

UNTANGLED POLICY BRIEF

SUPPORTING MIGRATION AND LABOUR MOBILITY

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Key Messages

- Migration can be key in addressing labour-market shortages in the European Union, but better protections and support systems are needed, for both internal and non-EU migrants.
- Many migrants are overqualified for the jobs they perform because their qualifications from their home countries are not recognised. EU countries can help address shortages in higher-skilled fields by developing frameworks for qualifications recognition.
- Language and cultural orientation courses, and better access to citizenship, are among the factors that can improve migrants' societal integration.



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Executive summary

Ageing of the European population, labour market shortages, and skills mismatches across the EU reinforce the need to recruit immigrant workers to meet the needs of the labour market. Project UNTANGLED's results, together with previous literature, have important implications for migration policies at an EU and country specific level. UNTANGLED reports a relatively high level of migration to the EU and within the EU with strong differences in the education levels of migrants, and strong differences in the extent of migration between the EU countries. As the number of posted workers across the EU increases it becomes particularly important for the European Labour Authority (ELA) to safeguard the rights of migrants and establish fair labour markets across the bloc. Two key challenges that emerge in this context are the attractiveness of EU countries for migrants, and the successful integration of migrants into the labour market. The key challenges are addressed in this report by providing policy recommendations at the EU and country level.

European member states can offer financial incentives to attract migrants to the areas with the highest needs. Such incentives can take the form of reimbursement of costs when people move to take up work in another area, and preferential tax schemes to attract high-skilled foreigners. Employment opportunities should be improved for non-EU persons seeking employment in the EU by providing residence and work permits. The European Qualifications Framework should be more strongly implemented to accelerate the recognition of occupational qualifications in the EU and enable efficient movement of labour to and within the region. Fourth, societal integration should be improved by even more strongly focusing on language learning, providing access to affordable accommodation, appropriate social protections, and equal treatment directives, and by accelerating the granting of citizenship.

Background

In this report we review the current state of migration policies across the EU and provide recommendations for future policy implementation at a national level and to the ELA to ensure that EU labour markets treat their citizens fairly. The report summarises key migration policies that informs our policy recommendations for the rest of the EU and the ELA, which are focused on financial incentives, employment opportunities, qualification recognition, and social integration.

The OECD and UNHCR are international authorities that track migration trends and assess migrants' labour market integration (OECD, 2022; UNHCR, 2021). In the H2020 Project UNTANGLED, we offer comprehensive information on both intra- and extra-European migration. Specifically, Bachmann et al. (2023) show that, in 2021, in the labour markets of 19 countries of the European Union (EU) with available Labour Force Survey (LFS) data, natives represent on average 83.2% of the workforce and most migrants come from other EU27 countries (8.9%) followed by Asia (3.3%), while other continents represent less than 3% of the workforce. Some of the EU migration may also be driven by the Posted Workers Directive, which enables employers to send their employees to conduct service in another EU state on temporary basis.¹ Kennedy and Fiorucci (2023) state that in 2017 there were approximately 2.8 million posted workers in the EU which increased from 1.29 million in 2008. Posted workers may act as short-term supply of labour to another EU member state and increase migration across the EU.

¹ For more information on the EU Posting of Workers Directive see <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:01996L0071-20200730>

The lack of standardisation of rules related to posted work across the EU means that posted workers may experience unequal treatment in the EU labour market in terms of pay, entitlements, and conditions of employment (Kennedy & Fiorucci, 2023). As a result, the European Labour Authority was established to monitor the application of rules and regulations related to labour mobility. Key objectives of the ELA are to strengthen the trust in EU migration policies and to promote labour mobility across the EU. There are several other policies and initiatives for labour mobility within and towards the EU. For example, the Schengen Agreement and the Euro currency have facilitated the movement of European workers between member states (Beine et al., 2019).

The education level of migrants across the EU varies significantly based on their region of origin (Bachmann et al., 2023). While immigrants from North America mostly have a high level of education, for Asian immigrants, the distribution of education levels (low, medium, high) is quite balanced, and for African immigrants, the proportion with a low level of education is relatively high. There is a vast literature analysing the integration and the labour market impact of immigrants (Dustmann et al., 2016; Edo, 2019). Immigration has been shown to have heterogeneous effects across workers with different education levels (Borjas, 2003, Ottaviano & Peri, 2012). On the positive side, immigrant workers can create jobs (Albert, 2021), generate productivity gains through innovation and increase trade connections. On the negative side, persistent employment gaps, occupational and wage differentials between immigrants and natives exist (Guzi et al., 2021; Berbée & Stuhler, 2023). The legal status and the institutional setting faced by migrants, such as arriving as a student or as an asylum seeker facing employment bans upon arrival (Fasani et al., 2021), can affect immigrants' labour market integration.

Employment visas vary across EU countries but the European Union has introduced a common scheme, the EU Blue Card, with an objective to attract international talents to Europe. The EU Blue Card program offers language and cultural orientation courses to participants and provides a work permit for 2 to 4 years in an EU country. Giovanis et al. (2021) shows that this program helps immigrants integrate into the social norms of their host societies. The scheme is especially valuable for companies in need of a highly skilled workforce, including technology-oriented or knowledge-based small and medium-sized enterprises. In 2021, 29,000 EU Blue Card permits were issued, with Germany representing 67% of the EU total (Eurostat, 2022). Another path to enter the EU labour market is by obtaining visas in the EU's Schengen area, which have been particularly beneficial to persons from Western Balkan countries and Eastern Partnership countries. According to Eurostat, the total number of first residence permits issued to nationals of the visa-free countries more than doubled between 2008 and 2017, and most of them were issued for work activities (European Migration Network, 2019).

In recent years, forced migration and the number of refugees to the EU has increased. In particular, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to a surge in Ukrainian asylum applications in Europe. Guichard et al. (2022) find that there were more than 4.7 million asylum seekers from Ukraine across Europe. The processing of asylum applications in EU countries remains largely under national authority and jurisdiction. Nevertheless, the EU has been working on harmonising processes and setting up a common European Asylum System. The first-time enactment of the Temporary Protection scheme for displaced people from Ukraine has exemplified that coordination can be achieved in times of crises.

Beyond the repartition of asylum seekers across member countries, specific integration and re- and up-skilling policies need to be put in place for refugees. Arendt et al. (2022) underline that it is essential to implement integration policies with the goal of aiding refugees in acquiring the language and specific knowledge necessary to rapidly access the labour market of their destination country.

This is especially critical for refugees, who are typically less prepared and face more difficulties resulting from a lack of skills compared to economic migrants (Brell et al., 2020). It has been shown that while all refugees and economic immigrants have lower employment probabilities compared to the native-born, this gap is more pronounced for refugees compared to all other immigrants.²

There is a need to strengthen and expand policies aimed at promoting immigration and socioeconomic integration of immigrants in the EU. Projected population ageing across the EU will reinforce the need to recruit immigrant workers from outside the EU in order to meet the needs of the labour market. Existing studies highlight that immigrants are more responsive to changing labour and skill shortages than natives in labour market, especially in Spain (Amuedo-Dorantes & de la Rica, 2010), in Norway (Røed & Schøne, 2012), in the UK (Dustmann et al., 2010), in France and Germany (Bachmann et al., 2023) and in the EU15 (Guzi et al., 2018).

It is important to acknowledge that national and European perspectives and attitudes towards immigration do not align. There are common fears around Europe that low paid foreign workers may put downwards pressure on wages (Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021), exploit social security systems (Alesina et al., 2021) or adversely effect social and cultural cohesion. At the same time, immigrants provide a positive net contribution to the society overall (Kancs & Lecca, 2017). Right-wing parties and populists may adopt immigration concerns with an aim to implement policies that are not helpful to asylum seeker or immigrant integration into a society. Examples of this are recent UK government policy announcements that will make it much more difficult for the spouses of immigrants to enter the UK. Due to the inconsistencies and contradictory policy developments around immigration in the EU, it becomes difficult to offer straightforward policy recommendations at a national level. It also makes for EU-wide policy development difficult. However, national and EU institutional policy recommendations discussed in this report aim to improve migrant worker labour market outcomes, societal integration, and national economic performance.

Recommendations

Policy implications

A key observation across the EU is that labour markets are increasingly facing shortages. This is reflected in a growing number of job vacancies, low unemployment rates, and aging population that continues to exacerbate labour shortages in most EU countries (Sommerfeld, 2023). At the same time geographical mobility has been identified as one of the main strategies to mitigate labour mismatch across Europe (Eurofound, 2014). Countries that are adopting policies to encourage immigration are largely focusing on high-skilled individuals in occupations affected by skills shortages (Sommerfeld, 2023). For highly skilled workers outside of the EU, some countries are issuing specific work permits, start-up visas, or freelance visas. Dorn and Zweimüller (2021) find that a significant policy concern for many countries is the sustainability of long-term residents and socio-economic and political integration of immigrants. Sommerfeld (2023) indicates that it is also important to attract low-skilled workers since labour shortages are evident across a variety of occupations, and because immigrants working in non-shortage occupations may give way for other persons to work in shortage occupations. The European Commission has emphasised the need for efficient geographical mobility as a key strategy to mitigate labour market imbalances and to increase future growth. By considering existing migration policies they may inform policy development in other EU countries and at the EU level.

² European Commission's definition of 'economic migrant' and 'refugee' can be found here: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/economic-migrant_en

With any development of migration related labour market policies there need to be better support systems and protections of EU and non-EU nationals. An exemplary measure to foster the labour market integration of refugees is the EU Talent Pool pilot initiative, an online job search tool launched by the European Commission in October 2022 to help those fleeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine with securing employment in the European Union. In addition, the European Labour Authority stands as a pivotal force in enhancing cross-border labour mobility, particularly for posted workers within the EU. Through fostering cooperation and coordination among EU member states, the ELA ensures the effective enforcement of rules governing posted workers. This involves offering guidance to employers and workers, promoting information exchange, and facilitating dispute resolution. Still access to public benefits, employment services, integration of children and availability of housing can be problematic for immigrants into a new country, due to difficulties in navigating a new and often complicated system, recognition of documentation, and language difficulties (Eurofound, 2015). Social partners, such as governments, employers, and trade unions, can provide information and assist in efficient social and labour market integration of migrants. However, such policies and practices are uneven across the EU.

Policy recommendations

Geographical mobility can efficiently address labour market imbalances and assist in improving economic performance. Therefore, it is essential that EU institutions, such as the ELA, and national policymakers receive policy recommendations on supporting migration and labour mobility. The key migration policy recommendations broadly relate to financial incentives, employment opportunities, qualifications recognition, and societal integration. Best practices in each area and related recommendations are discussed next.

Financial incentives

Financial incentives to encourage geographical mobility can come in a variety of forms. Some initiatives include financial aid or reimbursement of costs when people are moving to take up work in another area. For posted workers national rules concerning reimbursement of costs vary across the EU (Rasnača, 2019). There is no EU wide legal framework for reimbursement costs related to cross border moves for work, but the ELA can safeguard posted workers' rights to reimbursement according to national and international policies. In addition, EU member states such as Denmark, France, and Italy have designed preferential tax schemes to attract high-skilled foreigners and expatriates, granting fiscal incentives to individuals who move their residence to the country. Empirical evidence shows that tax incentives are an effective policy to induce immigration, especially among high-income workers and professions with little location-specific human capital (Kleven et.al. 2020; Bassetto & Ippedico, 2023). Similar tax incentives can be implemented in other countries seeking to attract specific type of workers.

Employment opportunities

For non-EU persons seeking employment in the EU, country-specific residence and work permits are among the key policy decisions to influence the level of supply of labour (IOM, 2013). Due to significant labour shortages many of the EU-27 countries³ offer migrants employment specific protections to assist with their integration (European Migration Network, 2023). Such policies have previously advocated for the inclusion of undocumented migrants in EU employment directives (Carta & Neidhardt, 2022).

³ Countries include Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Germany, Estonia, Greece, Finland, France, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden.

In addition to policies that facilitate immigrants' access to the EU member states' labour markets, active labour market policies have emerged as a pivotal tool in facilitating the integration of immigrants and thus mitigate labour shortages. European member states and the ELA may monitor and disseminate information on national training and employment opportunities to help immigrants, especially posted workers, to enter the labour market quickly and efficiently.

EU member states such as Germany, Ireland, and Sweden are experiencing an influx of highly skilled people due to labour market policies and strategies, which are accompanied by appropriate investment in higher education, research and development, science and technology, and patenting, that encourage immigration (ESPON, 2020). Highly skilled individuals are often attracted to regions with developed metropolitan areas, clusters of financial services, innovation hubs, and growing manufacturing sectors (ESPON, 2020). Therefore, at a national level, interregional capital movements and investment are likely to contribute to the development of sectors and address labour shortages.

Qualifications recognition

A significant barrier to cross-border mobility is the recognition of a standardised qualifications framework (Eurofound, 2014). In the EU, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) has been established to make the translation of qualifications across different jurisdictions feasible. The recognition of minimum training requirements to be authorised to work in specific occupations across the EU is facilitated by the EQF. Most EU countries have been engaging with the EQF, which helps to facilitate efficient movement of labour within the EU. In terms of immigration from outside of the EU, better recognition of foreign qualifications can accelerate migrant integration and labour market participation (Anger et al., 2022). This is important because in many instances migrants are over-qualified for the jobs that they do, while their qualifications are suited for occupations that are experiencing shortages of skilled workers (Eurofound, 2015). The lack of policy on qualification recognition means that in most EU countries migrants are overqualified for the jobs performed when compared to equivalent native workers (IOM, 2013). In the EU, the ELA can work with policymakers at a national level to assess, acknowledge, and incorporate foreign qualifications in a national setting to improve geographical mobility and appropriate allocation of labour within sectors that are experiencing skill shortages. The ELA could also support the recognition of international qualifications to inform qualification and migration policy in EU member states.

Societal integration

One of the main barriers to labour movements within the EU and integration of immigrants is the lack of proficiency in the local language (Lochmann et al., 2019). To promote labour mobility, the EU views language learning as one of the main policy priorities and, therefore, provides funds to many projects and programmes to encourage multilingualism (Renard & Milt, 2023). Language proficiency is often the key requirement when people move to take up jobs in other regions. Therefore, some EU member states offer publicly funded language courses to immigrants. Other countries should adopt similar language learning policies and offer free or affordable access to language training. This leads on to the role of educational attainment as a good predictor of migrant integration and labour market participation. As a result, some governments have implemented legislative acts (Germany, Luxembourg), established new agencies (Ireland), or simplified standards for educational recognition (Lithuania, Romania) to help with migrant educational attainment and training, recognition of existing education, and societal integration (IOM, 2013).

Another way to foster the societal integration of immigrants is to facilitate access to host country citizenship. Naturalisation allows immigrants full political rights and guarantees a higher stability of their residency in the host country (OECD, 2022). Although the direct economic effects of naturalisation

are limited, as most naturalised immigrants already have permanent visas and full access to the host country's labour market, evidence shows that access to citizenship can substantially improve the labour market integration of immigrants (Bratsberg et al., 2002; Gathmann & Keller, 2018; Hainmueller et al., 2019). In addition, facilitating naturalisation and liberalising birth-right citizenship significantly improve the school performance of immigrant children (Felfe et al., 2020; Gathmann et al., 2021). As the cost of naturalising foreign citizens is close to zero, while the returns are clearly positive, granting access to citizenship might be thought of as a particularly cost-effective integration policy (Fratini & Bertino, 2023). Accordingly, the overall trend among the EU member states has been to take steps to encourage more immigrants to pursue citizenship. Germany, for example, announced the intention to enact significant reforms to nationality law in its 2021 coalition agreement. Changes would focus on simplification of requirements, such as lowering the number of years of residency to five years (or three in the case of special integration achievements) and lowering the required level of German-language proficiency. Other EU member states, such as Latvia, Lithuania and Luxembourg, have sought to increase flexibility for migrants seeking to acquire citizenship. However, some countries, such as Denmark and Greece, have recently considered restrictions to or additional requirements for naturalisation, which might be harmful to immigrants' societal and economic integration (OECD, 2022).

Other effective societal integration policies include access to affordable accommodation, appropriate social protections, and equal treatment and anti-discrimination directives (Carta & Neidhardt, 2022). Countries that have adapted laws to advocate for migrant rights have experienced greater migrant integration. The ELA could support EU labour mobility by providing information on language learning, naturalisation of EU citizens, and social integration policies at a national level. The ELA could also review and enforce existing rules on migrant worker integration at a national level across the EU.

Conclusions

EU labour markets are increasingly facing labour shortages. At the same time the number of people in the EU has grown due to the expansion of the EU, as well as an influx of refugees, and increased labour movements of non-EU residents. Growing EU economy and business performance has also increased employment opportunities in the region. However, labour market shortages persist. A key strategy to mitigate labour shortages across Europe is appropriate immigration policy. Countries that have adopted appropriate immigration policies are better suited to address labour market mismatches when they arise, while other countries may consider similar approaches to tackling labour market imbalances.

Immigration can lead to job creation, improved productivity, innovation, and an increase in international trade. Many of the EU member states have embraced the positive impacts of immigration by offering migrants integration opportunities, such as language and cultural orientation courses, special work permits, and financial support for regional mobility. Larger EU countries, such as Germany and Italy, that are experiencing significant labour market mismatches in key economic sectors are implementing policies and practices to recruit immigrant workers from outside of the EU.

Financial incentives to encourage immigration can include policy around reimbursement of regional mobility costs and tax reduction/deduction. Work permits, migrant rights policies, and formal links and supports for labour market opportunities can also increase migrant labour market participation. Appropriate recognition of qualifications at a national level improves immigration outcomes and can be used as a tool to address labour market mismatches. Social integration policies, such as publicly funded provision of language courses, affordable accommodation, equal labour market treatment, and anti-discrimination policies, can break down barriers to labour movements within the EU and address labour shortages in the region.

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About UNTANGLED

UNTANGLED is a three-year interdisciplinary Horizon 2020 research project that seeks to examine the interconnected trends of globalisation, demographic change and technological transformation, and their effects on labour markets in the European Union and beyond. By engaging a broad range of stakeholders, including companies and civil society organisations, we will develop practical policy proposals to help governments cushion the negative impacts of these trends and ensure their benefits are enjoyed fairly across regions and sectors.

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