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Enhancing Third-Country National Talent Retention and Employment Permit Compliance: A Management Consultancy Approach for Business in Malta

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Abstract

The study will examined the relationship the management consultancy intervention and talent retention of the third country nations in Malta office relocation. A management consultant is an expert who has some professional or technical skills, on the basis of which he or she advise clients who came to him/she for consultation. Employee retention or talent retention is the most crucial challenges facing employers in the many firms as a result of shortage of skilled labor, low talented people, economic growth and turnover of employee level. This study will adopt a qualitative research approach based subjectivist ideology. The population of this study includes (20) twenty management staff of the school. A purposive sampling will be used with the open-ended questionnaire in line with the thematic analysis and using manual coding and NVivo 12 software in terms of data analysis.

Keywords: *Management Consultant Intervention, Talent Retention, and Employment Permit.*

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The introduction provides the rationale for the investigation, an overview of the processes that are used in the research work, such as the objectives, the research questions that the investigation was designed to answer, the scope, significance of the study, it is very essential to get the reader's mind set for what he/she would go through in the document. However, it would make the reader to understand that the context is towards the third country nations (TCN) as discussed below.

1.1 Background to The Study

The crucial target of talent retention is to in-cooperate the stakeholders; because it would enhance happiness to both employees and employers. It facilitates loyal employees sticking to the company for a longer duration, which in turn will benefit both the stakeholders. So, employee retention is not just a problem or matter that can be dispensed with records and reports (Gorde, 2019). It is purely or decently depends upon how the employers understand the various concerns of the employees and how they help them resolve their problem in terms of need. Every organization spends time and invests money in grooming new employees and makes them corporate-ready. According to Gorde (2019) organization will definitely be in complete loss, if such employees quit after they are fully trained.

On the other hand, organization is/are absolutely at loss when the employees resign from their job once they are fully educated or trained. This concept, talent retention takes into consideration the numerous measures taken so that an individual stays in an organization for a period of time frame. Talent retention has become a major asset for any organization in this era of global competition. A firm invest high amount of capital in their Human resource practices such as recruitment, selection & training programmes and what happens to the firm if these talents or employees either resign or leave the organization in short while pursuing new carrier opportunities. In the same vein, overwhelmed by unpredictable retention trends and cut throat global competition, firms are now achieving the need to understand the supply-demand equation that is healthier in order to assemble efficient methods to attract or draw and retain top competent workforce (Swaroopa & Sudhir, 2019).

According to Hom, Lee, Shaw, and Hausknecht (2017) employee retention is the most crucial challenges facing employers in the many firms as a result of shortage of skilled labour, low talented people, economic growth and turnover of employee level. This concept involves taking measures to encourage the workforce (Human resource) to retain in the firm for the maximum period of time. However, employment permit in this regards, in the light of international declarations and conventions, management of an organization owes it as an obligation to ensure the health and safety of all their personnel. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) Article 10 of R164, employers are obligated among other things, to provide workplaces and equipment, and use work methods, which are safe and no risk to health" and "to provide the necessary work supervision". Also, one of the objectives of the national policy on occupational safety and health in Nigeria (2006) is" to prevent accidents and departures from health arising out of or in the course of work''.

According to Alcumus, Safe Contractor Guidance Document (2016), a permit to work (PTW) is a formal written safety control system, that is implemented to help prevent accident or injury to personnel, prevents damage to plant/machinery and to prevent damage to a product or to a client site. The above definition attempted to render a comprehensive definition of permit to work system but could not state at what stage in the work process that the permit to work is required. Permit to work is an indispensable document without which it is impossible to initiate the commencement of a hazardous work, maintaining the progress of the work and confirming the cancellation/closure of work. Employment permit or permit to work in an organization with respect to third country nations. According to Alcumus, Safe Contractor Guidance Document (2016), the document viewed permit to work as a formal written safety control system, that is executed to help prevent accident or injury to personnel, however, prevents damage to plant/machinery and to prevent damage to a product with regards to client site. Permit to work is an indispensable document without which it is impossible to initiate the commencement of a hazardous work, maintaining the progress of the work and confirming the cancellation/closure of work (Ifeanyi & kirfi, 2019). The term of an employment permit typically states or outline the specific conditions and arrangement that may govern an employee's work relationship with an employer. However, these terms may also include the employee's termination arrangement, hours of work, benefits, wages, and start date respectively.

A management consultant is an expert who has some professional or technical skills, on the basis of which he or she advise clients who came to him/she for consultation. In management, Imaga (2003) pointed out that consultancy services involve the management of an organization consulting experts to help in tackling general business problems and other more specified problems, which are not strictly auditing and tax oriented. Management consultants are experts in management profession who are called in by organizations in a state of ill health. They are expected to apply their knowledge in diagnosing the illness of their clients and apply necessary treatment that will lead the client's organization to the path of health recovery, growth and development (Akpanabia, 2017). However, his intervention or approach would be to analyze the organizational situation and prescribing solution to be applied. Here, employees in the client organization keep on working while the consultants stand by to watch unfolding events.

Human Resource Management Practices are strategic, integrated and coherent approaches to the employment, development and well-being of the people working in organizations (Armstrong, 2016). Human Resource Management Practices are the process through which management builds the workforce and tries to create the human performances that the organization needs. According to Boxall and Purcell (2016) HRM is concerned with the human beings in an organization. Again, Human Resources Management encompasse the management of people in organizations from a macro perspective, i.e. managing people in the form of a collective relationship between management and employees. This approach focuses on the objectives and outcomes of the Human Resources Management functions. It means that the Human Resources Management function in contemporary organizations is concerned with the notions of people enabling, people development and a focus on making the employment relationship fulfilling for both the management and employees (Armstrong, 2016).

1.2 The Problem

However, the relocation of the global business school may psychologically affect the workforce in terms of commitment and performance. Therefore, the management consultant has to play a major in terms of education and communication in order to reduce this perception in the institution. More so, organisations such as the global business school Malta may be facing a lot of problems in talent retention these days. However, hiring knowledgeable people for the job is essential for an employer but retention is even more significant than hiring (Hom et al., 2017; Edward, 2011). Organisations are looking for talented employees therefore, if an individual is not satisfied with the job he/she is doing, it may lead to a switch over to another job or some other more preferable job. Today, with the fast changing economic environment, the need and

demands of the employees are also changing very rapidly. Effective talent retention is a systematic effort by the employers creates and fosters an environment that encourages current or old employees to remain employed, by having policies and practices that address their diverse needs (Herman, 2005; Amoo, Saka, & Dangana, 2020). Therefore, the way recruitment & selections are done in order to attract potential talents into the organisation is crucial.

Employee retention is major to the long-term health and success of any organization; however, it is becoming increasingly difficult for company across the globe to attract, motivate and retain significant talent. Employee turnover is a major challenge faced by the companies globally. Retention rates are still on the increase and as the war for talent becomes more intense each year it is becoming increasingly significant for organizations to ensure they have the right in which the human resources are encouraged to remain with the company for the maximum period of time or until the completion of the project. Employee Retention is beneficial for the company as well as the workforce (Swaroopa & Sudhir, 2019). The demand for best employees is increasing day by day with increasing competition. As such, it has essential for organization to ensure that their employees keep on working with them and maintain a completive edge. However, a large number of employees nowadays do not want a traditional career within one organization. Currently, most of the employees are less and loyal and more opportunities than that of the past (Harman, 2005; Amoo et al. 2020). Employees are the organization's key resources and the success or failure of organization center on the ability of the employers to attract, retain and reward appropriately, competent and talented employees' willingness to stay on the job largely depends on the compensation system of the organization (Armstrong, 2003). In an attempt to ensure that talented employees are retained, organizations need to consider a variety of appropriate ways to reward the employees to get the desired results (Falola, 2014).

In the same vein, the need for organizations to manage health and safety cannot be overemphasized. It is critical and central for organizations to develop the science of anticipation, recognition, evaluation and control of hazards arising in or from the workplace that could impair the health and well-being of workers. Effective permit to work system is one of the fundamental ways of identifying, evaluating and reducing hazards in job operations especially in high and medium risk jobs to a level as low as reasonably practicable. Therefore, organizational activities where permit to wok system (PTW) seems to be frequently applied include but not limited to; Hot works, excavation(manual or mechanical), demolition works, jobs performed by contractors, potential oxygen deficiency or enrichment, potential flammable/explosive atmosphere, potential high temperature/pressure, potential exposure to hazardous chemicals (toxic, reactive, acid, caustic, confined space entry, bypassing or removing/altering safety devices and equipment, elevated work, Introduction of ignition sources where not permanently allowed (fire permit), electrical troubleshooting or repair on live circuits, maintenance or repairs in areas, or to equipment or lines, containing or supposed to contain hazardous materials or conditions, manual or powered excavations, use of mobile cranes, insulation or catalyst handling, use of adapters, product conversion of stationary or mobile or portable vessels and containers, temporary or permanent changes, alterations, modifications of equipment or processes, exposure to traffic (road, rail,) and exposure to moving/rotating machine(Ofoegbu, Olawepo, & Ibojo, 2013).

According to Ifeanyi and kirfi (2019) most institutes or firms seems to pay a lip service to the permit to work document resultantly, the permit to work system exists only in theory. It seems to have become a routine duty for most organizations to obtain and sign the permit to work document (PTW) before commencement, during job extensions or closure of the job task without paying adequate attention to the critical health and safety concerns of the document. The practical application of the risk preventive measures for the various pre-identified potential hazards inherent in the job as contained in the permit to work and provision of adequate supervision for the job seems to be overlooked and the same time ignored. However, it is on the above short comings that the research seeks to carry out a study on the above variables in Malta with respect to third country nations.

1.3 The Objectives of The Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between management consultancy intervention and talent retention of the third country nations in Malta. The specific objectives are to;

i. Examine the current challenges faced by businesses in retaining TCNs and how management consultancy strategies improves
ii. Assess the extent of compliance with TCNs employment permit regulations among businesses of the in Malta.
iii. Identify the management consultancy strategies that are effective in improving retention and

employment permit compliance of TCNs by businesses in Malta.

1.4 Research Questions

Based on the foregoing arguments**,** this study aims to address the following research questions:

i. What are the current challenges businesses and complying with business in Malta face in retaining TCNs and employment permit regulations among businesses of the in Malta?

ii. What management consultancy strategies are effective in improving retention of TCNs by businesses in Malta?

iii. What the management consultancy strategies are effective in improving TCNs employment permit compliance by businesses in Malta?

1.5 Significance of the study

This study produced and at the same time provide theoretically relevant and useful outcome for managers and stakeholders or broad of trustees on how it can improve service deliveries to clients or those in need of one services or the other and lead to competitive advantage in the enterprise. This study will also produce practically useful results, which will expose the employers in Malta with rest to third country nations on how best to integrate its resources to enhance organizational sustainability. It will also demonstrate a clear understanding why employers of the third country nations should buy the idea of (management consultancy intervention, organizational support, human resource practices well as their regulatory and institutional frameworks and talent retention and employment permit) especially in this unpredictable business environment where diverse talents are required in order to sustain the business. Again, it will be useful to non-governmental organisations or agencies handling employment related matters, the labour Unions and other affiliate Unions and hence, it will be beneficial to academicians, researchers and students to make references while carrying out their research on these variables, or involve in seminars, symposia and workshops as it is a rich resources material.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The scope of the study basically means all those things that will be covered in the research work or project. It defines clearly the extent of content that were covered by the research in order to come to more logical conclusions and give conclusive and satisfactory answers to the research. However, the study scope identified herein provides the framework which streamlines the activities of the research as regards to content, geographical and unit.

1.6.1 Content Scope

The content scope of the study is the theoretical review. The content scope of this study will cover management consultancy interventions, organizational support, human resource management practices and regulatory and institutional framework and talent retention and employment permit.

1.6.2 Geographical Scope

This study was domiciled in Malta. More so, the study was also cut across employees of the third country nations (TCNs) in Malta.

1.6.3 Unit Scope

This specifies the unit of analysis. The objects of theorizing in the social sciences manifest themselves at different level of analysis. The level of analysis refers to the entities about which the theory poses concepts and relationships – individuals, groups, and organizations and society. The unit of analysis was the organizational or macro level of analysis.

Structure of Dissertation

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CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This chapter thoroughly assesses the literature arranged under conceptual clarity, theoretical framework, empirical analysis, and a summary of current gaps. It draws upon recent scholarly works and studies pertinent to the retention and employment permit compliance of Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) across EU member states. The review is organised into several key sections. It begins by discussing the conceptual framework underlying the study, followed by an examination of the roles played by employment agencies and compliance officers. It then delves into the empirical findings from related studies across EU member states. Finally, the chapter identifies gaps in the existing literature that this study seeks to address, thus justifying the need for a focused investigation into the Maltese context.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

2.1.1 Challenges Encountered by Businesses in Retaining Third Country Nationals (TCNs)

In the context of rising globalisation and labour mobility, Sommarribas (2021) defined Third-Country Nationals as workers who are neither nationals of the European Union nor the European Economic Area, and they are essential in mitigating labour shortage, particularly in Malta. Despite the critical role of TCNs in various sectors, particularly construction, healthcare, and hospitality, businesses face difficulties retaining them. The retention of TCNs is fundamentally linked to organisational stability, immigration policy, socio-economic integration, and legal compliance. This chapter examines businesses' primary challenges in retaining TCNs, utilizing empirical studies, policy reports, and case-based evidence from the EU and Malta (European Commission, 2024).

1. Legal and Bureaucratic Hurdles

The complex legal and bureaucratic frameworks regulating the employment of TCNs present a significant challenge. Businesses must navigate a complex regulatory permit system that includes documentation, timelines, and employer obligations. Third-country nationals (TCNs) in Malta must adhere to the Single Permit Application system, consolidating work and residency permits. This system often experiences high demand, resulting in extended processing times and increased administrative errors. The European Commission (2023) indicates that inconsistencies in permit administration and inflexible renewal procedures frequently generate uncertainty for employers and workers alike. Expired or delayed work permits pose risks of fines for businesses, while TCNs may face unemployment or deportation, resulting in increased turnover. In 2022, employers in EU states identified permit renewal uncertainty as the primary factor contributing to turnover among third-country nationals (OECD, 2023). Additionally, small and medium-sized enterprises frequently lack the human resources capacity necessary to oversee and ensure compliance with permits, resulting in legal infractions.

2. Cultural and Social Integration Barriers

Retention is a social issue where Cultural integration remains a significant barrier for many TCNs, especially in countries where language and cultural norms are distinctly different. Language proficiency is essential for job performance, social lifestyle, and belonging. In a Malta-based study by Gauci and Vella (2022) many TCNs felt socially out of place regarding cultural integration, little or no support for language education, and no training. Although some larger companies provided cross-cultural training, mentoring, or community-building projects, these programs are hardly followed in SMEs due to budgetary constraints (ILO, 2021).

3. Economic Pressures and Cost of Living

One big problem is living expenses, especially regarding housing and utilities. Recent sharp increases in Malta's rental rates have disproportionately affected low- to middle-income earners, many of whom are third-country nationals (TCNs). Companies may offer competitive salaries, but they hardly provide enough housing help, which has become a leading factor influencing TCN turnover. Many TCNs who replied to the Malta Chamber of Commerce's 2023 poll said they were leaving Malta because of expensive rent (Malta Chamber, 2023). This inclination results in operational interruptions to businesses, rising hiring expenses, and high staff turnover. Countries like Germany and Canada have shown encouraging outcomes on retention by subsidizing accommodation for foreign workers (Lufthansa HR Report, 2020).

4. Workplace Discrimination and Exploitation

Discrimination and unequal treatment remain a big challenge for TCN retention. While labour laws prohibit discriminatory practices, enforcement is often weak, and many cases go unreported. TCNs frequently experience wage disparities, minimal benefits or unequal workloads compared to local workers. The ILO (2021) has documented various forms of workplace exploitation, including unpaid overtime, contract manipulation and verbal abuse. When workers perceive an environment as hostile or unjust, loyalty to the employer diminishes rapidly. This issue is further exacerbated when companies

lack inclusive HR policies or mechanisms for grievance reporting. Businesses that invest in ethical standards, diversity training, and inclusive workplace culture are more successful in retaining diverse talent.

5. Weak Retention Policies and Lack of Strategic Planning

Finally, many businesses lack a proactive strategy for retaining foreign talent. Retention policies are often reactive rather than preventative. Few organizations conduct regular satisfaction surveys, offer retention incentives, or engage TCNs in dialogue about their challenges. PwC Malta (2022) revealed that only 23% of surveyed SMEs had a formal strategy for managing foreign workforce retention. In contrast, companies with structured onboarding, periodic reviews, and mentorship programs showed up to 30% lower turnover rates among TCNs.

2.1.2. Role of Employment Agencies and Compliance Officers

Employment agencies play a pivotal role in recruiting TCNs. The Employment Agency Regulations impose stricter standards on these agencies, including prohibitions on charging fees to candidates and requirements for transparency in operations (Arnold, 2017). Additionally, the role of Compliance Officers within organizations has become increasingly significant. These professionals are responsible for ensuring adherence to local and international regulations, thereby safeguarding organizations from legal and financial risks. Employment agencies and compliance officers serve as vital intermediaries, ensuring legal compliance, protecting workers' rights, and facilitating long-term retention. Their collaborative role is especially crucial in countries where the influx of TCNs has transformed labour market dynamics (European Commission, 2024; OECD, 2023).

Employment agencies act as critical conduits for connecting job seekers, particularly TCNs, with prospective employers. In recent years, their role has expanded from basic job placement to encompass orientation, legal guidance, and cultural adaptation. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021), well-regulated employment agencies reduce labour exploitation, streamline work permit processes, and enhance workplace integration. For instance, in Malta, licensed agencies must comply with national recruitment standards that prohibit charging fees to candidates and mandate transparency in contractual terms (Jobsplus, 2023).

Beyond placement, employment agencies also play a preventive role in retention by ensuring appropriate job matching. Mismatches between workers' qualifications and job demands often result in early turnover. Agencies that conduct comprehensive skills assessments, language testing, and cultural orientation significantly increase job satisfaction and commitment among TCNs (Gauci & Vella, 2022). This is especially important in sectors such as healthcare and hospitality, where misalignment can adversely affect both service quality and workforce stability.

Compliance officers operate within organisations to uphold adherence to both internal policies and external regulations, including employment and immigration laws. Their responsibility is particularly pronounced in managing the complex requirements associated with employing TCNs. These include monitoring visa durations, ensuring timely renewal of work permits, and safeguarding against discriminatory practices (Dorn, & Zweimuller, 2021). As identified by PwC Malta (2022), organisations with designated compliance officers demonstrated higher retention rates and lower incidences of permit lapses or legal infringements. Compliance officers also play an instrumental role in designing and implementing inclusive workplace policies. These may include anti-discrimination measures, grievance redress mechanisms, and employee support programmes, all of which contribute to improved retention outcomes. According to the OECD (2020), firms that integrated compliance training into their HR protocols retained 30% more TCNs than those that did not.

Successful recruitment and retention of TCNs often hinge on coordinated efforts between employment agencies and compliance officers. For example, integrated onboarding programmes jointly managed by agencies and internal compliance teams have been shown to reduce attrition rates significantly (Smith & Turner, 2018). Such programmes typically include legal induction, language training, housing support, and mentorship schemes.

In Germany and Canada, cross-sector partnerships involving private agencies, public institutions, and compliance experts have led to the development of retention toolkits tailored for foreign workers (Brookfield Institute, 2020). These toolkits include modules on workplace rights, compliance checklists, and cultural adaptation. Malta's evolving framework for labour integration would benefit from adopting similar models to support its TCN workforce sustainably.

Despite their importance, employment agencies and compliance officers face considerable challenges in their mandate. These include limited resources, lack of digital infrastructure for permit tracking, and inconsistent enforcement of recruitment standards. Moreover, SMEs often lack the financial or organisational capacity to employ dedicated compliance officers, leaving gaps in legal oversight (ILO, 2021). Policy recommendations include increased funding for capacity-building in employment

agencies, mandatory compliance training for HR personnel, and the digitalisation of permit monitoring systems. Governments should also consider mandating collaborative frameworks between licensed agencies and registered compliance officers as a prerequisite for hiring TCNs. Such systemic changes would significantly enhance both recruitment efficiency and retention outcomes.

In conclusion, employment agencies and compliance officers are foundational pillars in the recruitment and retention of TCNs. While agencies serve as initial gateways into the workforce, compliance officers uphold the long-term legal and ethical framework necessary for sustainable employment. As labour markets continue to internationalise, their coordinated efforts will remain essential to ensuring that TCNs are not only recruited effectively but also retained equitably and legally. Enhancing their roles through policy reform and institutional support is therefore a critical step towards inclusive and compliant labour market systems in the EU and beyond.

2.1.3 Concept and Relevance of Management Consultancy

Management consultancy refers to the practice of providing professional advice and services to organizations to help them improve their performance, address complex issues and achieve their goals. Management consultants help businesses optimize operations, identify strategic opportunities and implement solutions to various challenges. Management Consultancy organizations with their diverse roles, provide professional advice to develop specific features and functions of the organisation or its overall management and operations growth. Steiner and Reichmuth (2015) offer a comprehensive definition of management consultants specialized in the public sector, describing them as, economic and social experts as well as scientists, who deliver a mandated, ad-hoc and paid consulting service to the administration or political leaders with a focus on processes or structures of public administration (Poonsiri, 2017).

According to O'Mahoney (2010), consultants are viewed in different ways such as political agents who shape agendas, fashionistas who create management trends, missionaries for capitalism who impose neo-liberalism on developing countries and fraudsters who trick managers into spending money on ineffective advice. Jung and Kieser (2012) suggest that the management concept needs to be more specific and usually gets vaguer during the discourse as different consultancies develop variants and other actors contribute interpretations.

Canato and Giangreco (2011) posit that consultants appear to play four prominent roles in innovation: information sources, standard setters, knowledge brokers and knowledge integrators. In general, MC companies possess specific knowledge and know-how and apply them to fulfil the goals established by the organisation. Rather than focusing on a single firm's specific activities or search paths, they also have been exposed to general trends in the industry. This level of expertise allows consultants to act as counsellors and futurists, especially for firms that are new to the market or lack a specific form of expertise.

When the benefits of acquiring external knowledge outweigh the costs of producing it internally, it makes sense to consult. Public administrations require policy knowledge, assessment of stakeholder dynamics and evaluation of governance systems provided by consultancy companies (Seabrooke & Sending, 2022). Management consultants have become increasingly visible and influential in policy formulation, implementation and public services restructuring (Kirkpatrick et al., 2019). Public organizations have increasingly sought management consultancies to support their efforts, as they rarely have the resources or skills to implement such programs themselves (Radnor & O'Mahoney, 2013). The demand for consulting advice in the public sector can sometimes be mandated by regulators, politicians or even Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (Kirkpatrick et al., 2023). Consultancies often serve to make legitimate decisions and changes to stakeholders (Kirkpatrick et al., 2019). Kirkpatrick et al. (2023) claim that, to date, no systematic research has shown a link between consulting use and the development of management functions across broader populations of public sector organizations.

Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011) stated the significant contribution of management consultants in formulating and implementing policies for public management reform across the globe. The influence of consultancy firms on the public sector has grown due to policies related to privatisation, central government activities and IT systems development (Kirkpatrick et al., 2019). It is debatable whether using consultants is a good idea or not. On one hand, it can bring in expertise that is not available within an organisation. It can strengthen policy and implementation capabilities and ultimately lead to better outcomes, such as improved efficiency and service quality. Advocates of consulting claim that it potentially benefits clients through a combination of people (access to specialist skills), process (knowledge on how to approach a task), and perspective (offering an independent, expert, or innovative view) (Kirkpatrick et al., 2019). However, the emergence of consultancy in the public sector predates the arrival of New Public Management (NPM) (Poonsiri, 2017), management consultants have primarily been used to push ideologically motivated NPM reforms, particularly privatisation.

Privatisation becomes the key to effective government, reducing the size of the public sector, shifting responsibilities to the private sector (Nguyen, 2019), and establishing more attractive alternatives for the private sector (Salamon, 2011). Along with outsourcing, privatisation and public-private partnerships, the use of consultants is one of the methods by which the private sector has entered into new governance structures (Beveridge, 2012), a new approach to problem-solving for the era of "third-party government" (Salamon, 2011). Salamon (2011) claims that "new governance" departs public organizations' focus to an external network of actors on which they increasingly depend. Such networks can bring significant challenges along with advantages. This dichotomy draws on two other bodies of theory: "principal-agent theory" and "network theory".

"The increased use of management consultants in the USA is further evidence of the hollowing of the state" is claimed by Momani (2013). As a result of established interdependencies between public agencies and a host of third-party actors, the government gains essential allies. However, it simultaneously loses complete control over the operation of its programs (Salamon, 2011). Browne (2021) argued that "over-reliance on consultancy contracts in Australia, is a symptom of the hollowing out of the public service". "Governments have moved to reduce or 'hollow out' permanent staff, assuming that external help can be hired on demand" (Kirkpatrick et al., 2023).

Steiner and Reichmuth (2015) claim that, due to the increasing public pressure to strive for a lean administration, the number of public employees is kept at a minimum. Thus, public organizations require external help for additional projects, such as an internal reorganization exceeding the existing capacity of the staff. Meanwhile, management consultants are a convenient way to circumvent possible hiring stops, as they do not show up on the payroll.

Nevertheless, consultants act as agents of change for applying policy transformation and honing management (Seabrooke & Sending, 2022). The tendency for consultancies to exercise power in an opaque and anti-democratic way has been called "consultocracy" by Hood and Jackson (1991). Consequently, "short-term, outsourced expert knowledge production is increasingly replacing civil servants' and politicians' long-term work." Ylönen and Kuusela (2018) define consultocracy as a phenomenon in which short-term, outsourced expert knowledge production often increasingly replaces the long-term work of civil servants and even politicians. This results in an increased power of consultants over politics, public governance and public sector practices. As a result, the increased use of consultants diminishes public agencies' planning capacity (Seabrooke & Sending, 2022).

Public agencies sometimes require consultancy due to budgetary and hiring limitations in their bureaucracies. In such situations, consultants are hired to perform specific tasks without incurring the costs of hiring permanent civil servants. The decision to use consultants is associated with their perceived efficiency, which can offer standardized advice on a larger scale and with a broader scope (Kirkpatrick et al., 2023). In some cases, consultants are viewed as "fire-fighting" agents for public administrations (Craft & Howlett, 2013).

Thy occupy a space defined as "permanence of temporary services" (Seabrooke & Sending, 2022). Public servants' experience of challenges by management consultants is widespread in the media, policy and academic research (Ylönen & Kuusela, 2018). This challenge is often presented as a hollowing-out process, not in the sense of outsourcing shared services, that dominate the field, but rather in reducing internal management expertise and bringing in external actors (Kirkpatrick et al., 2023). Consultants are perceived as "intruders" (Menon & Blount, 2003), posing a threat to managers' ethos, expertise, jobs and prospects or simply as being unnecessary.

Seabrooke and Sending (2022) suggest that there is a micro-to-macro relationship that regulates the interactions between consultancies and public administrations towards the focal points. The scholars claim that for interactions between consultancies and public administrations, these focal points are mainly concerned with task-setting around the recognition of ethos, expertise and status. Recognition of expertise is not only linked to the analytical and technical demands of the task but also to perceptions of command over abstract knowledge and capacity from cross-organisational experience. Since the 1940s, consultants have brought business techniques into public administration agencies, leading to controversy over whether they support or

undermine the public ethos (McKenna, 2006). Not only are the outcomes of consultancies' engagement with public administration inefficient, but consultants diminish skill development and ethos of public service, which includes valuing "legality, neutrality, equity, and loyalty" (Galwa & Vogel, 2021), that must be carried out by public servants. Expertise can be based on a wide array of more or less specialized knowledge, skills, technology, or tools. Recognition of status is critical in managing uncertainties (Seabrooke & Sending, 2022).

Seabrooke and Sending (2022) posit that the relationship between consultancies and public administrations can

significantly impact who controls tasks and how they are justified.

There are also potentially significant implications for policy around governing consulting use and associated costs. This is especially true in light of evidence suggesting that rising expenditures on consultants can have negative consequences for performance or whether consulting advice is perceived by managers either as a threat (lowering its use) or an opportunity (increasing its use) (Kirkpatrick et al., 2023).

2.1.4 Role of Management Consultancy in Employee Retention of TCNs

Across many European Union member states, TCNs fill essential roles in sectors grappling with chronic labour shortages, such as healthcare, construction, hospitality, and logistics (Gauci and Vella, 2022). Retaining these workers has become vital to economic stability and organisational resilience, particularly as aging populations and skill mismatches strain domestic labour supplies. While employee retention in general is shaped by factors such as job satisfaction, salary, leadership and organisational culture, TCNs retention requires a deeper understanding of cross-cultural dynamics, migration regulations and socio-political realities. TCNs face a range of additional challenges including immigration-related uncertainties, isolation due to cultural differences, language barriers and limited social support systems (OECD, 2020). A generic human resource approach may therefore fail to capture the complexity of retaining a culturally diverse and legally constrained workforce.

A major determinant of TCN retention is the legal and administrative framework governing work permits and residency. Delays in processing permits, ambiguous visa renewal policies, and lack of transparency regarding employment rights contribute significantly to worker insecurity (European Commission, 2024). For businesses, these uncertainties are not only operational liabilities but also strategic threats. A workforce plagued by instability is unlikely to reach peak productivity and organizations may struggle to sustain morale and continuity. Consultants in human resource management can play a critical role in mitigating these challenges. By conducting compliance audits, reviewing internal policies and training HR personnel in cultural competence and legal awareness, management consultants offer actionable pathways for businesses to improve retention outcomes. A well-known case study involves PwC's consulting work with SMEs across Europe, where interventions led to measurable improvements in both employee satisfaction and permit compliance (Smith & Turner, 2018).

Moreover, strategic retention practices such as onboarding programs tailored for international workers, culturally sensitive workplace training, legal assistance with documentation and accessible communication channels have been found to significantly reduce attrition rates. According to Hausknecht et al. (2009), targeted support mechanisms have a compounding effect on retention by building trust and signaling organisational commitment to worker well-being. This is particularly relevant for TCNs operating under tenuous legal and social conditions. Comparative studies from other regions offer valuable insights. For example, in Canada, the Global Talent Stream initiative requires employers to submit a Labour Market Benefits Plan detailing how they will support foreign workers. Research by the Brookfield Institute showed that employers who implemented structured integration and support programs under this scheme saw a 70% improvement in retention and productivity (OECD, 2020). Similarly, in Germany, the integration policies adopted by multinational companies such as Lufthansa have yielded long-term benefits in employee engagement and loyalty.

Beyond operational concerns, the moral and reputational dimensions of TCN retention should not be overlooked. Organizations that invest in equitable treatment and inclusive policies not only reduce legal risks but also enhance their employer brand. Social Exchange Theory supports this by arguing that when workers perceive fairness, respect and reciprocal value, they are more likely to remain loyal and committed (Blau, 1964). For TCNs, these perceptions are often formed early in the employment relationship and are shaped by how employers address both practical needs and emotional well-being.

Ultimately, improving TCN retention demands a multi-layered approach. Employers must recognize the interplay between legal frameworks, workplace practices and personal experiences. Government institutions need to streamline permit processes and ensure clear communication of rights and responsibilities. Meanwhile, management consultants must act as bridges, translating policy into practice, diagnosing structural weaknesses and crafting customized interventions (Smith & Turner, 2018). Only through this collaborative model can sustainable and ethical retention of TCNs be achieved in a competitive global labour market.

2.2 Empirical Review of Studies on Enhancing Third-Country Nationals Talent Retention and Employment Permit Compliance.

2.2.1 Empirical Review of Retention of Third Country Nationals in the European Labour Market

A pivotal empirical study on migrant worker retention was conducted by Kahanec and Zimmermann (2016), who

investigated labour market outcomes for migrants, particularly from third countries, across the EU following the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. Using EU Labour Force Survey microdata, their quantitative analysis found that while EU migrants integrated more swiftly, TCNs faced significantly lower employment rates and higher over qualification. The study concluded that retention was not merely a function of economic integration, but also institutional support, including access to training and recognition of qualifications. While the survey emphasized macro-labour trends, its implications are relevant for Malta's service-based economy, where TCNs often occupy low-skill roles despite having higher qualifications. In a more organizationally focused context, Fasani, Frattini, and Minale (2021) examined the employment trajectories of migrants in Italy and Spain using linked administrative and survey data. Their study revealed that employers who offered structured career progression, language support, and legal assistance saw better retention outcomes among TCN employees. Utilizing regression analysis and qualitative interviews, they showed that firms acting as "integration agents" achieved lower attrition rates. This is particularly relevant for Maltese employers in sectors such as healthcare and tourism, where job turnover among TCNs remains high. Although conducted in Southern Europe, the socio-economic parallels to Malta make their findings directly applicable to the present study.

2.2.2 Empirical Review of Employment Permit Systems and Compliance Dynamics

Ruhs (2013), in his comparative analysis of labour immigration policies across high-income countries, including EU member states, emphasized the trade-offs between openness and control. Using policy analysis, the study found that overly restrictive or unclear permit rules often led employers to circumvent legal channels, undermining compliance. Ruhs suggested that simplicity and employer-centered procedures increased compliance without sacrificing state control. This insight is crucial for Malta, where businesses have frequently cited bureaucratic hurdles and delays in work permit processing (European Commission, 2023). The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2021) provides empirical support for these claims, which published a comprehensive report on labour migration governance in the EU. Based on a review of national migration policies and stakeholder interviews across 12 member states, including Malta, the ILO found that permit systems with high administrative transparency, public-private coordination, and digitalized processes correlated with higher compliance. In Malta's case, the report noted improvements in JobsPlus coordination but also highlighted persistent challenges such as inconsistent permit renewal timelines and limited employer training on legal obligations.

2.2.3 Empirical Review of Management Consultancy and Employer Practices

A robust empirical contribution comes from the OECD (2020), which examined how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in OECD countries, including Malta, manage migrant workers. Through a mixed-methods approach involving employer surveys and interviews, the study concluded that SMEs struggle with legal compliance due to limited HR capacity and lack of access to legal expertise. However, it also found that when SMEs received targeted support, such as HR training and compliance toolkits, their ability to manage permits and retain skilled workers improved substantially. This aligns closely with the management consultancy model proposed in the current study, which seeks to deliver tailored support to Maltese employers.

Complementing this, the Dorn, and Zweimuller (2021) released a detailed study on labour market integration measures for TCNs in the EU. Drawing on national case studies, including one from Malta, the EMN documented how employers that engaged with integration services, such as mentorship schemes, legal advisory partnerships, and cultural mediation, achieved significantly better outcomes in both compliance and retention. These findings reinforce the role of external expertise in bridging gaps between regulatory demands and business realities.

2.3 Gaps in Existing Literature

The present seeks to fill several gaps in the existing literature. First, there is a significant lack of country-specific research on Malta, with most studies focusing on larger EU economies. While Malta faces acute labour shortages and a growing TCN workforce, it remains underrepresented in the literature on TCN retention and compliance. This research addresses this gap by providing a context-specific analysis tailored to Malta's legal, economic and demographic realities.

Another critical gap is the employer's perspective. Existing studies tend to focus on migrant or institutional perspectives, often neglecting the challenges faced by employers in managing TCNs. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the challenges Maltese businesses face in retaining TCN talent and ensuring permit compliance, particularly within the SME sector.

Moreover, most literature stops at identifying issues without providing solutions-oriented frameworks. The study stands out by proposing a management consultancy approach that offers practical, actionable strategies for businesses to improve both TCN retention and compliance.

This approach directly addresses the needs of firms looking for tangible support in managing migration-related HR and legal requirements.

Further, there is a gap in the literature regarding the integration of human resource management (HRM) and compliance within a unified framework. Most studies treat these areas separately, but in practice, they are interdependent, particularly in Malta, where non-compliance can affect retention. By integrating these two areas, the study offers a comprehensive approach to improving business performance while ensuring legal compliance.

Finally, little research has been done on the role of external support services, such as management consultants, in helping businesses address TCN issues. This study fills that gap by exploring how consultancy services can enhance business practices and compliance.

In summary, this study contributes to the literature by localizing the issue to Malta, centring the employer's experience, integrating compliance and HRM strategies, and proposing a practical consultancy model for improving TCN retention and compliance.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This section, the study will emphasize on the various methodologies that will be used. However, it will start with philosophical postulation.

3.2 Research Philosophy

3.2 Research Philosophy

The research philosophy forms the foundational worldview that guides how knowledge is constructed and interpreted in a study. It encompasses assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired (epistemology), and the role of the researcher's values in the research process (axiology). For this study, which seeks to explore the relationship between management consultancy interventions and the talent retention and permit compliance of Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) in Malta, an interpretivist paradigm was adopted.

Interpretivism recognises that reality is socially constructed and subjective, and it places emphasis on understanding the meanings individuals assign to their experiences within a specific context. This philosophical stance aligns well with the qualitative approach employed in this study, where in-depth interviews were conducted to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of business managers working with TCNs across different sectors in Malta. Rather than seeking universal laws or objective truths, the aim was to explore nuanced understandings and multiple realities shaped by institutional constraints, economic environments, and cultural dynamics.

From an ontological standpoint, the study assumes a relativist position, meaning that multiple realities exist, each shaped by the participants' unique backgrounds and interpretations. This was particularly relevant in capturing the diverse perceptions and practices of Maltese businesses in managing foreign talent and navigating legal frameworks.

Epistemologically, the study is grounded in a subjectivist view of knowledge, whereby knowledge is co-created through dialogue between the researcher and participants. The researcher does not remain detached but actively interprets the meanings embedded in the data, acknowledging their role in shaping the findings. This orientation justified the use of thematic analysis, where codes and themes were generated inductively from the data, allowing rich interpretations to emerge from the participants' narratives.

In terms of axiology, the study acknowledges the influence of values and context. The researcher's commitment to improving understanding of labour equity, inclusion, and regulatory compliance guided the study's design, choice of participants, and interpretation of findings. This value-laden approach aligns with Creswell and Poth's (2018) view that qualitative research is inherently shaped by the positionality of the researcher and their ethical engagement with the research setting.

Overall, the interpretivist research philosophy provided a flexible and human-centred lens that was well-suited to exploring complex social phenomena such as consultancy impact, migrant worker integration, and institutional constraints in the Maltese labour market. It enabled the generation of in-depth, contextualised insights that quantitative approaches may not have adequately captured.

3.3 Research Approach

Research philosophy, refers to the belief system and basic assumptions that serve as the underpinning in the creation of knowledge (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). In essence, it involves all steps and considerations that researchers make when developing new insights within a particular field of research

3.4 Research Design

A research design is the 'procedures for collecting, analyzing, interpreting and reporting data in research studies .It is the overall plan for connecting the conceptual research problems with the pertinent (and achievable) empirical research. In other words, the research design sets the procedure on the required data, the methods to be applied to collect and analyze this data, and how all of this is going to answer the research question (Lelisa, 2018; Grey, 2014).

3.5 Research Strategy

In this section, there are two thoughtful or type of research strategy in research with include; case study and a study. However, our area of concentration will be on the relationship between management consultancy intervention and talent retention of the third country nations in Malta.

3.6 Data Collection Methods

Data collection is the process of collecting or gathering data (information) aiming to gain insights regarding the research topic (Taherdoost, 2021). Data collection as the main stage of research can overshadow the quality of achieving results by decreasing the possible errors which may occur during a research project. Data will be collected using an open-ended questionnaire, designed to elicit detailed, narrative responses that aligned with the study's research questions.

3.6.1 Primary Data Collection

The primary source of data collection will be the open ended questionnaire which means that the participants can contributes in the work and through one-on-one interview.

3.6.2 Secondary Data Collection

This section, secondary data will be generated through textbooks, internet sources, journals, magazines, and other dissertations

3.6.3 Justification of Methods

Research design serves are a blueprint that guide or present a picture of what the work would look like, in terms of techniques to be used by the researcher. Parametric statistical tests are powerful tests because they are no probabilistic test of significance. One of the most popular test used by students and researchers in the behavioral or social sciences includes-Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Co-efficient. On the other hand, the relations between the two quantity variable must be linear and it is more conveniently calculated by computer in terms of software. A respectable knowledge of univariate and bivariate regression/ANOVA will be applied in this stage.

3.7 Sampling Strategy

The non-probability sample will be adopted in the research work as a result of the nature of the study.

3.7.1 Sampling Technique

A sample is a proportion or subset of a larger group called population. A good sample is a miniature version of the population of which it is a part just like it, only smaller (Verma, Gautam, Pandry, Misha & Shukla, 2017). However, therefore, the study will adopt the purposive sampling techniques during field work

3.7.2 Sample Size and Participant Selection

This section the will adopt the population as the sample size with respect to selected management staff of global banking school Malta office. However, a number of 20 participants will be selected purposively as the population in this study.

3.7.3 Justification of Sampling Approach

The relationship between the variable will undergone transcription in line the research research questions, must be linear, and it is more conveniently calculated by computer in terms of software descripted below.

3.8 Data Analysis

The analysis of the data depends upon the types of variables and its' nature (Niraula, 2019). The first thing for the data analysis is to describe the characteristics of the variables been studied. There are two board types of

data analysis, which is the descriptive, or univariate data analysis and the inferential data analysis (Okwandu, 2007).

3.8.1 Method of Analysis

The collected data will be analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report.

3.8.2 Analysis Procedure and Tools

Responses will be first transcribed and read thoroughly. Again, initial codes will be developed manually, and NVivo 12 software will be used to organize and visualize the data efficiently.

3.8.3 Link to Research Questions

In this section, the research questions will be linked to the questionnaire question in the regard.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Here, the participants will be briefed on the topic and its relevance in the society to enable them feel free to contribute to the work.

3.9.1 Informed Consent

Again, the participant must show willingness and give consent to be part of the research work before interview by the research.

3.9.2 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Here, it is obtainable that the researcher will not disclose whatever response given by the participants during and after the research work to non-participants

3.9.3 Data Protection and Ethical Approval

Data protection ensures the confidentiality and security of sensitive information. On the other hand, ethical approval guarantees that the research or practices adhere to ethical standards and guidelines. Again, the research will ensure the requirement are met in order to carry out the research work.

3.10 Trustworthiness and Rigour

From the viewpoint of a qualitative research, trustworthiness and rigor are watchfully interconnected, however, in order to ensure the credibility, and dependability, and values of the outcomes. Hence, rigor in the regard, demonstrates the quality of the research process and outcomes.

3.10.1 Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility can be seen as the degree to which research findings are believable and accurate. It essentially establishes the truth value of the study and ensuring that the outcomes or findings are a plausible representation of the participants experiences and perspectives.

3.10.2 Dependability

In the context of qualitative research work, dependability is the stability and consistency of the findings over time and ensuring they are not random as well as been biased. It is like reliability in a quantitative research.

3.10.3 Conformability

Here, it ensures that the study's conclusions are supported by evidence and are not personal preferences and assumptions after the whole process by the researcher.

3.10.4 Transferability

In the context of the qualitative research, the extent of findings or research outcomes can be applied to other contexts or settings beyond the specific study. The interest of the researcher is based on potential for insights to resonate and be applicable to similar situations.

3.10.5 Minimizing Bias

The researcher has to involve careful planning, reflection and execution. Most importantly, the researcher will apply a neutral interview techniques and anonymization in order to minimize been bias.

3.11 Limitations

There may setbacks, inability to get all the necessary information at some point and also to be able to convince participants to give out their opinions.

3.12 Summary

In summary, research philosophy in terms of qualitative approach will be done in line with thematic analysis with software such as NIVO because it is more words than figure. However, the researcher has to apply purposive sampling techniques because the study would interview management staff of the global school in Malta.

CHAPTER FOUR

Data Presentation and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative investigation into how management consultancy interventions influence talent retention and employment permit compliance of Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) in Malta. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 20 participants across multiple sectors, namely IT, hospitality, cleaning, and engineering, thematic analysis was applied using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. A combination of manual coding and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 12) was used to identify patterns across the dataset. The analysis produced twelve distinct themes that reflect both the challenges and opportunities businesses face regarding TCN retention and permit compliance. This chapter presents these themes as they relate to the study's research questions and objectives.

4.2 Data Presentation and Analysis According to Research Questions

4.2.1 Challenges in Retaining TCNs and Ensuring Compliance

Theme 1: Economic, Social, and Discriminatory Barriers to TCNs Retention

The retention of Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) in Malta remains a significant challenge for businesses across sectors, as consistently reported by respondents in this study. From the analysis of the interview transcripts, a recurring and deeply embedded set of interrelated challenges emerged, including high cost of living, particularly housing, limited access to social support, and perceived workplace discrimination. These factors collectively diminish motivation, job satisfaction, and ultimately, long-term commitment among TCNs. Many respondents noted that these issues transcend industry and nationality, affecting TCNs employed in cleaning, engineering, IT, hospitality, and education sectors alike.

One of the most prominent and immediate concerns voiced by nearly all participants was the high cost of living in Malta, especially in relation to accommodation. Several participants from the cleaning and hospitality sectors explained that rent consumes a substantial portion of their salaries. Respondent 3, a taxi owner, noted that "the high cost of rent, with no housing support from small companies like mine, makes it hard to keep staff for long." Similarly, Respondent 5, a carpenter, highlighted how rent and basic needs overwhelm workers, saying, "You need to pay work permit, skill pass, rent… it's so difficult." The financial burden was even more pronounced for those with families. For example, Respondent 4, a cleaning supervisor from Colombia, observed, "Some want to bring their families, but it's impossible because the pay is low, and the rent is very high."

This financial strain, as illustrated in the responses, not only results in high attrition rates but also discourages long-term settlement or integration by TCNs. Workers often pursue alternative employment not necessarily for career advancement but as a survival strategy. As Respondent 6 shared, "Some people leave not because they want to, but because they simply cannot keep up with the bills." This implies that retention is not just an HR function but also a socioeconomic issue, especially when dealing with non-EU nationals facing structural disadvantages.

Beyond financial limitations, social challenges were also highlighted. Many TCNs expressed a sense of social exclusion or alienation. Respondent 7, an IT staff member, captured this sentiment by stating, "It's difficult when you feel disconnected. You're here to work, but there's little chance to be part of the place you're working in." Others pointed to the lack of social support systems and cultural adaptation mechanisms. For instance, Respondent 4 noted, "We come from different cultures. Without help to adjust, many people just leave. They feel out of place." This theme was echoed by Respondent 8, a maintenance manager in the hospitality sector, who highlighted how the absence of institutional support for integration negatively affects TCN commitment and mental wellbeing.

Perhaps most troubling were reports of subtle but persistent discrimination and under-recognition within workplaces. Several respondents conveyed a shared experience of being treated differently because they are not from the EU. Respondent 2 stated plainly, "They [management] promote others, but never look at us TCNs." This under-recognition undermines morale and professional self-worth. Respondent 9, a housekeeper, recounted how colleagues from the EU were more often given responsibilities and recognition, regardless of qualifications. "Even if we work harder," she said, "they [EU staff] are seen first." This leads to a sense of stagnation among TCNs, as echoed by Respondent 10, a restaurant manager, who noted, "Most of our workers

leave after a year because they see no future here. They work, but they don't grow."

The presence of systemic bias, whether overt or subtle, appears to reinforce a cycle of exclusion that discourages retention. Respondent 1, an IT respondent, stressed this by stating, "Sometimes I wonder if our efforts are invisible. I code, I work late, but the one promoted is someone who joined after me." This suggests that beyond wages and permits, the culture of inclusivity, or lack thereof, has a substantial impact on retention. Where advancement and appreciation are not equitably distributed, TCNs understandably seek alternative employment, often in more inclusive companies or countries.

Some respondents also discussed the perceived lack of long-term opportunities and employer investment in their future. Respondent 6 reflected, "Companies only hire for the job now. They don't plan to keep us. One year and they let you go." Respondent 8 agreed, adding, "There's no strategy to help people grow… especially us TCNs." This suggests a structural issue where employers view TCNs as short-term labour solutions rather than long-term contributors, further compounding the problem of retention.

The cumulative effect of these factors paints a picture of compounded disadvantage. Financial insecurity, social exclusion, and institutional bias are not isolated issues but intersecting forces that continually push TCNs away from long-term employment in Malta. While some businesses genuinely attempt to support their foreign workforce, the absence of systemic support, such as affordable housing, inclusive HR policies, and anti-discrimination safeguards, renders many of these efforts insufficient.

In conclusion, this theme underscores the multidimensional nature of the retention problem. It is not simply about salary levels or permit durations. Rather, it is about the environment within which TCNs live and work. Addressing these retention challenges requires holistic reforms, ranging from affordable housing initiatives and inclusive career pathways to workplace policies that eliminate bias and promote equity. Only through such comprehensive efforts can businesses hope to retain the talents and contributions of TCNs, upon whom many sectors in Malta heavily rely.

Theme 2: Administrative Burdens, Bureaucratic Delays, and Legal Compliance Challenges

Another major obstacle to the retention of Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) identified across the interviews was the widespread frustration with administrative burdens and bureaucratic inefficiencies surrounding work permits and legal compliance. Participants from multiple sectors reported that the employment permit system in Malta is both rigid and slow, often resulting in delays that compromise worker security, employer planning, and overall retention efforts. In this study, such challenges emerged not only as procedural inconveniences but as deeply rooted institutional barriers that demoralise TCNs and limit businesses' capacity to maintain a stable and compliant workforce.

A consistent concern expressed by participants was the unpredictability and slowness of permit approvals and renewals. Respondent 5, a carpenter, shared a common experience: "When we arrive in Malta, we just have three months to get a job and make the work permit. After that time, if it's not done, we must go back or leave the Schengen area." This statement illustrates the pressure on TCNs to meet tight deadlines despite having little control over the bureaucratic pace. The implication is not just inconvenience, it can mean the loss of legal status, income, and employment, all of which are detrimental to retention.

Respondent 4, a cleaning supervisor from Colombia, echoed this by saying, "Some wait six months or even one year. Identity Malta is very slow sometimes. We have to prove again and again that the worker is good." These long waiting periods can cause significant uncertainty, pushing workers to seek employment in countries with more efficient systems. In turn, employers lose valuable staff, particularly those who have already integrated into the work culture. The sense of futility in navigating these prolonged delays contributes directly to turnover and instability.

The burden of complying with employment regulations is especially pronounced for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) without internal HR departments or dedicated compliance officers. Respondent 6, a school reservation supervisor, noted, "Most companies now do not have HR strategies to maintain workforce at all." For small-scale businesses like the one described by Respondent 10, a restaurant manager, the challenge is not just about permit processing, but understanding what is legally required in the first place: "The government

changes the rules, but we are not informed. We only find out when it's too late, and then we suffer."

Several participants revealed that their companies had been penalised or faced threats of fines due to misunderstandings or delays in permit renewals. Respondent 2 from the engineering sector highlighted, "The government changes laws without notice. One day we are compliant, the next we are not." This level of unpredictability, especially in regulatory environments, discourages long-term planning and often leads to reactive decision-making. Workers affected by delayed renewals are not only unable to work but are sometimes forced to leave the country temporarily, weakening organisational continuity and productivity.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Respondent 8, a maintenance engineer, who explained, "Last year, between October and December, everything was delayed. It was a rough end for everyone. We tried to be patient, but many employees got tired and left." His words reflect the shared reality that poor permit administration directly feeds into attrition and operational disruption. Even when employers are willing to wait out the delays, many workers are not in a position, financially or emotionally, to do the same.

In some cases, legal uncertainties were amplified by the perceived lack of support from government institutions. Several interviewees mentioned the absence of clear guidance and accessible communication from agencies like Identity Malta and JobsPlus. Respondent 7, an IT professional, stated, "Companies are left alone to figure out what the new law means. There is no workshop, no newsletter. We just hope we are doing it right." The resulting compliance gaps not only place firms at legal risk but also expose workers to sudden job loss due to documentation lapses.

Even when companies seek external help to bridge this gap, affordability remains an issue. Respondent 1 observed, "We want to do the right thing, but we can't afford to hire someone full-time just to chase documents." This reiterates how bureaucratic complexity disproportionately impacts SMEs, which form the bulk of employers in Malta. As businesses operate with minimal HR infrastructure, the inability to properly manage administrative responsibilities ultimately discourages them from employing TCNs at all, thus affecting labour diversity and availability in key sectors.

The consequences of this theme are far-reaching. On one hand, the institutional design and operational inefficiencies in Malta's permit system actively undermine retention by creating unnecessary stress and procedural breakdowns. On the other hand, the absence of tailored support or even basic administrative transparency leaves many employers exposed to unintentional non-compliance. The cumulative effect is a workforce that feels insecure, undervalued, and unsure of its future, factors that are antithetical to retention.

Participants across the board expressed a desire for a more transparent and efficient system. They suggested improvements such as digitalised permit tracking, quarterly regulatory updates from the government, and simplified documentation procedures. Respondent 3, a taxi operator, offered a practical idea: "The government can create an online system to track the permit process like a passport. That would help both the worker and the employer." This recommendation underscores the demand for institutional reforms that not only streamline compliance but also support long-term retention by removing unnecessary barriers.

In summary, this theme illustrates that the Maltese employment permit system, in its current form, is a major structural impediment to TCN retention. The legal and bureaucratic hurdles create uncertainty for both workers and employers, strain organisational resources, and lead to preventable turnover. Retention, in this sense, is not only about wages or motivation, it is directly shaped by the state's regulatory efficiency and administrative coherence. Until these systemic issues are resolved, both compliance and workforce stability will remain elusive goals for many businesses employing TCNs in Malta.

Theme 3: Structural Disconnection, Limited Support Systems, and the Consultancy Access Gap

Beyond the economic and bureaucratic hurdles already discussed, a subtler yet profoundly influential set of challenges emerged from the interviews: systemic disconnect between policy frameworks and on-the-ground business realities, inadequate institutional support for compliance, and unequal access to consultancy services. Together, these structural issues present a compounded barrier to effective TCN retention and regulatory adherence, especially among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

One consistent concern raised by participants was the perception that Maltese governmental institutions formulate and implement regulations without adequately considering how these rules play out in practice. Respondent 8, an engineering manager in the hospitality industry, summarised this frustration: "They [the

authorities] change rules all the time, but they never tell us clearly. We find out when the inspector shows up." This sentiment was echoed by Respondent 4, a cleaning supervisor, who stated, "We are not given proper updates, and some of us have to go back and reapply just because a form changed."

This disconnect not only frustrates employers but also exposes workers to unforeseen legal risks. Participants described instances where even minor changes in regulation, such as a shift in documentation requirements, were not formally communicated, leaving both employers and TCNs scrambling to adjust. In such a volatile regulatory environment, it becomes exceedingly difficult for firms to establish long-term workforce planning or maintain staff morale.

Several participants also mentioned that while larger companies have the resources to manage legal and regulatory transitions, SMEs are disproportionately disadvantaged. Respondent 10, a restaurant manager in Valletta, explained, "We cannot afford to have lawyers on staff. We do everything ourselves, and sometimes we miss things." He further noted that when they do try to get support, consultancy fees are prohibitively expensive, effectively excluding small businesses from accessing the same quality of strategic advice enjoyed by their larger counterparts.

Respondent 5, a carpenter, shared a similar frustration, noting, "We have to pay for everything, work permit, rent, health, and then we don't get any help. Some companies, they pay for lawyers, but we can't." In such scenarios, TCNs are more likely to leave companies that cannot offer them legal or institutional stability. This not only harms worker retention but also fosters a cycle of vulnerability, where the least-resourced companies employ the most precarious workers under the least secure conditions.

This institutional fragility is compounded by the inaccessibility of external expertise. Respondent 7, an IT assistant, explained that his company had only one legal consultant on a project basis: "He comes maybe once every few months. We rely on him, but sometimes we need help urgently, and he's not available." Such reliance on irregular or part-time consultancy services makes consistent compliance difficult and weakens the internal capacity to retain foreign staff in the face of evolving legal demands.

More significantly, a number of participants proposed that the state itself should play a more proactive role in bridging these gaps. Respondent 9, a housekeeper, observed: "It would help if the government worked with small companies to give us shared consultants or even manuals." These suggestions reflected a broader call for structural support measures, such as subsidised consultancy services or the development of centralised digital platforms to facilitate permit applications and renewals.

Some interviewees went even further, proposing the creation of a formal consultancy pool supported by the government. Respondent 6, a school supervisor, remarked, "If the government can help pay part of the consultant's fee or offer shared services for small companies, everyone will benefit. We will keep our workers and avoid fines." This proposed solution underscores a critical insight: consultancy is not a luxury, but a strategic necessity for legal compliance and talent retention in Malta's complex regulatory environment.

What also became evident was the psychological burden created by this lack of structural clarity. Employers and supervisors repeatedly described a sense of operating in the dark, not knowing whether their HR practices were compliant or sustainable. Respondent 1, from a technology firm, said: "Every few months, we hear new things about work permits, but there is no central source to trust. Everyone is guessing." This anxiety translates into a lack of confidence in organisational planning and reduces the effectiveness of even the best-intentioned HR policies.

There were also concerns about unequal treatment among companies. Respondent 2, working in engineering, explained, "Big companies get treated differently. They get faster responses, better updates. Small ones like us get forgotten." This perceived inequality contributes to a stratified labour market where only the most resource-rich businesses can afford to stay compliant and retain staff, while others suffer high turnover and reputational damage.

Furthermore, some respondents felt that existing public resources, such as JobsPlus and Identity Malta, were inadequately equipped to support the dynamic realities of employing foreign nationals. Respondent 3, a driver, stated, "Sometimes we go to JobsPlus, and they don't even have answers. We get told to wait or come back next week." These institutional inefficiencies increase administrative burden and deter firms from taking on the responsibility of employing TCNs in the first place.

In conclusion, this theme reveals how gaps in structural alignment, resource distribution, and institutional responsiveness collectively hinder the ability of

businesses, especially SMEs, to both comply with employment regulations and retain their foreign talent. The findings suggest that meaningful reform must go beyond simplifying permit procedures; it should include state-supported consultancy models, better communication frameworks, and equitable access to strategic advisory services. Without addressing these systemic disparities, the broader goal of retaining TCNs in Malta's workforce will remain difficult to achieve.

4.2.2 Extent of Compliance with TCNs Employment Permit Regulations Among Businesses in Malta.

Theme 4: Legal Navigation, Consultancy Support, and Varying Compliance Capacities.

The findings of this study revealed that the extent to which businesses in Malta comply with TCN employment permit regulations is significantly shaped by their access to legal advisory services and the nature of their internal compliance capacity. While some organisations demonstrated high levels of compliance, often supported by consultancy engagement, others operated in a reactive or even improvised manner due to financial or informational constraints. The result is a highly uneven landscape of permit adherence across the business sector, with Third-Country Nationals often bearing the consequences of these discrepancies.

Several respondents indicated that their organisations had instituted robust legal compliance mechanisms through external consultancy support. Respondent 1, an IT manager, explained, "We have a consultant who keeps us up to date. He tells us what documents are needed, checks expiry dates, and even submits on our behalf." For this firm, the outsourcing of regulatory tasks to a professional ensured continuous legal alignment and shielded them from the bureaucratic bottlenecks that plague many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

In contrast, Respondent 4, working as a cleaning company supervisor, highlighted the challenges of not having a dedicated compliance team: "Sometimes the law changes and we don't even know. We find out when we go to renew and it's rejected." This lack of proactive tracking and legal foresight was echoed by Respondent 9, a housekeeper, who recounted that their company had lost employees due to permit lapses, stating, "Some of our workers had to leave because their renewal didn't go through in time… We didn't have help to follow up properly."

This gap in legal knowledge and administrative skill is particularly stark in SMEs, where multitasking is common and HR roles are often informal. Respondent 5, a carpenter in a workshop, summarised the issue succinctly: "We can't afford a legal department. We just try our best to submit things correctly, but sometimes we get things wrong." These submissions errors, even if unintentional, carry consequences, ranging from delays in work authorisation to deportation risks for TCNs.

Interestingly, some businesses attempted to bridge the gap by engaging consultants or lawyers on a short-term basis. Respondent 2, in the engineering sector, described how their company hired a freelance legal advisor to create manuals and provide brief compliance training: "We couldn't pay him monthly, but he helped us understand what documents we need and when." While not as robust as full-time consultancy, this minimal intervention allowed the business to meet basic requirements and reduced the likelihood of major compliance violations.

Another dimension of the compliance narrative was the administrative rigidity of government departments responsible for employment regulation. Respondent 6, a school supervisor, explained, "You do everything right, but then Identity Malta or JobsPlus takes too long. Sometimes they lose your documents. Then the worker waits for months." These institutional inefficiencies frustrate even those businesses that actively try to remain compliant. Respondent 7, from a tech support company, described their permit renewal experience as "a game of luck," depending on which government officer handled the file and when.

One recurring sentiment was that the current system does not distinguish between businesses that deliberately avoid compliance and those that are simply under-resourced. Respondent 8, a hospitality manager, lamented: "We are not criminals. We want to do it right, but the process is not designed to help us. It's designed to catch us failing." This perceived antagonism from regulatory authorities was demoralising for business leaders, especially those operating in high-turnover sectors like hospitality and cleaning, where permit delays can quickly destabilise operations.

Respondent 10, a restaurant manager, took a more measured view, stating that while the rules themselves were "not the problem," the issue was a lack of clarity and support: "If someone could guide us step by step, we would comply fully. We just don't have the know-how." His perspective reflects a willingness to comply that is

common among businesses, but one that is too often unsupported by institutional or professional mechanisms.

In some of the better-organised firms, compliance was integrated into the broader HR structure. Respondent 3, from a medium-sized cleaning company, noted, "We created a calendar to track everyone's permit deadlines. We also made sure everyone had digital copies of what they submitted." This initiative was reportedly taken on the advice of a consultant, and it greatly reduced permit-related incidents in the firm. Such examples demonstrate that compliance is not merely a function of regulatory awareness but also of administrative culture, something that consultants can help cultivate.

Importantly, participants who had engaged consultancy services, whether fully or partially, reported a greater sense of security in their operations. Respondent 6 affirmed this when she said, "Since we worked with the lawyer, no more surprises. Everyone's documents are checked ahead of time." This proactive culture stands in stark contrast to businesses that operate in crisis mode, reacting to regulatory changes only after penalties or permit denials.

Overall, this theme illustrates that permit compliance in Malta is highly variable and largely dependent on business size, sector, and access to consultancy. Larger firms and those with legal consultants fare better, while SMEs and micro-enterprises struggle with knowledge gaps, bureaucratic challenges, and systemic neglect. The inconsistent compliance landscape not only disadvantages TCNs, who may experience job loss or legal jeopardy due to employer error, but also undermines broader efforts to formalise and stabilise Malta's migrant labour economy.

To improve this situation, the findings suggest that permit compliance must be supported by external expertise, consistent governmental communication, and equitable access to legal resources. Without these interventions, compliance will remain uneven, and TCNs will continue to face job insecurity not due to their own performance, but because of systemic and structural shortcomings within their host country's administrative and legal environment.

Theme 5: Institutional Gaps and the Demand for Government-Supported Consultancy.

A significant number of respondents described systemic weaknesses in Malta's migration and employment permit governance structures, which directly undermined employer compliance efforts and exposed Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) to bureaucratic vulnerabilities. Chief among the concerns was the lack of institutional support for businesses, especially smaller ones, seeking to meet legal obligations regarding the employment of foreign workers. Participants repeatedly expressed the need for direct government intervention through subsidised consultancy support or simplified regulatory systems.

Respondent 1, from the IT sector, lamented the absence of user-friendly resources: "You go to the government website and get confused. Things are written in a way only lawyers understand." This sentiment was echoed across interviews, with many participants expressing a desire for clearer guidance. Respondent 6, working in an educational institution, remarked, "There should be a central place where we can always get updated information. Right now, it depends on who you ask, and everyone says something different."

One particularly telling quote came from Respondent 2, an engineer, who suggested: "If the government can pay part of the consultant's fee or offer shared services, it will help all businesses to be more compliant." This recommendation reflects a broader belief that businesses want to comply, but face technical and financial hurdles that make compliance difficult without structured external support.

In many cases, participants described how the absence of a consistent and responsive government interface made even proactive businesses vulnerable. Respondent 4, a supervisor in the cleaning sector, stated, "We've been trying to do things right, but then Identity Malta changes something and doesn't tell anyone. We only find out when there's a problem." This points to a critical institutional gap in policy dissemination and employer education.

Respondents also expressed concern about the one-size-fits-all nature of government procedures, which often fail to accommodate the operational diversity of Maltese businesses. Respondent 8, from hospitality, argued, "A restaurant with 10 staff cannot handle paperwork the same way a tech firm with HR and legal departments can." The rigidness of existing administrative structures was seen as favouring large organisations while marginalising smaller ones.

The call for government-supported consultancy schemes was especially strong among SMEs. Respondent 9 explained, "We don't need full-time consultants, but maybe the government can provide someone to visit

businesses once a month to help with papers. Like a mobile HR." This pragmatic solution, while modest, highlights a significant policy gap, one that, if addressed, could democratise access to compliance support and reduce the legal risks currently faced by TCNs due to employer error or oversight.

Another institutional shortcoming identified was the lack of digitalisation in key processes. Respondent 7, from a tech start-up, questioned why permit applications were not tracked through an online portal: "Why can't we see application progress online? Everything is paper and email, and if one email gets lost, the whole thing crashes." The lack of modern infrastructure was seen not only as inefficient but also as a factor that added stress and uncertainty to both employers and employees.

Beyond operational inefficiencies, respondents highlighted the emotional toll of dealing with unpredictable government processes. Respondent 5, a carpenter, described the situation as "always walking on eggshells," referring to the fear of making a legal misstep due to a lack of guidance. For many businesses, especially those without in-house HR expertise, this created an atmosphere of anxiety rather than cooperation with regulatory bodies.

Some participants suggested that the government partner with private firms to develop toolkits, workshops, and sector-specific guidelines to improve understanding of employment permit laws. Respondent 10, a restaurant manager, recommended that "they [the government] should host quarterly workshops where employers can come and ask questions. That way, mistakes can be avoided." These proposals underline a demand for structural reform rather than regulatory rollback, participants did not seek fewer rules, but better tools to follow them.

The implications of these institutional gaps are severe. When the government fails to provide adequate support, the burden falls disproportionately on TCNs who face permit rejections, job loss, or legal status complications as a result of employer non-compliance. Respondent 3 noted, "I've seen good workers go home just because their papers weren't done right, not their fault, but the company couldn't keep up." This outcome contradicts national goals of attracting and retaining international talent.

Moreover, several interviewees drew comparisons between Malta and other EU countries. Respondent 6, who had previously worked in Germany, observed, "In Germany, we had a system where the local council helped small businesses with forms. Here, you're left alone." These international comparisons suggest that the issues are not inherent to migration management, but rather reflect gaps in national policy design and implementation.

In summary, this theme highlights that legal compliance among Maltese businesses is not merely a matter of motivation, but also of institutional facilitation. The absence of government-sponsored consultancy services, a lack of digital tracking infrastructure, inconsistent policy communication, and rigid administrative formats all contribute to compliance failures. These, in turn, destabilise the employment trajectories of TCNs and increase legal vulnerabilities for employers.

Addressing these issues requires a coordinated public-private framework in which government agencies actively support businesses through education, subsidised consultancy, and administrative reform. Without this scaffolding, compliance will remain inconsistent, and the Maltese labour market risks continued inefficiencies, worker displacement, and reputational damage.

4.2.3 Management Consultancy Strategies Supporting Retention and Employment Permit Compliance

Theme 6: Integrated Management Consultancy Strategies for Retention and Compliance

The findings across interviews indicate that where management consultancy interventions were adopted, whether formally through external firms or informally through professional advice, they played a critical role in improving both talent retention and compliance with employment permit regulations among businesses employing Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) in Malta. The consultancy strategies identified as most effective include inclusive human resource practices, improved communication structures, cultural integration efforts, and legal compliance support.

Many participants explained that consultants helped them implement tailored HR policies that made TCNs feel valued and supported in their workplaces. Respondent 2, an engineer, shared that after consulting with external advisors, they introduced structured onboarding and mentorship programmes. He explained, "It helped a lot when we started doing proper onboarding. People now know what is expected and feel part of the team from day one." Such structured human resource practices not only clarified roles and responsibilities but also gave TCNs the psychological safety necessary to engage productively with their new environment.

In addition to onboarding, consultants reportedly played a role in fostering internal promotions and clarifying career progression. Respondent 5, a carpenter, observed that after a training and policy session with an external advisor, "some colleagues started being considered for better roles, not just cleaners forever." This suggests that inclusive HR frameworks introduced by consultants helped break down the invisible barriers to advancement that some TCNs faced, contributing positively to retention.

Communication enhancement was another area in which management consultancy had a clear impact. Several participants, such as Respondent 8 from the hospitality sector, recounted how consultants introduced participatory communication structures like weekly team meetings and feedback loops. "Before, we worked and went home," he said. "Now we can talk about our ideas or problems every week with the manager." This inclusivity fostered trust and early conflict resolution, which participants linked to lower turnover and improved workplace satisfaction.

Cultural integration emerged as a major component of effective consultancy. Consultants often facilitated workshops that helped demystify differences in customs, language, and social expectations. Respondent 7 from the IT sector said, "We did a diversity workshop, and it changed everything. People understood each other better, and there was less gossip or assumptions." Such activities were viewed as essential in building mutual respect in multicultural teams. They contributed to a more harmonious working environment, making TCNs feel accepted and thus more likely to stay.

Moreover, cultural sensitivity wasn't limited to workshops alone. Several participants noted that consultants advised on minor yet impactful changes such as allowing flexible prayer times or recognising national holidays important to TCNs. Respondent 10, managing a restaurant, shared that these small gestures "made workers feel seen and respected." These inclusions, though modest, sent powerful messages about organisational values and were found to positively impact both morale and loyalty.

Legal advisory services were perhaps the most practically impactful consultancy support, especially for small businesses without dedicated HR or legal departments. Respondents consistently mentioned that consultants provided permit compliance checklists, liaised with authorities like Identity Malta, and prepared supporting documents for renewals. Respondent 1 from the IT sector explained, "Our consultant handles everything legal, we never miss a deadline anymore." This relieved businesses of administrative burdens and gave TCNs confidence in the stability of their jobs.

In cases where businesses could not afford full consultancy packages, modified or freelance arrangements still proved beneficial. Respondent 3, from the cleaning sector, recounted, "We hired a lawyer for one session, he trained us and left manuals to follow. That's what we've been using since." These simplified consultancy engagements were seen as scalable, practical solutions that helped smaller enterprises remain compliant without bearing unsustainable costs.

The preventative dimension of consultancy services was also widely acknowledged. Rather than reacting to permit problems or staff exits, consultants helped businesses anticipate legal changes and adjust HR policies accordingly. Respondent 6, working in a language school, described how their organisation, upon the advice of a consultant, revised their employee contracts and vacation structures to align with new regulations. "When the audit came," she said, "we had no issues because we were already prepared."

Participants further pointed out that these consultancy-driven systems created a professional culture that attracted and retained better quality staff. Respondent 9, working in hospitality, summarised this impact succinctly: "When you have good policies, people respect the company. They want to stay." This indicates that beyond the practical functions of consultancy, like document filing or workshop facilitation, the presence of structured, inclusive systems signalled professionalism and care, enhancing employer reputation and employee loyalty alike.

Importantly, some participants observed that the combination of consultancy-led training, communication structures, and legal preparedness not only improved TCN retention but also mitigated compliance risks. Respondent 4 explained, "Before, we were guessing on how to fill forms. Now we know what to do, and workers trust us more." This dual benefit, better staff retention and improved regulatory alignment, validates the strategic utility of consultancy in navigating the increasingly complex terrain of migrant employment in Malta.

In summary, the interviews demonstrate that integrated consultancy strategies addressing HR, communication, cultural engagement, and legal navigation were highly effective in enhancing both TCN retention and permit compliance. These approaches helped transform many workplaces from reactive, under-prepared environments into structured, inclusive, and legally sound operations. The data suggest that such strategies, when implemented correctly and tailored to business size and sector, represent a best-practice model for managing TCN employment in Malta's diverse economy.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Discussion of Empirical Finding and Comparison to Existing Literature

The first major empirical finding of this study reveals that economic, social, and discriminatory barriers significantly undermine the retention of Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) in Malta. Interviews indicated that high living costs, especially unaffordable housing, exert unsustainable pressure on TCNs, many of whom already receive low wages, particularly in hospitality and cleaning sectors. These economic burdens are not isolated concerns but form a complex web of socioeconomic exclusion that discourages long-term commitment. The data also exposed a deep sense of under-recognition and perceived discrimination. Respondents reported that TCNs were routinely overlooked for promotions or training opportunities, which diminished their job satisfaction and professional motivation. These findings reinforce earlier work by Kahanec and Zimmermann (2016), whose EU-wide study found that TCNs often face systemic underutilisation and occupational segregation, even when possessing comparable qualifications to EU nationals. Similarly, Fasani, Frattini, and Minale (2021) found that migrants in low-wage EU jobs suffer from both wage penalties and limited upward mobility due to legal and institutional constraints. In this study, the absence of clear career trajectories, coupled with subtle but consistent bias, contributed to TCNs' decisions to change employers or leave Malta altogether. These observations suggest that economic hardship alone does not account for attrition; rather, it is the cumulative effect of financial strain, social exclusion, and workplace inequity that drives high turnover rates.

The second theme centres on the administrative burdens, bureaucratic delays, and legal compliance challenges faced by both employers and TCNs. Participants consistently reported experiencing rigid, opaque, and slow employment permit processes that not only led to work insecurity but also created a sense of instability within organisations. Many SMEs without legal or HR departments found themselves overwhelmed by ever-changing permit rules and tight documentation deadlines. Respondents described permit renewals taking months, missing deadlines due to unclear procedures, and experiencing inconsistent feedback from government institutions such as Identity Malta and JobsPlus. These findings align with those reported by Ruhs (2013), who argued that complex and restrictive labour immigration policies, particularly in smaller EU countries, frequently result in both intentional and unintentional non-compliance. The European Commission's (2023) Country Report on Malta similarly noted systemic issues in the processing of employment permits, highlighting delays and a lack of interdepartmental coordination as recurring problems. The current study's respondents further observed that even when businesses attempted to stay compliant, inadequate communication and bureaucratic sluggishness from public institutions undermined their efforts. Importantly, the absence of proactive support mechanisms, such as automatic updates or dedicated case officers, contributed to a legal compliance environment marked by uncertainty and risk, further discouraging firms from employing TCNs over the long term.

The third empirical finding highlights systemic gaps and limited access to strategic consultancy, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises. Respondents frequently described a disconnect between policy design and real-world implementation, noting that policy updates were often released without adequate explanation or support. SMEs, which form a substantial portion of Malta's business ecosystem, struggled to access quality consultancy services due to cost constraints and a lack of tailored support. These findings reflect those of the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD, 2020), which found that many EU member states face implementation gaps between national migration strategies and on-the-ground employer practices. In this study, participants suggested the establishment of shared consultancy schemes or public-private advisory models to support legal compliance and talent retention. Many interviewees lamented the lack of institutional support structures that could help them adapt to regulatory changes without overburdening operational capacity. This theme underscores the idea that talent retention and legal compliance are not only organisational responsibilities but also dependent on institutional environments that provide equitable access to knowledge and advisory infrastructure.

The fourth theme builds directly on the previous one, reflecting the variability in the extent of compliance with TCN employment permit regulations among businesses. Respondents revealed that access to legal consultancy or HR expertise greatly influenced their ability to comply with regulations. Organisations with internal legal teams or external consultants consistently reported fewer compliance issues and smoother renewals. In contrast, SMEs without such support reported missed deadlines, rejected applications, and inadvertent legal breaches. This confirms previous observations by Dorn and Zweimüller (2021), who found that access to expert legal services correlates positively with regulatory compliance among European employers of foreign labour. In this study, firms that employed freelancers or part-time legal advisors

managed to bridge knowledge gaps, while others operated on reactive models prone to compliance failures. Interestingly, even organisations willing to comply faced difficulties due to the rigidity and non-digital nature of the current Maltese permit system. Employers expressed frustration with manual paperwork, inconsistent departmental feedback, and outdated information portals. These inefficiencies not only increase compliance risk but also diminish confidence in institutional processes, leading to avoidable attrition of skilled TCN workers.

The fifth theme centres on the institutional demand for government-supported consultancy mechanisms. Many respondents advocated for government-subsidised or publicly provided consultancy services to assist businesses in managing both retention and compliance challenges. Employers reported that while they recognise the value of consultancy, financial limitations prevented consistent engagement. They proposed solutions such as shared consultancy pools, digital training toolkits, and quarterly employer workshops hosted by regulatory bodies. These suggestions align with findings from Frattini et al. (2022), who observed that firms that received integration support from public-private partnerships, such as local councils or migrant inclusion centres, had significantly better retention and compliance outcomes. The current study's respondents proposed pragmatic steps, such as mobile legal clinics and digital permit dashboards, to bridge institutional and informational gaps. Furthermore, they expressed concern that without government intervention, the uneven playing field between large corporations and SMEs would widen, leaving smaller businesses disproportionately exposed to fines and high turnover. This theme reinforces the importance of embedding consultancy support into national labour strategy to ensure equitable compliance and improve long-term workforce stability.

The final empirical theme affirms the transformative potential of integrated management consultancy strategies in enhancing both TCN retention and permit compliance. Respondents who had engaged consultants, either formally or on an ad hoc basis, reported improvements in HR systems, workplace communication, cultural integration, and legal documentation processes. Structured onboarding manuals, staff mentorship schemes, and internal feedback mechanisms helped TCNs better understand expectations and feel more included in their work environments. These practices align with evidence from the European Migration Network (2021), which found that businesses that incorporated inclusion-focused HR practices reported lower attrition rates and greater migrant workforce engagement. Additionally, legal compliance improved when consultants provided document tracking systems and liaised directly with authorities. Participants in this study consistently described consultants as both knowledge providers and cultural translators, helping firms navigate regulatory ambiguity and workplace diversity simultaneously. This mirrors the findings of OECD (2020), which argued that management consultancy functions as a strategic resource that enhances organisational adaptability in complex labour environments. Notably, participants who had adopted consultant-led changes described their businesses as more professional and appealing to both current and prospective employees. This suggests that consultancy interventions not only solve immediate challenges but also build institutional credibility, reinforcing a firm's ability to attract and retain diverse talent in the long term.

CHAPTER SIX

Summary, Conclusion, And Recommendations

6.1 Summary

This study explored the relationship between management consultancy interventions and the dual outcomes of talent retention and employment permit compliance for Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) in Malta. Recognising Malta's increasing dependence on migrant labour, particularly in service-heavy sectors such as hospitality, engineering, IT, and cleaning, this study looked at how organisations are managing the legal and human challenges associated with foreign workforce integration.

The study was guided by three objectives, understanding the challenges faced by businesses in retaining TCNs, assessing the extent of compliance with permit regulations, and identifying effective consultancy strategies. The study adopted a qualitative methodology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants across various industries, and data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Six key themes emerged from the analysis of the data collected. These themes were: (1) Economic, Social, and Discriminatory Barriers to TCN Retention; (2) Administrative Burdens, Bureaucratic Delays, and Legal Compliance Challenges; (3) Structural Disconnection, Limited Support Systems, and the Consultancy Access Gap; (4) Legal Navigation, Consultancy Support, and Varying Compliance Capacities; (5) Institutional Gaps and the Demand for Government-Supported Consultancy; and

(6) Integrated Management Consultancy Strategies for Retention and Compliance.

Findings revealed that retention and compliance outcomes are shaped by complex interdependencies between organisational readiness, institutional structures, and access to consultancy support. Economic constraints, social exclusion, and perceived discrimination continue to push many TCNs out of long-term employment, while bureaucratic opacity and inconsistent regulatory frameworks challenge even the most well-intentioned employers. Nevertheless, the research demonstrated that where management consultancy is available, whether full-scale or part-time, it contributes significantly to better retention practices and legal adherence, particularly through structured onboarding, cultural sensitivity, legal advisory services, and internal policy alignment.

6.2 Conclusion

This research confirms that retaining TCNs and ensuring employment permit compliance in Malta is not solely a question of policy enforcement or employer willpower, it is also fundamentally about access to institutional support and strategic knowledge. While many businesses genuinely aim to comply with legal mandates and foster inclusive work environments, their efforts are often hindered by systemic inefficiencies and uneven access to resources. Notably, the study found that micro and small businesses, despite employing a large share of TCNs, are the most disadvantaged in navigating regulatory complexity due to limited HR and legal capacity.

Management consultancy emerges in this study not as an ancillary service, but as a strategic enabler, helping businesses build internal capability, mitigate compliance risks, and foster long-term workforce stability. However, this resource remains unevenly distributed, with many smaller firms unable to afford or access it. Therefore, this study concludes that the sustainability of Malta's TCN workforce depends not only on individual organisational initiatives but on a broader ecosystem of support, including policy reform, digitalisation of permit systems, and government-subsidised consultancy frameworks. If such structural interventions are introduced, the benefits of consultancy can be democratised across sectors, and Malta can position itself as a more stable and inclusive environment for foreign workers.

6.3 Contribution to Knowledge

This research makes several original contributions to academic, theoretical, and policy-oriented knowledge. Empirically, the study provides one of the first in-depth qualitative investigations into how management consultancy interventions affect both talent retention and legal compliance outcomes for TCNs in Malta. While previous research has tended to address either retention or compliance in isolation, this study presents a holistic view of their intersection, grounded in the lived realities of employers managing diverse workforces in a highly regulated environment.

Theoretically, the study enriches the application of Strategic Management Theory, Lewin's Change Theory, and Institutional Theory by illustrating how consultancy serves as both a change agent and strategic resource. Specifically, it demonstrates how external consultancy can help firms align with institutional expectations, implement adaptive HR systems, and reconfigure organisational practices to enhance both retention and compliance, a reflection of dynamic capabilities theory (Teece et al., 1997) and institutional legitimacy models (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Practically, the study identifies a critical policy gap, namely, the lack of accessible, state-supported consultancy services for SMEs. By empirically grounding the call for shared consultancy schemes, simplified permit systems, and institutional support networks, the findings offer timely insights for policymakers, employers, and industry associations seeking to enhance migrant workforce governance in Malta and comparable EU contexts.

6.4 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made.

1. Employers should prioritise inclusive HR practices and invest in structured onboarding and cultural competence training to support the integration and retention of TCNs. This should include clear job expectations, mentoring schemes, and cross-cultural awareness sessions. For instance, in Canada, the Rexdale Community Health Centre offers cultural training that has significantly improved migrant staff engagement and workplace satisfaction. Maltese organisations can replicate such initiatives to foster inclusive work environments that support long-term retention.
2. Businesses, especially SMEs, are encouraged to explore shared or freelance consultancy models to bridge the resource gap in legal and HR compliance. Australia's Small Business Digital Grants provide funding for external advisory support, enabling small enterprises to access professional services without bearing the full cost. A similar shared consultancy pool among Maltese SMEs, possibly coordinated by chambers of commerce, would increase access to expert guidance on permit and retention strategies.

3. The Maltese government should introduce subsidised consultancy support schemes to assist SMEs in maintaining legal compliance and improving TCN retention. In the United Kingdom, ACAS offers free workplace advice services, reducing litigation risks for small firms. A Maltese equivalent could democratise access to strategic HR and legal advice, especially in high-turnover sectors like hospitality and cleaning.

4. The digitisation and streamlining of Malta's employment permit process is urgently needed to improve transparency and reduce administrative delays. Denmark's Ny i Danmark platform enables both employers and migrant workers to track application progress online, significantly reducing stress and uncertainty. Malta should adopt a comparable system that features document submission portals, automated status notifications, and centralised policy updates.

5. The government should foster public–private partnerships that support migrant workforce development, such as employer training workshops, legal education sessions, and inclusive HR policy development. Ireland's Immigrant Investor Programme has effectively coordinated business and state interests to enhance migrant integration. Malta could replicate this model through collaboration between JobsPlus, Identity Malta, and industry associations.

6. Management consultancy firms should offer affordable and scalable service models tailored to SMEs. France's Les Comptoirs France Services provides administrative and legal support at reduced rates to small businesses. Maltese consultants can adopt a similar model by offering sector-specific "TCN toolkits" including onboarding templates, compliance calendars, and virtual training modules.

7. An inter-ministerial task force on migrant workforce integration should be established to improve policy coordination and institutional responsiveness. Sweden's Integration Board serves as a precedent, facilitating alignment between immigration, labour, and business policy. A similar structure in Malta could eliminate bureaucratic silos and improve employer access to regulatory guidance.

8. A centralised online knowledge hub for employers of TCNs should be developed, hosting downloadable resources, legal updates, and compliance guides. New Zealand's Immigration NZ Employer Portal is a leading example of such a tool, providing clarity and reducing dependency on informal channels. Malta should create a portal under JobsPlus or Identity Malta to serve this purpose.

9. The introduction of an annual recognition scheme for businesses that demonstrate excellence in TCN inclusion and compliance is recommended. Germany's Qualitätssiegel Attraktiver Arbeitgeber recognises inclusive employers and has been effective in spreading good practice. A Maltese "Migrant Employer of the Year" award could similarly incentivise inclusive and legally compliant employer practices.

10. The government should implement tax incentives for firms with strong TCN retention records and no compliance infractions. In Belgium, employers receive social security reductions when hiring long-term unemployed migrants. Malta could design a similar fiscal mechanism to reward employers that consistently adhere to employment laws while investing in their TCN workforce.

11. National guidelines and workshops should be made mandatory for companies employing a threshold number of TCNs, ensuring uniform understanding of legal obligations and HR best practices. This aligns with training protocols in Norway, where employers receive state-funded instruction before hiring migrants. Standardised training in Malta would reduce compliance errors and promote best practices across industries.

6.5 Limitations of the Study

This research is limited in several respects. First, the study's reliance on a qualitative design and a purposive sample of 20 respondents limits its generalisability. The findings may not reflect the full spectrum of experiences across Malta's diverse sectors. Second, data were collected exclusively from employers and managers, excluding the direct voices of TCN employees. Their perspectives on retention and permit compliance would provide valuable balance and depth. Lastly, the dynamic nature of Malta's immigration policies means that some insights may evolve over time, potentially affecting the longitudinal applicability of the findings.

6.6 Suggestions for Further Research

Based on the limitations of the study, the researcher makes the following suggestions.

1. Future studies should adopt a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative data, such as staff turnover rates, permit rejection frequencies, or consultancy ROI metrics,

with qualitative perspectives. This will allow for more nuanced triangulation of findings and increase generalisability.

2. Cross-country comparative studies involving other small EU economies. This might reveal best practices in consultancy-supported migrant labour integration.

3. A study should be done that focuses on TCN employee perspectives, possibly through descriptive methods or employee-focused interviews. This might help to capture the holistic experience of retention and compliance beyond managerial narratives.

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APPENDIX 1

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW FOR THE STUDY: ENHANCING THIRD-COUNTRY NATIONAL TALENT RETENTION AND EMPLOYMENT PERMIT COMPLIANCE*:* A MANAGEMENT CONSULTANCY APPROACH FOR BUSINESSES IN MALTA

Section A: Exploring Challenges in Retaining TCNs

1. Can you describe your experience managing or working with Third-Country National (TCN) employees in your organisation?
2. What challenges have you encountered in retaining TCNs in your workforce?
3. How do these factors affect TCN retention in your view?
4. What are the main reasons why TCNs leave or stay in your organisation?

Section B: Assessing Compliance with Employment Permit Regulations

5. How does your organisation manage the employment permit process for TCNs?
6. What challenges have you experienced in ensuring compliance with employment permit regulations?
7. What are the areas where your organisation struggles to meet compliance requirements?
8. What kind of support do you think businesses need to improve permit compliance for TCNs?

Section C: Exploring Management Consultancy Strategies for TCN Retention

9. How have you engaged any external management consultants to support your organisation in TCN retention strategies
10. What consultancy-led interventions have proven effective in helping your organisation retain TCNs?
11. What is the impact of external consultancy services on the retention rates of TCNs?

Section D: Exploring Management Consultancy Strategies for Employment Permit Compliance

12. Which consultancy practices or tools have helped improve your organisation's compliance with employment regulations for TCNs?
13. Do you believe management consultancy has long-term benefits for compliance? Why or why not?
14. What consultancy-driven policy recommendations would you suggest to enhance legal compliance for businesses employing TCNs in Malta?

APPENDIX II

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Respondent	Gender	Nationality	Sector	Position	Years in Malta	Size of Organisation
R1	Male	Kenya	Hospitality	Hotel Supervisor	2 years	Medium
R2	Male	Nigeria	IT	IT Assistant	1 year	Medium
R3	Male	Algeria	Transport	Taxi Business Owner	8 years	Micro
R4	Male	Colombia	Cleaning Services	Area Supervisor	2 years	Medium
R5	Male	Colombia	Engineering	Carpenter	2 years	Large
R6	Male	Philippines	Education	School Worker	3 years	Large
R7	Male	Peru	IT	IT Support Specialist	1 year	Medium
R8	Male	Kenya	Engineering	Maintenance Manager	3 years	Medium
R9	Male	Ethiopia	Hospitality	Housekeeping Supervisor	2.5 years	Small
R10	Male	Kenya	Hospitality	Restaurant Manager	1.5 years	Small
R11	Female	Bangladesh	Hospitality	Front Office Manager	3 years	Medium

R12	Male	Ghana	Cleaning Services	Site Supervisor	2.5 years	Small
R13	Female	India	Hospitality	Human Resource Assistant	4 years	Medium
R14	Male	Nepal	Construction	Mason Supervisor	2 years	Medium
R15	Female	Zimbabwe	Cleaning Services	Housekeeping Coordinator	3 years	Small
R16	Male	Morocco	Engineering	Electrical Technician	3.5 years	Medium
R17	Male	Egypt	Hospitality	Cook	2 years	Small
R18	Male	Sudan	Logistics	Forklift Operator	2.5 years	Medium
R19	Female	Uganda	Cleaning Services	Shift Leader	2 years	Medium
R20	Female	Nigeria	Hospitality	Assistant Manager	2 years	Medium

APPENDIX III

RAW DATA TABLE SHOWING DERIVATION OF THEMES

Theme Number	Theme Title	Sources of Data (Key Respondents/Quotes)	Related Research Objective
Theme 1	Economic, Social, and Discriminatory Barriers to TCNs Retention	Respondents 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10: Rent too high, limited support, perceived discrimination	Challenges in retaining TCNs
Theme 2	Administrative Burdens, Bureaucratic Delays, and Legal Compliance Challenges	Respondents 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10: Permit delays, unclear laws, fear of non-compliance	Challenges in retaining TCNs
Theme 3	Structural Disconnection, Limited Support Systems, and the Consultancy Access Gap	Respondents 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10: Poor updates, consultant costs, limited access	Challenges in retaining TCNs
Theme 4	Legal Navigation, Consultancy Support, and Varying Compliance Capacities	Respondents 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9: Legal preparedness via consultants, compliance tracking	Extent of compliance with TCN employment permit regulations
Theme 5	Institutional Gaps and the Demand for Government-Supported Consultancy	Respondents 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10: Advocacy for subsidised consultancy, mobile HR support	Extent of compliance with TCN employment permit regulations
Theme 6	Integrated Management Consultancy Strategies for Retention and Compliance	Respondents 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10: Consultant-led onboarding, HR, cultural and legal training	Management consultancy strategies supporting retention and compliance

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to

Global Banking School

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MBA Management Consultancy

DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this dissertation constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions or writings of another.

I declare that the dissertation/consultancy project describes original work that has not previously been presented for the award of any other degree of any institution.

I declare that the project had received the ethical approval before the field work was carried and that an extraction of data is provided in appendix.

I understand that my work is subject to a viva. I may be required to defend my work at an oral examination.

Signed,