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Migration orientations of teachers and student teachers in Albania: a sequential mixed-methods study

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Introduction: This study explores the migration orientations of in-service teachers and student teachers in Albania, a country facing persistent educational and labor market challenges within the Western Balkans. Teacher attrition and outward migration have intensified debates on retention, professional status, and education system sustainability.

Methods: A sequential exploratory mixed-methods design was employed. Qualitative data collected in 2023 identified key push and pull factors, such as low salaries, limited professional development, and declining recognition of the profession, which informed the development of a nationwide survey administered to 816 participants in 2025.

Results: Quantitative analyses showed no significant associations between migration intentions and economic status, age, or perceived professional status. However, a clear group difference emerged: student teachers were more frequently undecided about emigration, whereas in-service teachers expressed clearer intentions either to stay or to leave. Qualitative narratives provided deeper insight, emphasizing the interplay of economic pressures, institutional weaknesses, and concerns related to professional dignity and trust.

Discussion: Findings highlight the limitations of partial reforms and underscore the need for systemic measures that strengthen professional recognition, career pathways, and institutional credibility. The study offers longitudinal evidence that contributes to debates on teacher retention and education sustainability, with implications for policy strategies aimed at reducing teacher shortages in transitional education systems and advancing the Sustainable Development Goals.

KEYWORDS

teacher migration, student teachers, Albania, migration orientations, exploratory mixed-methods, professional recognition, institutional trust, teacher retention policy

Introduction

Migration constitutes a phenomenon with significant social and economic consequences in Albania and the Western Balkans, shaping labor markets, human capital development, and demographic trends. Emigration aspirations remain among the highest in the region, especially among young people and professionals, for whom migration is often perceived as a pathway to improved living standards and career

advancement (Eurofound, 2024; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024; King and Gëdeshi, 2020). Teacher migration, in particular, has become a growing focus in international research. Scholars highlight “push–pull” factors such as low salaries, limited professional development, and restricted career prospects (Kataev et al., 2021; Kolesnikova et al., 2021; Lachelle Smith, 2021; Thompson, 2023), alongside the challenges of recruitment, cultural integration, and pedagogical adaptation. In this context, globalization has redefined teachers as “movable commodities” in the international labor market (Brown, 2008), situating them within broader global migration dynamics rather than local constraints.

International research highlights that the outmigration of qualified teachers undermines both educational quality and system performance (Shmis et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2024; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016). Evidence from South Africa and Jamaica shows how teacher emigration has deepened educational deficits, weakened institutional capacity, and reduced standards (Brown, 2008; Thompson, 2023). Global analyses further stress that teacher shortages are a pressing international challenge, directly threatening the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (Binder, 2024; UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2023; UNESCO, 2024).

Regional findings from the Western Balkans reinforce this picture, pointing to structural weaknesses and insufficient investment that compromise education quality and intensify migration trends (Shmis et al., 2025). Related studies note that limited opportunities and low levels of well-being among youth contribute to aspirations for emigration (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024).

At the same time, research on migrant teachers in host countries reveals important contradictions. While improved working conditions and higher salaries are evident benefits (Lachelle Smith, 2021), many also face professional vulnerability, integration barriers, and pedagogical difficulties in multicultural classrooms (Yip, 2024; Mantel, 2024). These findings suggest that teacher migration extends beyond economic reasoning, reflecting a complex interplay of social status, professional conditions, and integration challenges.

In European countries and in systems undergoing continuous reform, structural teacher shortages have led to compensatory measures. Resch (2025) illustrates this with the Austrian case, where retired teachers have been reintegrated to mitigate systemic deficits. In the Western Balkans, migration is closely tied to labor market dysfunction and persistent employment challenges, which act as enduring drivers of workforce outflows (Dabrowski and Moffat, 2024).

In Albania, despite recent salary increases (INSTAT, 2024), teacher pay remains significantly lower than in European countries, serving as a direct driver of emigration. The limited prospects for career progression, inequitable rewards, and weak social recognition further erode the attractiveness of the profession (Maghnoij et al., 2020; European Commission/Eacea/Eurydice, 2021; UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia and OECD, 2024). Evidence from large-scale assessments such as PISA and PIRLS underscores the link between teacher working conditions and educational quality, highlighting the negative impact of underinvestment and unsustainable reforms (Shmis et al., 2025; European Commission, 2024).

Analyses show that intrinsic motivations, such as emotional attachment to the profession and perceiving teaching as a vocation (Agaj, 2023) act as retention factors but remain insufficient to counter systemic pressures. The lack of fair remuneration and limited opportunities for professional development gradually undermine teacher resilience (Beteille and Evans, 2019; Farahmandpour and Voelkel, 2025). European evidence confirms that recognition, career development, and professional well-being are decisive for reducing attrition (European Commission/Eacea/Eurydice, 2021).

The persistently low global status of teachers also acts as a discouraging factor (Arnold and Rahimi, 2024), while reports connecting the profession to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals underscore the importance of strengthening teachers' roles for sustainable development (Binder, 2024). Overall, this literature suggests that teacher migration emerges from the intersection of global and local dynamics, where personal motivations interact with structural deficiencies and the demands of the international labor market.

Student migration further illustrates the broader challenge of human capital loss and “brain drain.” In Albania, educational and economic drivers intertwine with perceptions of low university quality and weak alignment of degrees with labor market needs. Empirical studies highlight deficiencies in professional practice, didactic infrastructure, and curricular relevance to employment as strong push factors (Demneri Kruja and Taçe, 2022; King and Gëdeshi, 2020; Osman et al., 2024). Beyond structural factors, subjective well-being and institutional trust significantly shape migration orientations. Students reporting higher dissatisfaction and lower confidence in institutions are more likely to express migration intentions (Likaj et al., 2024; Eurofound, 2024; UN Albania, 2024). A further determinant is the perceived “international applicability” of degrees: the stronger students believe their qualifications are recognized abroad, the greater their inclination to emigrate (Kulka et al., 2025). These findings suggest that student migration cannot be explained solely by domestic shortcomings but must also be understood through the lens of how educational capital is valued in an increasingly competitive global market.

An additional dimension of migration concerns the interplay of social, familial, and economic factors that can both drive and inhibit mobility. Economic insecurity, limited professional opportunities, and corruption are identified as major push factors for the emigration of youth and education professionals (Sahatcija et al., 2020; Jenishaj, 2025). Family ties, however, exert a dual influence: aspirations to secure a better future and access to quality education for children often motivate departure, while obligations toward elderly parents and intergenerational responsibilities may discourage it (Miceli and Bilecen, 2025). This ambivalence is also reflected in Parker et al. (2022), who emphasize the tension between the pursuit of better opportunities abroad and the social commitments that promote staying.

The experience of the Albanian diaspora further illustrates migration as a collective, family-based project rather than an exclusively individual decision (Vathi et al., 2019). At the regional level, Eurofound (2024) reports that young people in the Western Balkans express low levels of well-being and a pessimistic outlook, which reinforce migration orientations but do not always culminate in actual mobility. These findings suggest that economic and

social factors operate within a dynamic field of tension, balancing aspirations for change against the need for stability.

Institutional determinants weigh as heavily as economic ones in shaping migration orientations. Studies underline that the absence of meritocracy, pervasive corruption, and institutional weakness exert a direct impact on emigration decisions (UNESCO, 2017; IIEP-UNESCO, 2024; UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia and OECD, 2024; UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report and Education Cannot Wait, 2025). Recı and Papa (2024) highlight how weak public consultation, deficiencies in quality assurance, and the misalignment between education and labor market demands foster perceptions of blocked career trajectories. When policies are not evidence-based and fail to invest in teachers' professional development, institutional support for the profession weakens, thereby reinforcing migration pressures (UNESCO, 2024).

At the political level, migration is closely tied to challenges of European integration and persistent institutional uncertainties across the Western Balkans (Dabrowski and Moffat, 2024; Val, 2022). Historical evidence on Albanian return migration further illustrates that, in the absence of strong institutional support, returns tend to be temporary and precarious, thus perpetuating migration cycles (IOM and ISOP, 2008; Vathi et al., 2019). Overall, the literature suggests that distrust in institutions is as decisive as economic drivers in shaping migration orientations.

A salient feature of migration is the ambivalence and hesitation that shape decision-making. Classical models frame this as the tension between "push" and "pull" factors (Massey, 1988), while Riosmena (2024) extends the framework by distinguishing between micro (individual motivations), meso (social networks and institutions), and macro (economic and political structures) levels of analysis. In Albania and across the region, many teachers and students report migration aspirations, yet often without concrete or feasible plans (King and Gëdeshi, 2020). Family responsibilities, fears of non-integration, and perceived risks abroad act as strong deterrents, reinforcing hesitation (Miceli and Bilecen, 2025; Parker et al., 2022).

International studies on migrant teachers confirm this ambivalence: even when economic conditions improve, professional vulnerability and the challenges of cultural diversity persist as sources of insecurity (Yip, 2024; Mantel, 2024; Dimitriadis, 2020; Damaschke-Deitrick and Wiseman, 2021). Similarly, young Albanians frequently view migration as a risky venture, where the potential for failure and instability fuels fluctuating orientations (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024; Eurofound, 2024). Given the multidimensionality of migration orientations, this study employs an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This design is particularly appropriate for underexplored phenomena, as it supports the development of new constructs and context-specific instruments. The qualitative phase captures in-depth perceptions of in-service and student teachers regarding economic, social, and professional factors influencing their decisions to stay, migrate, or remain ambivalent. These insights inform the quantitative phase, where survey instruments enable systematic comparisons across cohorts and over time.

The adaptability of this design has been demonstrated across disciplines: defining teacher qualifications in Thailand (Opasrattanakorn and Soontornwipast, 2021), building entrepreneurial self-efficacy scales (Setiawan, 2023), integrating

classroom observations with survey tools in educational technology (Isikwe, 2023), and developing instruments for nursing education and simulation safety (Hussein et al., 2025). Applications in public health and communication studies also confirm its utility in capturing complex, context-specific dynamics (Walker et al., 2023; Garip, 2025). Longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches are particularly effective in contexts where migration orientations fluctuate over time, as shown by King and Gëdeshi (2020), Osman et al. (2024), and Pressley et al. (2024), who demonstrate the value of combining qualitative insights with quantitative validation.

This research is guided by two overarching questions: (1) What are the perceptions of in-service teachers and student teachers regarding recent improvements in salary, professional development, institutional support, and evaluation? and (2) What is the relationship between emigration intentions and factors such as economic status, age group, and perceived professional recognition? By addressing these questions, the study fills a critical gap in the literature on teacher and student-teacher migration in transitional societies. It provides longitudinal evidence that integrates qualitative and quantitative dimensions, with implications for teacher retention strategies, professional pathways, and institutional trust in Albania and the Western Balkans. More broadly, it contributes to global debates on teacher shortages, youth aspirations, and the sustainability of education systems, aligning with international priorities such as the Sustainable Development Goals and efforts to enhance the status and attractiveness of the teaching profession worldwide.

Materials and methods

Research design

The investigation was organized in two consecutive stages and followed a sequential exploratory mixed-methods approach (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). In the first stage, carried out in 2023, data were gathered to explore how teachers and student teachers perceived migration and which factors influenced their intentions. The information obtained in this phase was used as the basis for constructing a new survey, which was administered in 2025 to a larger and more diverse group. The link between the two phases lay in the design of the second instrument: the issues that emerged initially were transformed into structured survey items so that they could be tested quantitatively (Fetters et al., 2013).

To ensure methodological coherence, the sequential design followed the logic of instrument development characteristic of exploratory mixed-methods research, where qualitative themes are transformed into measurable constructs to enable broader quantitative testing in the subsequent phase.

Participants and sampling

The study relied on two separate samples.

Phase I (2023): 380 participants took part (78.2% female, 21.8% male). They included both in-service teachers and student teachers preparing to enter the profession. Most respondents lived in urban areas, and a large proportion had completed postgraduate studies. Around seven in ten were already employed in teaching.

Phase II (2025): 816 participants were surveyed (90.3% female, 9.7% male). The majority were in-service teachers (86.2%), while 13.8% were student teachers. Most lived in towns and cities, and nearly nine out of ten held a Master's degree. The sample was geographically broad, covering all 12 Albanian regions, with the highest representation from Tirana and Durrës.

Gender distribution: The gender patterns observed in both phases mirror national trends in the Albanian teaching profession, which is predominantly female.

Instruments

The 2023 survey was semi-structured. It included basic demographic questions, followed by items on migration orientations (stay, leave, undecided), preferred destinations, and the main motives behind those choices. Open-ended questions asked participants to describe what kinds of reforms or changes they considered necessary in teaching and in society.

The 2025 survey was fully structured and designed on the basis of insights from 2023. It included demographic and employment information, questions on migration plans, and items on professional experiences. Teachers were asked whether, compared to 2 years earlier, they had noticed changes in their salary, training opportunities, institutional backing, or working conditions. Student teachers evaluated aspects of university teaching, practicum placements, academic guidance, and the learning environment. Several of these items used a three-option response scale (yes/no/somewhat). The instrument also contained open-ended prompts that allowed participants to express their views more freely. Before large-scale use, the survey was tested in a small pilot group to ensure clarity.

Instrument validation

Development of the 2025 instrument followed a three-step validation process: expert review by researchers in the field, who examined item clarity and relevance; pilot testing with 32 participants to refine wording, response formats, and item sequence; and internal reliability analysis, with all multi-item scales showing acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha \geq 0.70$). The scale measuring teachers' and student teachers' perceptions of improvements was introduced with a common item stem: "Have you noticed improvements in the following areas over the last 2 years?" The scale comprised eight indicators for in-service teachers and eight for student teachers. Examples for teachers include salaries, training and professional development opportunities, institutional support, and working conditions and infrastructure, while examples for student teachers include the quality of university teaching, the quality of teaching practice, support from academic staff, and the learning environment and infrastructure.

Data collection and analysis

In both phases, the surveys were distributed online via Google Forms. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and survey links were shared through professional networks and academic channels to ensure broad reach.

Responses from 2023 were examined through an analysis of categories and themes, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, which helped identify issues such as economic pressures, dissatisfaction with salary, and low professional recognition. These themes directly informed the content of the 2025 questionnaire. Data from 2025 were processed with SPSS, producing descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and subgroup comparisons. The reliability of multi-item scales was estimated using Cronbach's alpha.

Justification for nonparametric analysis

Nonparametric techniques (Spearman correlations, Kendall's tau-b, and chi-square tests) were used due to the ordinal nature of the variables, the use of three-category Likert-type indicators, and skewed distribution patterns, which violate normality assumptions. These methods are appropriate for exploratory designs and provide robust estimates without requiring interval-level measurement or normally distributed data.

Ethics

Prior to participation, respondents were informed that the survey was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential, and that their answers would be used exclusively in aggregate form. No personally identifiable information or sensitive data were collected. The sample included both student teachers and in-service teachers from schools across various regions of Albania. In accordance with institutional research policies, studies based solely on anonymous survey data that do not involve sensitive information or vulnerable populations are exempt from mandatory ethics committee review. The present study therefore adhered to institutional and national guidelines on research integrity, informed consent, and data protection.

Results

This section reports on participants' perceptions of recent improvements in their professional and educational contexts, analyzed separately for teachers and student teachers. The findings are presented descriptively, with particular emphasis on indicators that showed the highest and lowest levels of reported improvement.

Teachers' perceptions of improvements

Teachers were asked whether they had noticed improvements in their work and professional environment over the past 2 years. The indicators examined included salaries, opportunities for professional development, institutional support, working conditions and infrastructure, evaluation and reward practices, parental and community engagement, workplace well-being, and participation in school decision-making. As shown in Table 1, the highest proportion of positive responses ("yes") was reported for opportunities related to professional development (57.5%), followed by salaries (49.6%) and participation in school decision-making (42.0%). By contrast, the lowest reported improvement

concerned evaluation and reward practices (17.0%), where more than half of respondents (54.6%) selected “no.” For indicators such as institutional support, working conditions, and workplace well-being, the modal response was “somewhat,” suggesting perceptions of partial but uneven progress across schools. The 95% confidence intervals (CI) for all indicators are presented in [Table 1](#) to provide greater statistical precision and to reflect the variability of valid responses across participants.

Student teachers’ perceptions of improvements

Students enrolled in teacher education programs were asked whether they had noticed improvements in their preparation for the teaching profession over the past 2 years. Indicators included the quality of university teaching, quality of teaching practice, support from academic staff, learning environment and infrastructure, opportunities for professional development, preparation for the teaching labor market, participation in student and academic life, and the fairness and objectivity of evaluation practices.

As shown in [Table 2](#), the highest proportion of positive responses (“yes”) was reported for opportunities related to professional development (53.0%), support from academic staff (49.7%), and the quality of teaching practice (42.4%). By contrast, the lowest positive perceptions concerned fair and objective evaluation (38.1%) and the quality of university teaching (38.4%). For several indicators, the modal response was “somewhat,” indicating that many students perceived partial progress. The 95% confidence intervals (CI) for all indicators are presented in [Table 2](#) to reflect the variability of valid responses across participants.

Relationship between the tendency to emigrate and selected factors

This section presents the results of the statistical analyses conducted to examine the relationships among the key variables of the study. The analyses were carried out using statistical procedures that were appropriate to the type of data and to the level of measurement applied. In line with the exploratory sequential design, the quantitative findings are reported together with illustrative qualitative insights. The qualitative evidence was collected in 2023, providing contextual insights that complement the statistical analyses.

Relationship between economic status and intention to emigrate from Albania

To assess the relationship between perceived economic status and the intention to leave Albania, a Spearman’s rank-order correlation was performed. The results revealed a very weak and non-significant association, $r_3(814) = 0.015$, $p = 0.673$. The corresponding data are presented in [Table 3](#).

Despite the absence of statistical significance, qualitative evidence highlights that economic pressures remain central to migration considerations. Examples include: “Salaries are very low and prices keep increasing; life is unaffordable.” (*Teacher 12*); “Low salaries, lack of meritocracy, and underdevelopment push me to think about leaving.” (*Teacher 228*).

By contrast, others described stability as a reason to stay, indicating economic heterogeneity within the teaching workforce: “I have a good job, I have everything here, emigration does not tempt me.” (*Teacher 211*). Student teachers similarly highlighted salary levels as decisive in shaping their orientations: “A higher salary is a motivation to stay; otherwise, remaining has no logic.” (*Student 201*).

Relationship between age and intention to emigrate from Albania

To examine the association between age and the intention to emigrate from Albania, Spearman’s rank-order correlation was conducted. The results indicated a very weak, negative, and non-significant correlation, $r_3(814) = -0.060$, $p = 0.088$. The corresponding results are presented in [Table 4](#).

Although the statistical test did not confirm a significant association, qualitative data provide important nuance. Older teachers often described stability, family responsibilities, and established life trajectories as key reasons to remain: “I am older and have built my life here; family, home, and work.” (*Teacher 114*); “I am close to retirement; I see no reason to emigrate.” (*Teacher 231*). By contrast, younger participants associated youth with greater openness to mobility and experimentation with foreign labor markets: “I am young, I want to try other experiences abroad; it is very difficult to start here.” (*Student 88*); “As a young person, it is easier for me to adapt, so I see migration as a real alternative.” (*Student 140*). This pattern reinforces age-related contrasts documented in regional youth migration studies, where uncertainty and opportunity coexist as competing forces shaping migration intentions.

Differences between teachers and student teachers in the intention to emigrate

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the association between participants’ status (teachers vs. student teachers) and their intention to leave Albania (“yes,” “no,” “not sure”). The results revealed a statistically significant relationship, $\chi^2(2, N = 816) = 10.98$, $p = 0.004$. Student teachers were more likely to report being unsure (44.2%) and less likely to state “yes” (18.6%) compared to teachers, who showed a higher proportion of definite responses (“yes” = 24.0%, “no” = 47.2%). The corresponding results are presented in [Table 5](#).

This finding reflects structural and institutional differences between the two groups. Student teachers typically face greater early-career uncertainty, weaker guarantees of stable employment, and less clarity regarding professional pathways, factors that amplify hesitation and reduce confidence in domestic career

TABLE 1 Teachers' perceptions of improvements in the last 2 years (percentages and 95% confidence intervals).

Indicator	Yes % (CI)	No % (CI)	Somewhat % (CI)
Salaries	49.56% (45.82–53.19)	9.94% (7.96–12.39)	40.50% (36.97–44.21)
Training and professional development opportunities	57.50% (53.78–61.07)	7.99% (6.19–10.20)	34.50% (31.14–38.16)
Institutional support	28.86% (25.65–32.33)	30.00% (26.74–33.50)	41.14% (37.53–44.79)
Working conditions and infrastructure	29.10% (25.92–32.63)	29.52% (26.33–33.07)	41.38% (37.81–45.07)
Teacher evaluation and reward practices	16.97% (14.34–19.88)	54.60% (50.93–58.27)	28.43% (25.24–31.89)
Parental and community engagement	31.03% (27.70–34.52)	20.73% (17.93–23.92)	48.24% (44.55–51.92)
Workplace well-being	35.68% (32.25–39.31)	20.31% (17.53–23.47)	44.01% (40.33–47.65)
Participation in school decision-making processes	41.99% (38.37–45.65)	19.10% (16.33–22.13)	38.90% (35.30–42.49)

TABLE 2 Student teachers' perceptions of improvements in the last 2 years (percentages and 95% confidence intervals).

Indicator	Yes % (CI)	No % (CI)	Somewhat % (CI)
Quality of university teaching	38.44% (33.06–44.11)	14.97% (11.34–19.49)	46.60% (40.98–52.31)
Quality of teaching practice	42.37% (36.87–48.07)	14.92% (11.30–19.43)	42.71% (37.20–48.41)
Support from academic staff	49.66% (43.96–55.36)	10.62% (7.58–14.68)	39.73% (34.28–45.44)
Learning environment and infrastructure	42.86% (37.33–48.57)	12.24% (8.98–16.49)	44.90% (39.31–50.61)
Opportunities for training and professional development	53.04% (47.35–58.65)	11.15% (8.05–15.24)	35.81% (30.56–41.42)
Preparation for the teaching labor market	41.24% (35.73–46.97)	16.49% (12.67–21.19)	42.27% (36.73–48.01)
Participation in student and academic life	39.10% (33.65–44.83)	17.99% (13.99–22.83)	42.91% (37.33–48.67)
Fair and objective evaluation of students	38.10% (32.73–43.77)	17.35% (13.45–22.09)	44.56% (38.98–50.27)

TABLE 3 Spearman's correlation between economic status and intention to emigrate.

Variables	r_s	p	N
Economic status – intention to emigrate	0.015	0.673	816

Spearman's correlation with $N = 816$ ($df = 814$) was very weak and not statistically significant ($p = 0.673$).

TABLE 4 Spearman's correlation between age and intention to emigrate from Albania.

Variables	r_s	p	N
Age – intention to emigrate	–0.060	0.088	816

Spearman's correlation with $N = 816$ ($df = 814$) was very weak, negative, and not statistically significant ($p = 0.088$).

TABLE 5 Crosstabulation of participants' status and intention to leave Albania.

Current status	Yes	No	Not sure
Student ($n = 113$)	18.60%	37.20%	44.20%
Teacher ($n = 703$)	24.00%	47.20%	28.70%
Total ($N = 816$)	23.30%	45.80%	30.90%

χ^2 test with $N = 816$ indicated a statistically significant association between participant status and intention to emigrate. All expected cell counts were greater than 5 (minimum expected count = 26.31).

prospects. In contrast, in-service teachers tend to experience more stability, stronger social anchoring, and clearer career trajectories, which contribute to firmer migration orientations.

TABLE 6 Correlation between perceived teacher status value and intention to leave Albania.

Variables	τ_s	p	N
Teacher status value and intention to emigrate	–0.023	0.456	816

Kendall's tau-b with $N = 816$ ($df = 814$) was very weak, negative, and not statistically significant ($p = 0.456$).

Qualitative evidence collected in 2023 reinforces this contrast. Student teachers often emphasized professional insecurity and hesitation about the future: “I am still unstable; I do not know what my professional future will be.” (*Student 19*); “I have no security; the system does not offer me guarantees after graduation.” (*Student 133*). Teachers, in contrast, underlined stability and stronger social or professional anchoring: “I have a job, a family, and I am connected to my country.” (*Teacher 45*); “As a teacher, I want to contribute here despite the difficulties.” (*Teacher 201*).

Relationship between perceptions of teacher status and intention to emigrate from Albania

Kendall's tau-b test was conducted to examine the association between participants' perceptions of the value placed on the teaching profession and their intention to emigrate from Albania. The results indicated a very weak, negative, and non-significant correlation, $\tau_s(814) = -0.023$, $p = 0.456$. The corresponding results are presented in Table 6.

Qualitative narratives further contextualize these results, highlighting persistent concerns about the declining social recognition of the teaching profession. Teachers remarked on this lack of respect for their work: “The status of the teacher has declined; the work is not respected as it once was.” (*Teacher 147*); “I work with dedication, but institutional respect is lacking.” (*Teacher 221*). Others, however, emphasized continued professional commitment despite these concerns: “I like to contribute here, even though the work of teachers is not valued.” (*Teacher 193*). Student teachers similarly voiced apprehension: “I feel that the profession does not have the status it deserves, which is why many of us think about leaving.” (*Student 135*).

Discussion

This study examined the perceptions of teachers and student teachers regarding professional and educational improvements (RQ1) and their impact on migration orientations (RQ2). By integrating quantitative data from 2025 with qualitative evidence from 2023, the results reflect both statistical patterns and subjective experiences, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between professional conditions and migration orientations.

Perceptions of improvements during 2023–2025 (RQ1)

Qualitative data revealed that participants perceived partial improvements in salaries, professional development, and institutional support, while evaluation and reward processes were identified as the most problematic areas. Narratives emphasized that training, even when considered useful, was rarely linked to career progression or to an increase in professional status. This finding is consistent with the observations of Maghnouj et al. (2020) and European Commission/Eacea/Eurydice (2021), which highlight that fragmented professional development and the absence of structured career pathways weaken motivation. Although salary increases have been documented (INSTAT, 2024; IIEP-UNESCO, 2024), qualitative reports indicated that many participants perceived them as insufficient when set against the rising cost of living. This interpretation aligns with UNESCO (2024), which stresses that limited financial benefits fail to address underlying structural gaps.

These findings offer empirical support for the mechanism underlying the professional recognition threshold. Even when material or structural conditions improve, teachers may still feel that recognition has not reached a minimum acceptable level required to sustain motivation and professional commitment. Similar insights appear in international research where strengthening identity, status, and recognition is shown to depend on meeting certain “threshold conditions” in the professional environment (Farrell et al., 2023; Kennie-Kaulbach and Janke, 2025). In the Albanian context, the absence of credible evaluation practices, weak institutional appreciation, and limited autonomy mean that improvements often remain below this threshold, leaving teachers feeling undervalued and professionally

insecure. As shown in the literature on teacher identity formation, recognition is central to consolidating a stable professional identity, and when this recognition is compromised, teachers become more vulnerable to dissatisfaction or detachment (Dahl, 2018; Pérez Gracia et al., 2022; Plaku and Leka, 2025).

Qualitative data also highlighted the fragility of the Albanian institutional context, where economic insecurities and perceived shortcomings in governance and transparency were described as sources of dissatisfaction. This interpretation is consistent with evidence from the Western Balkans, where structural governance challenges are reported to limit the effectiveness of reforms (Dabrowski and Moffat, 2024). Against this backdrop, partial improvements may lack credibility or fail to exceed the recognition threshold required for teachers to interpret reforms as meaningful rather than symbolic. Evidence from international analyses of retention policies supports this interpretation: isolated changes in pay or training have limited impact unless accompanied by higher levels of institutional trust, fairness, and recognition (De Witte et al., 2023; Symeonidis et al., 2025).

At the same time, student teachers highlighted shortcomings in initial preparation and teaching practice, which were linked to stronger migration tendencies in line with analyses by Demneri Kruja and Taçe (2022), Shmis et al. (2025), and Likaj et al. (2024). These findings suggest that early-career teachers may depend on higher levels of recognition and institutional support to develop a stable professional identity. Literature on early professional identity shows that when recognition is limited or inconsistent during teacher training, individuals may struggle to internalize the profession as a viable or respected career (Dahl, 2018; Pérez Gracia et al., 2022).

When interpreting these findings, it is important to consider the composition of the sample. Because the majority of respondents were based in urban areas, the perspectives of rural teachers, who may experience different or more pronounced challenges related to infrastructure, workload, and institutional support, are likely underrepresented. This contextual nuance suggests that levels of perceived recognition may vary across settings and, in some rural contexts, may fall even further below the professional recognition threshold. Accordingly, the threshold concept provides a useful lens for understanding why partial reforms may not uniformly translate into improved morale or reduced migration orientations across diverse school environments.

Migration orientations (RQ2)

Economic factors and age

Statistical analyses did not show significant associations between economic status and migration orientations ($r_s = 0.015$, $p = 0.673$), nor between age and orientations ($r_s = -0.060$, $p = 0.088$). However, qualitative data suggested that salaries and the cost of living remain important elements. This finding is consistent with Eurofound (2024) and Arnold and Rahimi (2024), who emphasize that the combination of low income and limited career opportunities acts as a push factor, as well as with the United Nations Progress Report on UN Albania (2024), which highlights employment constraints for young people.

Teachers versus student teachers

The chi-square analysis revealed a significant association between professional status and migration orientations ($\chi^2 = 10.98$, $p = 0.004$): student teachers were more often uncertain (44.2%), whereas teachers expressed clearer positions (“yes” 24.0%, “no” 47.2%). Qualitative narratives supported this pattern, pointing to greater insecurity among students and stronger stability among teachers. This finding aligns with evidence on youth migration in Albania (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024; Eurofound, 2024) and with studies emphasizing the impact of professional insecurities on migration aspirations (King and Gëdeshi, 2023; Kulka et al., 2025; Likaj et al., 2024).

These differences can also be interpreted through institutional dynamics. Student teachers frequently face unclear employment pathways, uneven practicum experiences, and limited assurances of full-time positions, conditions that heighten early-career uncertainty. In contrast, in-service teachers benefit from greater job stability and stronger professional networks, which reduce migration-related indecision. This pattern aligns with research showing that early professional identity formation is highly sensitive to recognition, autonomy, and institutional support (Dahl, 2018; Pérez Gracia et al., 2022). Fradkin-Hayslip (2021) further demonstrates that limited autonomy and weak recognition lower motivation and job satisfaction, reflections echoed in this study’s qualitative accounts.

Professional status and recognition

The Kendall’s tau-b analysis did not find a significant association between perceptions of professional status and migration orientations ($\tau_b = -0.023$, $p = 0.456$). Nevertheless, qualitative evidence indicated that declining prestige and lack of institutional respect strongly influence the decision to migrate, particularly among student teachers who perceive the profession as undervalued. This result is consistent with international findings that link low status to attrition and migration (Thompson, 2023; Mantel, 2024; Lachelle Smith, 2021; UNESCO, 2024). At the same time, Miceli and Bilecen (2025) show that family and social ties may act as balancing factors, mitigating this pressure and influencing the decision to remain. In this study, these relational commitments, ranging from family obligations to community responsibilities, also appear to buffer the impact of perceived status on migration-related decisions, offering a plausible explanation for the non-significant quantitative association.

In this context, the framework of a professional recognition threshold provides additional explanatory insight. Emerging research suggests that recognition, autonomy, and institutional support may act via threshold-type dynamics, insofar as when these elements fall substantially below a minimum sufficient level, the process of building a stable professional identity is weakened and the professional becomes more vulnerable to exit decisions (e.g., migration, attrition) (De Witte et al., 2023; Farrell et al., 2023; Kennie-Kaulbach and Janke, 2025; Plaku and Leka, 2025).

Theoretical contribution

This study advances theoretical understanding by introducing the notion of a professional recognition threshold, a concept that clarifies why modest material improvements may not meaningfully shift migration orientations among teachers. The

findings indicate that improved salaries or training opportunities alone are insufficient unless they are accompanied by increased institutional fairness, workload appreciation, career predictability, and social respect for the teaching profession.

The professional recognition threshold can therefore be understood as the minimum acceptable level of perceived professional value that teachers require before making long-term commitments to the profession. When recognition falls below this level, migration becomes a plausible or even rational strategy, even in the presence of incremental reforms in other domains. This situates the threshold at the intersection of motivation theory, teacher retention frameworks, and social recognition models, extending existing debates about why teacher attrition remains high in contexts of partial reform. Comparisons with other Western Balkan systems, such as Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, show similar patterns. Partial reforms in salary, evaluation, or professional development have not produced significant improvements in retention unless accompanied by clear career pathways, transparent evaluation criteria, and systemic stability. This suggests that the professional recognition threshold may represent a regionally relevant mechanism across transitional educational environments.

Implications

This study highlights several important implications for policy and practice.

First, partial improvements in salaries and training appear insufficient without deeper reforms in evaluation systems, recognition mechanisms, and career structures. Strengthening teacher retention therefore requires attention not only to financial incentives but also to professional dignity, institutional trust, workload fairness, and transparent career progression pathways. Second, the results show that migration orientations are shaped by a combination of economic, professional, and symbolic factors, illustrating that teachers evaluate their prospects through both material and relational lenses. Policies that focus solely on improving salaries may therefore overlook structural issues related to professional status and institutional stability.

Third, the uncertainty expressed by student teachers reflects a vulnerable entry point into the profession, where inconsistent practicum quality, unclear employment guarantees, and declining occupational prestige contribute to indecision and openness to migration. Strengthening early-career support systems and clarifying employment pathways should be central elements of future retention strategies.

Finally, the professional recognition threshold helps clarify why fragmented reforms can leave structural gaps that weaken the perceived impact of policy changes on teacher retention.

Study limitations

Temporal frame of the study

The 2-year period covered by the study (2023–2025) captured relevant developments within Albania’s education reforms. However, a longer temporal window would allow future research

to examine how migration intentions unfold into actual mobility, return decisions, or continued retention within the profession.

Geographic composition of the sample

Although the sampling strategy ensured broad national coverage, urban teachers were proportionally overrepresented, whereas rural teachers, who often experience distinct institutional and resource-related challenges were less represented. This may limit the extent to which certain rural-specific dynamics are reflected in the findings.

Directions for future research

Building on this study's findings, future research should consider:

- (a) Longitudinal tracking of teachers who express migration intentions, to observe real mobility trajectories and potential return migration.
- (b) Comparative studies across Western Balkan countries, to distinguish shared regional patterns from country-specific determinants of teacher migration.
- (c) Experimental or quasi-experimental evaluations of retention interventions, particularly those that address professional recognition, early-career stability, and school-level support mechanisms.

Data availability statement

The datasets generated for this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics statement

The requirement of ethical approval was waived by the Ethics Council, Aleksander Moisiu University of Durrës, Albania for the studies involving humans because according to the policies of the Ethics Council at Aleksander Moisiu University of Durrës, studies based solely on anonymous survey data that do not involve sensitive information or vulnerable populations are exempt from mandatory ethics approval. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The ethics committee/institutional review board also waived the requirement of written informed consent for participation from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin because participation

was anonymous and voluntary, no personal identifiers were collected, and the study did not involve sensitive information or vulnerable populations.

Author contributions

AP: Data curation, Validation, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Supervision, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Resources, Investigation. TT: Validation, Data curation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing, Software, Formal analysis.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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