support. While its core mission is anti-violence, its services are open to any woman who needs them. For a female student facing harassment, abuse or a crisis situation, it represents a genuinely accessible and immediate support resource.

Dar=Casa (#34) is a social-housing cooperative whose mission extends beyond renting affordable housing to fostering sustainable relationships between residents and improving quality of life. Given that housing is one of the most present practical barriers students face it is a relevant actor for the housing dimension of student integration.

Franco Verga COI (#36) focuses on the orientation and social integration of immigrants and refugees. Its broad, practical, guidance-centred mission makes it one of the closest matches for students — a student seeking help navigating bureaucracy or integration would very likely receive meaningful support here.

Società Cooperativa Sociale Terrenuove (#38) works to restore and support the psychological and social wellbeing of individuals. Its psychosocial and community-oriented services are framed around general life difficulty rather than a specific protected status, making them accessible to students dealing with the emotional weight.

Cooperativa Sociale Progetto Integrazione (#50) has as its primary mission the social and cultural integration of migrants. Its combination of legal aid, language teaching, intercultural mediation and advocacy covers a wide range of student-relevant issues, and its integration-centred identity makes it perhaps the single most natural third-sector partner for the pdesigned service.



Figure 49: Co-Design Session, Fondazione ISMU



Figure 50: Dar=Casa Social Houses

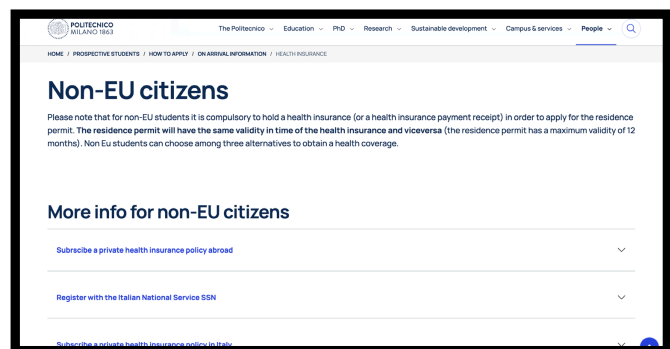
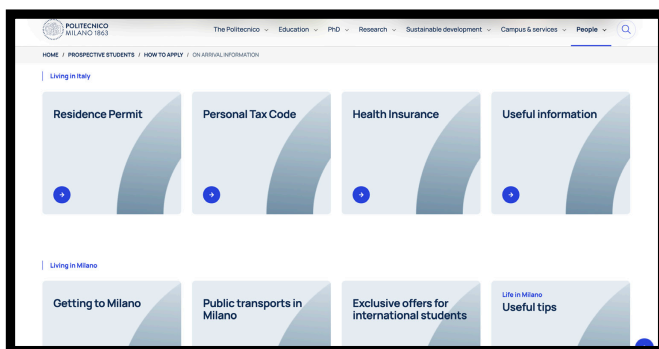
# University Services (Politecnico di Milano)

The university's role in international students integration was already analysed in the primary research — Politecnico di Milano beyond academic matters focuses on onboarding, social cohesion and connection to other infrastructures, rather than on helping to solve life-integration problems. The interview conducted with the Campus Life worker then confirmed and explained this strategy from the inside. This subchapter therefore tells what exactly Polimi formally offers.

## ONBOARDING INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Polimi's website hosts a set of on-arrival information pages aimed at incoming international students. These cover the core onboarding topics: first residence permit and the tax code, public transports, housing, through the university's own residences, health-insurance, a cost-of-living and banking possibilities. However, these guides are not detailed covering just basic official standards.

For questions the static pages cannot answer, university runs two direct channels: Inquiry Help Desk, which provides targeted in-person support (still mainly on academic-related issues), and a Live Chat offering real-time chat with an assistant. These are the points where a confused student can reach a human being. Overall, Polimi support operates in an "general explanation" mode that stops at the university's own walls, because anything beyond that Polimi neither owns nor can be responsible for.



Figures 51: Politecnico di Milano Website, On Arrival Information



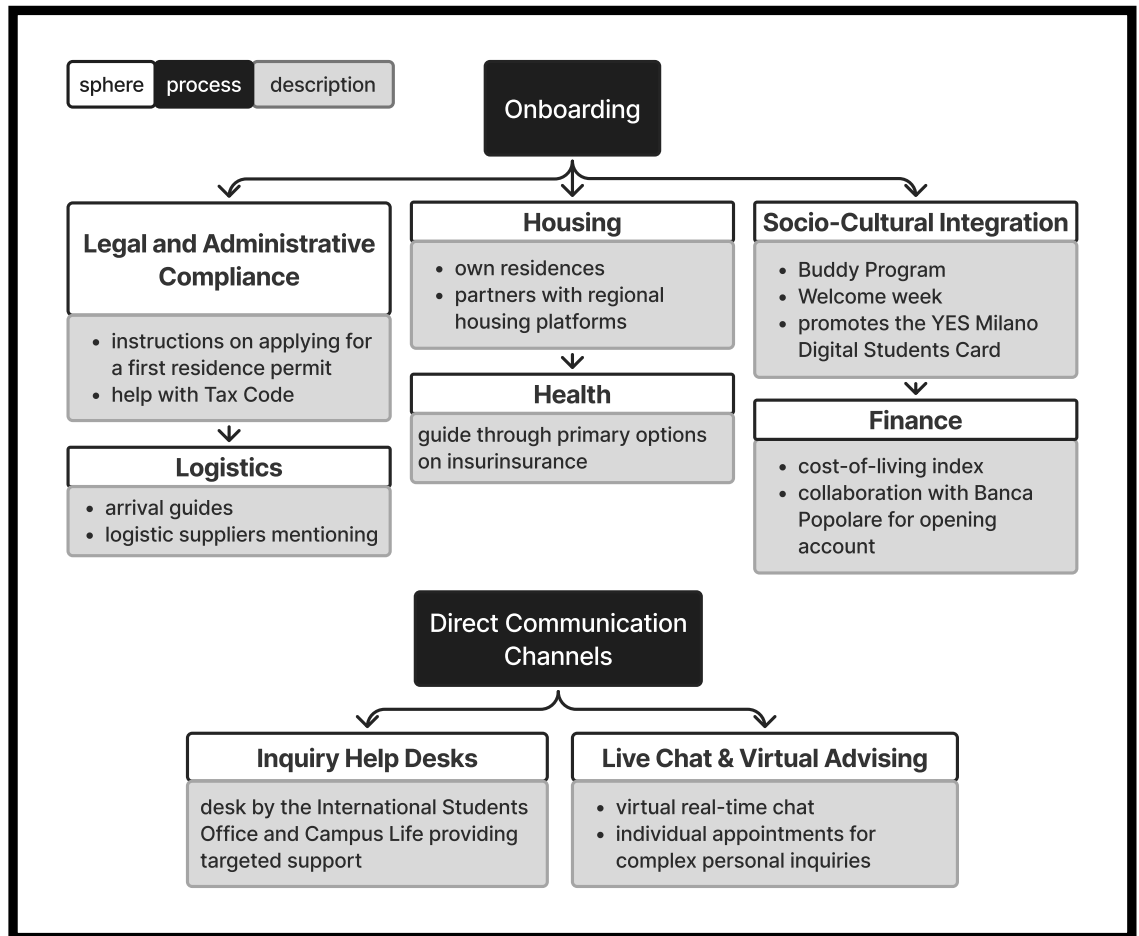


Figure 52: Onboarding Information and Human Help for International Students at Politecnico di Milano

## CAMPUS LIFE: ORIENTATION AND SOCIAL COHESION

Most of Polimi's integration work is hosted within the Campus Life division, specifically across two units: The Community Life and Merchandising unit, handling recreational and integration activities, and The Equal Opportunities unit, handling the more sensitive territory of equality and discrimination.

These units run Polimi's following integration programmes. Welcome Week introduces international freshers to the Politecnico and the Italian university system. Progetto Buddy pairs an Italian or international student with a newly arrived international student to accompany them through their first months. EXPO@POLIMI introduces the internal community to the diverse cultures within the university through music, workshops, exhibitions and traditional food. The Refugee Integration Program provides secure, legal educational corridors for refugee students. Psychological support is delivered through PoliPsi, alongside workshops on overcoming cultural-adaptation stress. PRISMA conducts qualitative and quantitative assessment of student lifestyles and emotional distress. Finally the university's anti-discrimination function provides legally binding protection and confidential support against harassment and bias.

Read together, these programmes confirm the pattern the pri-

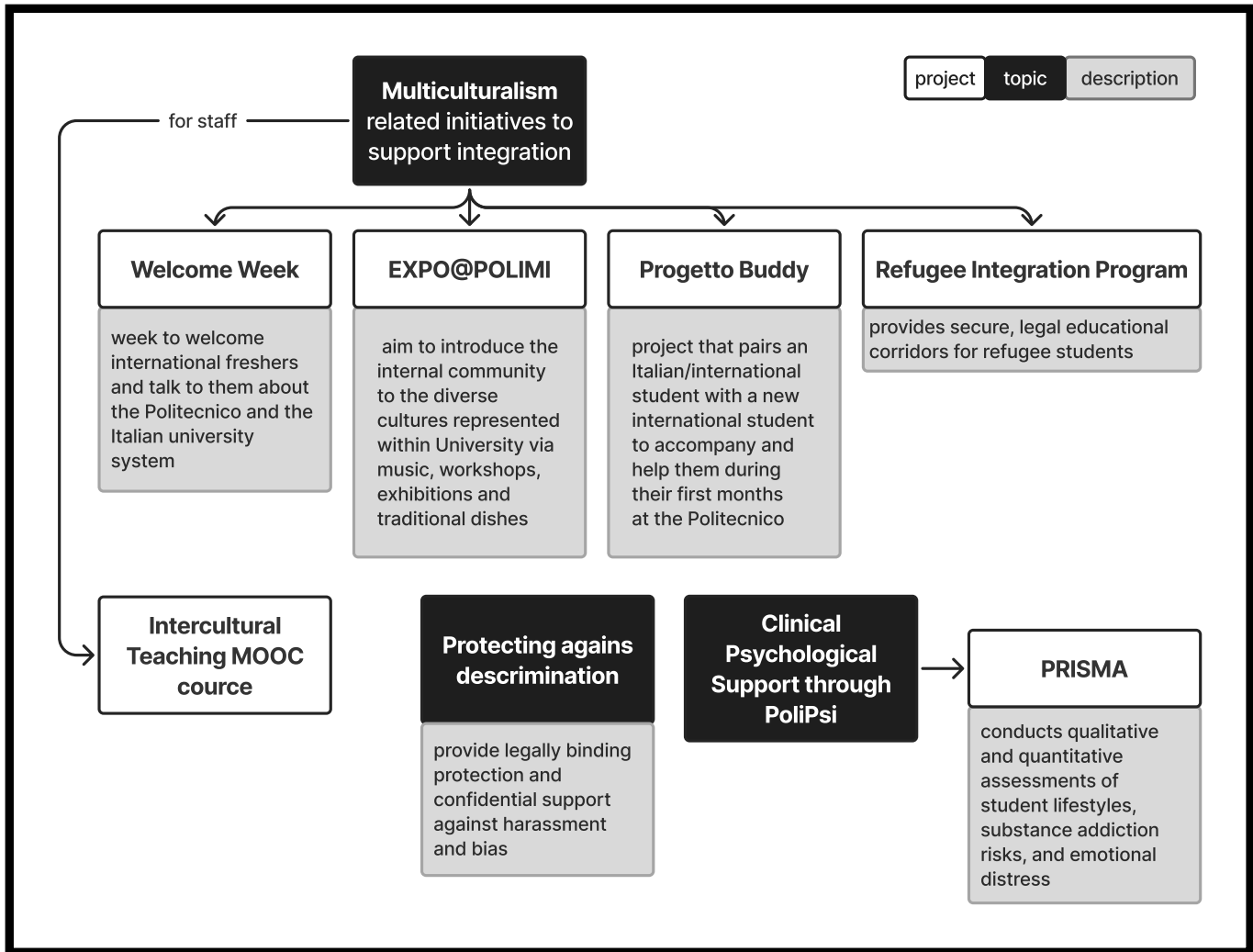


Figure 53: Integration Programs by Campus Life Division at Politecnico di Milano



Figure 54: EXPO@POLIMI

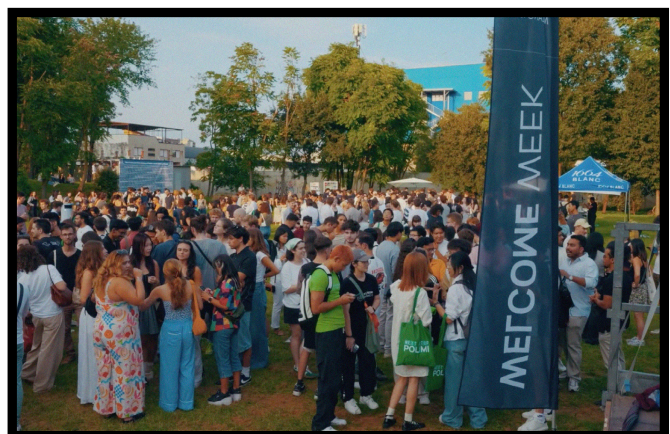


Figure 55: Welcome Week

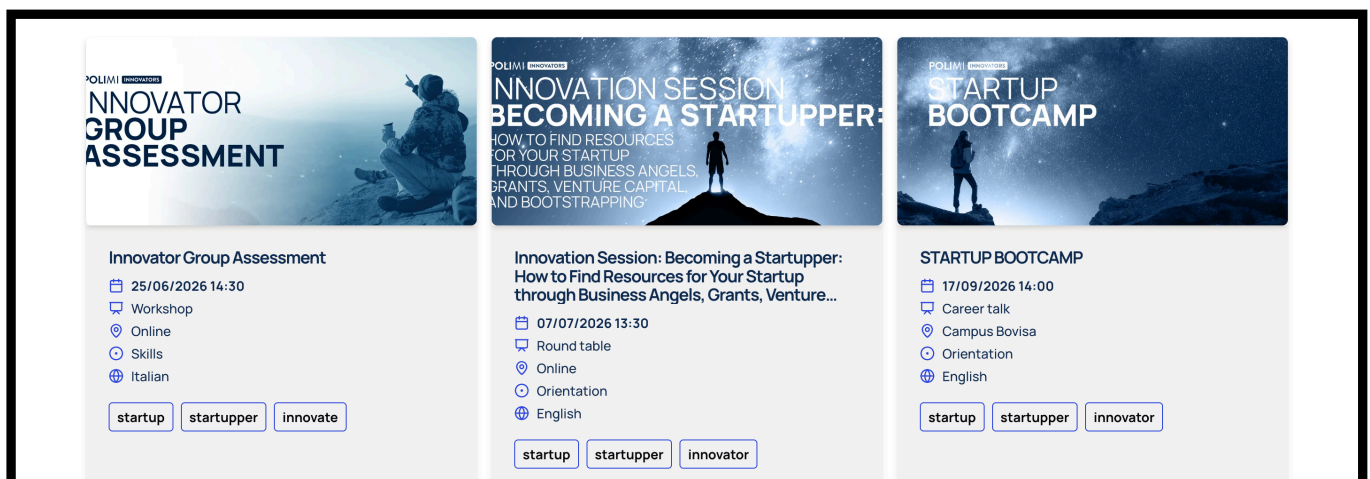
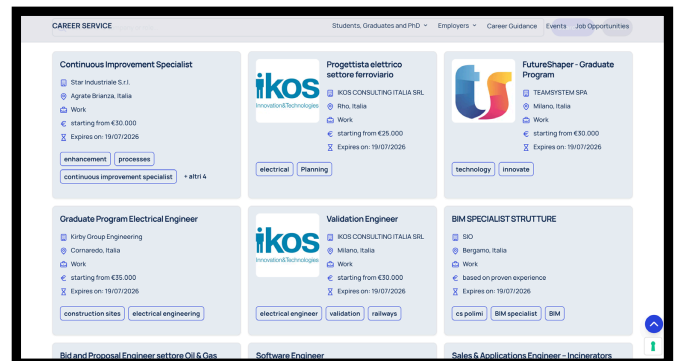
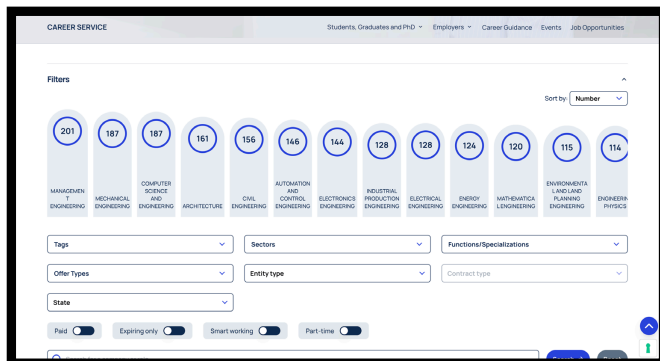
many research identified: Campus Life's integration work is genuine, well-intentioned and concentrated at the arrival moment and the social-cohesion dimension. It is strong at welcoming, connecting and supporting students socially — and intentionally absent regarding the practical, public, bureaucratic problems.

## CAREER SERVICE

Polimi's Career Service is the university's bridge to the labour market designed for all students. Its core function is connecting employers with students and graduates: it runs job and internship boards, organises career days and job fairs, manages internship activation and offers CV and career-preparation support. There is also an International Division aimed at non-Italian employers.

For international students, however, the Career Service tends to be less effective in practice (due to interview results, speaking with colleagues and own experience) — not because of any problems in the service itself, but because of the structure of the Italian labour market it operates within. Companies frequently prefer Italian speakers, hesitate over the complex nulla osta process required to hire a non-EU graduate and often prefer Italian candidates. The result is that international students using the same job board as their Italian peers receive far fewer responses, and the work-transition stage remains difficult even with a functioning career service in place. As a telling example, it can be mentioned that the overwhelming majority of my classmates completed internships within the university due to the impossibility of finding one outside of it.

As a conclusion, The Career Service offers the infrastructure — the barrier sits in the market and in the legal complexity of hiring a non-EU graduate, neither of which the service can resolve on the student's behalf.



Figures 56: Career Service Online Platform from Politecnico di Milano

## Migrant Community-Led Help

Beyond the formal services offered by the city, third sector, and universities, there is a fourth layer of support that no institution design and none controls: the help migrants and international students give each other. For many newcomers this informal, community-led layer is not a supplement to official services but the primary way to find reliable information. It is where the abstract rules of Italian bureaucracy get translated into concrete, situated steps by people who have just survived the same process. It is an accessible place, speaking your language, where you can find much more information than on official resource and where you will feel "I am not alone". As the migration-studies literature on social capital makes clear, newcomers rely heavily on "bonding" ties to their own community precisely because these ties provide both practical knowledge and emotional support during the most disorienting period of settlement.

The same dynamic that the primary research surfaced among students — peers trusted more than institutions — is a defining feature of how migrant communities in Milan function.

**“Whenever you meet a Mexican, that Mexican is supposed to tell you: “Hey, we have a group for Mexicans in Polimi.” And it’s about everything. People are pretty responsive there, so you are never ghosted. Everybody answers.”**

*Quote From One of the Interview Participants (Speaking About Chats with Co-Nationals)*

### MESSAGING-APP PEERS HELP

The most widespread form of this help lives in messaging apps. Across Milan's migrant and non-EU-student communities Telegram, WhatsApp and — for the Chinese community in particular — WeChat



function as everyday information infrastructures. Some groups are general co-national spaces; others are narrower, organised around a single university or a single topic. Some chats are also semi-closed, joinable only by invitation, to moderate scam and random people.

Research on how migrants use these channels, while largely conducted in other national contexts, identifies behaviours that can be transferred directly to the Milan case. Studies of migrant Telegram and WhatsApp groups consistently find that members "co-educate each other" through the immigration process, using a chat as a de facto information system (Nikkhah et al., 2018). Pinned messages are used here as information storages of most common answers and useful links. Still, there is a constant repetition of the same questions by newcomers who do not want to scroll back through thousands of prior messages or "search by words". In return it creates an "information noise," where finding a relevant answer sometimes means going through a flood of surplus messages. Also the repetitive pattern is a presence of a few highly active "veteran members" of the chat, who carry much of the answering.

The result is a layer of help that is genuinely valuable, both emotionally and practically, but still with structural disadvantages. The knowledge exists, but it is unstructured, hard to search, endlessly repeated and unverified. It is, in other words, precisely the raw material a better-structured tool would organise rather than replace.



Figure 57: Turkish WhatsApp Chat on Polimi DSU Discussions

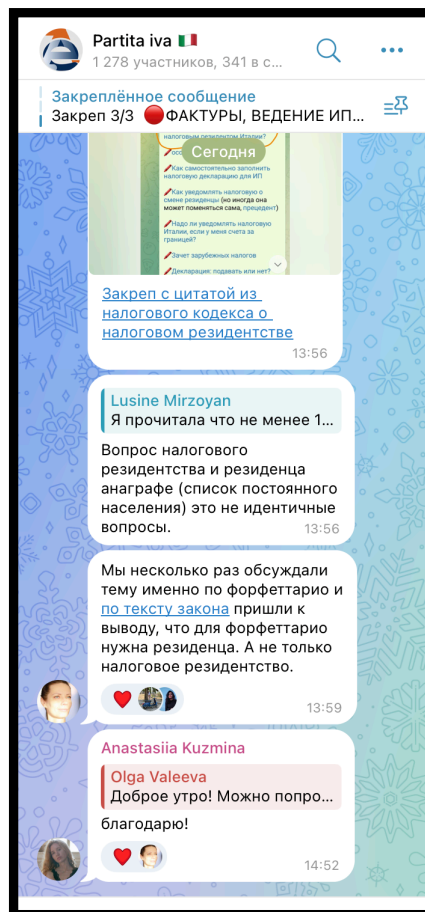


Figure 58: Russian Telegram Chat on Partita IVA Discussions



Figure 59: Chinese WeChat Groups on Polimi and Milan

## INFORMAL "HELPERS"

A second form of community help is more individual and, mainly, paid. Alongside the patronati, there exists an informal market of co-national "helpers" — people of migrant origin who, for a fee, assist others from their community with bureaucratic procedures and accompany them to offices such as the Questura, providing translation and on-the-spot guidance. A 2025 University of Milan study of migration intermediaries in the city (*Bonizzoni, De Blasis & Lampredi, 2025*) maps this in detail, describing a spectrum that runs from solidarity-based, free help to fully profit-driven commercial agencies.

On one hand, these "helpers" genuinely enable access — they make an unclear system navigable for people who could not manage it alone. On the other, weak regulation means that anyone can offer such services, with no required accreditation, no defined fees and wildly varying competence. The Russian-speaking community in Italy is a clear example of this market in action. In a summary, their help is real, but it can not be fully reliable and financially accessible.

## DIASPORA ASSOCIATIONS

The third form of community help is more organised and long-lasting: the diaspora associations. Milan is one of Italy's most multicultural cities and several of its largest communities maintain associations, cultural centres and religious institutions that anchor community life. As an example, the Chinese community, concentrated around Via Paolo Sarpi, is represented by groups such as Associna — an association of second-generation Italian-Chinese that grew into a reference point for identity, representation and anti-stereotyping advocacy. The Filipino community organises largely through the Catholic Church, functioning as social and informational hubs. The Sri Lankan and Latin American communities similarly cluster around churches, cultural festivals and consular events that sustain a sense of belonging.

The role of these associations is overwhelmingly cultural, religious and representational — preserving identity, organising community events, advocating for the group's voice, and offering a sense of home — rather than solving bureaucratic issues. They are where a newcomer finds community, celebrates a holiday or worships in their own language. The associations build belonging, trying to support



Figure 60: Philippine Consulate, 2025, The Sandiwa FillItalia



Figure 61: Iranian's Diaspora Maana, 2023, Solidarity Event

Services placement on Matrix is based on the analysis carried out, but is still approximate

Methodological note

bonding ties, while still working on bridging with host society and linking with structural local institutions.

In conclusion, Milan does not lack integration infrastructure — it has city-level platforms, 52 registered third-sector organisations, universities with genuine campus programmes and a dense layer of community-led peer help. As illustrated in the matrix below (*Figure 60*), current service offerings fall into three gaps: they are either not inherently designed for international students (impacting them only incidentally), provide student-specific support that is limited to official static information, or offer informal human guidance that remains unverified. No existing service combines high student-orientation with a hybrid of reliable official information, experience-based knowledge and responsive human support and.

The following chapter moves from diagnosis to direction: based on everything gathered — the background research, the primary research, the governance analysis, the services audit — it is framing the problem as a set of design challenges and defining the principles that any meaningful response should take into account.

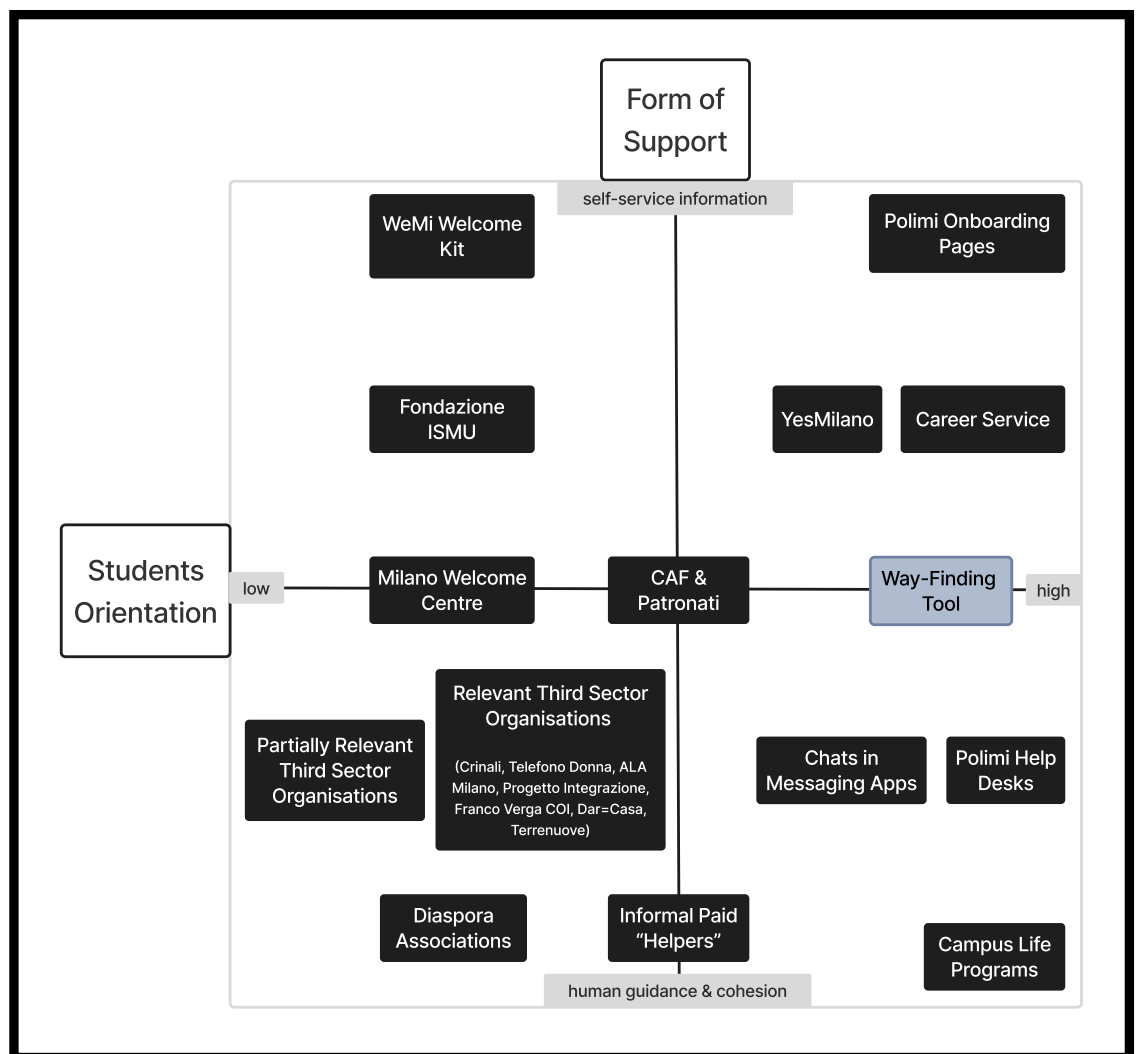


Figure 60: Milan's Integration Services Matrix





# **DESIGN BRIEFING AND IDEA GENERATION**

"Cohesion is an emotional release, it may not last as long as the person actually needs help. Today, I'm in a volunteer mood, and I'm like, "Oh, I will answer in the chat." But tomorrow, I won't be able to, because, let's say, my porridge has burned."

*Respondent's Quote From In-Depth Interview*

# 4.1

## **Synthesis and Problem Framing**

- i. Problem Framing
- ii. Formulating Design Challenges (How Might We)

# Problem Framing

The previous chapters have built a picture of a situation that is structurally uncomfortable. Italy attracts non-EU students, but the reality that meets them here — bureaucratically fragmented, linguistically and culturally often inaccessible, publicly largely not designed with international students in mind — creates the gap between expectations and reality. One of the interviewees said: *“I had pretty high expectations because I really dreamed about this country. And the biggest problem is that those rose-colored glasses quickly flew off and were simply shattered into dust.”* In other words, the problem, is real and it has consequences — students often feeling lonely, exhausted or anxious because of integration-related issues, seriously considering leaving. And it is not that support is absent — Milan has pretty big integration system for especially vulnerable migrant groups. The core issue is the lack of a reliable, personalized, and empathetic service tailored specifically for students. This chapter translates these diagnosis into a design direction through a gap-mapping scheme (Figure 61) and a set of How Might We questions.

## GAPS MAPPING: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE RESPONSES

The scheme on the next page was built in the following way:

- Formulating initial gaps by analysing primary research results;
- Linking them to the resulting gaps — the second-order problems that emerge when initial issues are left unresolved;
- Identifying possible solutions based on the case study analysis and the services audit results.

Scheme makes visible that problem clusters into five areas:

- Information architecture problem: official knowledge exists but is fragmented, outdated, misunderstandable and non navigable;
- Personalisation problem: rules and outcomes depend heavily on individual circumstances and human factors, but available resources treat everyone same and miss local updates;
- Limited help and poor awareness: students often arrive unprepared and receive bounded help from university and other sources, if they overall reach them;
- Trust and validation problem: students do not trust official resources and navigate primarily through peers and AI tools, that,

in turn, miss credential, verified layer.

- Belonging and community problem: lots of international students are connected mainly to co-national micro-communities but lack the bridging ties that would give them more sense of belonging out of the existing bubble.

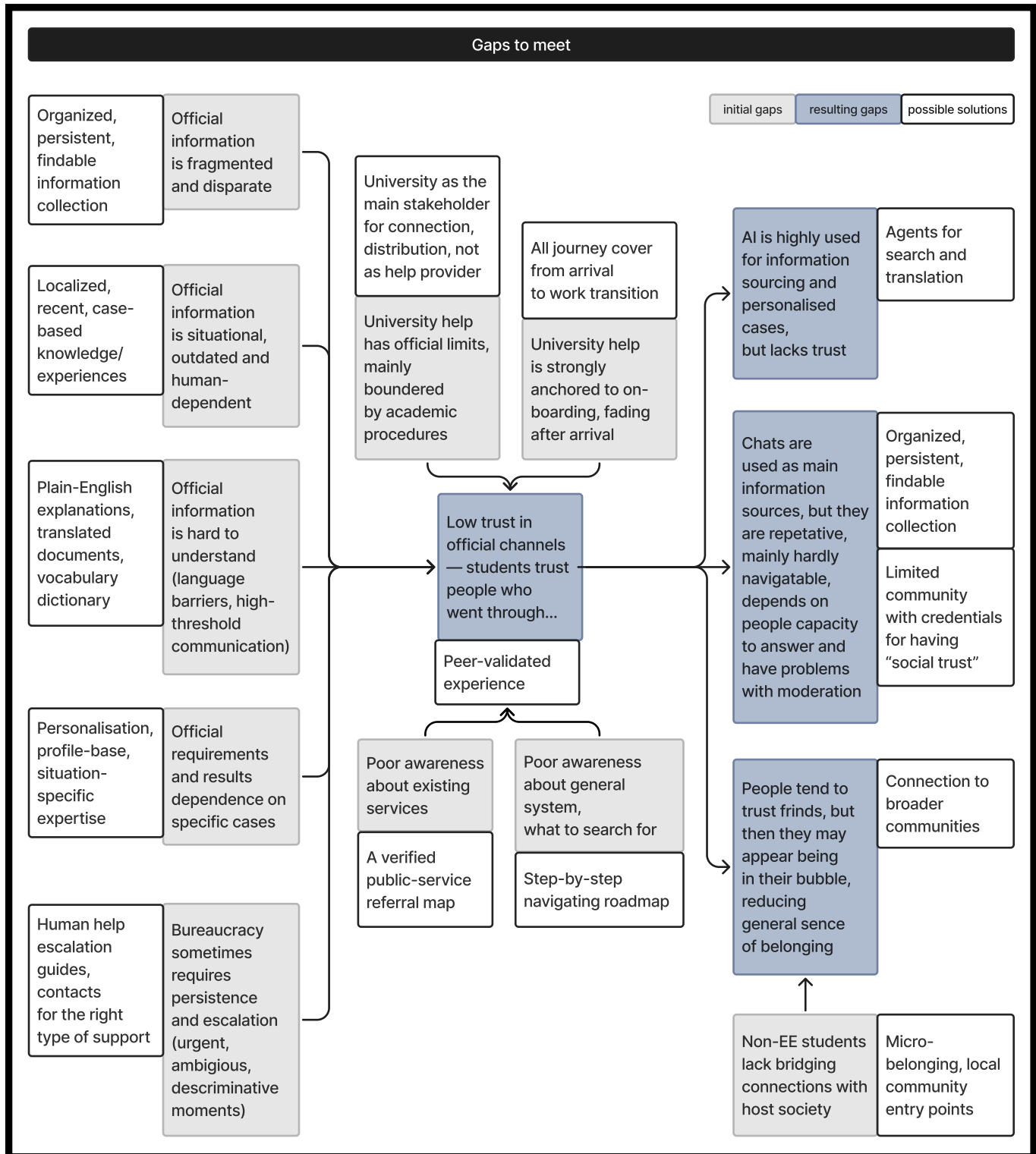


Figure 61: Synthesis of Existing Gaps to Meet

## Formulating Design Challenges: How Might We?

With the Gap Map as a foundation, problems can be reframed into design challenges. The How Might We format could be useful for this because it keeps the formulation open: specific enough to guide the idea generation, but also flexible not to predetermine the solution form. The main design challenge for this project could be formulated as:

**“How might we give non-EU international students in Milan a reliable, personalised, accessible guide through the integration journey — from arrival to work transition — that they can actually trust and navigate independently?”**

This big question can be broken down into more targeted questions, each of which corresponds to a specific problem area:

- *How might we make fragmented official information findable, navigable and up-to-date for unfamiliar users?*
- *How might we match the guidance a student receives to their specific situation without requiring them to read everything and figure out what applies?*
- *How might we surface and validate the peer knowledge, so it becomes searchable and trustworthy?*
- *How might we make it easy for a student to know when they need a real-life help and route them to the right one — a peer advisor, a university office, a third-sector organisation?*
- *How might we create an entry points into broader community life in Milan, so that belonging grows beyond the bubble?*

Taken together, these questions describe a system rather than a feature. The solution they are pointing toward is a service that connects official information, peer lived experience, personalisation, human escalation and community entry into something coherent enough to be reliable across the whole integration journey.

# 4.2

## Ideation and Concept Development

- i. From Problem Framing to Value Proposition
- ii. The Concept: A Four-Layer Way-Finding System



# From Problem Framing to Value Proposition

Found system components and design directions together create an ideation base

*Methodological note*

Once the problems were framed and the How Might We challenges were set, the necessary systemic components became clear:

- Verified, accessible, up-to-date official content;
- Searchable, experience-based peer knowledge;
- Profile-based personalisation;
- Reachable human support;
- Accessible connection to the city's existing integration system;
- Entry points into broader community;
- Simple and familiar navigation using high-trust AI.

The main missing layer appeared to be something that could hold official rules, lived experience, people and services together in one trustful navigable place.

The format of "how to deliver" these components was answered by the case studies. Instead of designing from scratch, I looked at how comparable problems had been solved elsewhere and treated the most transferable patterns as design directions. Among them are:

- Digital system with a layered architecture (Handbook Germany's structure of Inform, Discuss and Connect was the clearest demonstration of this and became a direct reference point);
- Guidance over search principle (personalisation prioritisation);
- Trust built through lived experience (forum with verification and moderation emerged as the most common and proven format);
- Crowdsourced quality control with feedback loops, so that content stays current and self-correcting;
- Modular content model, making incremental growth possible.

Worth mentioning that the main design challenge was never to invent information that did not exist, nor to replace the peer chats or university offices students already rely on. It was to organise what already exists into something a student could navigate in simple and independent mode, finding own way of integration. The main function of the service design was initially identified as an orchestration one — and it was transferred to the value proposition.

## VISION, MISSION AND VALUE PROPOSITION

With the components identified and the design directions set, the project's intent was formulated into vision, mission and value prop-

osition. The purpose of this formulation is to describe the desired outcome that the developed solution will strive to achieve, as well as the approach used to achieve this outcome.

Vision: A future where international students are able to settle, belong and thrive in Italy, while their international talent is valued as one of society's important resources, carefully recognized, protected and cultivated into social, cultural and economic value.

Mission: International education brings talent and perspective into the country, but attraction of students alone is not enough for long-term value creation. Without the right conditions for them to settle and belong they can just pass through the system without retaining in it. Mission of this project is to make the integration process for international students easier to navigate, better supported and less stressful. By connecting students to the existing integration system — its rules, its actors and each other — system will help them put down roots, find belonging and grow into active contributors to life in Italy.

The Value Proposition: The proposed tool is not just an information platform. It is a trusted connector (*Figure 62*) that organizes existing official rules, lived crowdsourced experience, people and services into one navigable support system. What makes the whole system trustworthy is a combination of:

- Easy-to-use, familiar, closed-loop internal AI that personalizes the experience and guarantees data reliability, eliminating dependence on third-party services;
- Presence of real people at every layer: peers in forum threads, system moderators, organisations' staff, university reachable human support and potentially others.

By orchestrating existing official knowledge, lived experience, human support and available resources, it helps students to find their own personal "integration way", reflected in a "way-finding" naming.

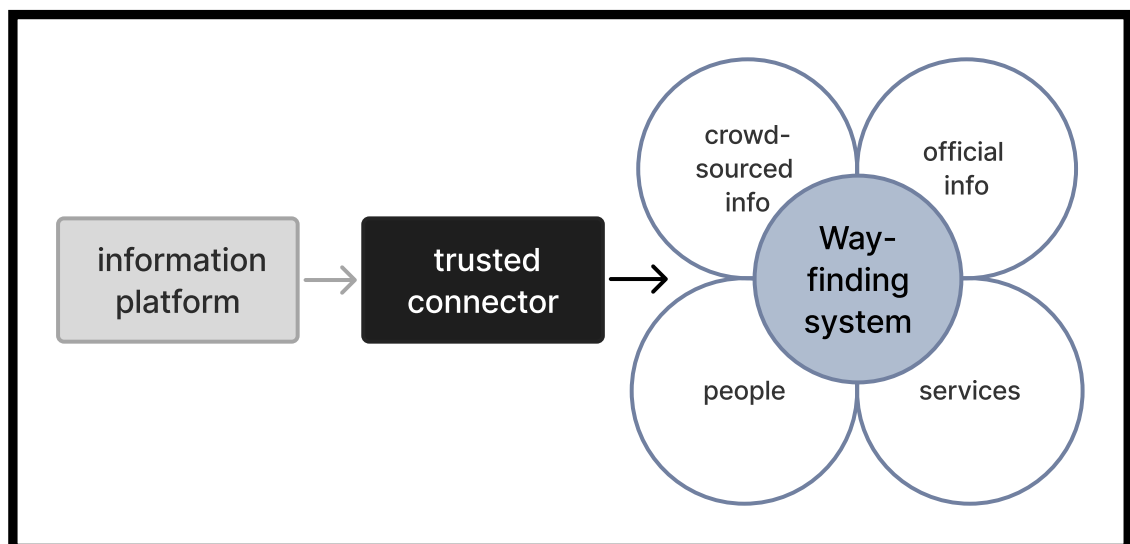


Figure 62: Way-Finding System Value Proposition

Based on the visualised for-layer value proposition model (*Scheme 26*) the concept was refined and designed in more detail in the next chapter, taking into account not only the layers of the system themselves, but also the format of interactions between them.

## The Concept: A Four-Layer Way-Finding System

Concept is based on four layers: official information, crowdsourced information, people connection and service actors connection. Together, they form a way-finding system that helps international students understand, discuss, connect and navigate integration journey.

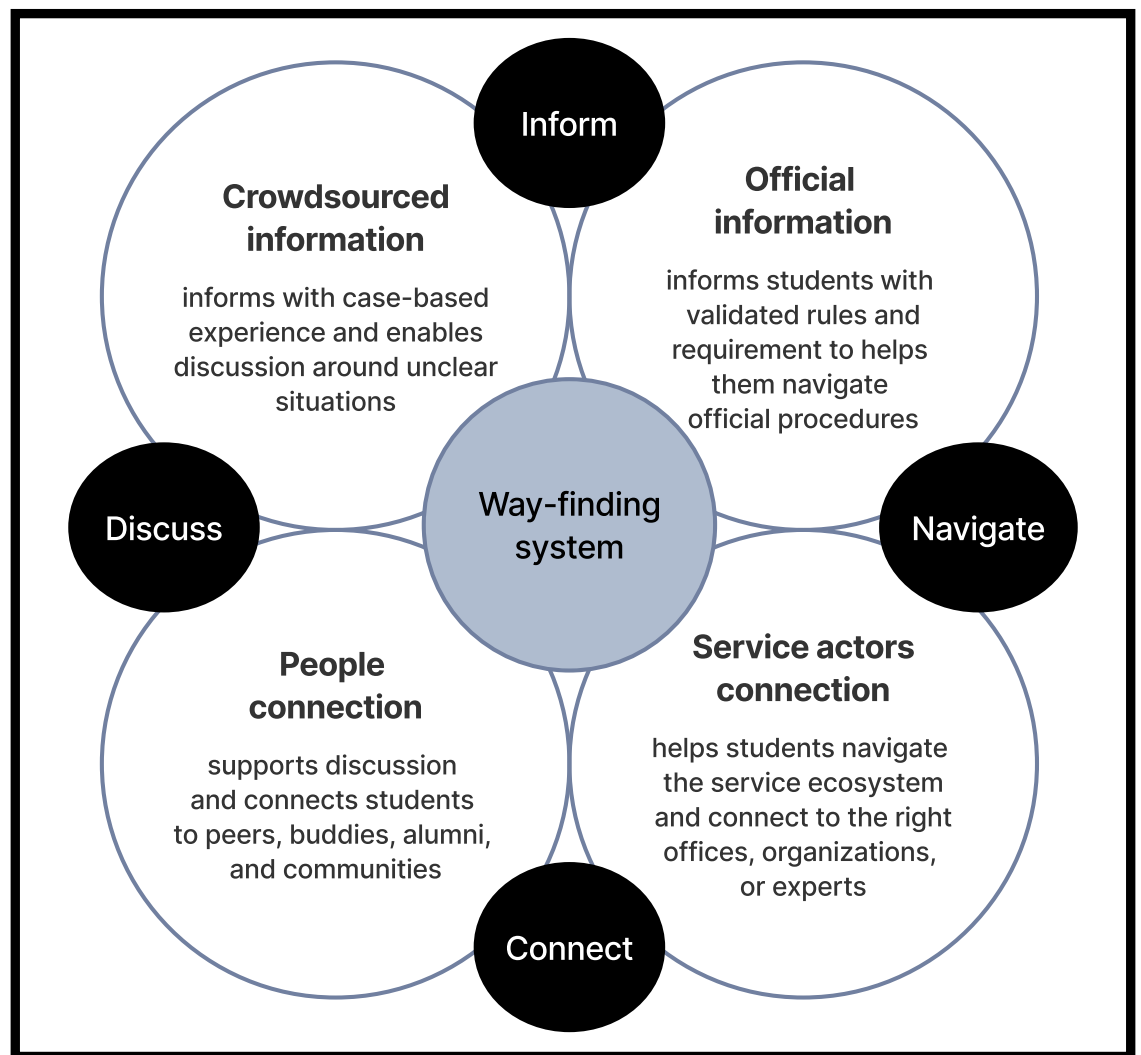


Figure 63: Way-Finding System Detailed Concept

## To preserve interculturalism direction platform is open to all students

*Methodological note*

Official information and crowdsourced information work together to inform students. Official information provides verified rules, procedures, and requirements, while crowdsourced information adds case-based experience from students who have already gone through similar situations. Together, these two types of information cover blind spots that neither official sources nor peer experience can solve alone.

Crowdsourced information and people connection allow students to discuss existing issues. Case-based stories and examples can lead students to ask follow-up questions, compare situations, validate whether their case is similar and exchange advice with people who have relevant lived experience. Connection with others via different tools like chat or direct ask for in-person help will help to build a sense of community and influence belonging.

People and service actors connections help students connect to the social and support landscape. This includes both informal human support, such as peers, buddies, alumni and student associations, and more formal actors, such as university offices, public services, legal support, career services or local organizations.

Service actors connection and official information help students navigate everyday life and institutional systems. By linking services to the rules, responsibilities, documents, and procedures behind them, the tool can show students where to go, what to prepare, who is responsible and what the next step should be.

### CHECKING THE CONCEPT AGAINST THE INTEGRATION FRAMEWORK

A concept was also checked against the two frameworks that had guided the project from the beginning: three-pillars model of integration (Scheme 3) and intercultural framework. Below is how the system meets each of the frameworks' components.

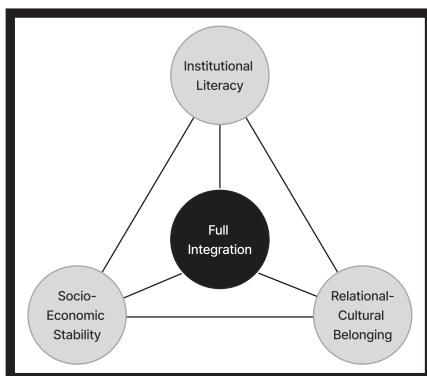
Institutional Literacy — Platform gives access to official materials, step-by-step legal instructions, terms dictionary, full directory of legal organizations, forum discussions and lifehacks to help in maintaining legal student status and understanding the administrative processes;

Socio-Economic Stability — Even if platform do not directly help in finding house or obtaining medical health it provides thematic collections of materials. The forum creates a space for the exchange of practical experience by discussing real cases. On plus, interacting with specific organizations and services via platform lead to direct assistance in social and economic issues;

Relational-Cultural Belonging — The forum thematic threads and announcements of events from universities and other organizations help students find like-minded people and receive support. Meanwhile, the search system allow them to discover potential entry points into other communities;

Interculturalism — Rather than closing the platform to non-EU students only the decision was taken to keep it open for all students, moving it even more towards a space for community-building that reaches beyond nationality.

As shown, the proposed concept does not aim to completely cover each of three-pillars, however, its core functions — inform, discuss, connect and navigate — delivered via main features support all identified aspects of integration.



*Reminder of Figure 7*

5

**PROJECT  
DEVELOPMENT**

"Digital platforms can contribute to social inclusion through their mechanisms of openness, generativity, and network effects... First, a platform's openness allows complementors and users to join the platform to contribute or use products and services. Second, generativity enables complementors to produce heterogeneous products and services on a platform. Third, platforms create same- and cross-side network effects. Same-side network effects are present when increasing numbers of users attract more users and increasing numbers of complementors attract more complementors. Cross-side network effects refer to more users drawing more complementors and vice versa."

*Schreieck et al, "Digital Platforms for Social Inclusion: The Case of and Information Platform for Refugees", 2024*

# 5.1

## **System Ownership and Architecture**

- i. Legal Structure and Future Vision
- ii. System Architecture: Multi-Tenancy Model



# Legal Structure and Future Vision

May seems strange to start from legal issues and future vision, but this is exactly where the prior questions to the whole system lie: who owns it and under what terms. In case of this project legal and organisational structures are the foundations, which are built directly from the research and without which the design choices in every subsequent section would be harder to explain.

The primary research established that the university cannot own the platform. Not because it is unwilling to help, but because of a carefully constructed institutional logic — university can not own most of the official and crowdsourced information to, firstly, avoid responsibility for the accidental dissemination of false information that could damage its reputation, and secondly, to maintain clear boundaries for assisting students. Therefore, the platform must be an independent entity that partners with the university rather than an extension of it.

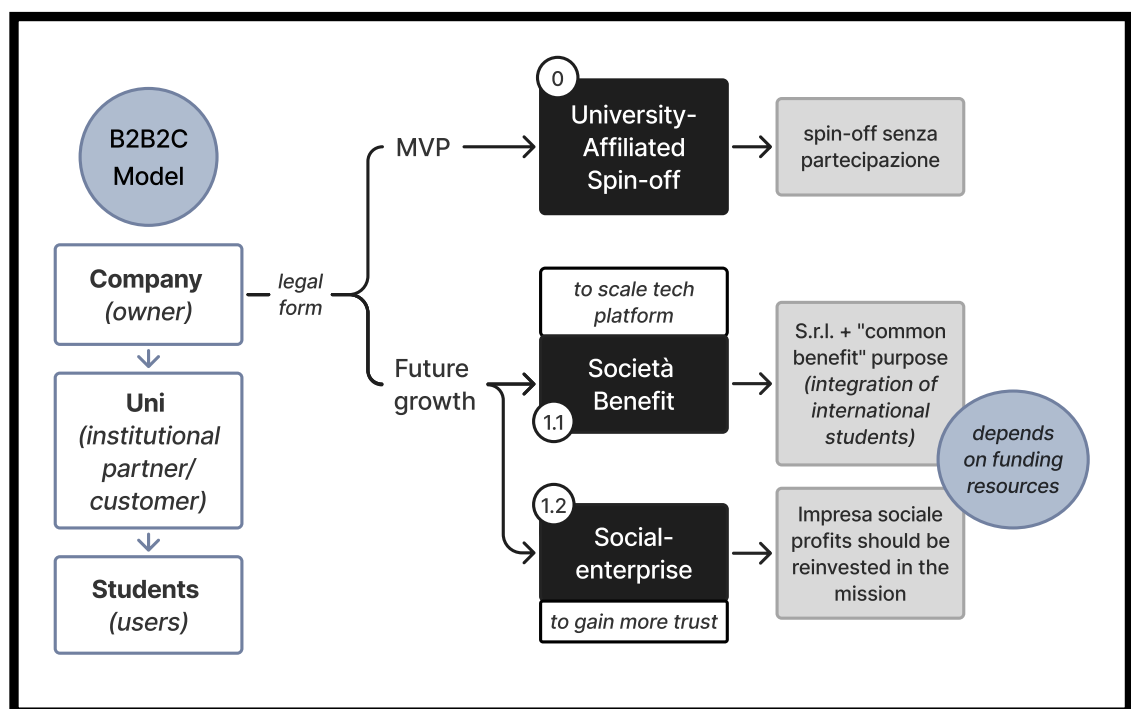


Figure 64: System's Legal Structure for the MVP and Future Growth

## BUSINESS MODEL

The ownership structure results in a B2B2C model (*Figure 64*). The company — independent entity that owns and operates the platform — sells or licenses access to universities (B2B). The universities distribute the platform to their students as an integration support tool (B2C), without bearing editorial responsibility for content beyond what they themselves contribute. Students use the platform as end users.

This model has two important points. First, it preserves the responsibility split: the company is the publisher, moderator and data controller; the university is a trusted distributor and a content partner just for its own official layer. Second, it enables geographic scaling — new universities can be added as new institutional partners on a shared technical backbone, each with their own tenant space, without the core platform architecture changing. This is the same federated model used by comparable platforms from Case Studies.

## MVP LEGAL STRUCTURE

If being real, for the MVP stage, the proposed legal form is a university-affiliated spin-off without equity participation. In this arrangement the company is incorporated as an independent S.r.l., founded to exploit knowledge and research developed within the university context — in my case, the design research underlying this thesis. Politecnico di Milano grants recognition of spin-off status through a formal agreement, allowing the company to use the university's name and benefit from institutional support (incubation, mentoring, distribution access), without acquiring a share in the company.

This deliberate choice makes the relationship described above even more clean: Politecnico lends its institutional trust and distribution reach, while the company retains full editorial and legal independence. The university becomes a partner and channel, not an owner.

## FUTURE POSSIBLE GROWTH

The system is designed with a long-term vision of geographic expansion — it may start from a partnership with only Politecnico di Milano and then expand to other universities in Milan, to other Italian cities. But this expansion is not only about technical and commercial changes, it also implies an evolution of the legal form. Two future trajectories are possible, depending primarily on how the organisation is funded:

- Società Benefit — form that keeps full commercial and investment flexibility (attracting capital like any tech startup). What it adds is a legally binded social purpose, protecting the mission from being abandoned if ownership changes.
- Impresa Sociale — form that keeps profit reinvested in the mission rather than distributed, allowing access to dedicated public fundings (grants from the Lombardy region, municipal contracts or EU instruments) and the highest possible trust.

The legal form may evolve in parallel with the geographic scale — from a university project to a public-interest infrastructure.

# System Architecture: Multi-Tenancy Model

To understand more technically how ownership is expressed in practice the system architecture was designed. Practically speaking, the platform is built on a multi-tenancy architecture — a pattern where a single instance of a software application serves multiple independent organisational customers on one shared codebase and infrastructure. To put it simply, within the shared system every partner run its own isolated space with its own content, its own members and its own administration. Each tenant controls and is responsible for the content inside its own space, while the company controls the shared infrastructure and shared core content. This is the technical expression of the scalability argument made in the legal and business model: the platform can expand to new institutional partners without architectural rebuilding.

It is also important to distinguish tenants from users. A tenant is an institutional boundary — an organisation with its own isolated space in the system. A user is an individual who logs in and is assigned a role within that space. Types of actors participating in the system will be discussed in a more detail later, but now it worth mentioning that:

- Universities are the primary tenants;
- Comune di Milano or other government agencies could become possible future tenants;
- Service actors are not tenants, they appear more as participants, verified and credentialed contributors;
- Students are end users the entire system is built to serve.

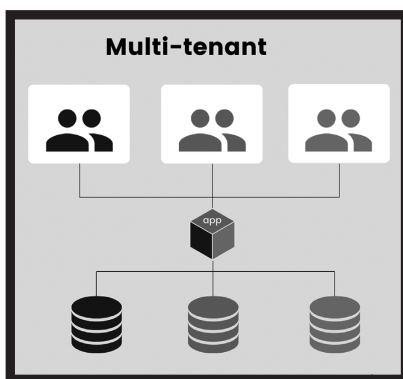


Figure 65: Multi-Tenant Principle

## CONTENT ARCHITECTURE

Every piece of content in the system belongs to different visibility layers, reflecting multi-tenancy architecture. There are 3 of them:

- The shared core, that is visible to every user, regardless of which university they belong to. It contains content that does not change by institution. The company is editorial controller for this layer. This shared core is what makes the platform immediately valuable from day one.
- The tenant layer, that is visible only to members of a specific tenant. Polimi students, in addition to the shared core, see Polimi-only space with Polimi related information. Bocconi students

see the equivalent for their institution. These spaces are fully isolated — it allows each institution to maintain its own information environment, its own community and its own real-world service offerings within the same infrastructure.

- And an additional filtered layer, that works across all tenants, ordering all the information shown to the user in a personalised manner, prioritizing the most relevant content.

## AUTHENTICATION PROCESS

Access to the platform is managed through Single Sign-On (SSO) integrated with the tenant's own identity system, meaning user enters platform with tenant's credentials. Once the confirmation from tenant is received, the system assigns the user a role that determines everything they can see and do within the platform. First, this approach verifies without excluding: SSO confirms that every user is a real person. Second, it helps routing automatically to the right space — the platform knows who you are and where you belong from the first login. Third, it avoids the Italian identity-verification bottleneck — SPID system, requiring resident registration. Below is a simplified scheme explaining how exactly authentication process is structured (*Figure 66*).

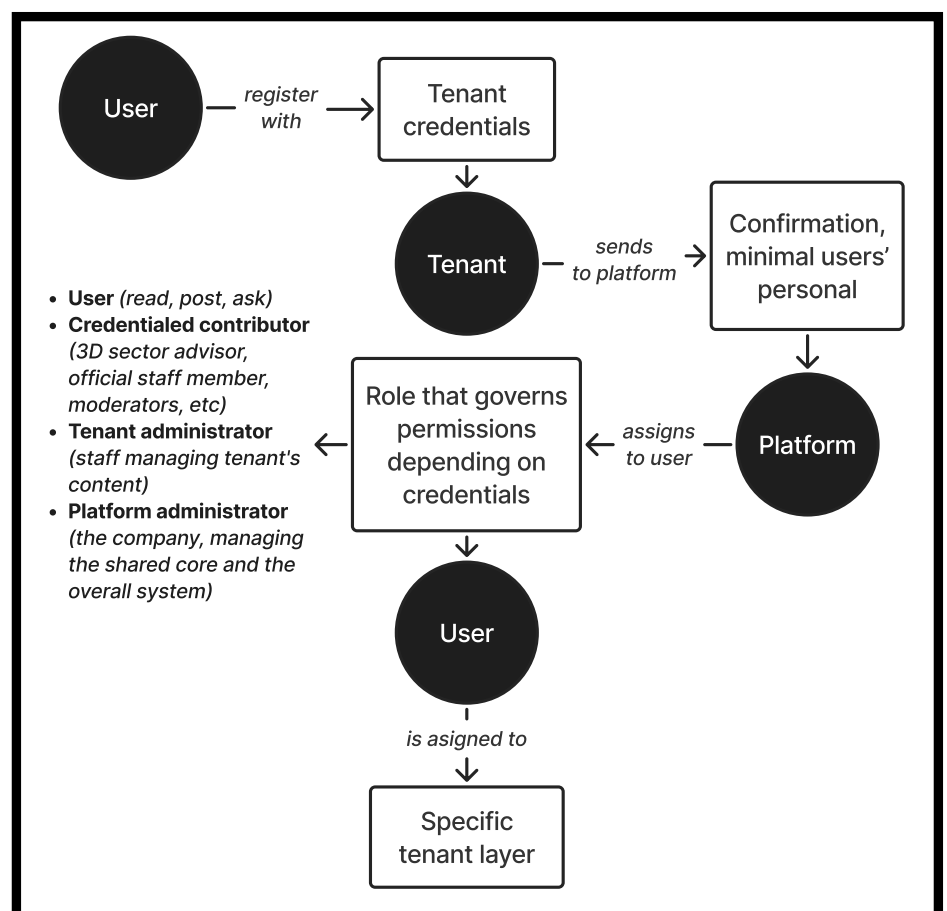


Figure 66: Visualised Authentication Process Within the Platform

# 5.2

## **The Offering: Digital and Physical Layers**

- i. Offering Map
- ii. Digital Features of the Web Platform
- iii. Physical Touchpoints of the Polimi Spin-Off

# Offering Map

Offering Map  
is created from  
the students  
perspective  
reflecting  
Polimi spin-off  
structure

Methodological note

The previous section established who owns the system, how it scales and how content is separated and governed across tenants. This section moves to the precise offers of the system, describing what actually main users — students — may find there.

Offering Map (Figures 67 & 68) presented below is organised across two dimensions. The first is the distinction between the digital platform and the physical real-world layer: designed way-finding system is not a separated application, but a hybrid system where a web-platform and in-person services connected to the university existing infrastructure work together, each feeding the other. The second dimension is development priority: features are grouped as critical for the MVP, desirable for the MVP and post-MVP — a sequence that reflects both the research findings (bureaucratic and navigational needs are the most urgent and will be addressed first) and the practical reality of launching with limited resources.

The map is done specifically for the first, Politecnico spin-off, version. It covers five main components: the AI assistant, the handbook, the forum, the personal account and the three physical Polimi services — the Redirection Service, Responsive Programming and PoliAdvisors. All of them will be described in more detail in the following chapters after having a general understanding.

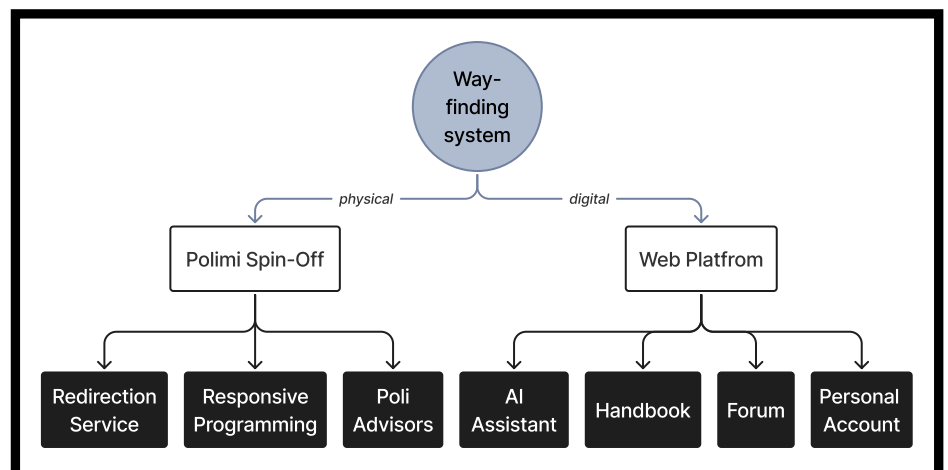


Figure 67: Simplified Offering Map View

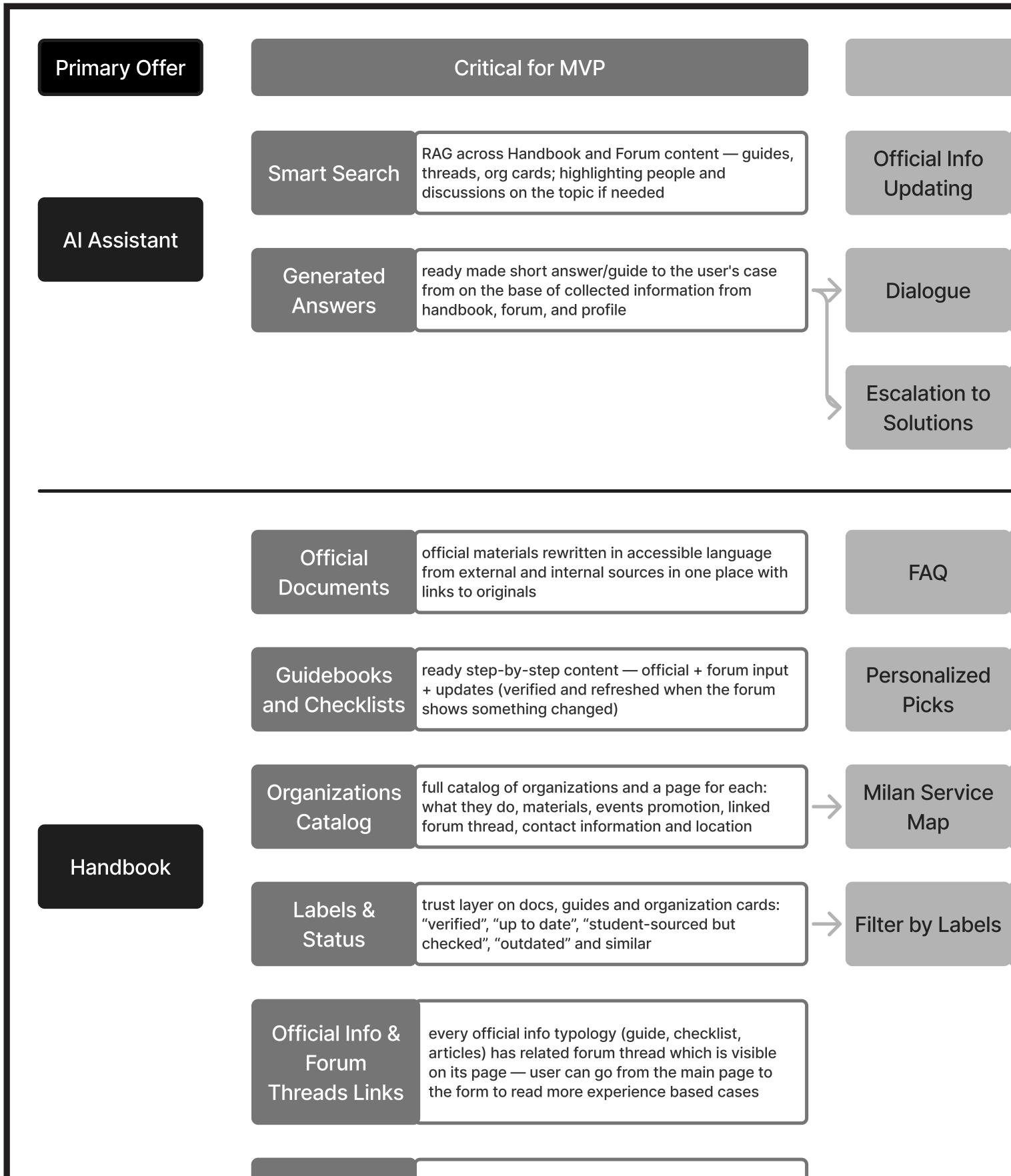
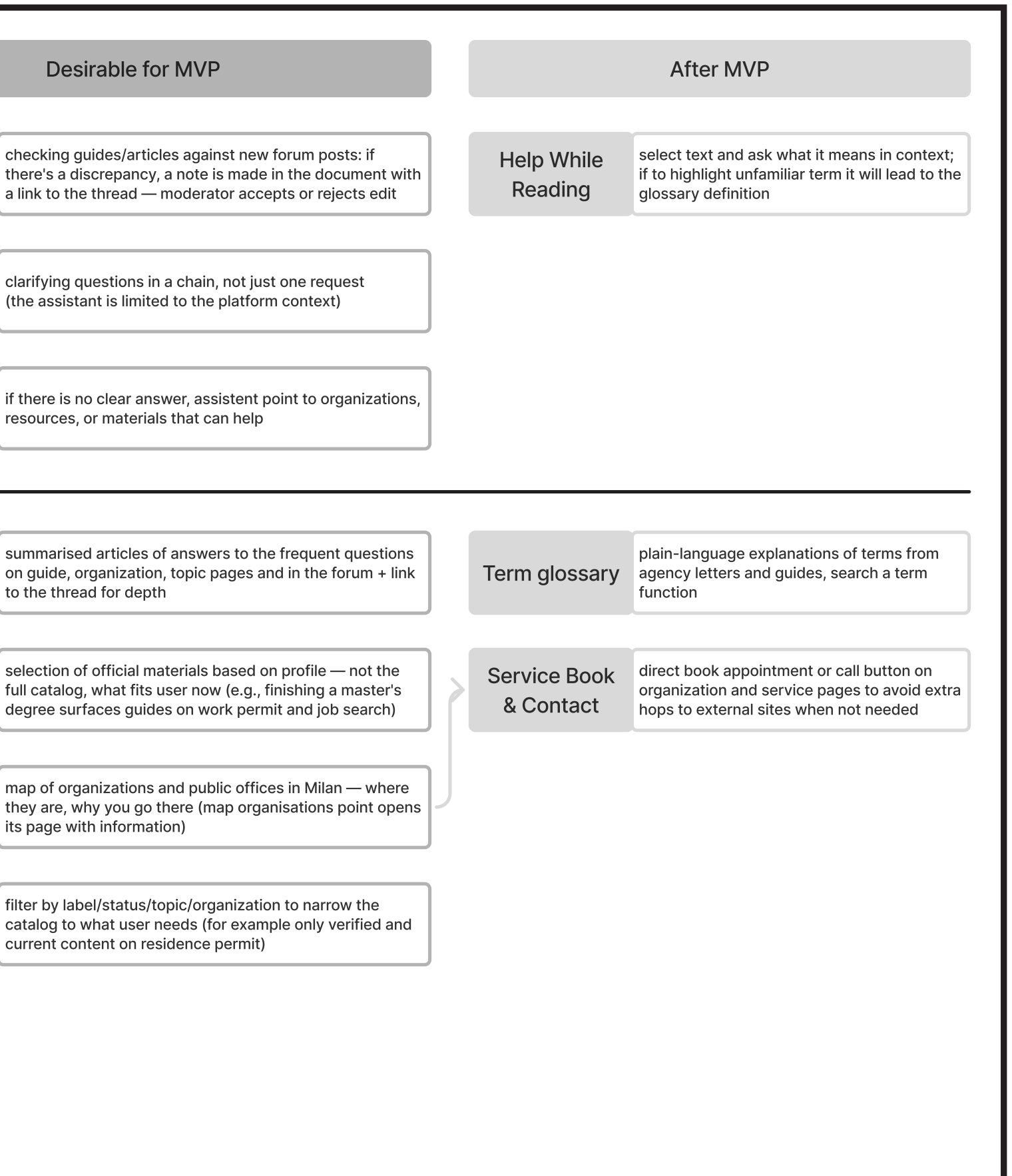


Figure 68: Offering Map





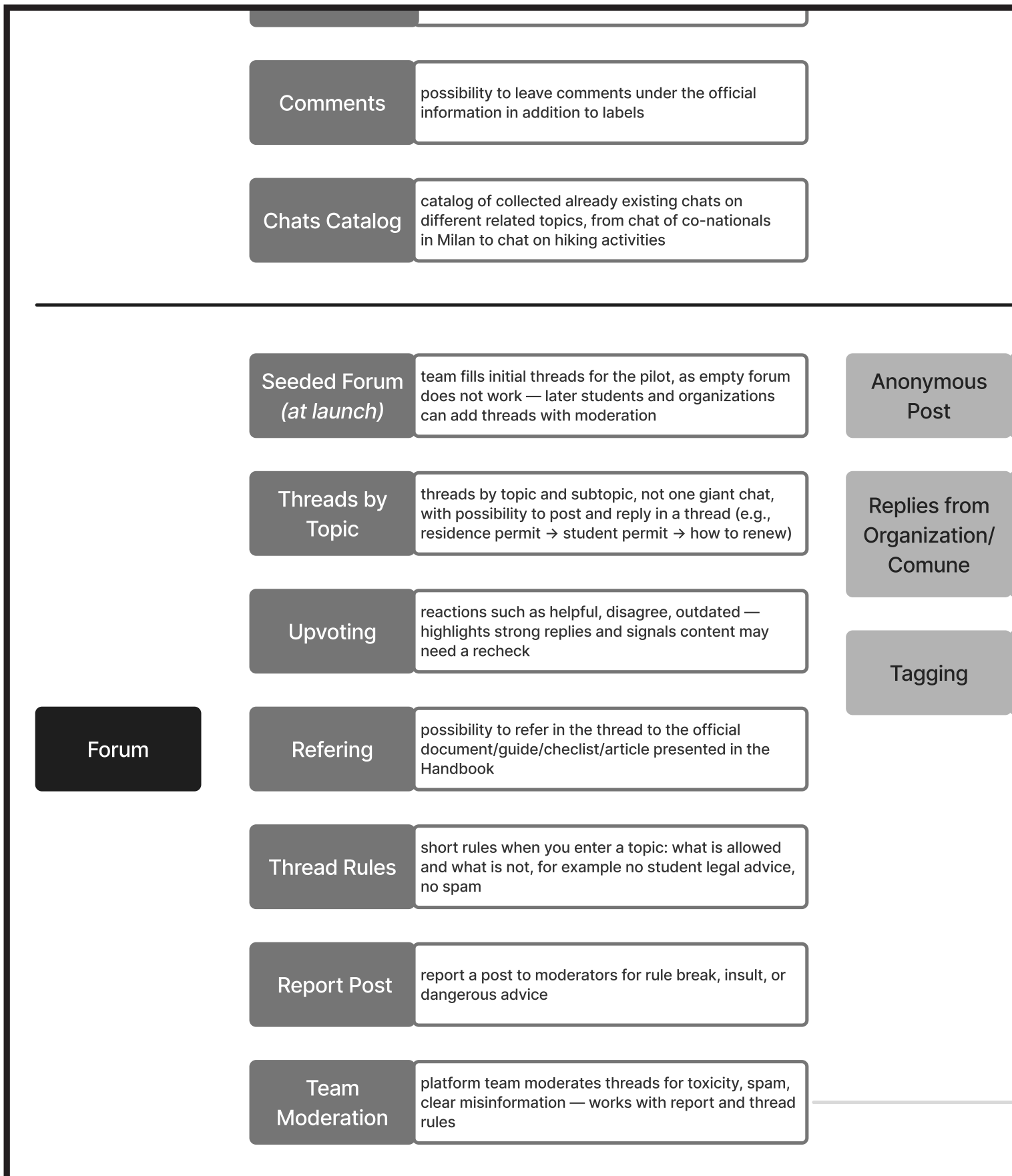
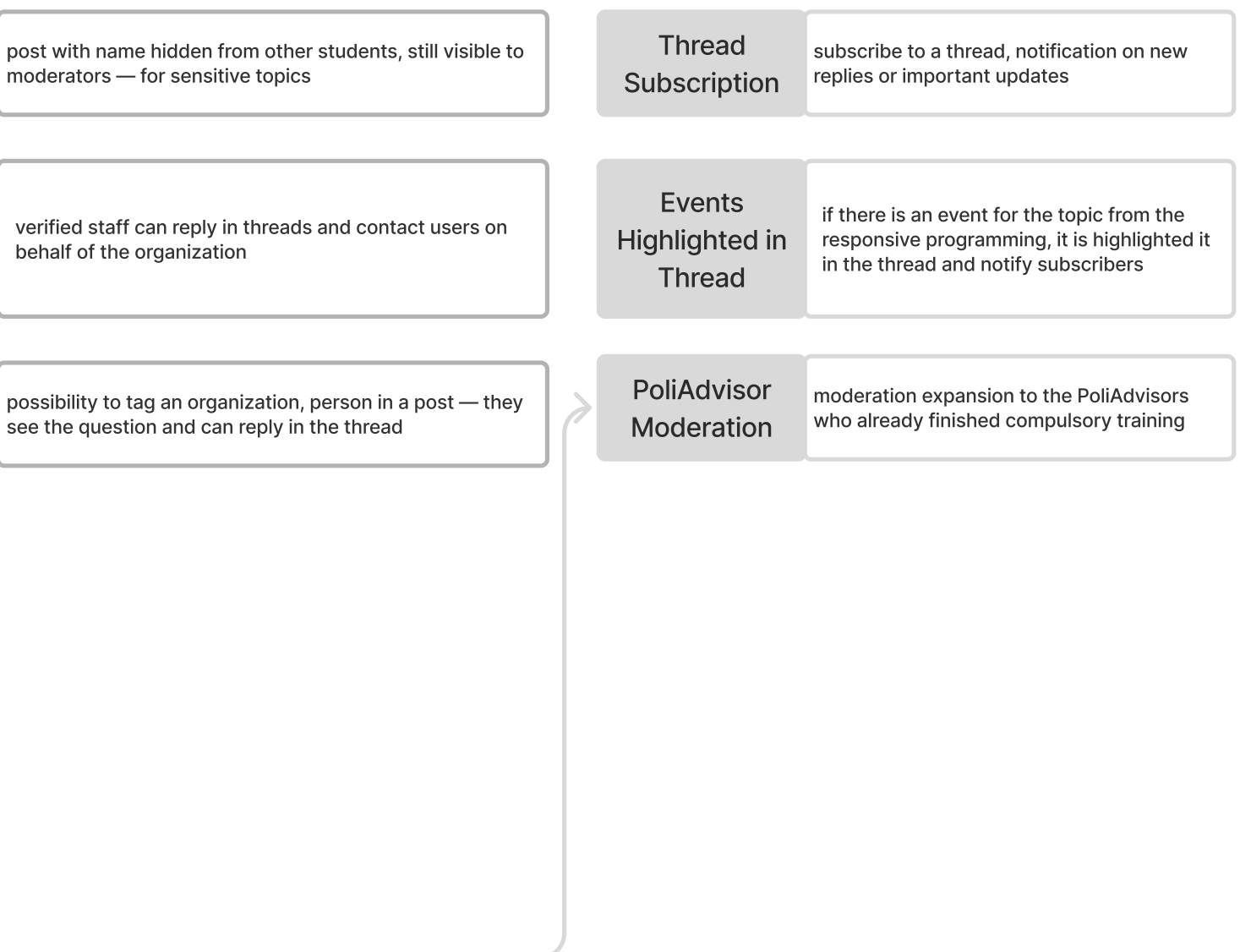


Figure 68: Offering Map



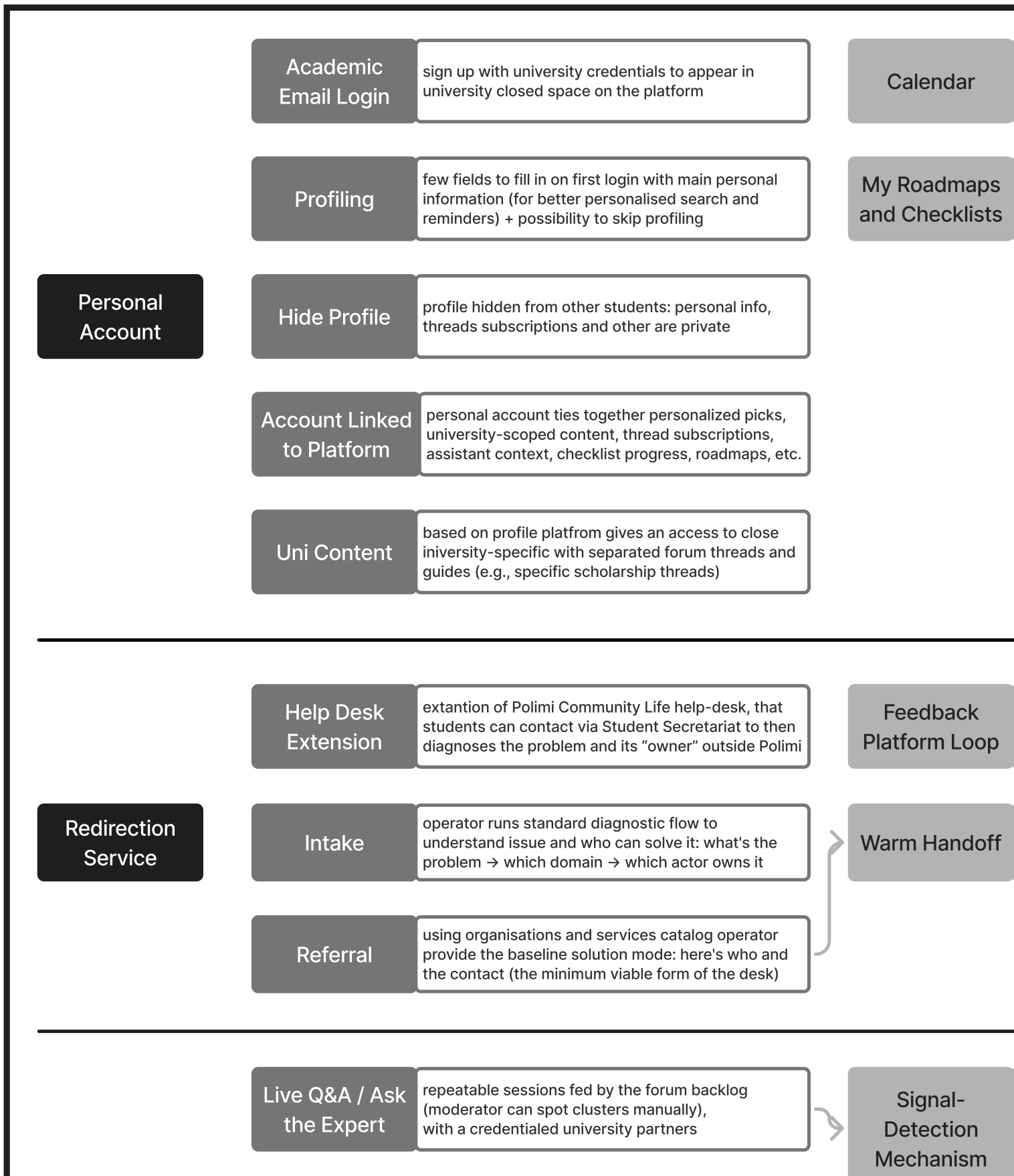
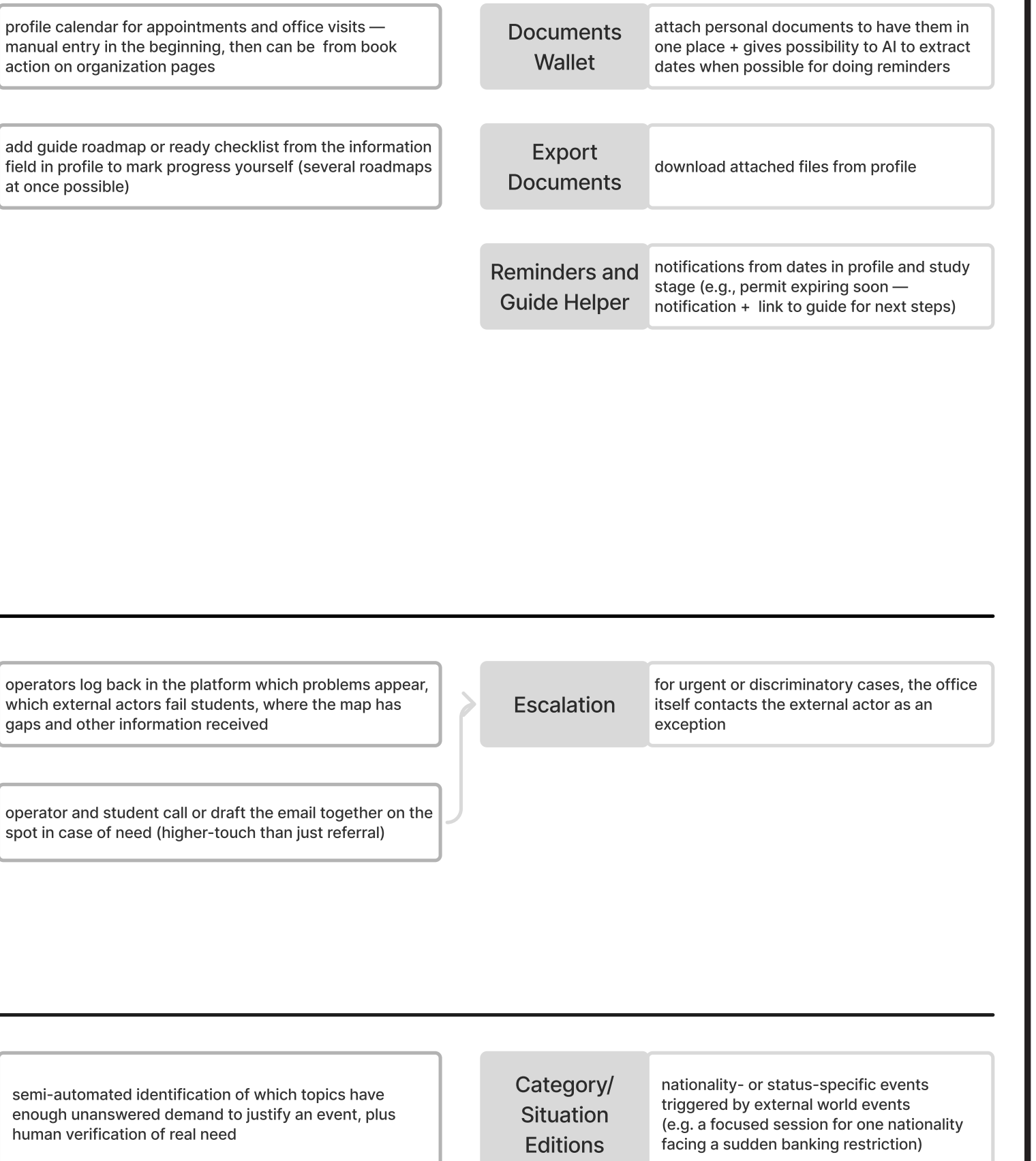


Figure 68: Offering Map



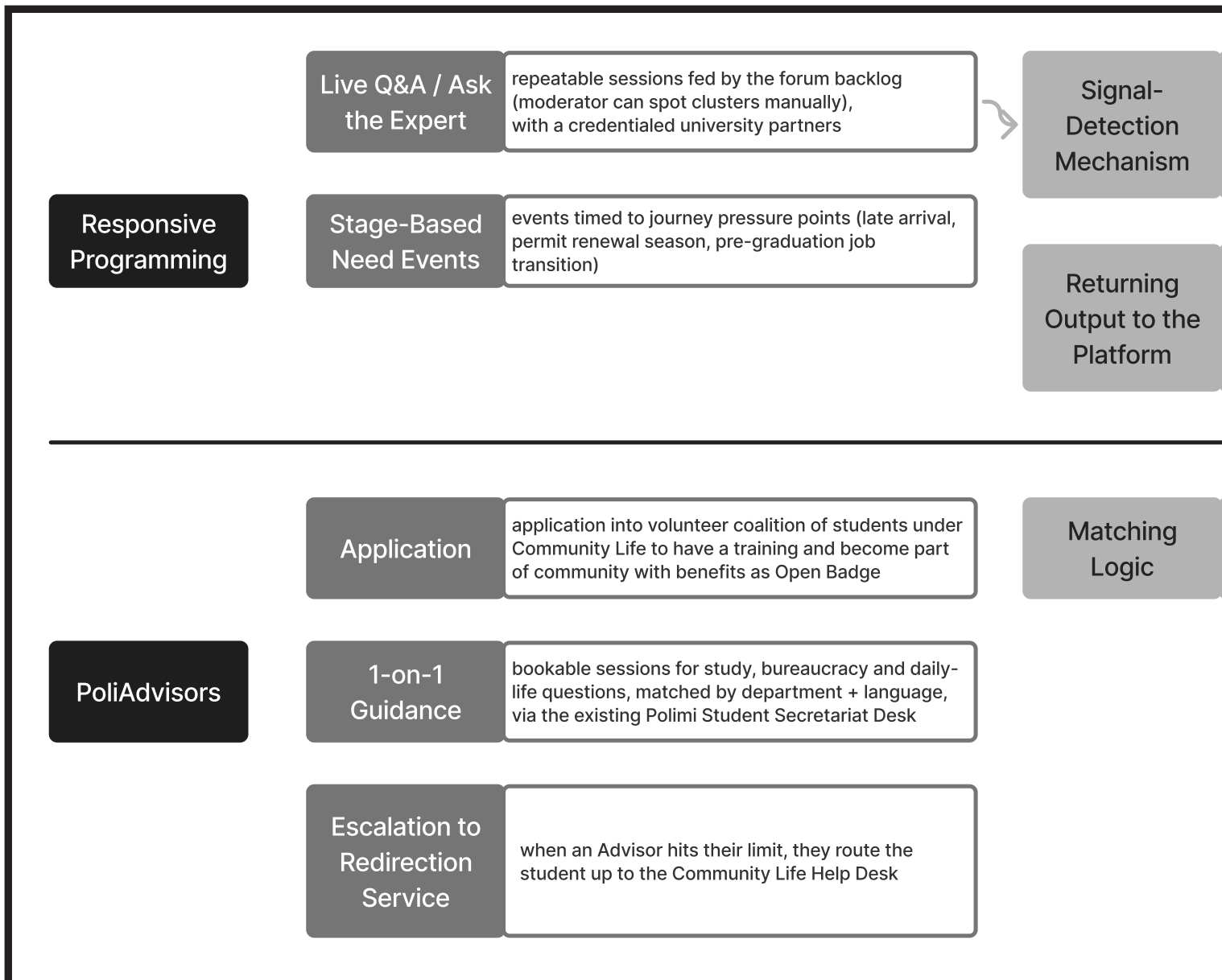
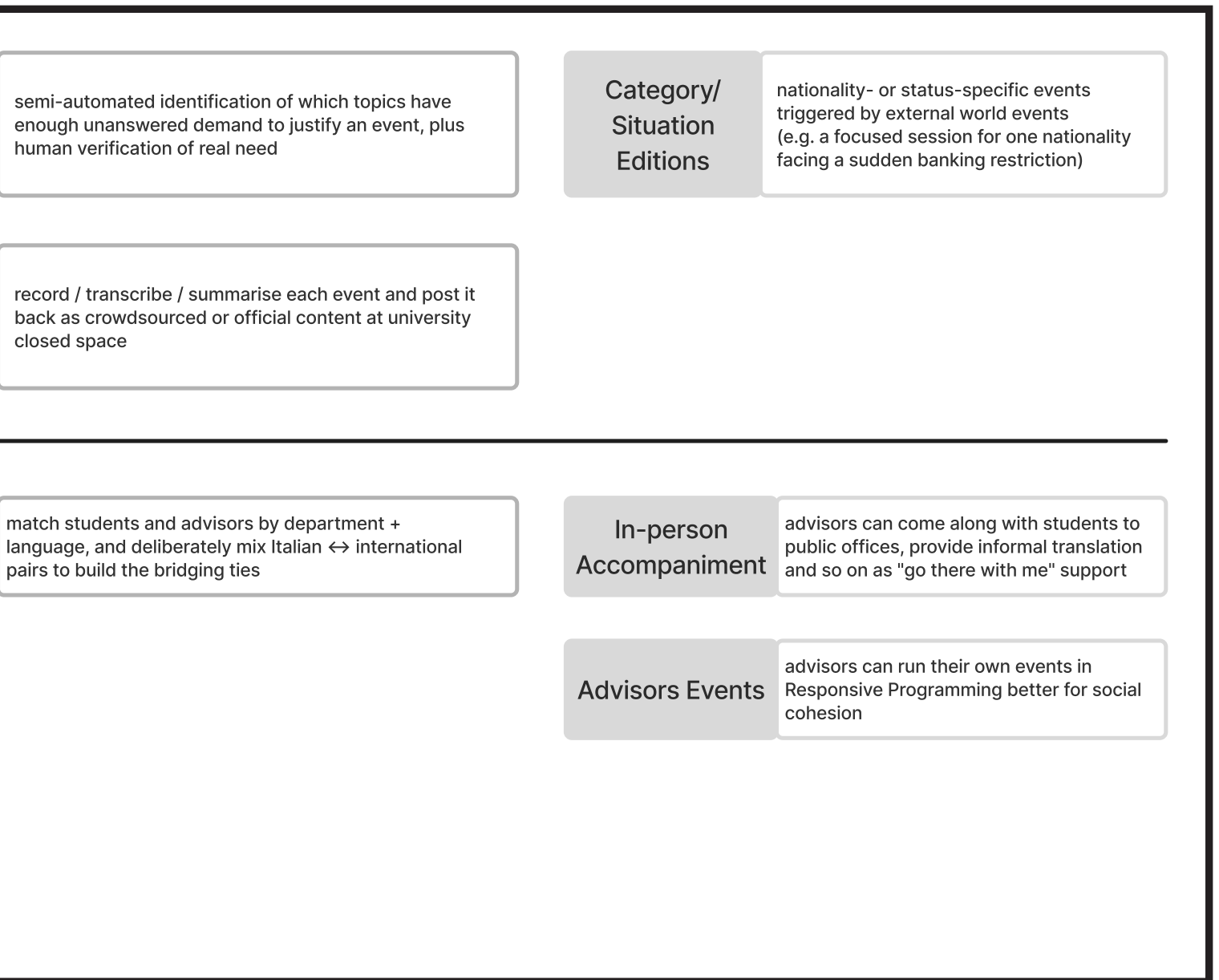


Figure 68: Offering Map



## Digital Features of the Web Platform

The main touchpoint within the whole Way-Finding System is the Web Platform. It consists of 4 components (*Figure 69*):

- Personal account — the student's own space on the platform, containing user's identity, documents, calendar, roadmap, etc;
- Handbook — the platform's knowledge base, containing official documents, guides, organisations, FAQ, links, etc;
- Forum — peer experience-based knowledge of the system, containing threads, discussion, stories, Q&As, etc;
- AI Assistant — navigation engine limited to the platform's own content, with personalised search, shorten answers, etc.

All features are interconnected (*Figure 69*). AI Assistant collects information from Handbook and Forum, considering Personal Account

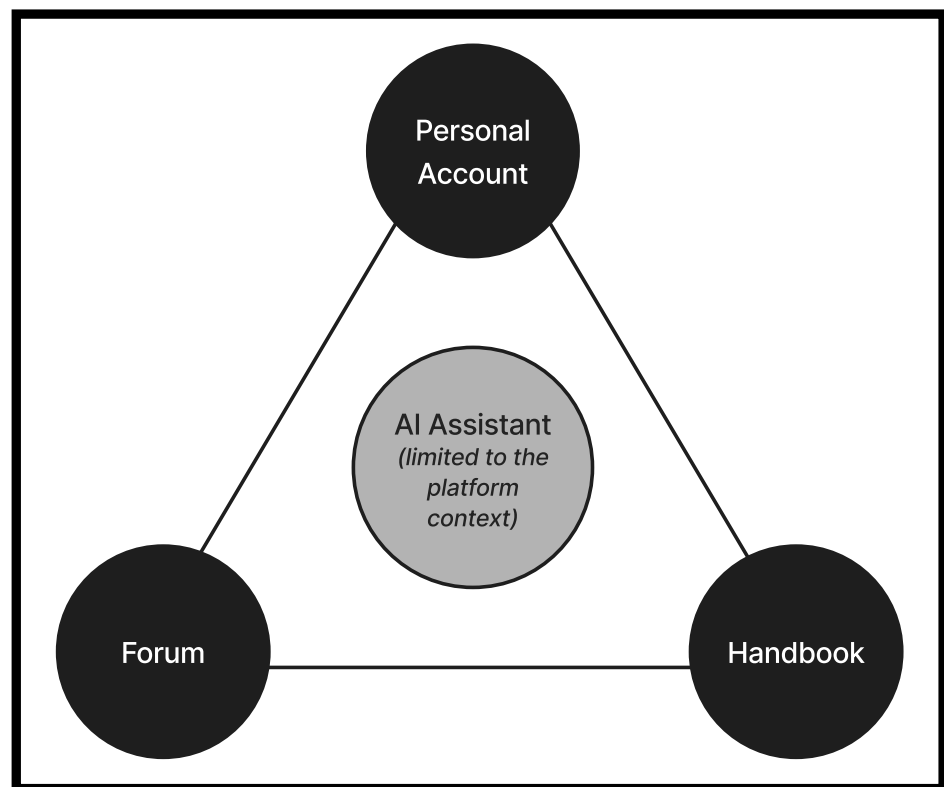


Figure 69: Digital Features Correlation Inside the Web Platform



setting to then deliver the most appropriate and personalised answers. The Handbook can grow through Forum contributions — when several verified threads confirm a new experience or a change in official procedure, they can be combined into a new or updated article. The Forum can reference official Handbook articles directly within threads, giving peer discussion an anchored source layer. The profile filters content across both — students in their final semester see job-permit guide, students who just arrived see residence-permit content first.

## PERSONAL ACCOUNT

The personal account is the starting point for any user experience. After the first authentication, students are asked to fill out a short form to receive more personalized responses from the platform, after which they find themselves in their own personal space. It stores their identity information, saved articles, roadmaps and checklists, calendar, privacy settings and university-scoped content access. As mentioned, it is not a passive account: the AI Assistant, Handbook and Forum filter and surface content based on what the profile knows about the students, including their nationality, legal status and interests.

## HANDBOOK

Handbook is the platform's knowledge base. It brings official documents, articles, step-by-step guides and checklists, Milan services/organisations' pages, FAQs and terms glossary into one place.

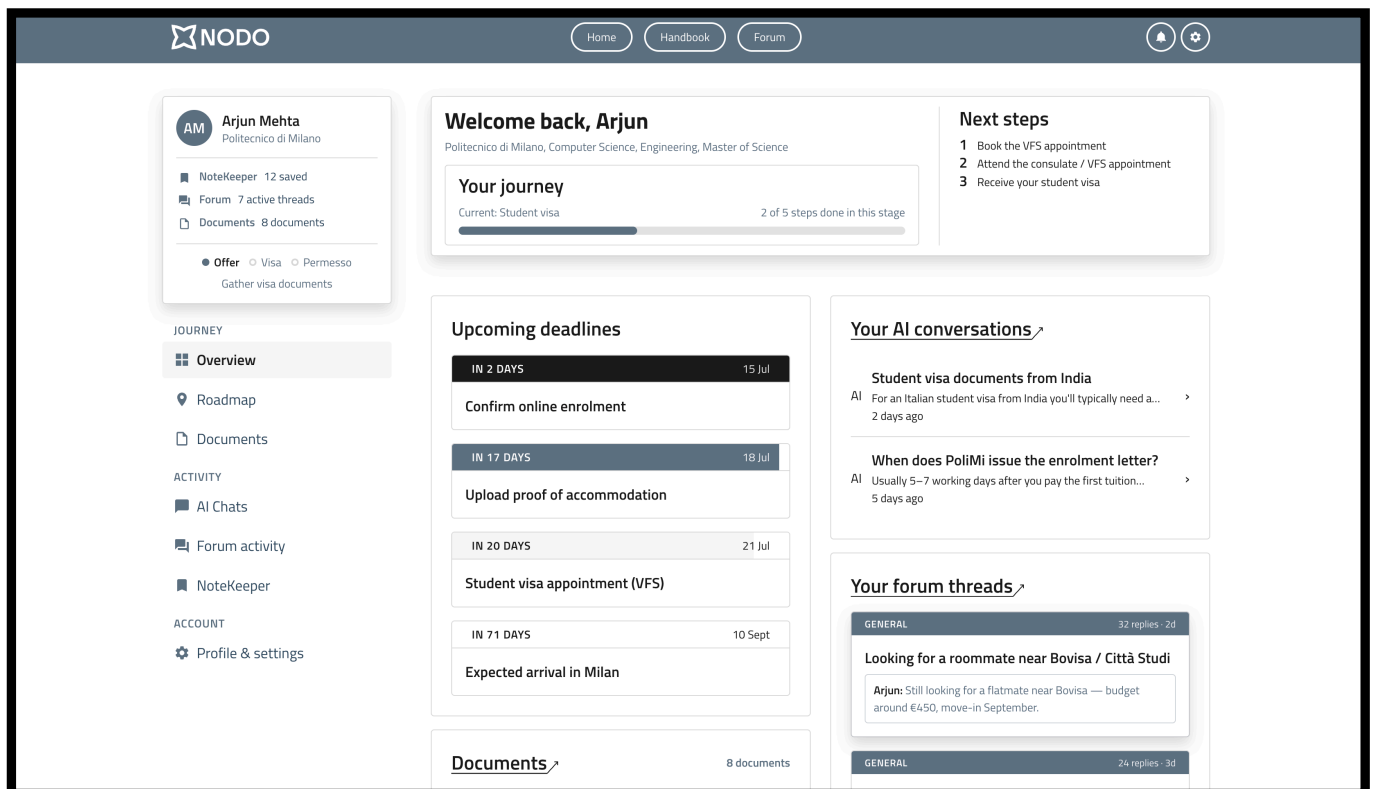


Figure 70: Personal Account Page of the Web Platform

Everything is rewritten in accessible language, linked to original sources and kept updated through a trust label system. Every note, guide or checklist can be added by the student to their profile's note keeper to track progress and have everything relevant nearby. The Handbook is also not static: it is growing over time by verified crowd-sourced contributions from the forum, new information from tenants and contributors, and overviews of relevant events.

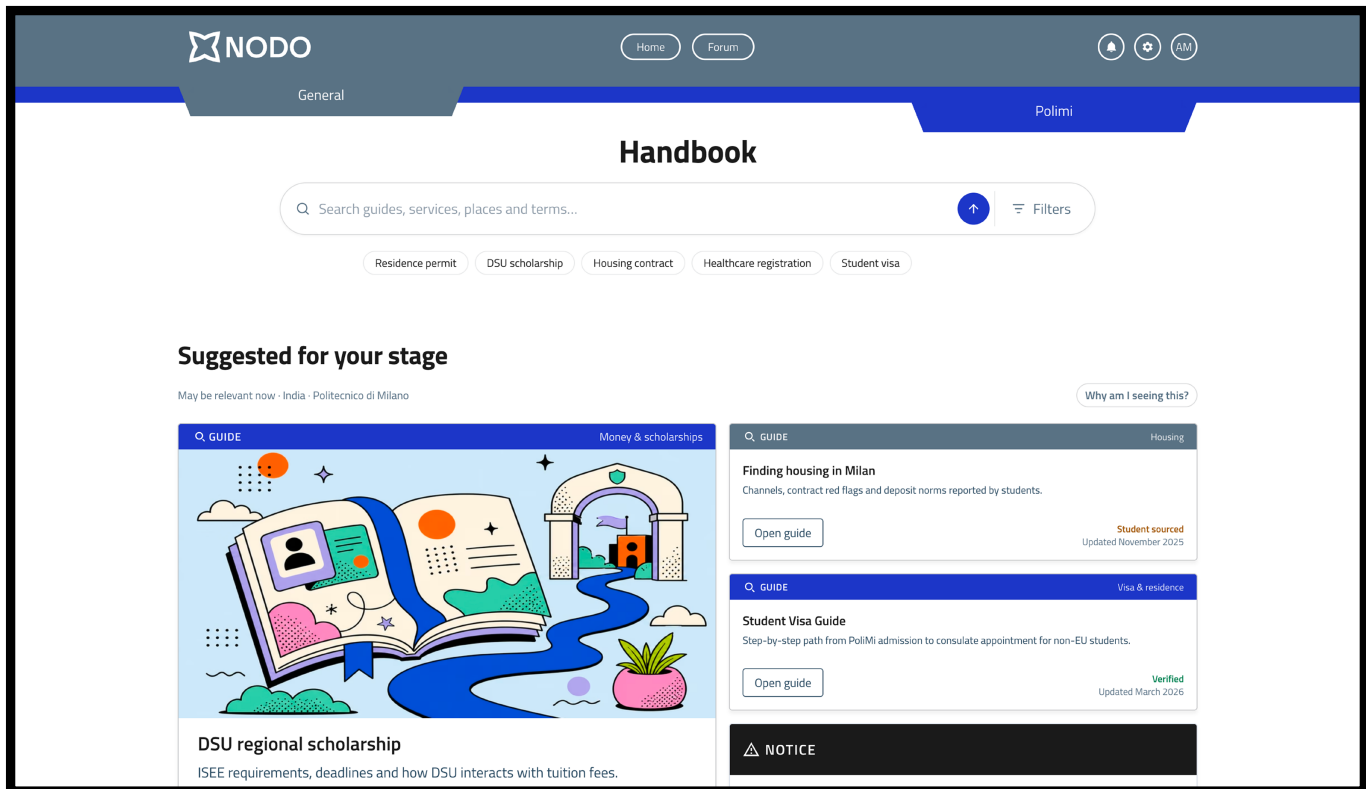


Figure 71: Handbook Page of the Web Platform

## FORUM

Forum is the peer layer of the system. It organises discussions into threads by topics and subtopics, allowing students to post, reply, upvote, refer to official handbook articles and subscribe to threads for updates. Credentialed contributors — verified staff from partner organisations or the university — can also reply in threads. Anonymous posting is available for sensitive topics. Moderation is handled by the platform team and, after mandatory training, by PoliAdvisors.

## AI ASSISTANT

AI Assistant is not a standalone chatbot, but a context-aware navigation engine limited to the platform's own content. It provides personalised search, generates ready-made answers to a student's specific situation and asks clarifying questions in dialogue chains. When no clear answer exists within the platform, it points the student toward relevant organisations, services or materials rather than guessing. The AI is what turns three functional sections into one way-finding

system: it reads the profile to understand who the student is, reads the Handbook to find what applies to them, reads the Forum to add lived context and surfaces the most relevant combination of all three.

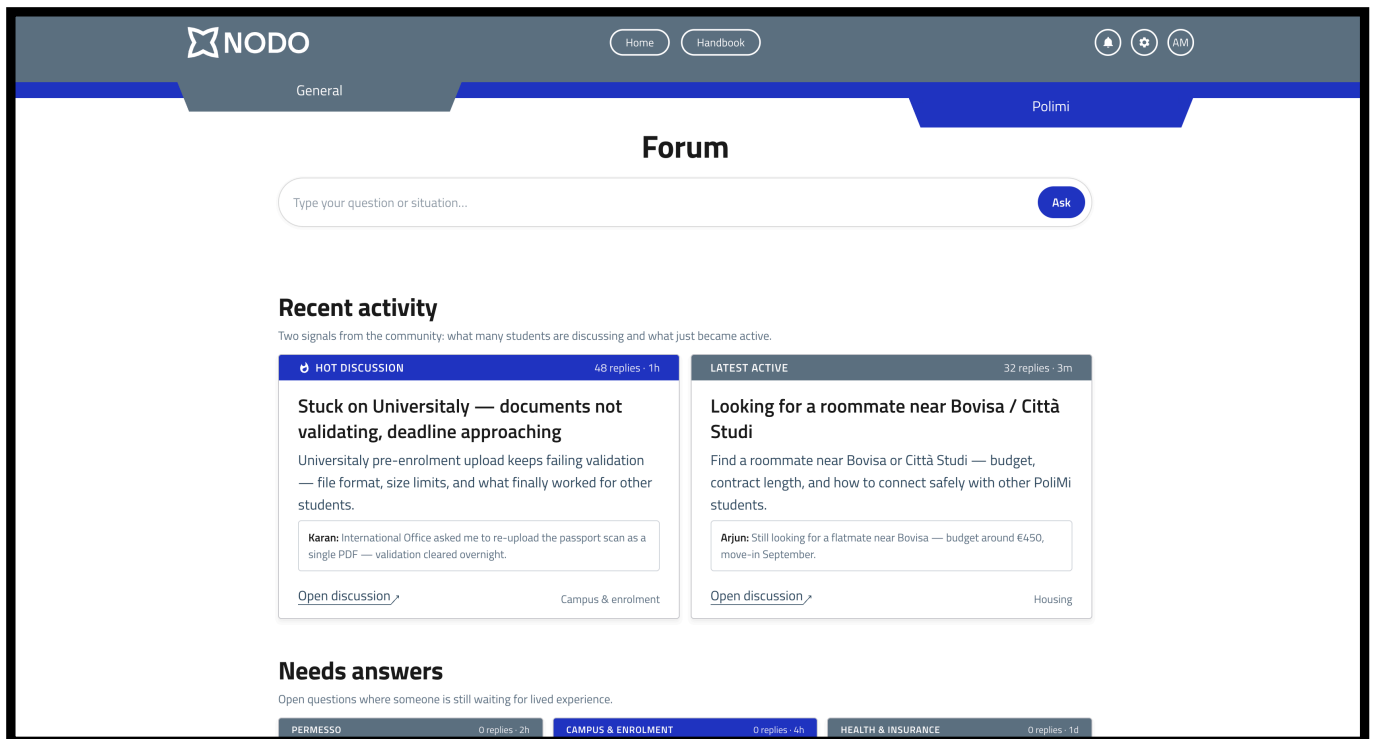


Figure 72: Forum Page of the Web Platform

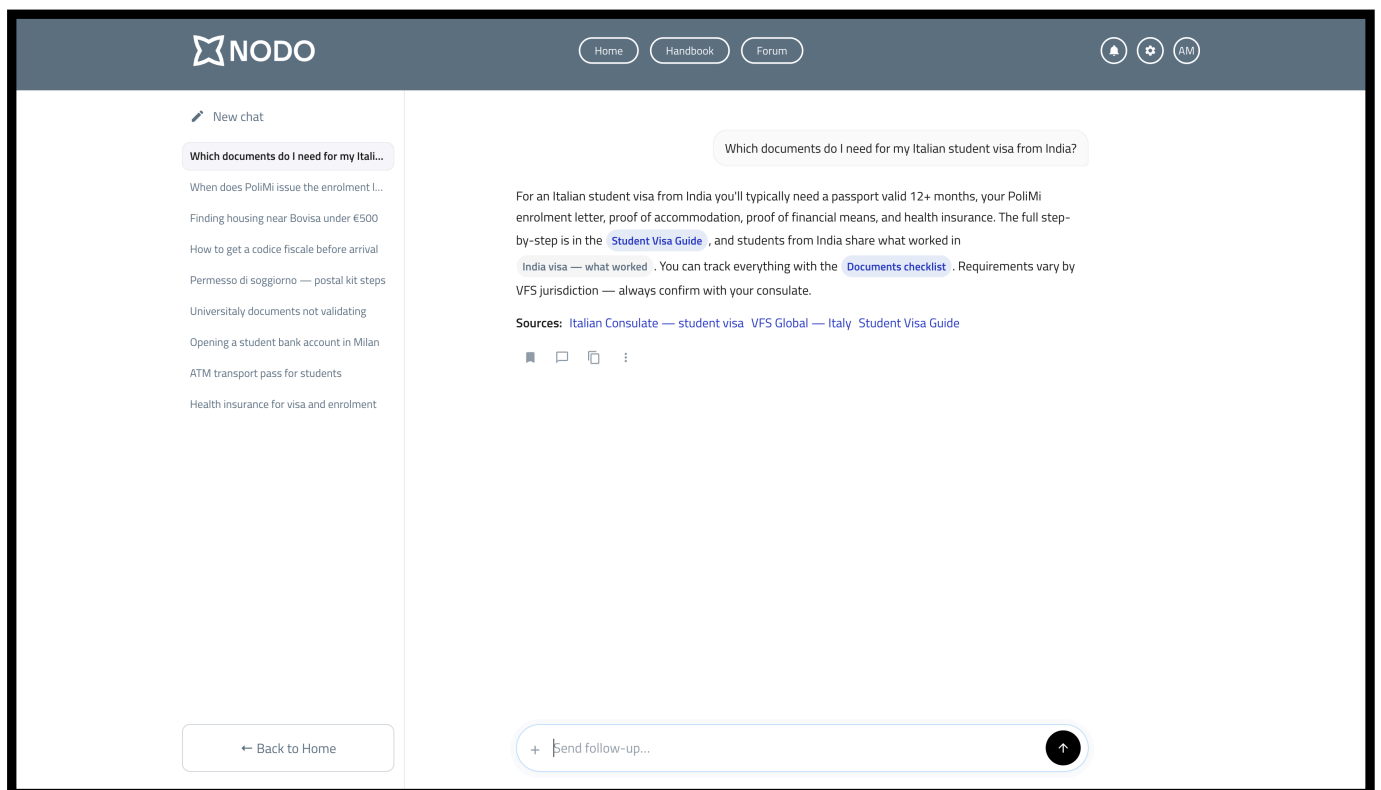


Figure 73: AI Assistant Interaction Within the Web Platform

## Physical Touchpoints of the Polimi Spin-Off

The digital platform is one half of the system. The other half is real people, operating in real time inside the university. These services are designed, firstly, to provide the necessary human support to students who cannot find an answer on the Web Platform or whose situation is beyond the capacity of any guide, and, secondly, to promote greater social cohesion and cross-national interaction.

The three services described here — the Redirection Service, Responsive Programming and PoliAdvisors — are the part of possible Politecnico di Milano Spin-Off model. All three were developed within the university's existing system of integration services, hosted in Polimi's Campus Life division. These services formalize and expand the university's "connecting role" without requiring it to go beyond its self-defined responsibilities. Politecnico remains what research has confirmed it already is: an anchor, a distributor, a warm starting point, not a problem-solver in processes that are not its own.

Each service is also connected to the Web Platform. The platform directs people to physical services when it recognizes that a problem requires human intervention. People, in turn, refer back to the platform with the information they receive during interactions (for example, which problems can not be solved digitally alone, what is confusing about the platform, which external actors fail, where the service map has gaps and so on). The loop is what keeps the system alive and self-improving rather than static.

### REDIRECTION SERVICE

The Redirection Service is an extension of the existing Community Life Help Desk, bookable through the Student Secretariat Online Desk. It's the desk for problems whose owner is outside Polimi. When a student faces an emergency or a situation they can not decode, they call or visit Help Desk. Operators there does not solve the problem — they diagnose where it belongs and hand the student off to the responsible actor. The current help desk already handles some of these moments informally — The Redirection Service institutionalises that behaviour without expanding the university's legal responsibility.

The service works through a structured intake (*Figure 75*): the operator asks what the problem is and which domain it belongs to (legal,

housing, health, finance, discrimination, etc.) to understand which external actor owns it, using the platform's organisations catalogue as the working tool. From there the operator response could be:

- Basic referral — operator just provide contact details;
- Warm handoff — the operator and student make the call or draft the email together;
- Escalation — for urgent cases the operator, as an exception, contacts the external actor on the student's behalf.

The desk is not only a solution for individual students — it is a data-collection mechanism for the whole system, as every interaction feeds back into the platform — repeating problem patterns signal where the handbook needs updates, consistently failing external actors signal where the service map needs flagging.

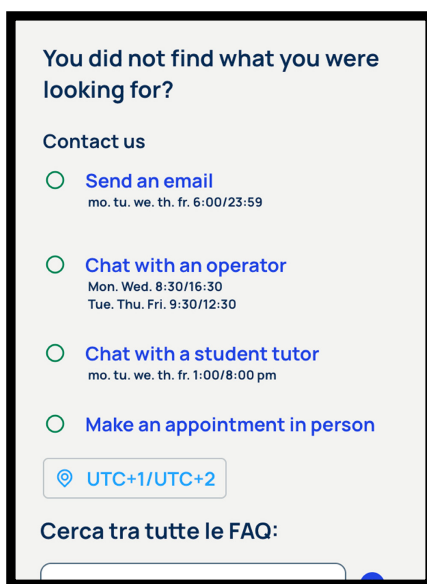


Figure 74: Secretariat Desk

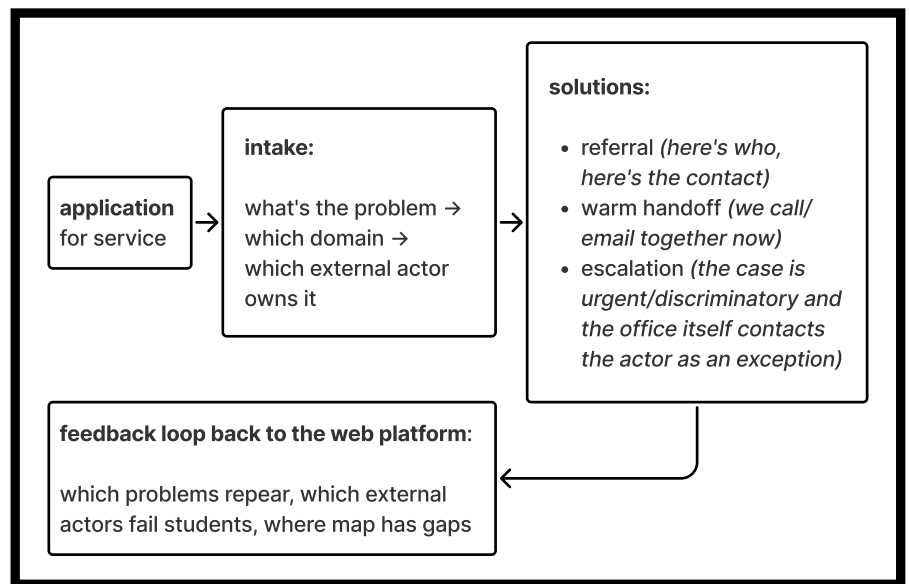


Figure 75: Redirection Service Working Process

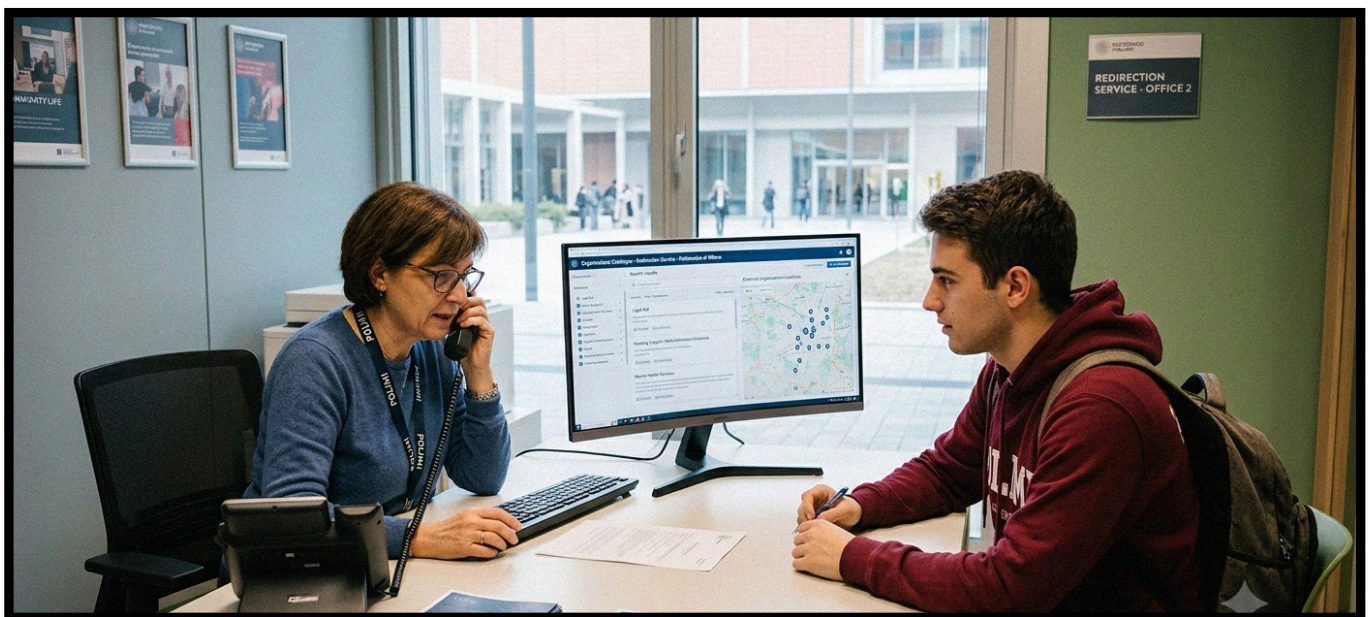


Figure 76: Redirection Service



## RESPONSIVE PROGRAMMING

The second service addresses a problem events programming within university has now: students participate in events in the beginning, when they are free from study, then their participation fades. I made the assumption that this could happen not only because of the obvious workload of students with their studies, but also because events are calendar-driven and generic rather than responsive to what students actually need and when they actually need it.

Responsive Programming is a set of in-person or online events whose topics and timing are defined by live signals from the platform or other sources. The process is following (*Figure 78*): when human-verified data shows a sudden surge in interest or anxiety in students, it triggers the target event. For example, the forum has many unanswered questions about permit renewals — meaning, a live Q&A session with a qualified consultant could be organized. The possible event formats are following:

- Live Q&A and Ask the Expert sessions — are repeatable, fed directly by platform backlog and run with credentialed partners who can answer questions;
- Stage-based events — events that are timed to the known pressure points of the integration journey, like late arrival, permit renewal season, the approach to graduation and work transition;
- Category or situation editions — are nationality- or status-specific sessions, triggered by external events, such as a sudden banking restriction affecting a particular community.

The output of every event feeds back into the platform. Sessions are recorded, transcribed, and summarised; the insights and answers are posted back as crowdsourced or official content in the relevant forum threads and handbook articles. The event is not the end product — the persistent, searchable, documented answer is. This is the mechanism that turns a one-off live discussion into a lasting contribution to the platform's knowledge base.

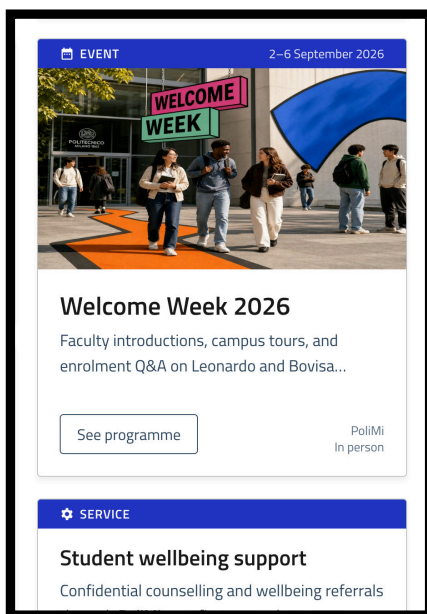


Figure 77: Event Card

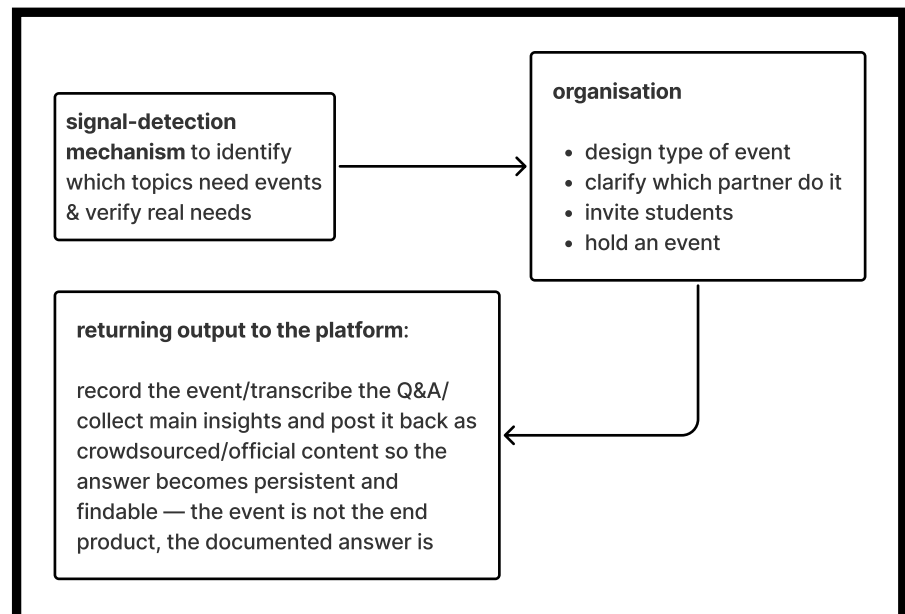


Figure 78: Responsive Programming Working Process



Figure 79: Responsive Programming Stage-Based Event

## POLIADVISORS

The third service operates at the most human level of the system. PoliAdvisors is an institutionally hosted volunteer coalition of students — both Italian and international — organised under Campus Life as an expansion of the existing Buddy Program. The difference is that the Buddy Program is a one-to-one pairing happening at arrival, which is based on personal goodwill rather than institutional structures. PoliAdvisors acts more as an orientational help-service provided from students to students, supervised by the institutional structure. It is inspired by the existing service for Erasmus students in Bicocca — Bicocca University Angels.

To become an Advisor students need to apply and finish a compulsory training. They don't necessarily have to know the answers to every possible question internationals might face; rather, they act as facilitators, working together to solve problems that may arise. Their help can be delivered via:

- 1-on-1 guidance — bookable orientation sessions matched by department and language, via existing Polimi Online Services appointment system. Possible session topics may vary from study-related (creating a timetable, contact points at the university) to organisational (banking and insurance issues) to general (where is the best café, where to go in the evening);
- In-person accompaniment — Foreign students may request that someone accompany them to public offices (post office, police station, etc.) and provide them with unofficial translation;
- Escalation — when an Advisor can not help, they route the student up to the Routing Desk;

Advisors also participate in Responsive Programming, running



their own events or contributing to those organised by Campus Life and partners, which gives the programme a peer-to-peer dimension alongside the expert-led sessions. Additionally Advisors can become Web Platform moderators if they receive enough knowledge needed.

The motivation architecture is worth noting explicitly because voluntary systems without it tend not to last. Advisors receive an Open Badge — a verifiable digital certification issued through Bestr company, displayable on a CV or LinkedIn profile. It documents the skills and competencies developed through the role. They also gain access to an international network and the kind of language and cultural exchange that benefits both the Advisor and the student being supported. The incentive is designed to make participation attractive beyond altruism, trying to make the coalition more sustainable rather than just dependent on a small number of highly motivated individuals carrying the load.



Figure 80: PoliAdvisor

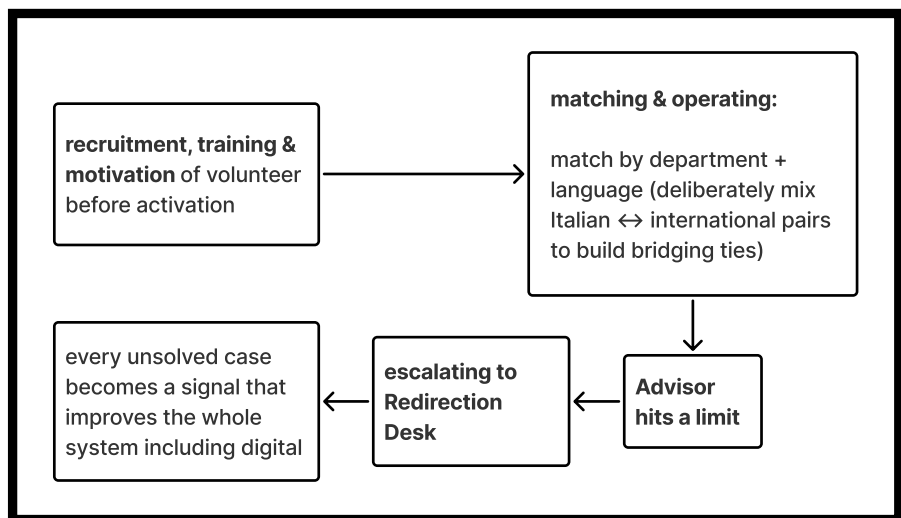


Figure 81: PoliAdvisors Working Process



Figure 82: PoliAdvisors Corner



# 5.3

## **The Ecosystem: Actors, Roles and Flow**

- i. Ecosystem Structure and Offerings Flow
- iii. Stakeholders Map

# Ecosystem Structure and Offerings Flow

Up to this point the system has been described from the inside — its ownership, its architecture, its features. However, a way-finding platform which main goal is to orchestrate, to connect actors who already exist, but currently operate without coordination, cannot be understood in isolation. Hence, this section steps back to describe the system more from the outside, touching the ecosystem actors and the role each one plays.

## THE ECOSYSTEM STRUCTURE

The structure is visualised (*Figure 83*) to represent main idea — everything is interconnected and the way-finding system function as a node, a connective layer: it orchestrates the four surrounding actors into a coherent structure:

- Students are both the reason the system exists and one of its primary content engines. They are the target users, but they are also the contributors of its lived-experience layer, the crowd-sourced knowledge and peer support that no official source can produce;
- Universities are the partner, distributor and credibility anchor. They give the platform reach and institutional trust, and they provide the infrastructure through which the system reaches its users and delivers its services.
- Service Actors are the partners who actually solve problems. This category spans the third sector, private providers and public-private agencies. They are united by a shared function: owning the answers, holding the capacity to act and delivering the concrete help. The platform routes students to them rather than attempting to replace them.
- The Public sector — the municipality and regional bodies — is the regulator and long-term sustainer. It is the source of authoritative city-level information from the beginning, and, the most likely, source of long-term investment and public-interest legitimacy in the context of future growth. As set out in the architecture and legal sections, the public sector is more of a later-stage actor, joining once the platform has grown beyond the single-university pilot.

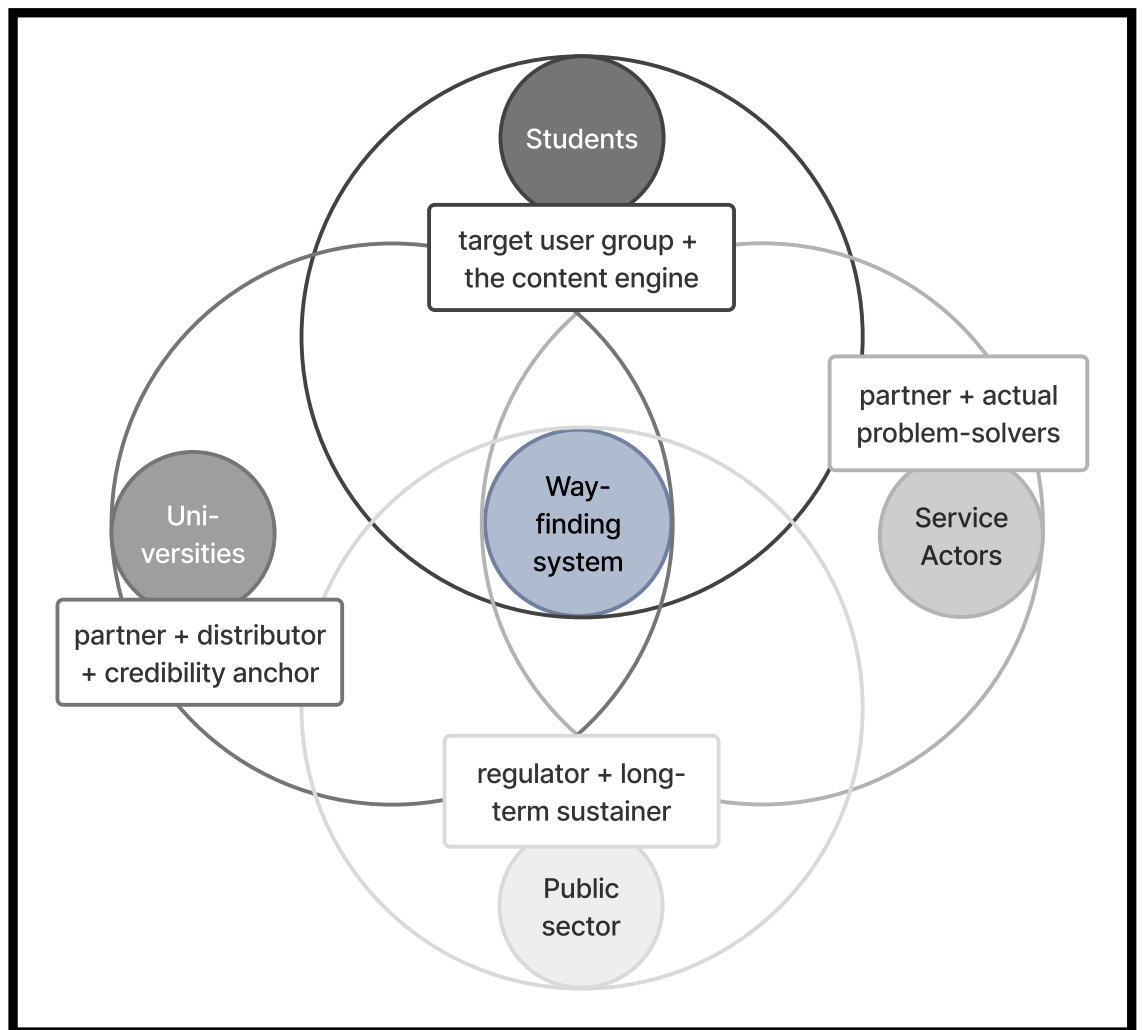


Figure 83: Ecosystem Structure of the Way-Finding System

### THE OFFERING FLOW: A RECIPROCAL VALUE EXCHANGE

The relationships between actors are not one-directional, they have a reciprocal value exchange. Each actor both gives something to the system and receives something back. The offering-flow map (Figure 84) captures this as a set of give-and-receive pairs:

- Students give — crowdsourced content, demand signals and peer volunteering; receive — a personalised way-finding digital tool and access to real-life university-backed services;
- Universities give — credibility, distribution, verified content, Online Desk infrastructure and SSO authentication; receive — reduced front-desk load, an own closed digital space for structured integration support, a real-life services framework and demand data;
- Service actors give — solving capacity, credentialed answers and event participation; receive — visibility, structured demand signals and qualified, routed students;
- The public gives — authoritative information, regulatory legitimacy and future investment; receives — replicable integration infrastructure and aggregated insight.

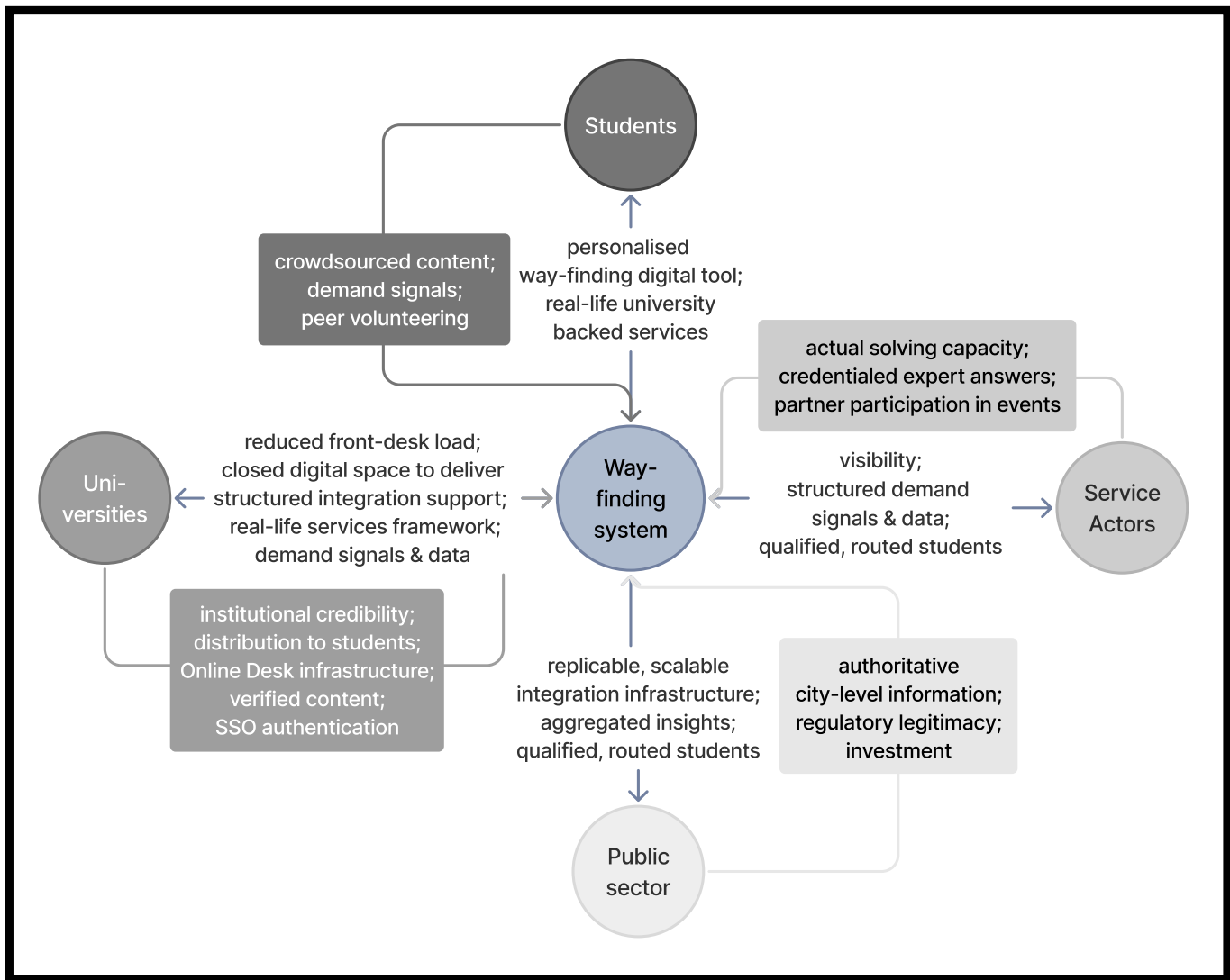


Figure 84: Ecosystem Offering Flow within the Way-Finding System

What turns these exchanges into a living system are two self-reinforcing loops:

First, the crowdsourced wheel (Figure 85) — students give content → receive a better tool → which produces more content. As mentioned, international students arrive on the platform as users, but they quickly become its most valuable content producers. Every question asked in the forum, every answer upvoted as helpful, every thread that flags a discrepancy with official procedure and every experience shared after a bureaucratic encounter is raw material that feeds back into the Handbook. The result is the following: more platform is used better is becomes, that in turn attracts more users, produces more content, improves the tool further. The first students who arrive and publish their materials shape the experience of everyone who arrives after them, without the need for a central editorial team to constantly check a shifting bureaucratic landscape. The community itself becomes the maintenance mechanism.

Second, the demand-signal loop (Figure 86) — platform data produces demand signals → which tell actors what is needed → who then serve students better. Every problem appeared, diagnosed and

solved within the system, both digitally and in-person, is logged back to the platform, signaling "this is what students need", "this is where the system fails", "this is how the issues could be resolved". All this information is shared with the other ecosystem members, primary with Service Actors and Universities, so they can learn over time and change services for the better. At the same time, Public Actors receives aggregated insight without having to conduct separate research. In this sense, the ecosystem also acts as a data collection system: the platform's usage is the research, continuously feeding back to every actor in the form of actionable demand signals, not just annual reports.

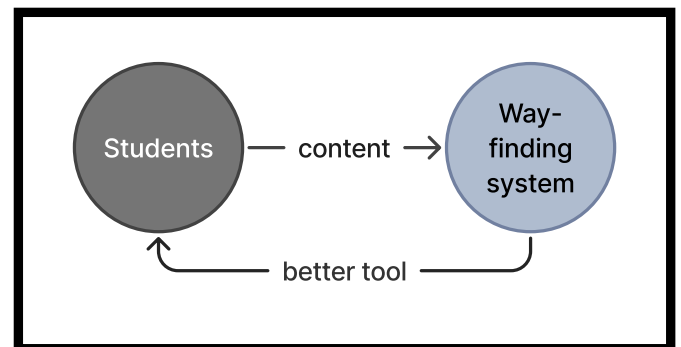


Figure 85: The Crowdsourced Loop

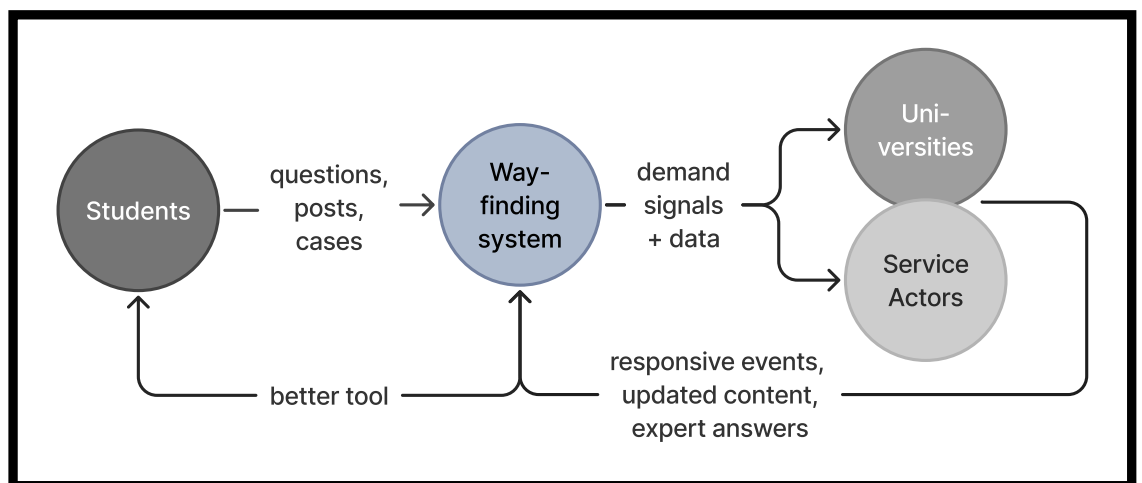


Figure 86: The Demand-Signal Loop

Taken together, these two loops are what distinguish the way-finding platform from a static information portal or a help desk. While such assistance is still useful, it "delivers and stops". This system gets better the more it is used and shares data and results with every actor in the ecosystem — which is what allows a small pilot to possibly grow into a self-sustaining infrastructure.

The ecosystem map shows the architecture of relationships, but not specific stakeholders. The following section maps that in detail, moving from the structural logic of the ecosystem to the named, real actors who participate in it.

# Stakeholders Map

Stakeholders placement on the map is based on the analysis carried out, but is still approximate

*Methodological note*

This map names the real actors of the first step, spin-off model, and sorts them by the kind of relationship each has with the way-finding system (*Figure 88*). Three categories structure the map:

- **Enablers** — the actors who give the system the right, the access or the foundational input to operate. Without them platform will not exist — not because they build it, but because they authorise it, host it or supply the institutional conditions it depends on. Politecnico di Milano is the foundational enabler here, as it grants spin-off recognition and authorises the partnership. The students sit in this category too, as they are main contributors whose questions, answers and lived experience sustain the platform's content;
- **Partners** — the actors who actively contribute to the content creation on the platform and deliver the integration services outside of it. This is the largest and most heterogeneous group, as it includes third sector, private, public-private and public actors already existing in the integration fabric of Milan.
- **Providers** — are commercial and technical suppliers. The main feature of a provider is that it is swappable: if relationships with one vendor becomes unsuccessful or a cheaper vendor appears, it can be replaced without changing the platform. This is precisely what distinguishes a provider from a partner — losing a partner changes the service, losing a provider changes only the supplier.

As with the service audit, this map should be viewed in terms of intent: it defines who can occupy each position and why, rather than representing a set of confirmed agreements that will require direct interaction to formalize relationships and partnerships.

## CLUSTERS WITHIN THE MAP

### ENABLERS

University governance and spin-off authorisation:

- Politecnico di Milano (as institution) — grants spin-off recognition, lends name and credibility, authorises the partnership;
- University governance body — evaluates and approves spin-off status, governs recognition agreement and IP terms;

- PoliHub — incubation, mentoring and spin-off pathway.

Operational units inside Polimi:

- Community Life Unit — hosts and delivers the three physical services within university;
- Student Secretariat — runs the Online Desk booking channel the Redirection Service and PoliAdvisors plug into;
- Polimi IT Services — provides SSO authentication and Online Services infrastructure;
- International Office — own official international-student administrative content and existing external referral relationships;
- Equal Opportunities & Inclusion Unit — owns discrimination and harassment cases; defines the platform's escalation;
- Polimi Data Protection Officer — must sign off the GDPR data-controller split, SSO minimal-attribute model, and profiling DPIA before launch.

Non-EU students: the primary user, the crowdsourced-content engine and the demand-signal source

PARTNERS

Legal and bureaucratic:

- Patronati and CAF centres — verified service actor, forum contributor, event participator;
- Cooperativa Sociale Progetto Integrazione — legal aid, language, intercultural mediation; verified actor, forum contributor, redirection referral target.
- Franco Verga COI — guidance and social integration for immigrants; forum contributor and redirection referral target.

City-level orientation:

- YesMilano — referral partner, welcome-day and content partner, forum contributor;
- Milano Welcome Centre — one-stop shop for consultancy and orientation, referral and event partner, potential future tenant;
- Fondazione ISMU — verified research partner, lends statistical and analytical credibility to the official-information layer;
- Fondazione Cariplo — local foundation-grant path, credibility signal in the Italian civic-tech space;
- Designers Italia — national digital-public-services design system, aligns the platform with Italian civic-tech standards.

Essential services:

- Banks with international-student services (e.g. Banca Popolare di Sondrio) — guidance, verified service actor;
- Housing platforms and Dar=Casa organisation — accommodation referral and content source for the housing domain;
- ATS Milano / SSN — health-system registration, referral target and healthcare-guide content source;

Social integration and wellbeing:

- Terrenuove — psychosocial support for general life difficulty;
- ALA Milano — health, anti-discrimination and social inclusion; covers the discrimination niche;
- Telefono Donna and Crinali — female-specific support: anti-violence and legal aid (Telefono Donna); health, wellbeing, and intercultural mediation for migrant women (Crinali).

Operational units inside Polimi:

- Polimi Career Service — internship boards, career days, and



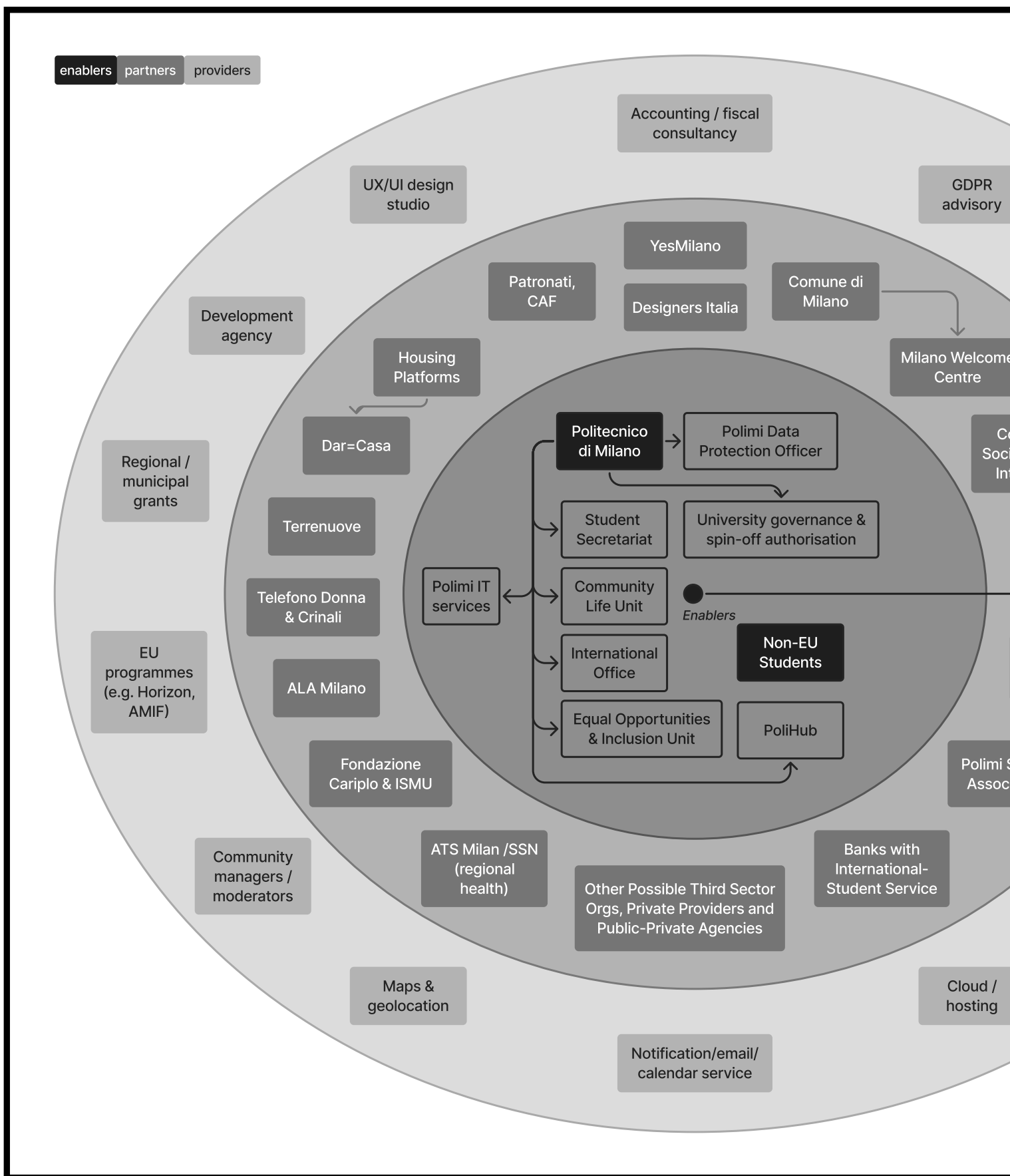
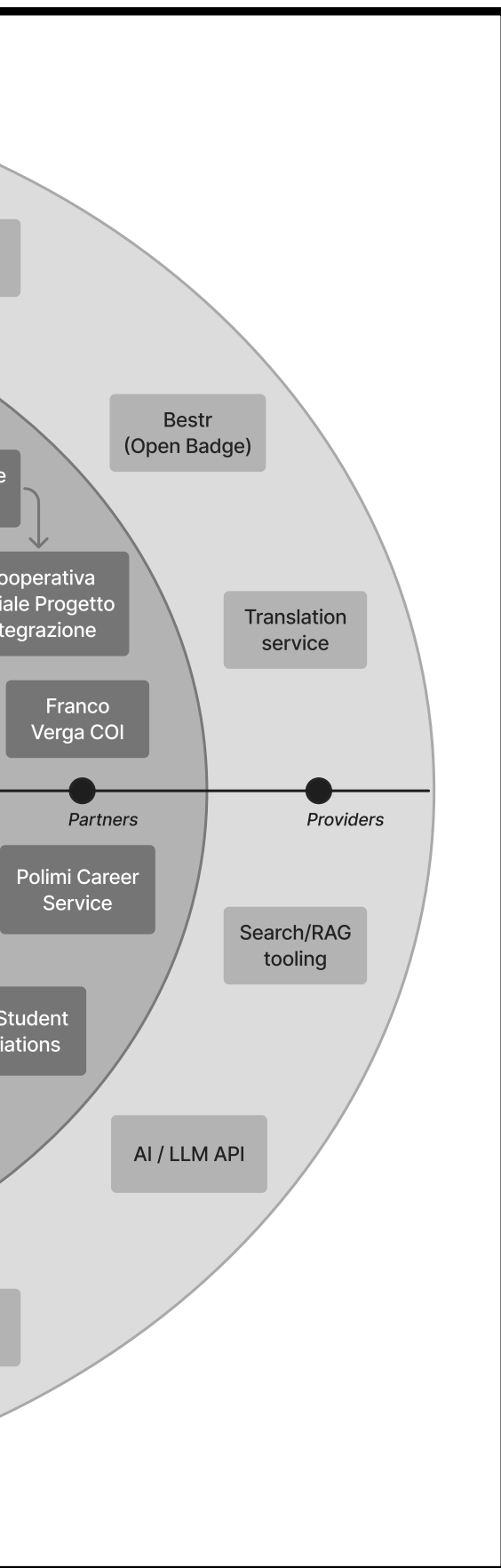


Figure 88: Stakeholders Map



pre-graduation programming, overall a distribution partner for work-transition content;

- Polimi student associations — peer-community infrastructure feeding forum activity and cohesion events.

## PROVIDERS

### Platform infrastructure:

- Cloud / hosting — EU-region host required for GDPR compliance (e.g. AWS, Azure);
- AI / LLM API — powers smart search, generated answers, and discrepancy detection (e.g. Anthropic, OpenAI);
- Search / RAG tooling — retrieval-augmented generation across Handbook and forum content;
- Maps and geolocation — powers the Milan service map (e.g. Google Maps);
- Notification / email / calendar service — reminders, deadline alerts and event notifications;
- Translation and localisation service — multilingual content.

### Building and maintenance:

- Development agency — builds and maintains the platform codebase;
- UX/UI design studio — visual and interaction design, aligned with Designers Italia standards;

### Credentialing and engagement:

- Bestr — issues the PoliAdvisor Open Badge (Italian institutional recognition is what makes the credential meaningful);
- Community managers and moderators — seed the forum at launch, run moderation, handle reports and expand to trained PoliAdvisors over time;

### Advisory and compliance:

- GDPR advisory — entity setup, data-processing agreements, and the profiling DPIA;
- Accounting and fiscal consultancy — S.r.l. administration and statutory filings;

### Funding sources:

- EU programmes (Horizon, AMIF) — primary funding path for the scaling phase;
- Regional and municipal grants (Lombardia, Comune) — funding streams relevant once city-level impact is demonstrated.

All these actors collaborate within the platform to make it work as an well-coordinated orchestration way-finding system.

This sections have described the system as a designed whole. The next chapter moves from system design to concrete form, presenting user journey map and prototyped parts — showing where the platform intervenes, which feature is relevant at which moment and how the digital and physical layers interact with each other.

# 6

**SERVICE  
PROTOTYPING**

"We create and disseminate practical tools to help design and build digital public services centred on people: simple, accessible, inclusive, reducing inequalities and compliant with regulations."

*Designers Italia, Visione e Missione (Translation),  
Dipartimento per la Trasformazione Digitale e AGID, 2025*

# 6.1

**Journey Map**

The name  
"NODO"  
reflects  
system's  
orchestration  
role

*Methodological note*

To prototype a service means to make it real — to give it a name, a face and a sequence of moments in which it is actually used. This part starts from the moments, from a Journey Map (Figure 89) that serves as a connective tissue between lived experience and prototyped screens and touchpoints of the service. Building the map before designing any interface was a deliberate choice — to bound the prototyping to the experience already shown and to avoid over-designing features beyond what the journey actually demands. Therefore, the prototyped screens that follow are not presented in isolation: each is anchored to a specific step in the journey. Naming comes second, complementing the map to make the service more reality-based.

The service is named NODO. In Italian, "nodo" means a node — the point in a network where connections converge, describing exactly what the platform is designed to do. NODO is the point through which a student can reach everything they need, and the place where fragmented information, services and people are held together into one navigable system.

## JOURNEY MAP STRUCTURE

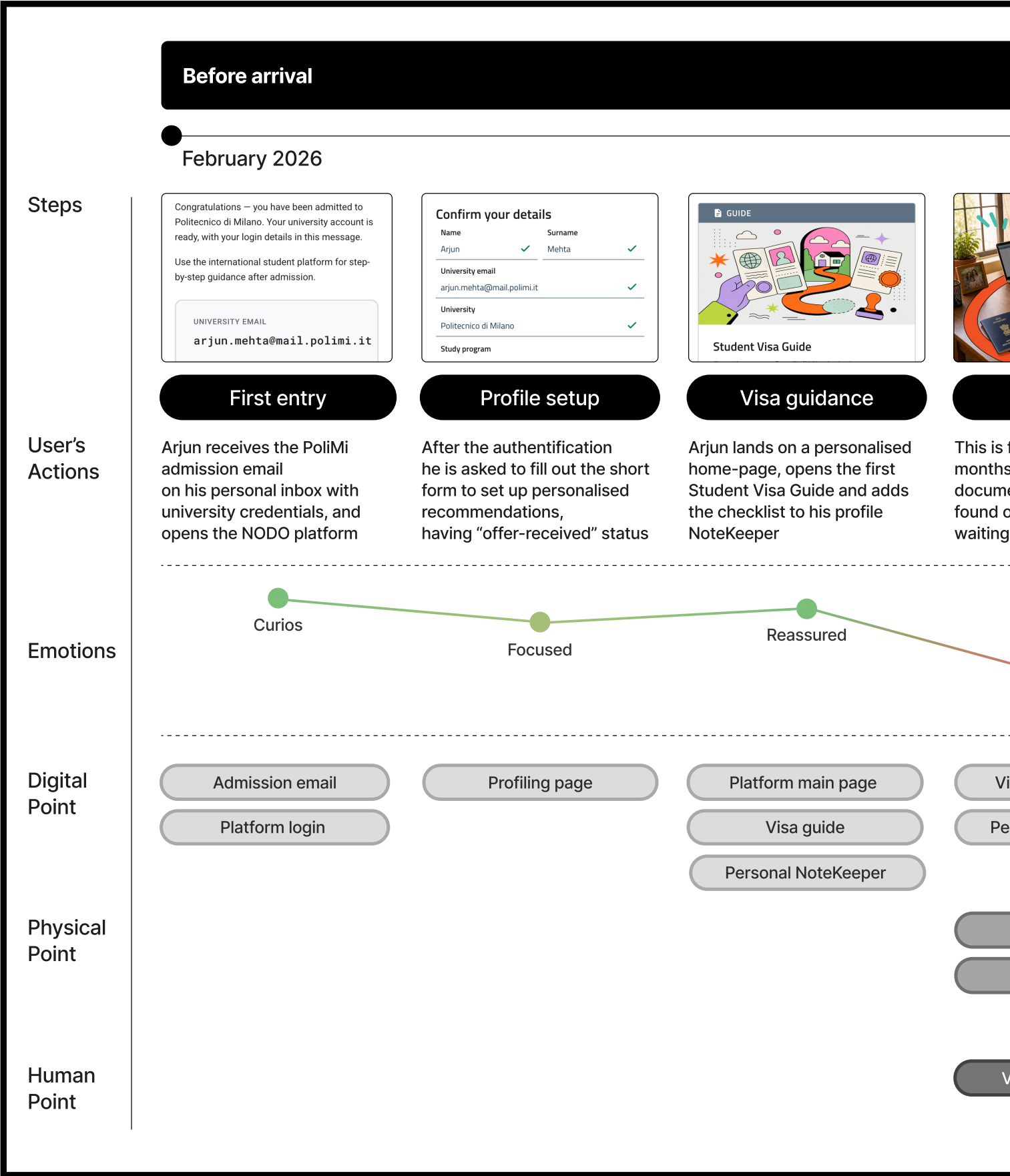
Important to note, the journey is narrated through a single figure, Arjun, who functions more as a path through the map rather than as a conventional design persona. Design persona was not built intentionally, as the international students community is too heterogeneous for one representative figure to be useful — students arrive from dozens of countries, each with a different relationship to bureaucracy, language level and support network. This diversity can not be represented in a single persona, it is addressed by the design itself, mainly by the profile-based personalisation, that adapt platform to each student specifically.

The map spans from February 2026, when the Politecnico admission offer arrives, to June 2027, when Arjun is invited to become a PoliAdvisor. This timeline is divided into four stages: Before arrival, Arrival, Navigating the Problem and Community Belonging. At each stage, individual steps describe a specific moment of action. Beneath them is an emotional line, serving as a connector between Arjun's reality and Nodo responds. After the emotional line, every step is read through three touchpoints: digital, physical and human. This three-way split reflects a design commitment that runs through the whole project — NODO is not just a digital information, it is a system in which screen, physical place and person each carry part of the experience. Read together, these layers show at which moment each feature matters, where the platform actively intervenes and where it simply directs the user to an offline service, and how emotions change reflecting the digital and physical actions.

What makes Arjun's journey more than a fictional construction is that it was not invented from a scratch — it is a combination of experiences collected during the interviews conducted in the primary research phase. The moments chosen to be represented are those that real students described in their own words as the most difficult to overcome. None of the interviewees lived this story exactly, but most experienced recognizable parts of it. This allows for the creation of a prototype that is closer to documented reality.

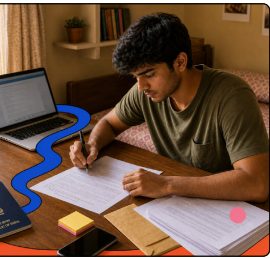
Journey  
is storytold via  
a single figure,  
whose path  
synthesizes  
documented  
experiences  
collected

*Methodological note*



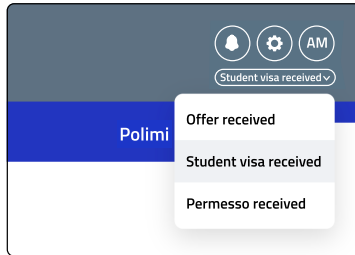


● August 2026



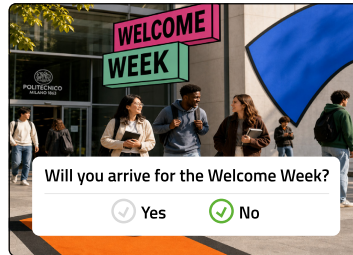
### Visa process

followed by several  
of preparing  
ents, using guidance  
on the platform, and  
for visa results



### Visa received

On August 30th the visa  
is finally received and Arjun  
updates the status of his  
Nodo profile



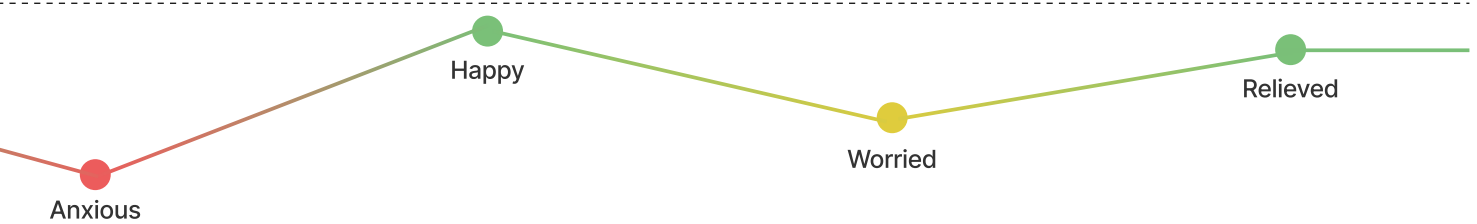
### Welcome Week invite

University via platform invites  
Arjun to visit Welcome Week,  
but he will not be able to arrive  
on time due to late visa approval



### Materials and Group

Fortunately, university already  
prepared all materials needed  
for late arrivals and invite  
students to join their  
classmates group



Visa guide, checklist

Personal NoteKeeper

Profile status change

Embassy

Visa documents

Visa centre worker

Attendance pop-up

Visa centre worker

Welcome Week guide

Personal NoteKeeper

WhatsApp group

Classmates

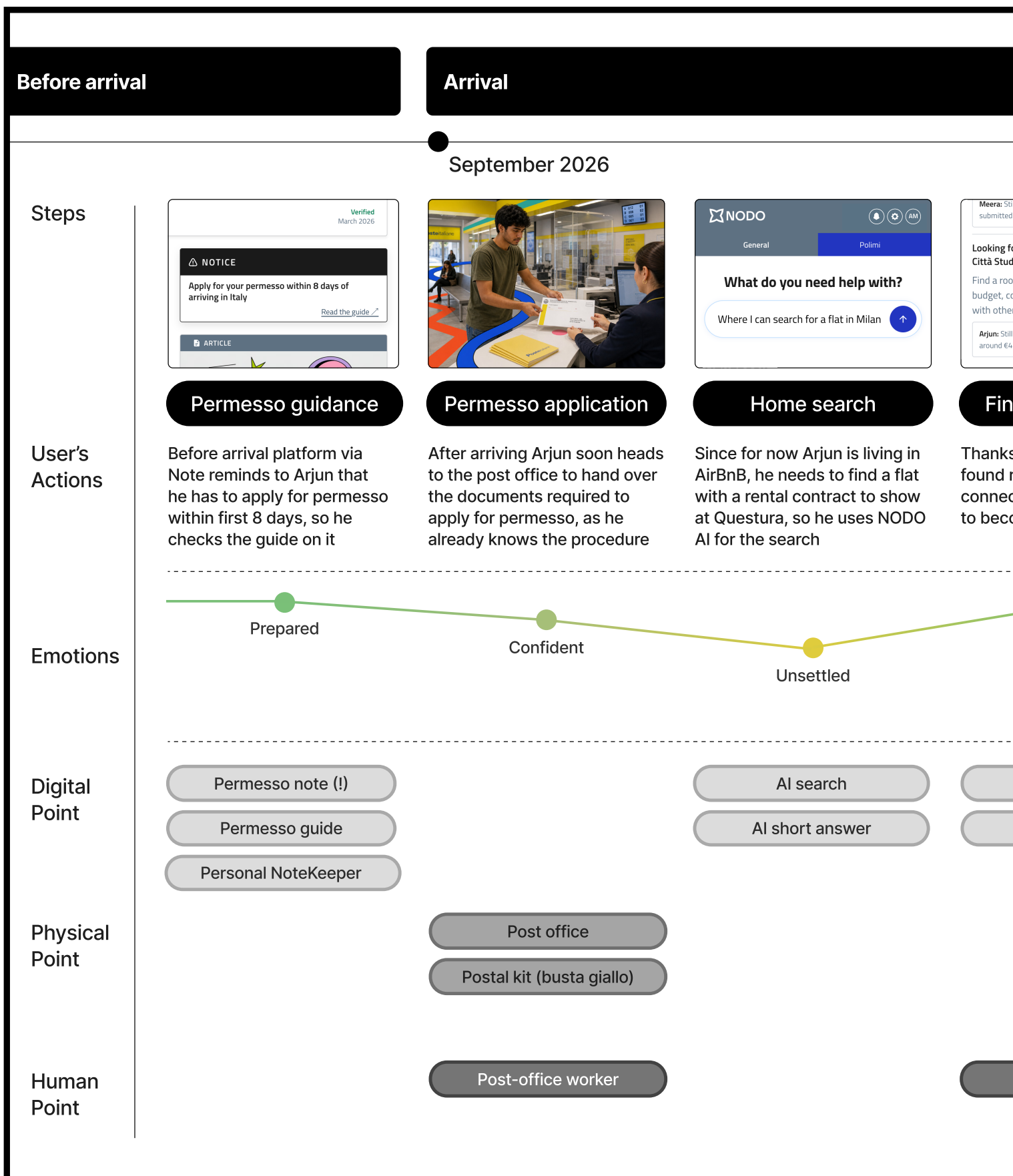


Figure 89: Journey Map

## Navigating the problem

October 2026

December 2026

...waiting on translated income docs — has anyone  
...a partial application?

...for a roommate near Bovisa / 32 replies · 1d  
...i

...mmate near Bovisa or Città Studi —  
...contract length, and how to connect safely  
...Polimi students.

...looking for a flatmate near Bovisa — budget  
...50, move-in September.



## Finding a roommate

## Attending Polimi event

## Questura fingerprints

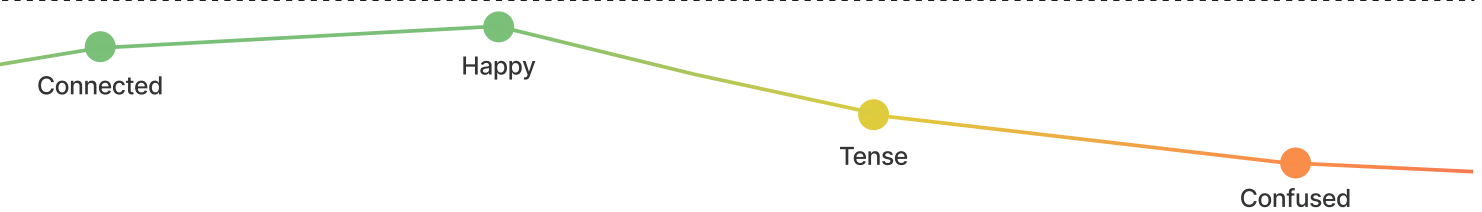
## Long SMS wait

...s to AI answer Arjun  
...related forum thread and  
...cted with a person there  
...ome his roommate

On the platform, he finds a  
Polimi event for students who  
missed Welcome Week and  
attends it

When the time comes, Arjun  
goes to the Questura to hand  
over the lease and get his  
fingerprints taken

Arjun is waiting for 2 month  
for his card to be issued, but  
no SMS with appointment time  
arrive, so he go and ask advice  
on the forum



Forum

Responsive programming

Forum

WhatsApp

Event card

Receiving Permesso thread

Registration form

Polimi campus

Questura

Permesso documents

Future roommate

Colleagues

Police Officer

Colleagues

Experts

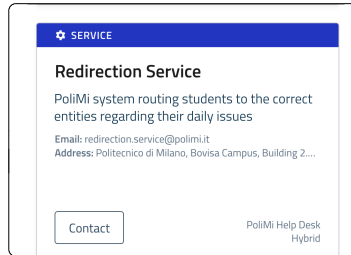
## Navigating the problem

### Steps



#### Attempt to take card

After discussing on forum he checks Questura website, sees that card is ready and goes to take it without appointment — officer does not let him in



#### Searching for help

Unsure what to do, Arjun turns to the NODO AI, explaining the situation. The AI admits no matching case and proposes a Redirection Service contact



#### Redirection Service

Arjun makes an appointment with Redirection Service, visits it and is advised to go to the main Questura with the complaint compiled by assistant



#### Re

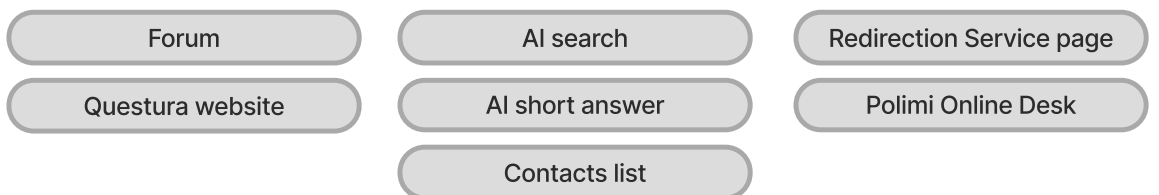
He goes to the Questura, telling the police officer the complaint, and finally receives the card

### User's Actions

### Emotions



### Digital Point



### Physical Point



### Human Point



Figure 89: Journey Map

## Community belonging

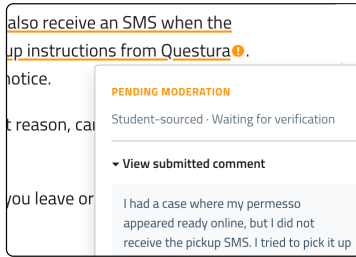
February 2027

June 2027



## Receiving the card

As he goes to the main Questura, he tells the whole story. The staff forward the request to the local Questura and Arjun receives his card.



## Sharing the experience

With the card received, he leaves an anonymous case on the guidebook and suggests an update — after moderation it becomes a verified addition.



## Association join

In the new year, Arjun is looking for something to do, comes across a card from a theatre association registered with Polimi at NODO, and joins them.



## PoliAdvisor invitation

As an active NODO user, Arjun receives an invitation to become a PoliAdvisor, which he accepts to help other international students.

Relieved

Empowered

Connected

Empowered

Permesso guide

Theatre association card

Platform notification

Comments

Application form

Questura

PoliAdvisors training

Permesso Card

PoliAdvisors corner at Polimi

Written complaint

Others PoliAdvisors

Experts

Police Officer

Moderator

Association members

# 6.2

## Prototype

- i. Design System and Visual Communication
- iii. Interaction Logic and Interface Design

# Design System and Visual Communication

The previous chapter gave the service a sequence of moments, a narrated life experience. This one gives it a face — the visual language, the logo and the UX/UI design decisions that make NODO recognisable as a product.

## DESIGN SYSTEM BASIS

The starting point for the visual system was not a blank canvas. It started from Designers Italia — a project of the Dipartimento per la trasformazione digitale and the Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale — is Italy's national reference point for the design of public digital services. Now it is a practical infrastructure: a design system, a component library, ready-to-use models and a community of designers working across the Italian public sector. Its stated mission is to produce digital public services that are simple, accessible, inclusive, and that reduce inequalities — all open source and built for reuse (*Designers Italia, 2025*).

The central output produced by Designers Italia is a "UI Kit Italia", the component and visual foundation that underlines their design system. In this project it was decided to use this kit as a design base. NODO sits at the boundary between a university platform and a public-interest service. Visually, it needs to signal the same institutional credibility that a government service carries. Building a visual system from scratch, especially only for the MVP, would have meant spending design effort to redo what UI Kit Italia has already resolved: a colour system tuned for accessibility and legibility, typographic scale and spacing rules tested across screen sizes and interaction patterns already familiar to users of Italian digital services.

The adaptation happened in two moves:

- The Kit's foundation was taken as given and applied consistently across all prototype screens, so the interface reads as a single product rather than a collection of parts;
- On top of that foundation, NODO-specific changes were applied: use of PoliMi's institutional branding for a visual distinction between general platform content and university-specific content; a set of more uniform colors built on a black and white palette; designed custom information card formats suited to the Handbook's content types; an interface written entirely in

UI Kit Italia was used as a basis for the design system to ensure credibility, accessibility and familiarity

*Methodological note*



English to serve an audience that, by definition, does not yet read Italian fluently and others.

None of these additions contradicted the underlying system — they extended it toward a different context. The result gives to the platform institutional credibility, accessibility and familiarity, aligning with WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) and Italian legal requirements for public digital services.

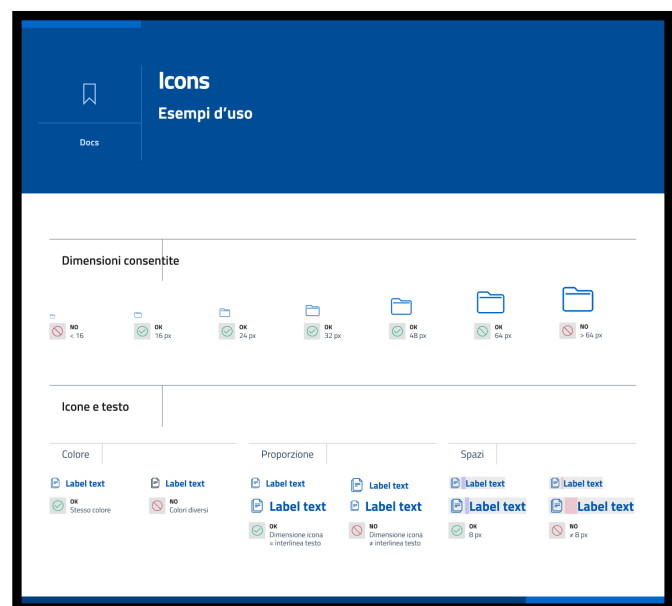
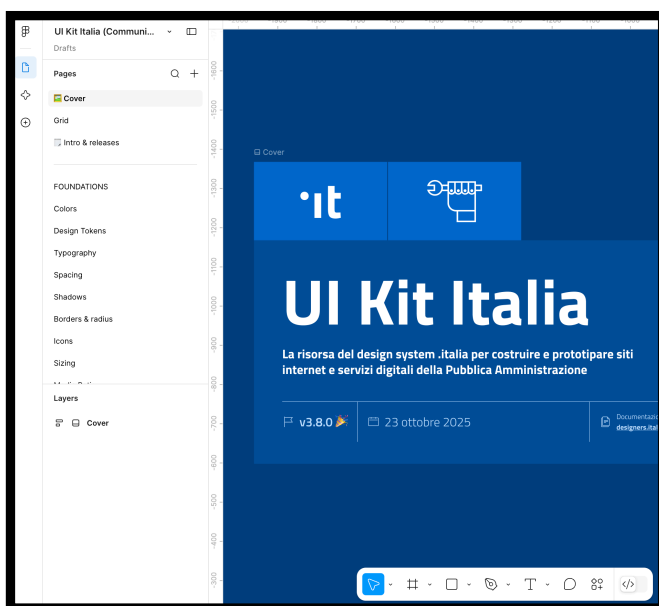


Figure 90: UI Kit Italia Collected in Figma by Designers Italia

## NODO LOGOTYPE

The main goals in developing the logo were to reflect the service's value proposition (trustful connector), to maintain enough institutional credibility and to deliver warmth that distinguishes NODO from a government portal. Final logotype consists of a wordmark, a symbol and a tagline (*Figure 91*).

The wordmark uses a rounded, open typeface, drawn from the GT Flexa Medium, giving the name a friendly and warm character. The symbol is inspired from the system's core principle: NODO is built on four interconnected functions — *inform, discuss, connect and navigate* — and the symbol begins from it. Four circles, one for each function, are arranged so that they meet at the centre overlapping each other. At the intersection of all four elements, a four-point form emerges: the node itself, the point where individual functions converge and connect. This represents the literal meaning of the name — *nodo*, the node where connection happens. From this intersection the symbol was developed through consistent abstraction (*Figure 92, left to right*).

The tagline completes the vision. "Your own integration pathway" states the service's purpose and, in the word "own", its central design commitment — that the "pathway" is not generic but personalised to each student. While the symbol encodes how the system is built and the wordmark sets its tone, the tagline names what it is for.

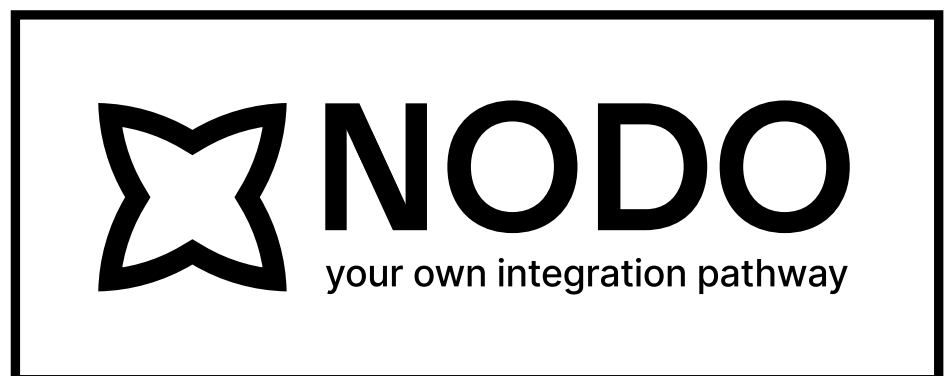


Figure 91: NODO Logotype with the Tagline

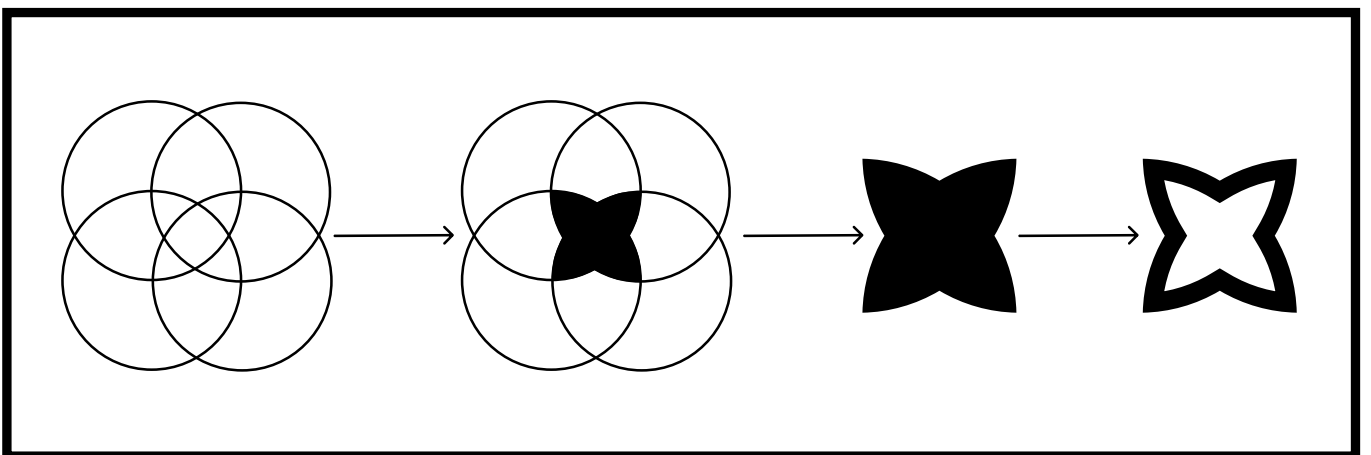


Figure 92: Symbol Development Logic

## NODO VISUAL IDENTITY

Each tenant may have its own main colour in the system

Methodological note

The visual identity follows the same logic that the whole system. NODO provides a set of neutral base elements — colours, illustrations and photographic style — which then could be combined with the specific elements of each tenant. The NODO core system is intentionally designed in a neutral manner, not to dominate, but to host, that allow the university to impose some of its own identity without the conflict. In the prototype this principle is most clearly visible in the colour palette.

The system font is the Titillium Web (*Figure 93*), the typeface from the UI Kit Italia. Adopting it keeps NODO aligned with the established visual language of Italian public digital services and inherits a font already designed for screen legibility, with a wide range of weights and with the full support for the accents and special characters that an international, multilingual audience requires.

The base colours are black, blue-grey and white (*Figure 94*). This

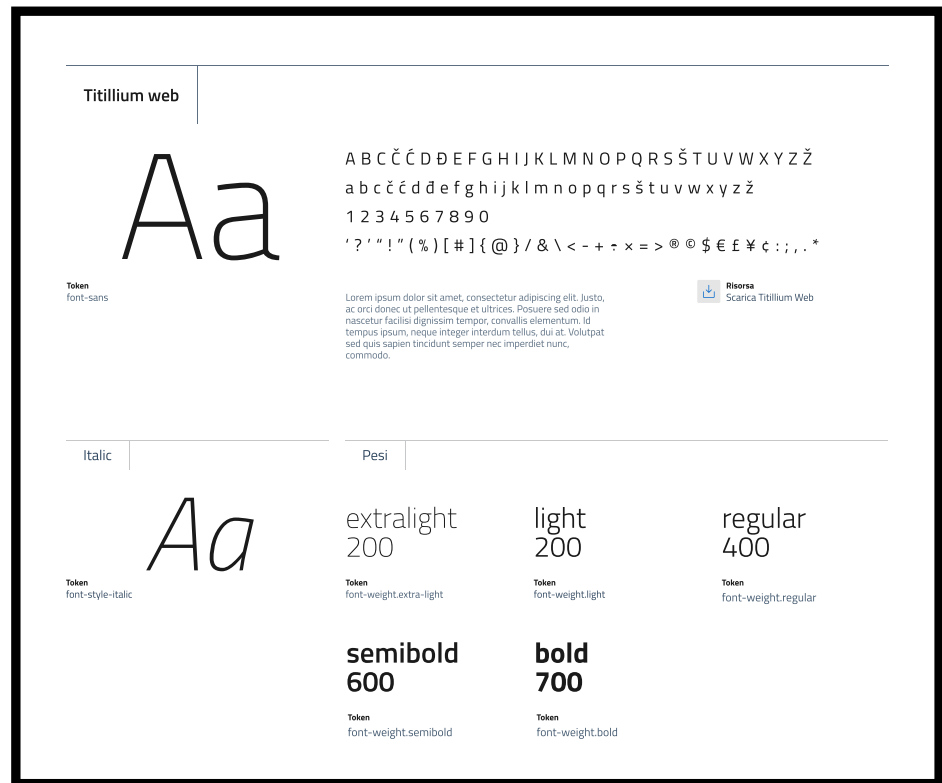


Figure 93: NODO System Fonts

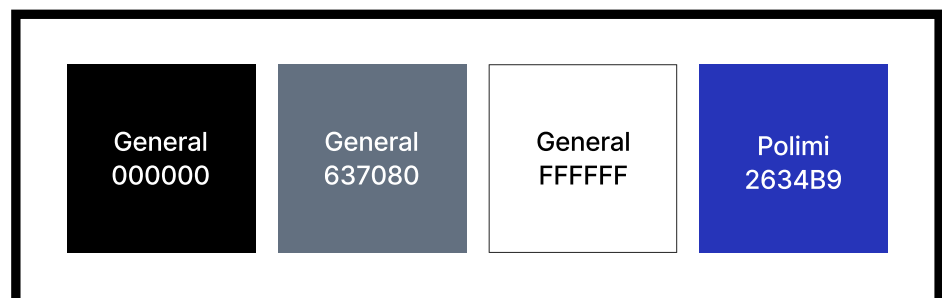


Figure 94: NODO System Colours

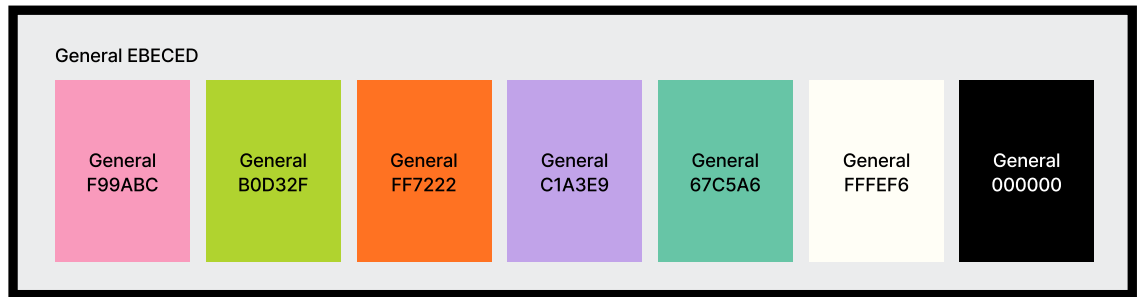


Figure 95: General Illustrations Colour Palette

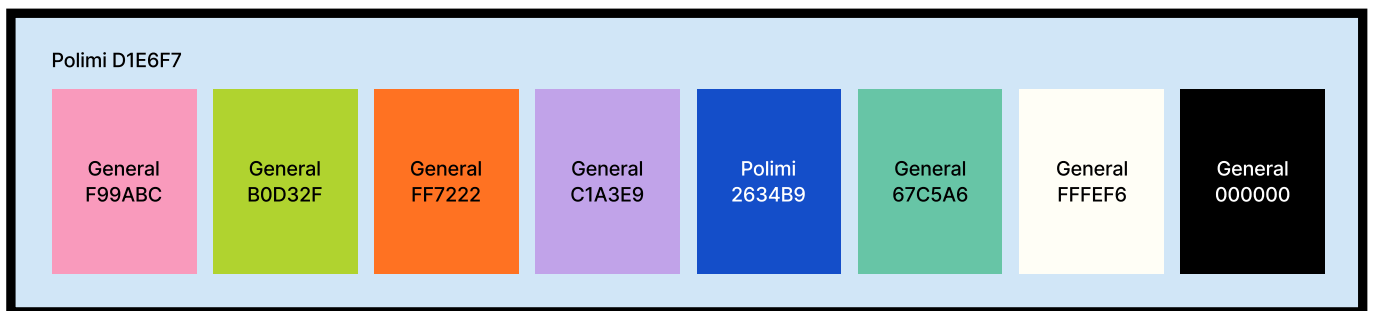


Figure 96: Polimi Illustrations Colour Palette

neutral foundation can easier pair with any tenant's brand colour without competition, which is essential for a multi-tenant system meant to serve many universities. In the prototype system's colours are represented alongside Polimi's institutional dark blue, which acts as the tenant accent. The same slot would hold a different colour for a different university, while the black, white and blue-grey base stays constant.

The same principle extends into the illustrations: every illustration draws from one general palette of soft, friendly colours (Figure 95). When an illustration relates to a specific tenant, that tenant's colour is added into the palette as one additional element: in Polimi's case, the institutional blue (Figure 96). The distinction is then reinforced by the background tint behind the artwork — a neutral grey for general content, a light blue for Polimi content. The result is that the illustrations themselves remain almost entirely shared and reusable, while a single added colour and the background indicate whose content the user is looking at.

Stylistically, illustrations use a flat, line-based language with bold black outlines, geometric landscapes, patterns and decorative marks — stars, dots and small organic shapes (Figures 95–96). The effect is warm and contemporary, closer to editorial illustration than to institutional one, which keeps the platform more human while its structure stays institutional. Illustrated scenes visually represent a theme or its main idea and are generally linked to reference cards containing various information.

Photography follows the same spirit (Figure 95). Rather than using standalone stock images, the photographs show real students and real life scenes, lifted by a few graphic colourful illustrative accents. This way, they fit into the same visual system as the illustrations and interface, and the digital and physical layers of the service are perceived as a unified whole.



Figure 97: Polimi Related Illustrations

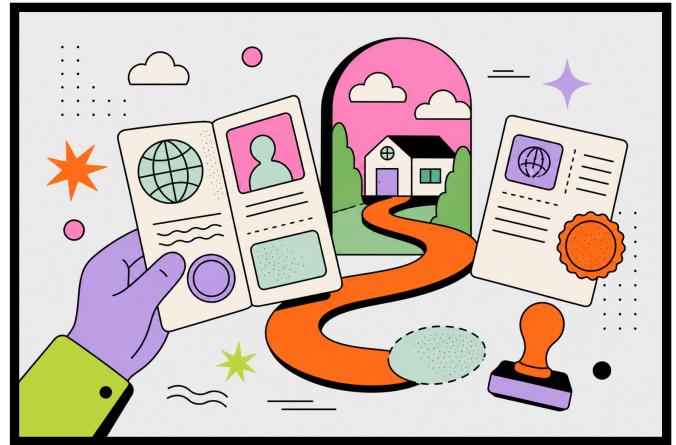
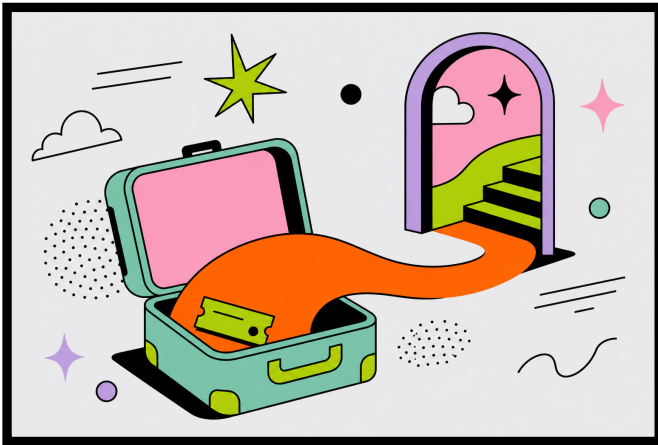


Figure 98: General Illustrations



Figure 99: Photos Treatment

The visual system described above defines what NODO looks and feels like. The next chapter presents its interface prototype, describing how a student moves through it, what the platform does at each moment of interaction and how the interface translates the system's logic into navigable touchpoint.



# Interaction Logic and Interface Design

The NODO digital platform experience starts after receiving an admission letter from the university applied to — which, in this prototype case, is Politecnico di Milano. As seen in the Journey Map, using the credentials sent by the university, the student is invited to log into the platform. After authentication, there is a short profile setup form asking the user to fill out their study program, current legal status, expected date of arrival and country of residence. This information will allow the platform to provide more personalized solutions in the future. After filling out the form and optionally connecting WhatsApp to it, the student arrives at the home page.

## HOME PAGE

The home page is the centre of the platform, from which students can reach anything. Additionally, rather than just acting as a landing page that redirects the user elsewhere, it also combines the main components into a single view: the Handbook, the Forum and the AI search, each already filtered here to what is most relevant to the individual user. The interaction logic is the following.

The header holds the NODO logo, the primary navigation, the account, settings and notification controls. The logo doubles as the way home, so that pressing it from anywhere on the platform returns the user to this page. Directly beneath the header sits a divider that splits the view into two contexts: General and Polimi. In the General view the user sees everything together (*Figure 100*), switching to Polimi narrows the page to only the content relevant to the institution (*Figure 101*).

Below divider at the top is an AI-powered search with the prompt "What do you need help with?" and pool of previous dialogues. This entity is placed first because it is the most direct path into the NODO system, the entry point for students who already know what they need and do not want to browse through all information.

The page then divides into two columns. On the left, the Handbook surfaces a personalised selection of content, deliberately mixing its different types, ordering them by relevance. On the right, the Forum works the same way: it opens with recently active threads and then moves into the topics most relevant to the user. Both threads and



Figure 100: Web Platform NODO, General Home Page

Handbook's content are color-coded to indicate their origin — a grey for General and a blue for Polimi ones. Thanks to this the user can tell at a glance whether an information or discussion belongs to the wider community or to their own university.



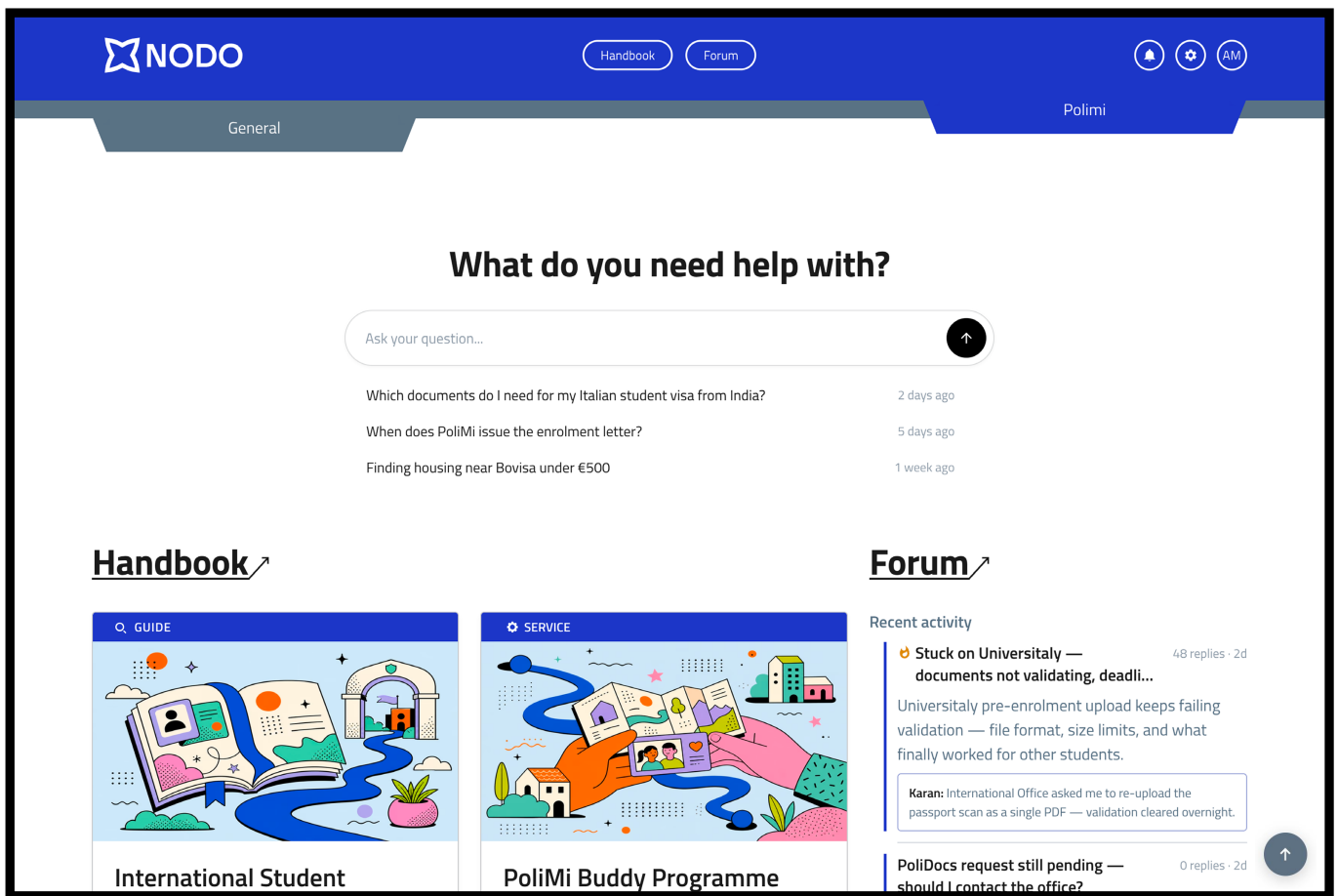


Figure 101: Web Platform NODO, Polimi Home Page

From here student can jump into any part of the NODO platform, and from anywhere in the platform they can return here. Additionally, a scroll-to-top control fixed at the bottom of the page keeps the long, feed-like layout easy to navigate, returning the user to the search at the top at any moment.

## HANDBOOK

The Handbook is NODO's structured knowledge base, its official, verified part. It has the same General/Polimi divider as the rest of the platform, so the user can scope the entire page to universal content or to their university's alone also here. There are six sections (Figure 102).

At the top sits the search bar, a filter control and a row of quick-access topics, that act as shortcuts to the most common needs. A user who knows what they are looking for starts here.

Below the search comes "Suggested for your stage" personalised section, that adapts to the individual user. Additionally, here is a "Why am I seeing this?" control, that makes this personalisation transparent, letting the user understand why these particular items were chosen.

Next, "Browse by topic" offers the structured alternative to personalised suggestion — the full map of the Handbook content, organised into clear thematic areas, for users who want to explore information by subject. Each section displays a number of resources and a set

[Home](#)
[Forum](#)

General

Polimi

# Handbook

Residence permit

DSU scholarship

Housing contract

Healthcare registration

Student visa

## Suggested for your stage

May be relevant now · India · Politecnico di Milano

Q GUIDE

Money & scholarships

### DSU regional scholarship

ISEE requirements, deadlines and how DSU interacts with tuition fees.

Open guide

Verified Updated April 2026

Q GUIDE

Housing

### Finding housing in Milan

Channels, contract red flags and deposit norms reported by students.

Open guide

Student sourced Updated November 2025

Q GUIDE

Visa & residence

### Student Visa Guide

Step-by-step path from PoliMi admission to consulate appointment for non-EU students.

Open guide

Verified Updated March 2026

NOTICE

### DSU application window closes 30 September

Read more

## Browse by topic

### Visa & residence

16 resources

Entry visa, permesso di soggiorno, renewals and official appointments.

Student visa

Residence permit (permesso)

Renewal & extensions

Family reunification

Documents & appointments

### Housing

24 resources

Finding rooms, reading contracts and avoiding common rental scams.

Finding a room

Contracts & deposits

Utilities & bills

Landlord disputes

### Health & wellbeing

22 resources

Insurance, SSN registration and student wellbeing services.

Health insurance

SSN registration

Mental health support

### Life in Milan

23 resources

Transport, neighbourhoods and everyday practical tips.

Transport & ATM

Neighbourhoods

### University & studies

20 resources

PoliMi enrollment, exams, credits and academic services.

Enrollment & registration

Exams & credits

Internships & thesis

### Money & scholarships

23 resources

Tuition, DSU, banking and everyday budgeting in Milan.

Tuition & fees

DSU scholarship

Banking in Italy

Taxes & budgeting

### Work & careers

26 resources

Part-time work rules, internships and career services.

Part-time work

Internships & placements

### Community & support

20 resources

Associations, peer networks and welcome activities.

Student associations

Peer support

Figure 102: Handbook Page

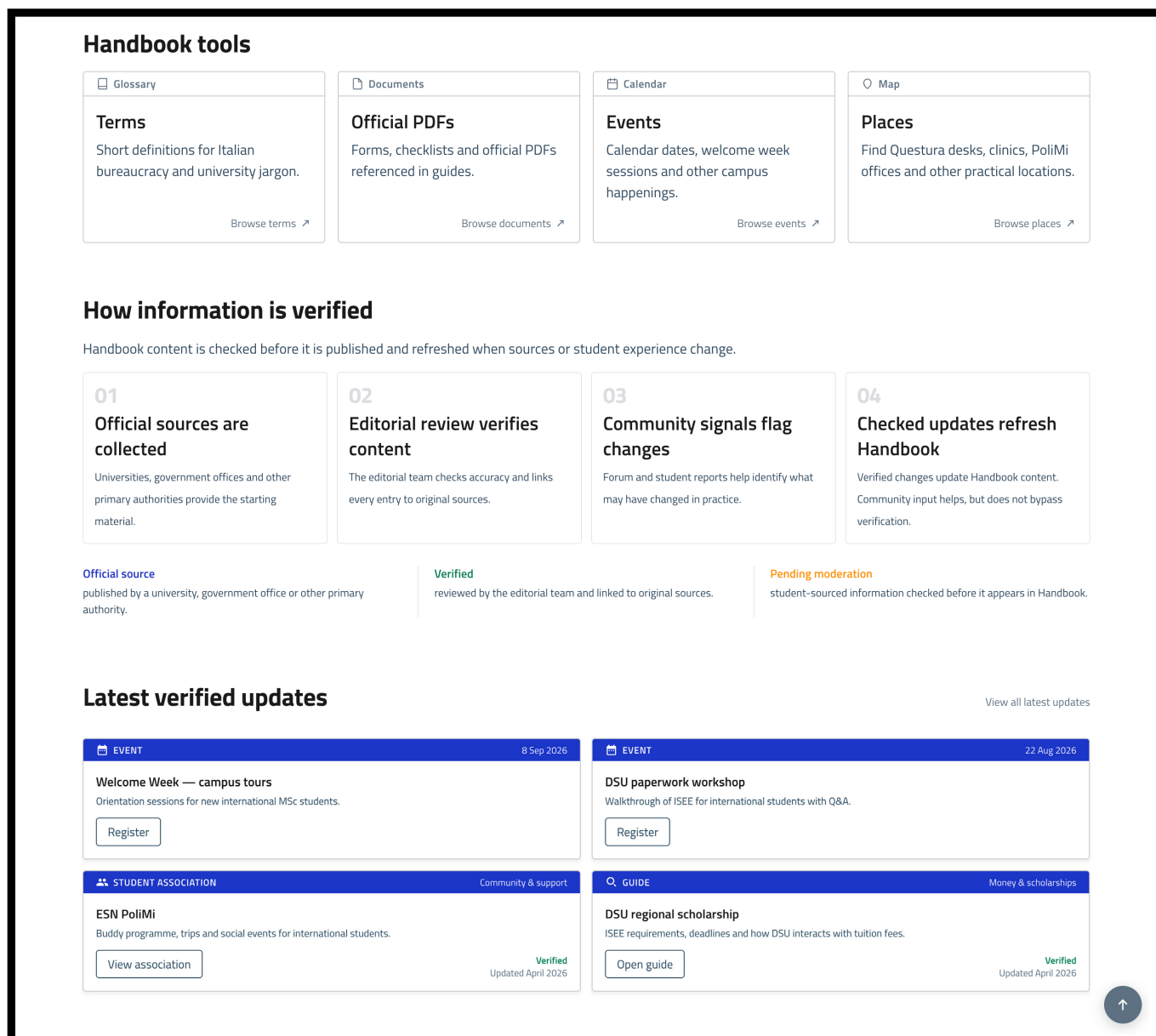


Figure 102: Handbook Page

of subtopics, allowing the user to assess the breadth of coverage of each section and quickly move on to a more specific question.

"Handbook tools" then gathers the cross-cutting utilities: a glossary of Italian bureaucratic and social terms, a library of official PDFs and templates, an event calendar, and a map of services around Milan.

The page then turns to trust. "How information is verified" explains, in four steps, how content earns its place in the Handbook. This is complemented by a legend defining the three states a piece of content can hold: official source, verified and pending moderation. Placing this directly in the Handbook is a deliberate choice — in a domain where wrong information has real consequences, the platform has to show how it works, rather than asking to be trusted blindly.

"Latest verified updates" closes the page with a feed of recently checked and updated content, signalling that the Handbook is living and maintained resource rather than a static archive.

Alongside free-text search, the Handbook offers a filtering system, opening through the Filters control beside the search bar. When expanded, it reveals a row of five filter dimensions, each working as a dropdown, so the user can narrow the content along several axes at once rather than relying on keywords alone. Selections are made across the dropdowns and then committed with the Apply button.

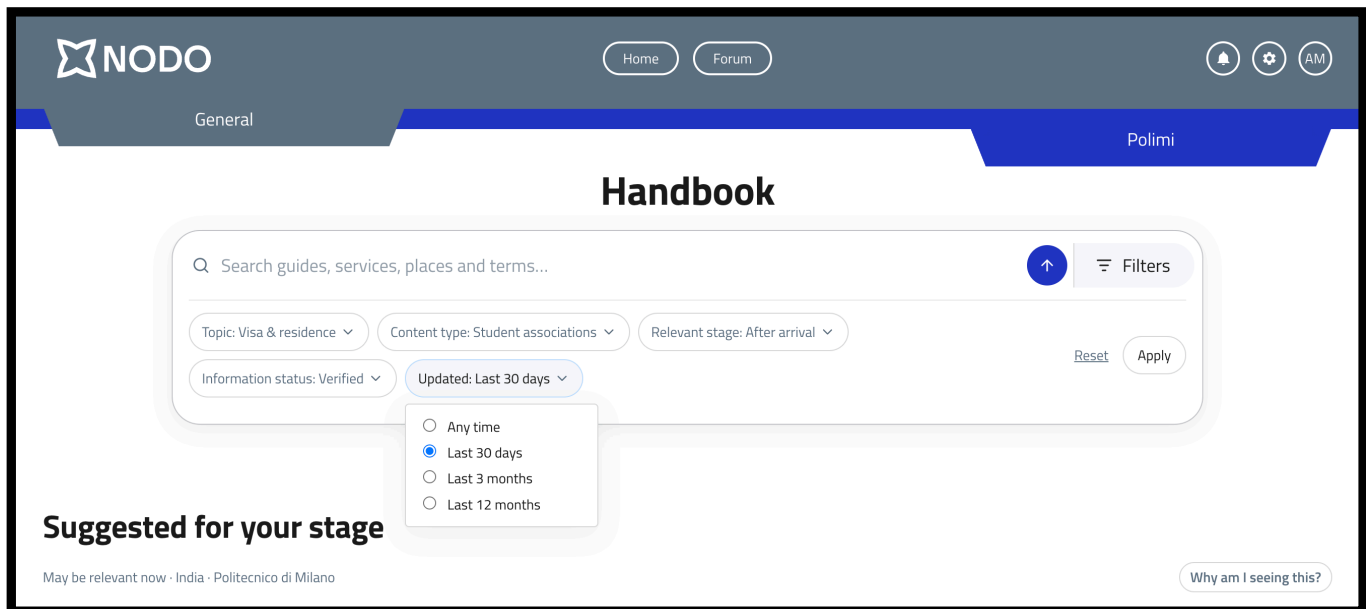


Figure 103: Handbook Page, Filtering Function

The Handbook content is delivered through a defined set of card types, each tied to a kind of conten. There are six of them:

- Guide — step-by-step processes;
- Article — editorial explanations;
- Notice — urgent reminders and warnings;
- Event — dated happenings such as Welcome Week;
- Service — helpdesks and office support, carrying a provider, a mode, and a linked location
- Organisation (general) / Student Association (Polimi) — community entry points.

Each type exists in several size variants, so the same piece of content can be rendered for different layouts easily. Cards content and specific inside formats vary. Looking at this with an example of Guide (Figure 104), it is built from a consistent sequence of different content types, each serving a different need. It can have a plain-language summary, additional notes, a step by step guideline, an interactive checklist to track the progress, FAQ and others types of information delivery. Each section, as well as the entire guide, can be added to a personal notepad to avoid losing it and quickly find useful information.

Every card closes with two final blocks. First, "May be useful", that surfaces related content of mixed types, connecting cards to the rest of the Handbook. Second, "About this guide", that provides the trust layer: the source, the journey stage it relates to and a list of official sources linked directly to their origin, sometimes followed by a disclaimer reminding the user that procedures might change and must be confirmed with the responsible authorities.

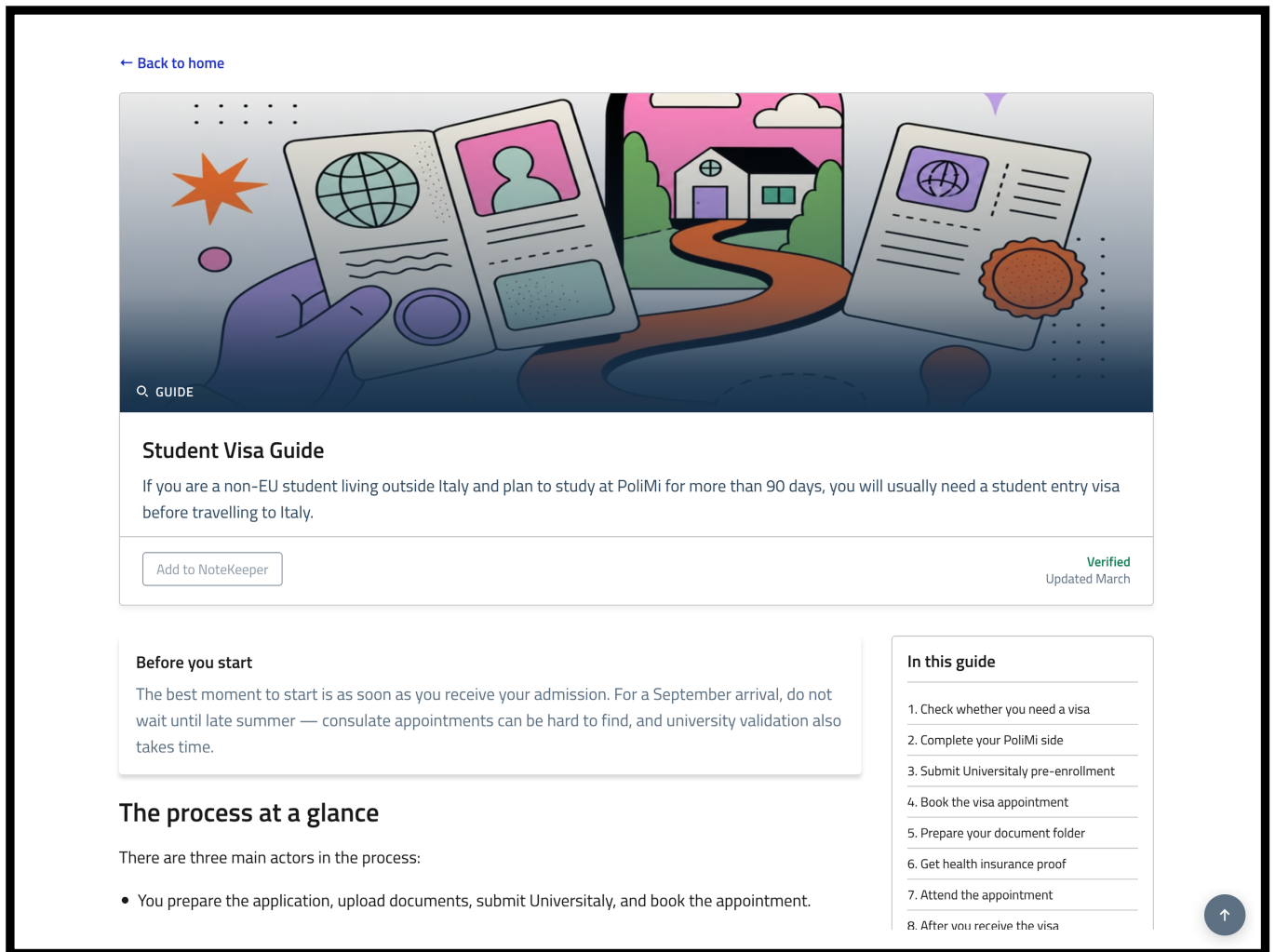


Figure 104: Giude Opened in a Full Page Mode

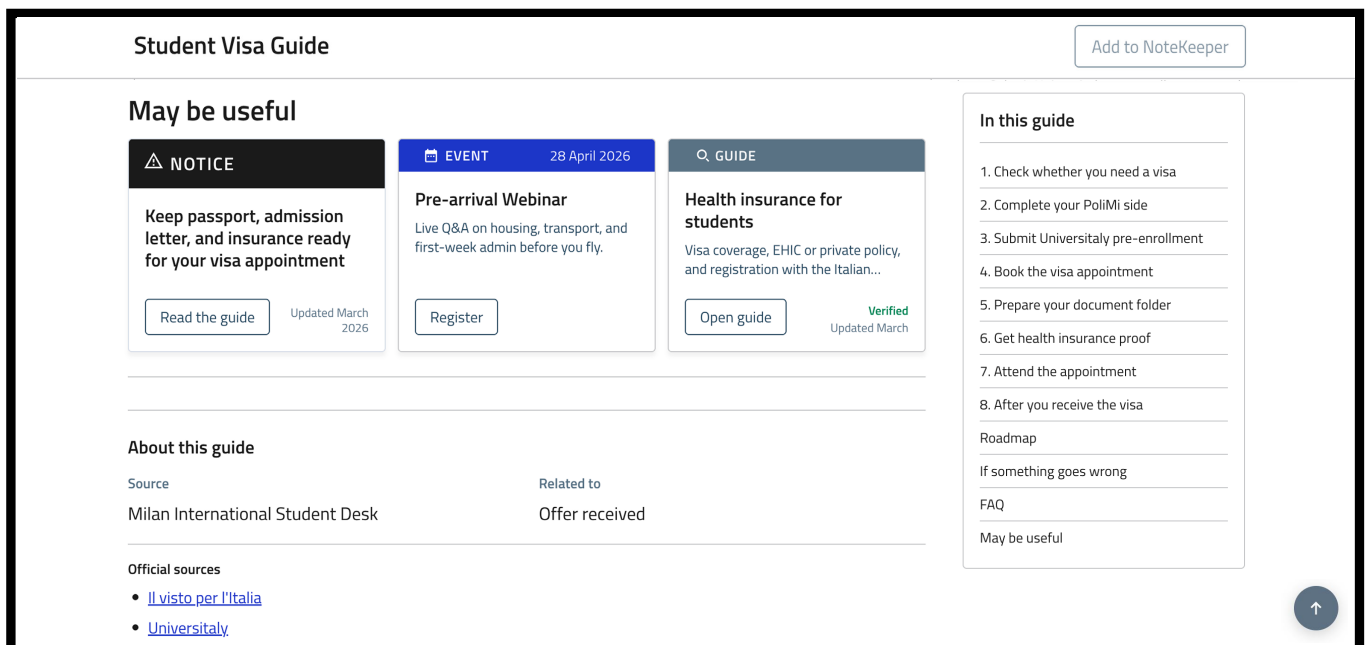


Figure 104: Giude Opened in a Full Page Mode

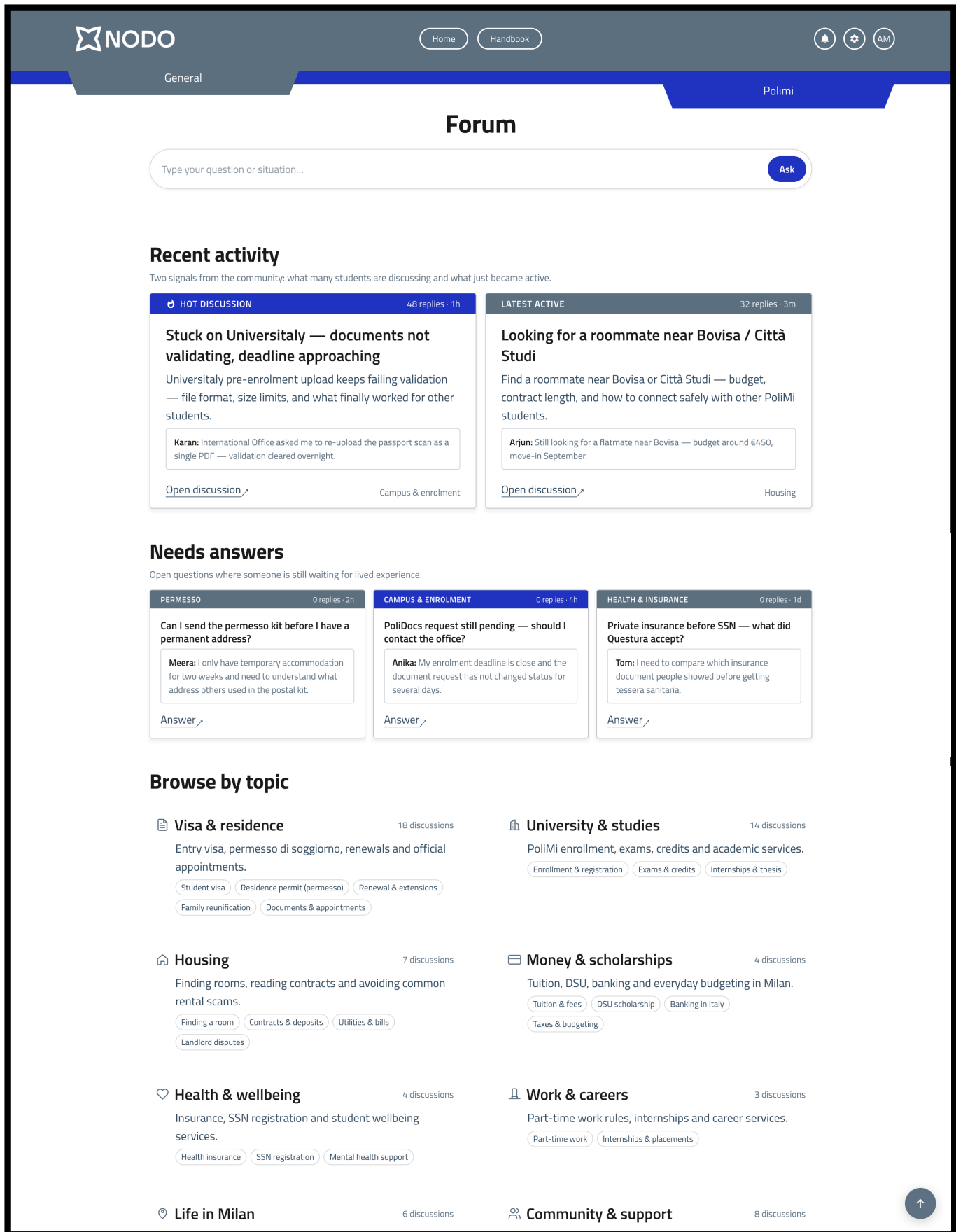


Figure 105: Forum Page

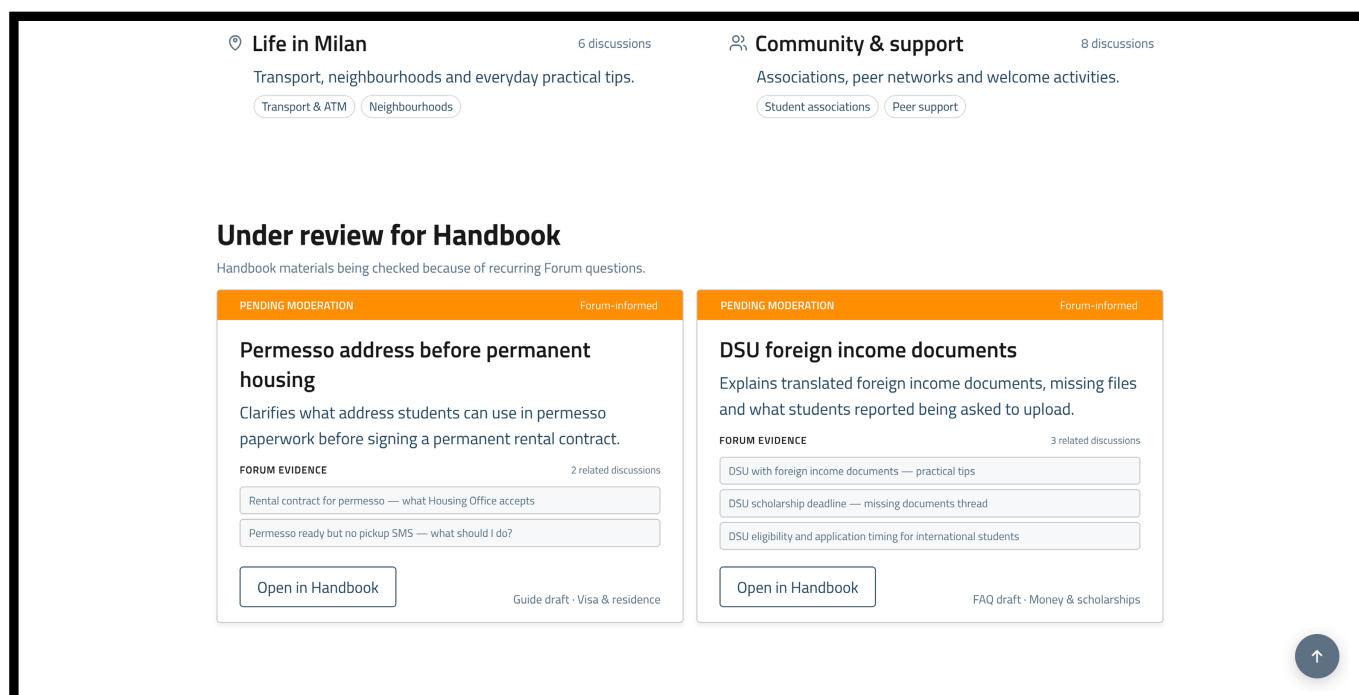


Figure 105: Forum Page

## FORUM

The Forum is the open, conversational part of NODO platform — the space where students exchange lived experience rather. It carries the same header and General/Polimi divider (*Figure 105*). There are five sections.

At the top sits the search bar, prompting the user to "type your question or situation", inviting to the real-world questions. This is the entry point for those who has a problem that no guide has solved.

The page then opens with "Recent activity", divided in: what many students are discussing ("Hot discussion" with a high reply count) and what just became active ("Latest active", most recent thread). Each thread card presents not just the topic, but also the latest message in the chat, inviting the user to reply in case of need or interest.

Next comes "Needs answers", open questions where someone is still waiting for the answer. These cards each show a question with zero replies, a preview of the situation and an "Answer" action. By highlighting unanswered questions, platform makes the burden of a waiting student visible and the community is encouraged to respond.

"Browse by topic" then offers the structured route through the Forum, mirroring the Handbook's taxonomy exactly. Using the same categories across both entities keeps the two parts of the platform legible as one system.

The page closes with the section "Under review for Handbook" with "Pending moderation" status, meaning Handbook materials being checked because of repeating Forum questions or directly asked change from the users. This section makes the contribution loop visible: it shows lived experience in the Forum being transformed into verified Handbook content, closing the circle between the platform's conversational and official layers and demonstrating, in the interface itself, that community input drives what the Handbook may cover.



## AI ASSISTANT

The AI Assistant is visible on the home page with the standard AI search bar and pool of recent questions. Returning user can either ask something new or pick up an earlier conversation without retyping it.

Submitting a question moves the user from the home page into a dedicated Assistant window (Figure 106). The conversation opens with the user's question and the Assistant's answer. Crucially, the answer is not just a plain text: it contains links to the platform's own content, surfacing the relevant Handbook articles, related Forum threads and external official sources. The Assistant therefore does not replace the Handbook and Forum — it routes into them, answering in a simple language while pointing to the verified and peer materials. Each answer can be saved, commented or copied, and a follow-up field keeps the conversation going.

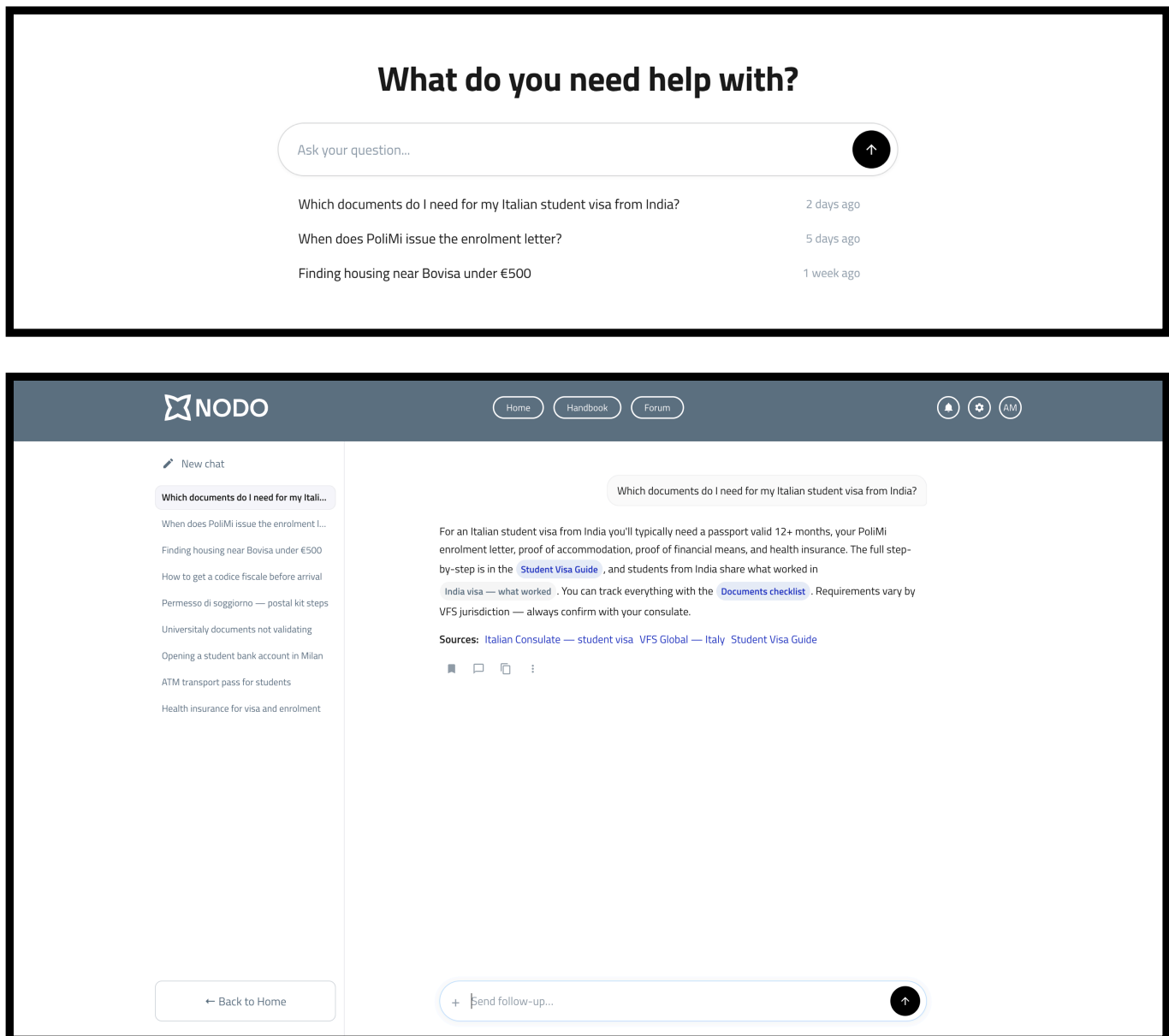


Figure 106: AI Assistant Window

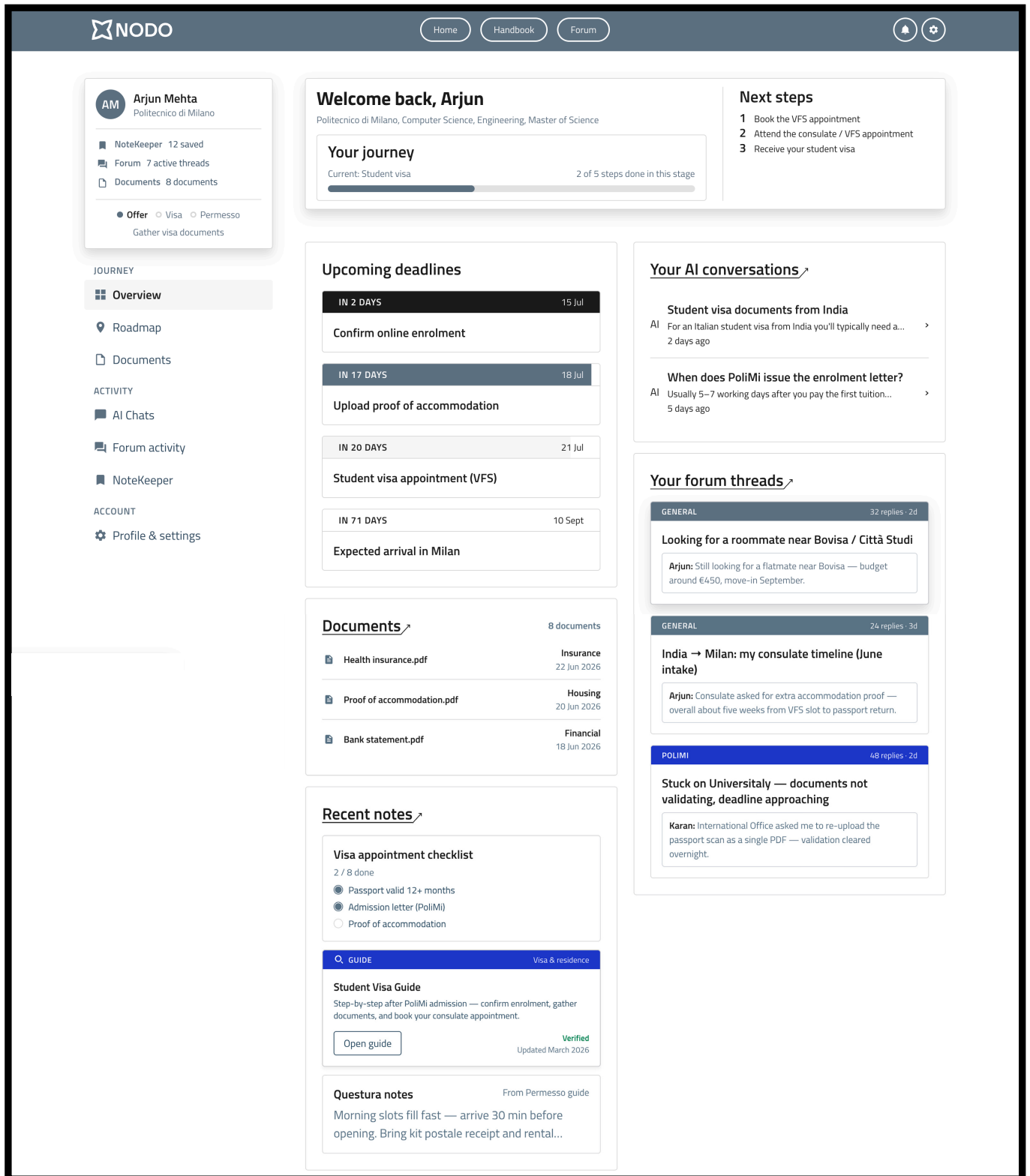


Figure 107: Personal Account, Overview

## PERSONAL ACCOUNT

The Personal Account is the student's own space on the platform, the context layer that makes everything else personalised. What the

profile knows about the student is what the AI Assistant reads from and what the Handbook and Forum use to surface the right content. It is reached from the account avatar in the header and is organised as a set of pages held together by an [Overview](#) (Figure 107). Profile card and orientation sidebar on the left stay visible throughout every account part, showing the student's name, university, saved counts and current status track. The Overview page is the hub that brings everything together, a sort of "home page" for student account.

The [Roadmap](#) page (Figure 108) shows the student's path from admission to settling in Milan as a sequence of journey stages, each with its own checklist and progress count. This is where the abstract journey becomes a personal, trackable to-do list tied.

The [Documents](#) page (Figure 109) is the student's document wallet: a single place to store and download files, grouped by category. Keeping documents here means they can feed date-based reminders.

The [AI Chats](#) page (Figure 110) collects every conversation with the Assistant. Chats are listed by question and openable in full, having the same saved history reachable from the home search.

The [Forum activity](#) page (Figure 111) gathers the student's involvement in the Forum — all their own posts, replies and saved discussions, filterable by type — so students can track the conversations they started or joined without browsing through the open Forum.

Finally, the [NoteKeeper](#) (Figure 112) is the student's saved library of checklists, guides and notes, with pinned items and the rest filterable by type. It is where anything saved from across the platform is kept together.

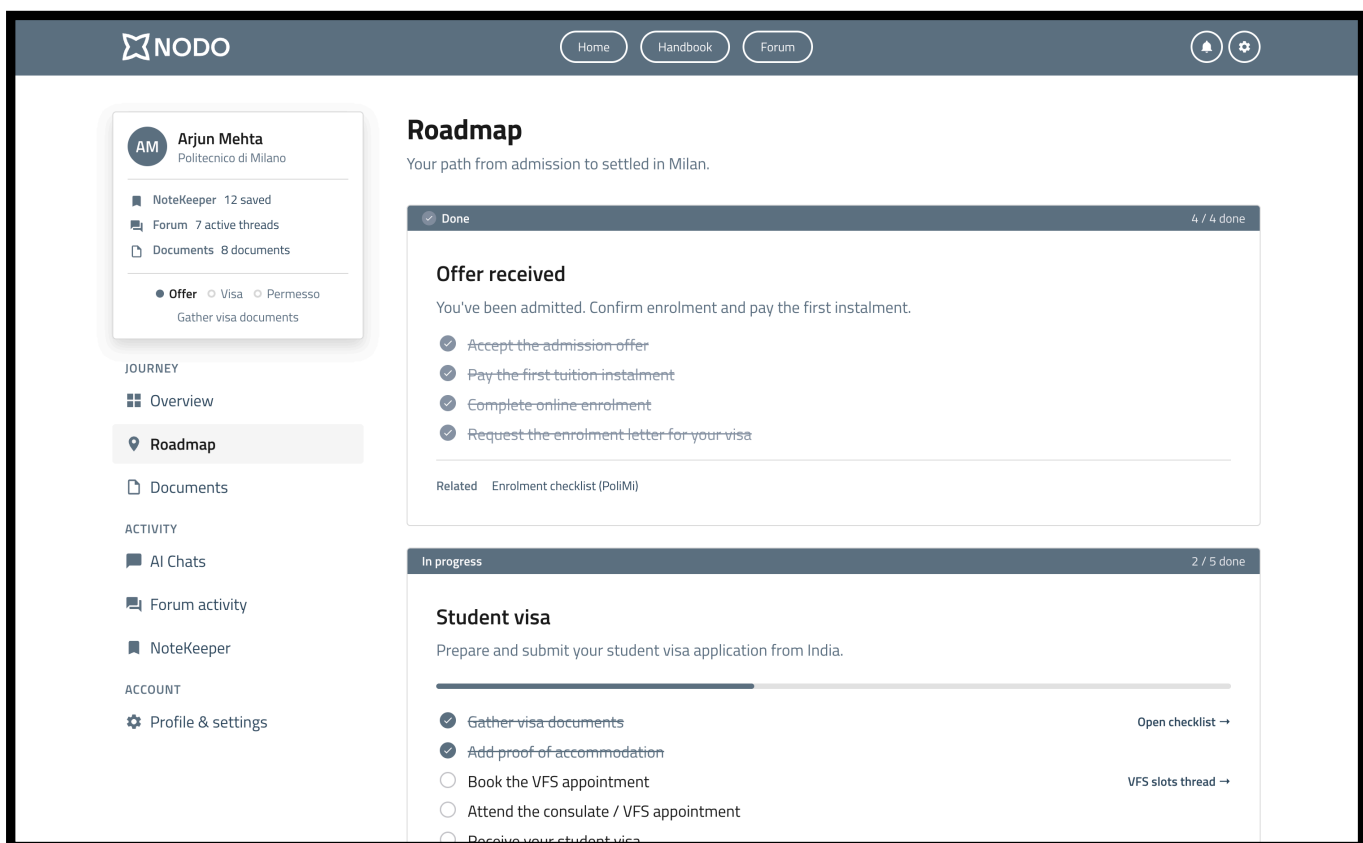


Figure 108: Personal Account, Roadmap

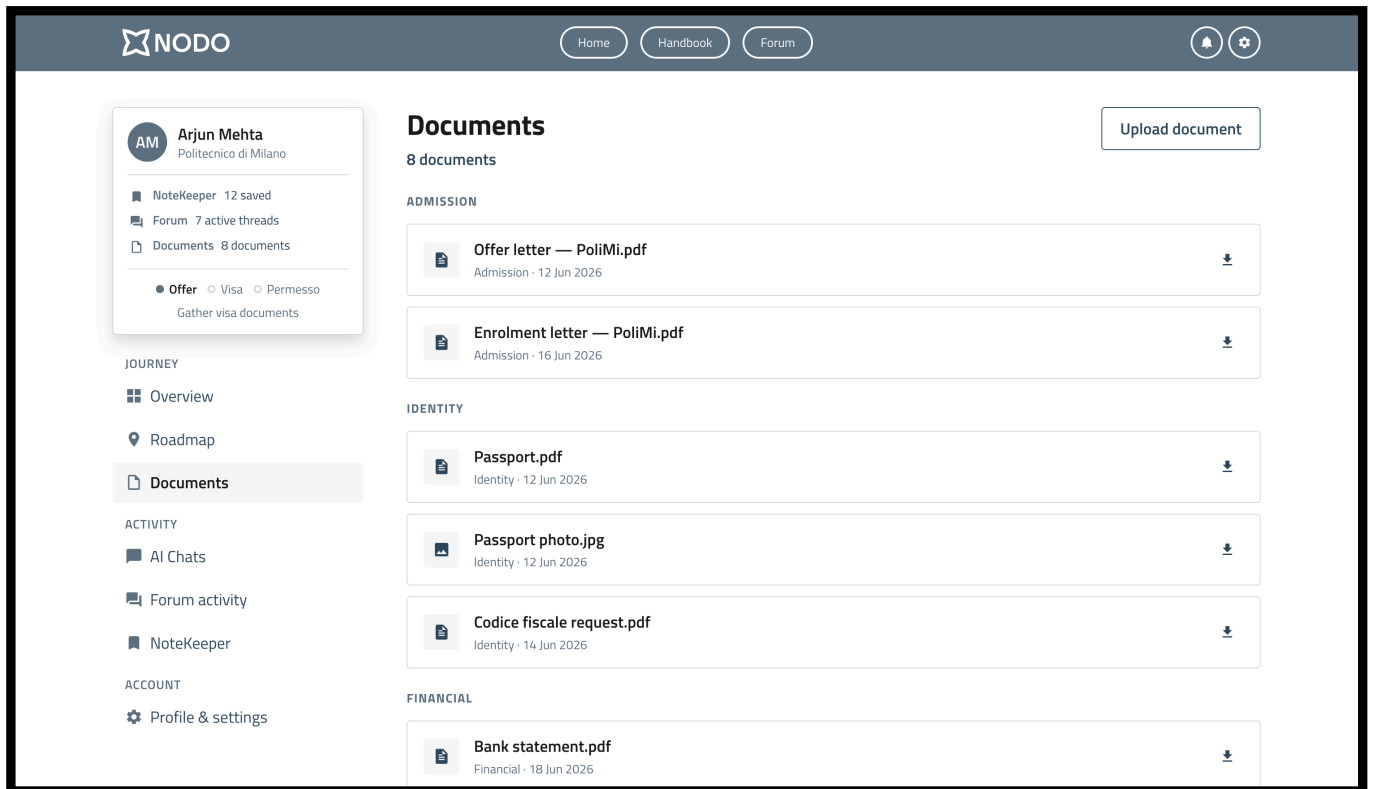


Figure 109: Personal Account, Documents

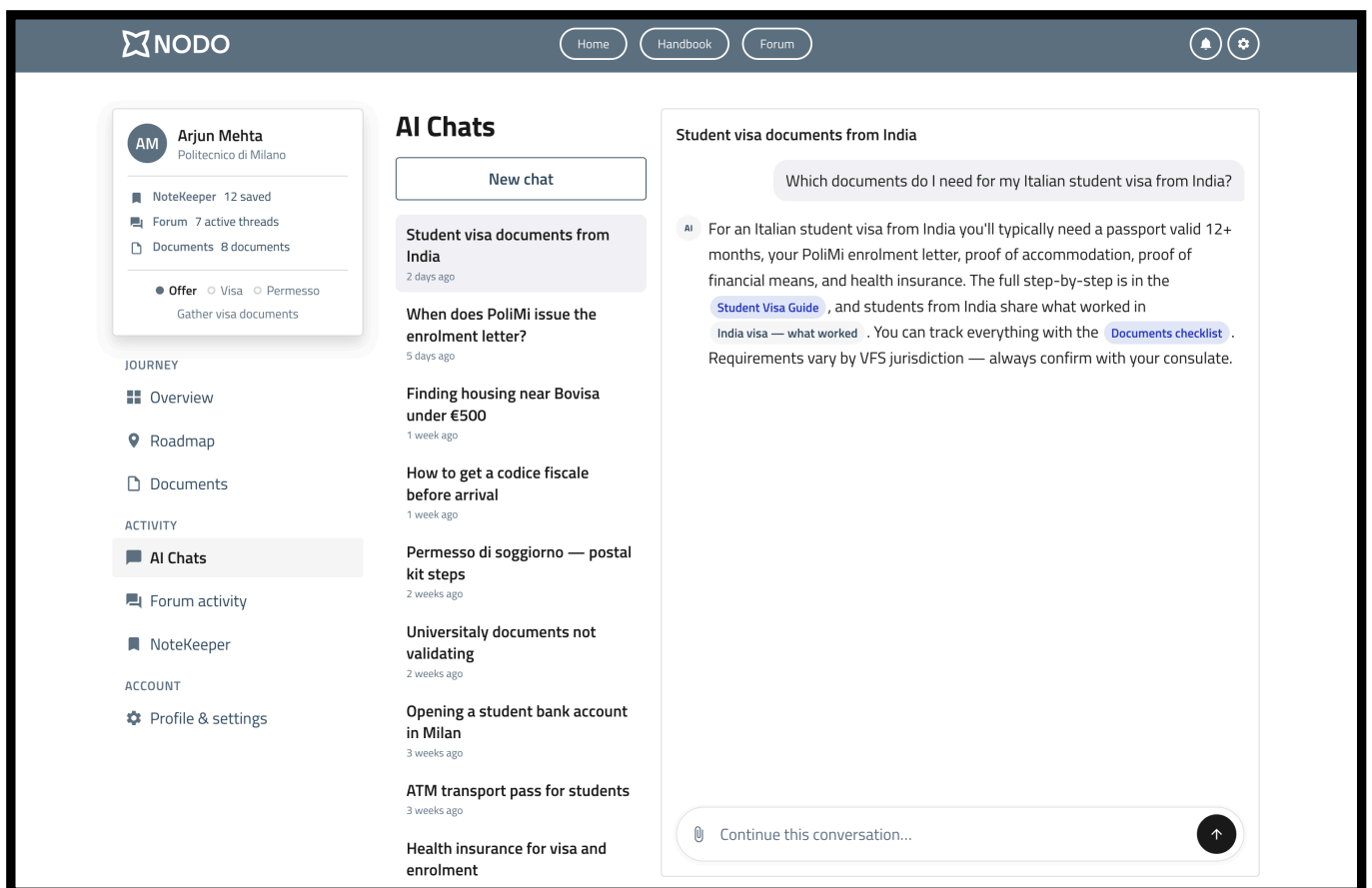


Figure 110: Personal Account, AI Chats

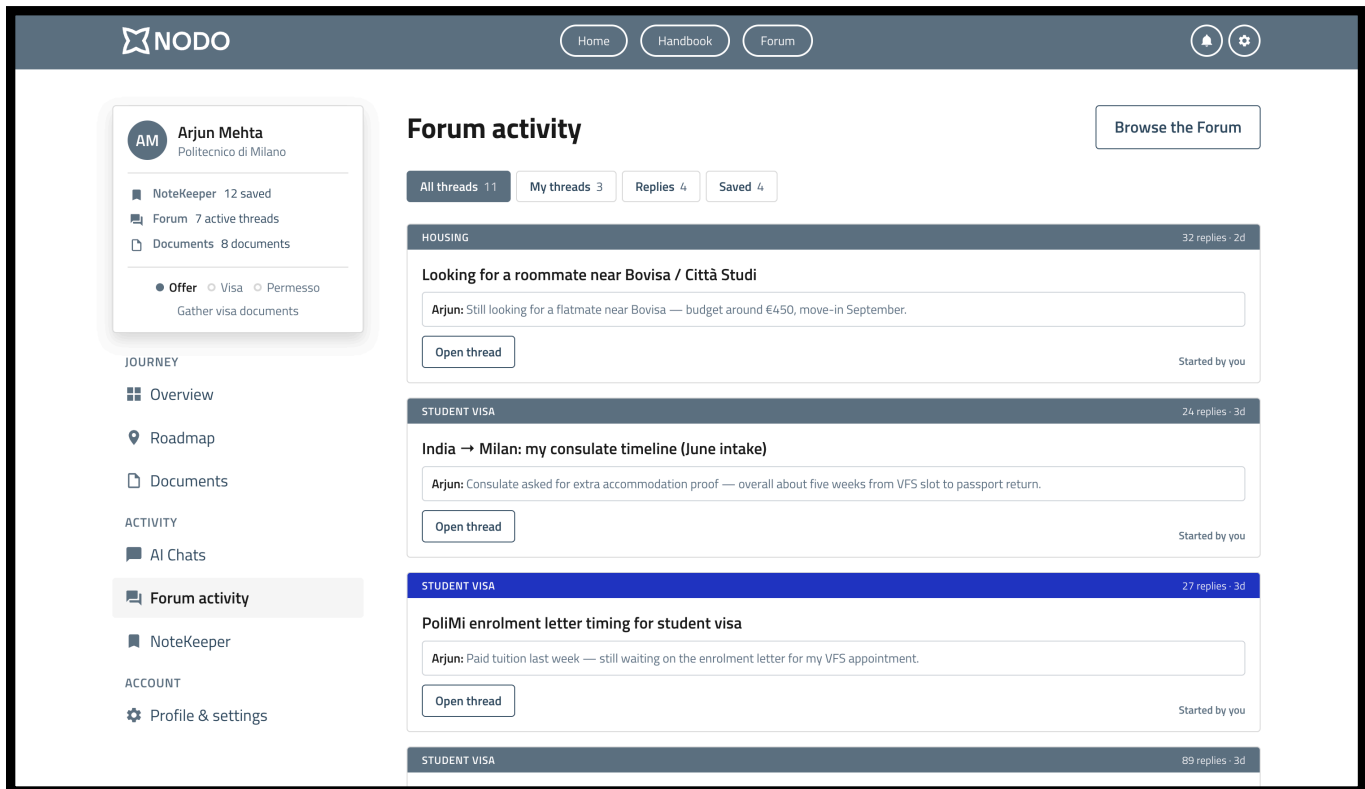


Figure 111: Personal Account, Own Forum Activity

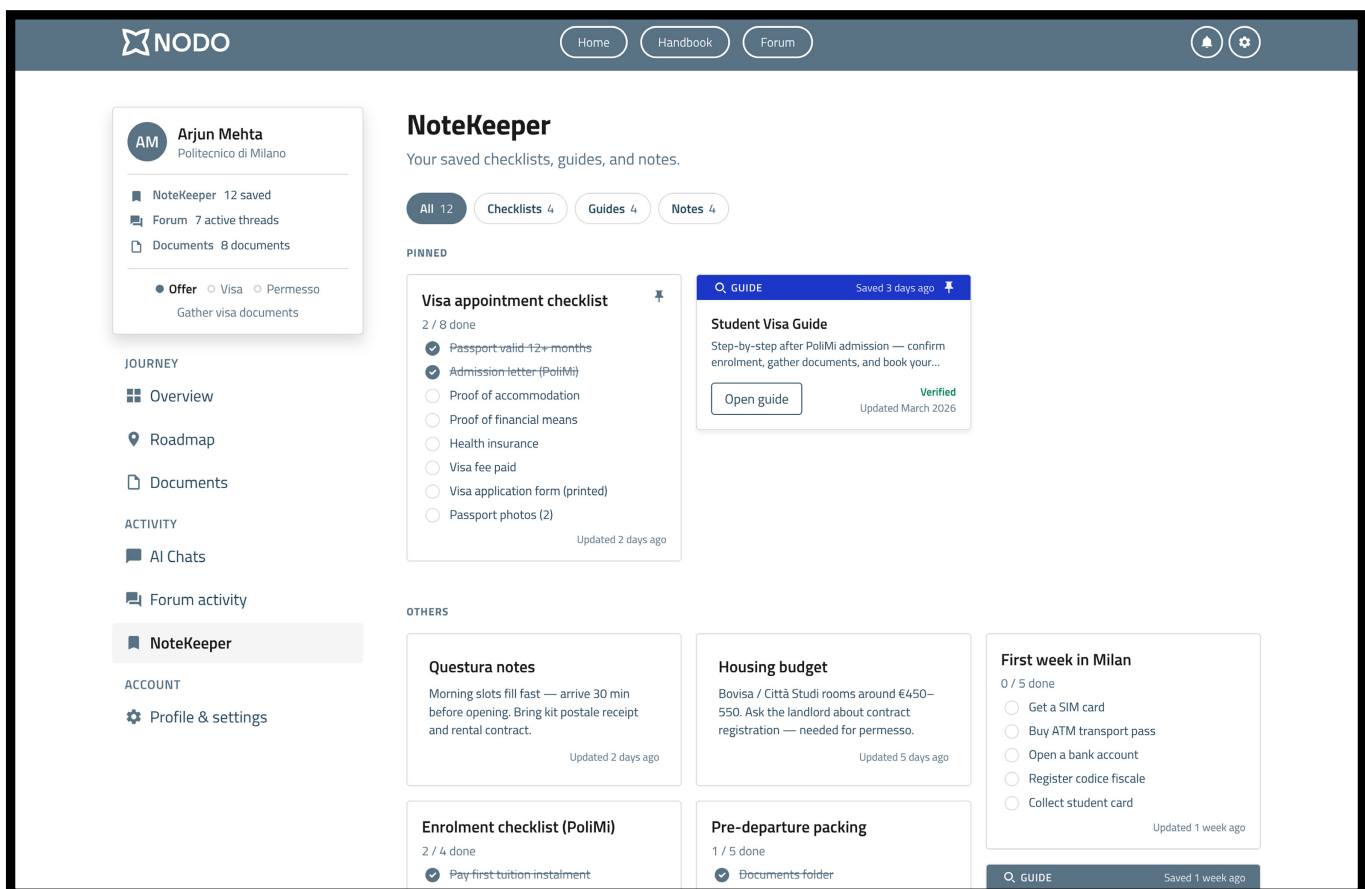


Figure 112: Personal Account, NoteKeeper

## MOBILE VERSION

NODO is designed responsively, adapting from the desktop layout to a mobile view (*Figures 113–115*). Here, the two-column Home page (Handbook and Forum) collapses into a flow, the navigation condenses into icons and cards resize to full width while keeping the same content and hierarchy. This is a necessity for the platform's actual context of use: the moments NODO is built for are rarely lived at a desk. Student might need to check documents to bring one more time while standing in the queue at the post office, find a document to show at the Questura or read a forum thread on the metro. Also survey and interview results are showing a need of mobile adaptation. Therefore, a way-finding system that only works well on a laptop will not be successful.

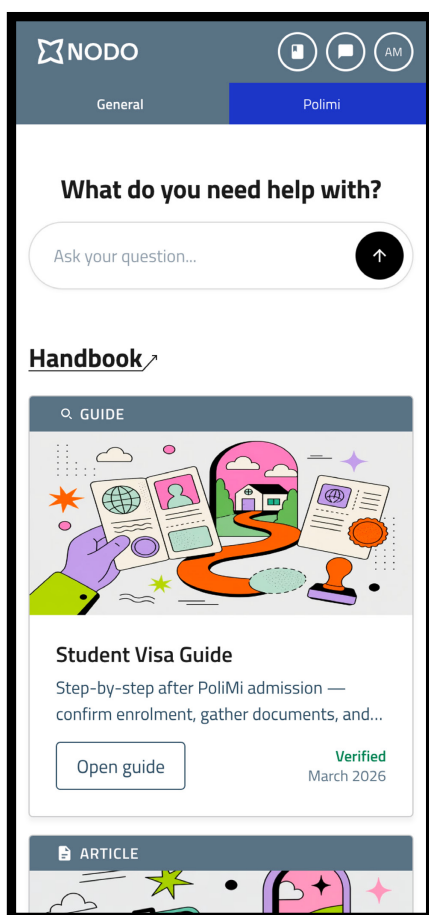


Figure 113: Home Page, Mobile Version

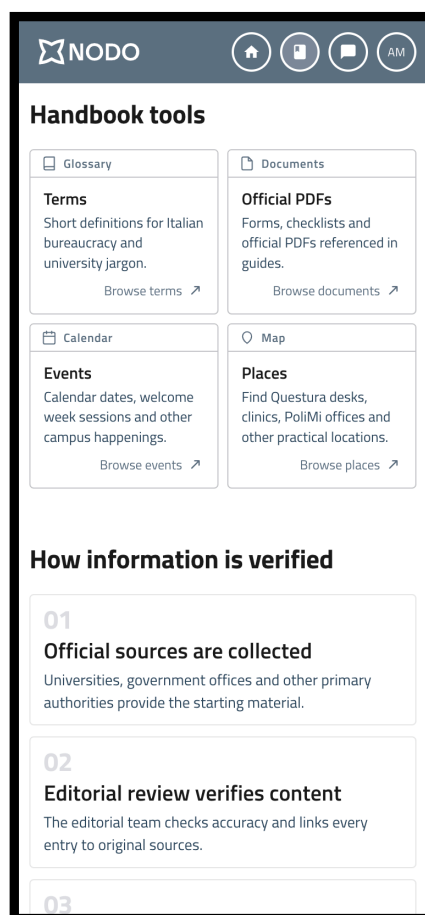


Figure 114: Handbook Page, Mobile Version

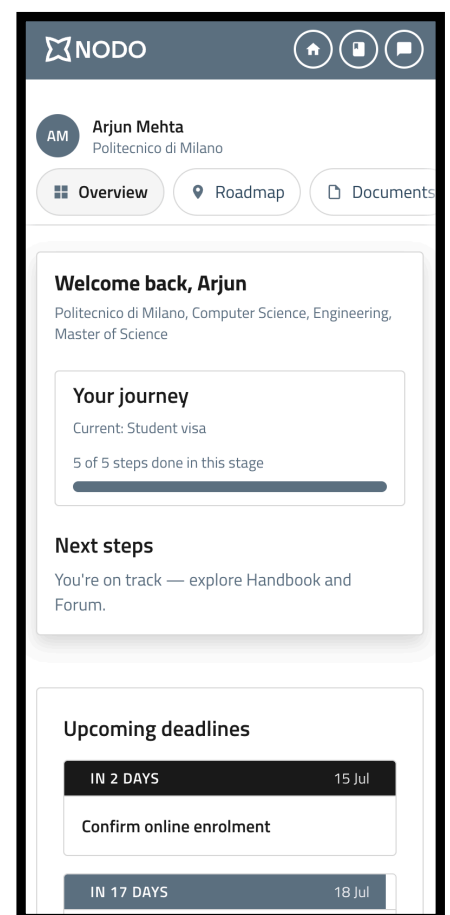


Figure 115: Personal Account Page, Mobile Version

While designing this prototype all main areas and features were tried to be covered. Still, it does not claim a full completeness. It covers the MVP core, demonstrating the key logics. What it cannot yet show is how the system performs under real use, with real students, in the real conditions of arrival in Milan. This question belongs to the next stage of development, in which case this prototype will require user testing and further refinement.



# **FINAL REFLECTIONS**



This thesis initial goal was to understand why Italy is so good at attracting non-EU international students and quite poor at retaining them, and what design might do about it. The work produced a dense research base — one that not only captures the phenomena already present in the literature, but also names and explains new ones. The "entry–stay paradox", the "geographic lottery", the portrait of Milan as a city caught between genuine drivers of change and the systemic fragmentation it inherits from the national frame, and the quite thin existing coverage of the non-EU students integration path — all of these emerged through the background research. Taken together, I believe the relevance of the topic and the need for change are visible and sufficiently explained, and that the primary research grounds them in lived evidence. Survey and in-depth interviews told a coherent story: the system does not reject people, it erodes them gradually, until leaving becomes the rational choice. From here the work performed a conceptual shift — reframing the problem not as missing information but as poor integration international students have into the institutional, socio-economic and relational-cultural fabric of the country. That reframing is, in my view, the real contribution of this thesis, because it changes what a solution is even supposed to do: not to publish more information, but to act as a trusted connector across an existing fragmented system.

## LIMITATIONS

The most significant constraint was related to the primary research, specifically the combination of my own network reach and a compressed, roughly three-week collection window. This produced a clear sampling bias, making results more directional, rather than statistically generalisable. To draw conclusions with greater confidence, more interviews need to be conducted and a larger sample of survey responses collected.

The stakeholder side also has its gap. The institutional perspective was gathered primarily through Politecnico di Milano, which I treated as the main feasible future stakeholder. A fuller picture would require reaching across more units of the same university, several other universities with different support structures and the Comune di Milano. Direct interaction with the municipality would allow me to verify whether the interest of the city authorities exists in practice.

Finally, all of this was carried out against an unstable geopolitical situation that strongly shapes general migration intentions and the decision to settle abroad. This fact inevitably coloured how respondents spoke about staying or leaving in Italy.

None of these limits invalidate the findings, but they do mark the boundaries of what can responsibly be stated and provide a clear starting point for further work, in its case.

## FUTURE VISION

If the project continues, the immediate priorities follow directly from limits: widening the respondent base, deepening the stakeholder map across Milan universities and municipality, and user testing the

prototype to move it from a concept toward a pilot. The system's architecture was initially designed based on the reality, not as an idealised proposition, and this is what makes me believe it can actually exist — even if in a smaller, lighter first form that requires less initial investment. An MVP pilot, anchored in a single willing university as the first tenant of the multi-tenant model, would let the core be tested before any wider commitment.

Beyond that, the longer vision is one of the system possible expansion. The thesis deliberately positions non-EU students as a part of the broader migrant community, facing the same structural issues as any other legal migrant group. Hence, a system built for students could, in a more mature form, extend to wider migrant community, inspired by the strongest international references. The multi-tenant structure is what makes this scaling plausible: new institutions and city-level actors could join the same shared core without fragmenting it further.

## POSSIBLE IMPACT

The most important argument for a service like this is whether it has a leverage. The problem of international students retention in Italy is real and has serious economic consequences, yet much of it is usually attributed to the labour market — the hardest and slowest constraint to move, and the one most often cited as the main obstacle to international students settling. What this work suggests is that the problem begins earlier, having its roots in a constant bureaucratic friction, in the absence of trusted guidance, in social isolation, in cultural society disinterest. These are issues that a well-designed integration system could address. In this sense, the proposed service could begin to impact students retention even before structural changes in the market occur, if any at all.

If it worked, the benefit would not touch the students alone. Universities would gain a more supported, more likely-to-stay international cohort and a more prominent role as a link between students and the urban ecosystem, increasing their importance on a city-wide scale. In turn, the city and its society would benefit economically and socially from talent that is integrated rather than remaining only temporarily.

I want to be careful and not to exaggerate, as, definitely, no single service solves a structural crisis and the impact I am describing is a probable direction rather than a guaranteed outcome. But even a partial success would matter, proving that the "entry–stay paradox" is not a fixed condition of the Italian system and can be changed.



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## **DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING AND DESIGNING PROCESS**

During the preparation of this work I used Notebook LM and Claude exclusively for the purpose of collecting and organising background information, refining grammar, improving linguistic clarity and translating selected passages originally written in Russian. All conceptual content, theoretical frameworks, methodological structures and design outputs presented in this thesis are my own work or are explicitly and correctly cited. After using these tools for linguistic revision and translation support, I carefully reviewed and edited all resulting content.

Cursor was used as an analytical assistant in two distinct stages of the research process. First, during the survey analysis phase, it helped to structure the dataset, generate summaries, identify patterns and produce draft insights — all of which were then validated by me against the raw data. Second, during the interview analysis phase, it helped to structure the transcribed material, identify insights and produce a draft analysis grounded in direct quotes, which I then reviewed and verified for accuracy and research relevance. Additionally, Cursor was used for the prototype code building, as this approach offers greater flexibility for future development compared to Figma-based prototyping alone.

I take full responsibility for the final version of this publication.

Quando la guerra sarà finita,  
ritorneremo tutte alla vita