

How Can Europe Deliver on the Potential of Talent Partnerships?

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Executive Summary

In June 2021, the European Commission held a soft launch for its new Talent Partnerships initiative, which will combine worker or student mobility schemes with related capacity-building support in countries in Africa, the Eastern Neighbourhood, and the Western Balkans. At the time of writing, details of the schemes are still being hammered out in negotiations between the European Commission, Member States, and other key stakeholders. But this concept heralds a new opportunity to think about how Europe engages with third countries on migration issues and avenues for cooperation on developing and attracting talent to address Europe's future labour market needs.

As European economies reopened in mid-2021, acute labour shortages quickly emerged in sectors ranging from logistics to hospitality. This experience, coupled with growing awareness of the contributions of immigrant essential workers at all skill levels during the COVID-19 pandemic, could help explain the more expansive view of talent emerging among Member States that is not limited to high-skilled workers. But matching workers in third countries with vacancies in Europe remains a challenge, not least because of the lack of reliable, up-to-date information about labour market conditions in third countries or compatibility of third-country and European training standards in different sectors.

Mobility schemes such as those proposed as part of the Talent Partnerships can test options to address Europe's labour market needs, including assessing demand in different sectors or along different migration routes, experimenting with a sectoral approach, or digitising recruitment or immigration processes. Given their small scale and high up-front costs, mobility schemes' pros and cons should always be weighed against those of other types of interventions, such as reforms to streamline immigration processes and reduce red tape. But when done well, mobility schemes can provide a useful way to test policy approaches that can then be scaled up or fed into future policy decisions.

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The Talent Partnerships could also support greater capacity-building in third countries. One step is to provide financial and technical assistance to help third countries participate in these schemes, especially if the countries' institutions have less expe-

rience in this area. Another step is to link mobility schemes with related investments in third countries' capacity in areas such as managing migration processes, conducting labour market assessments, improving the quality of vocational education and training, engaging diasporas, and providing reintegration support to returning migrants. Providing support to help partner countries conduct regular labour market assessments and assisting in mapping third-country education and training systems would offer benefits beyond the lifespan of a mobility scheme, helping to lay the groundwork for future cooperation and giving third countries greater ownership over these processes.

When designing the Talent Partnerships, European policymakers should also look beyond recruitment to think about options to help build the pipeline for talent in third countries. Mobility schemes often provide some professional and language training to help migrants adapt to destination-country labour markets and communities, but their ad hoc and tailored nature means these investments in training rarely have lasting impact, for example by integrating elements of this professional training into third-country curricula. Consulting with third-country employment agencies and education providers from a mobility scheme's inception phase could identify opportunities for a wider pool of students or workers to benefit from any resulting innovations to training or pedagogy. The Talent Partnerships could also continue to experiment with the global skill partnership model tested during the European Union's legal migration pilot projects, which proposes providing training to both prospective migrants and students who intend to find employment locally. More work needs to be done to see how this model can balance training and mobility imperatives, and identify avenues to achieve scale once this balance is struck successfully.

The impact of the Talent Partnerships will ultimately be shaped by the commitments that the European

Commission can secure from Member States, third countries, employers, and other key stakeholders, and the funding available for capacity-building. Flexibility about who to partner with and how long migrants can stay in destination countries, will be important, as is clear communication about the Talent Partnerships' goals and how they fit in with other European-led initiatives and policy priorities.

1 Introduction

Europe faces a looming shortfall in skilled workers as demand in knowledge- and service-intensive sectors grows and its populations age and workforces shrink.¹ For education and training systems, the question is how to train people for the jobs of tomorrow—including how to impart both technical knowledge and soft skills—and retrain workers displaced by these trends.² For immigration policymakers, the question is how to attract and retain foreign workers with in-demand skills and experience, or 'talent', to help address the shortfall.

These priorities are reflected in the European Commission's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, published in September 2020, which contains two separate talent-branded initiatives. One is the Talent Pool, which will be launched in early 2022 and aims to streamline immigrant-selection processes in Europe. The other initiative is the Talent Partnerships, which proposes a new set of mobility schemes for workers or students combined with related investments in capacity-building in partner countries as a way to help attract talent to Europe and foster deeper cooperation on migration with third countries. The latter initiative, which had a soft launch in June 2021 and is now being operationalised, is the focus of this policy brief.

At the time of writing, the details of the Talent Partnerships are still being hammered out in discussions between the European Commission, Member States,

third countries, and other stakeholders. But the evidence to date suggests that the Talent Partnerships will have two features that will distinguish them from previous EU-branded mobility schemes or partnerships.

The first is scope. The new partnerships would bring together mobility schemes for work or training with longer-term investments to build third-country capacity in areas such as labour market assessments, education, reintegration, and diaspora engagement. This direct link between mobility schemes and broader investments in capacity-building—backed by funds from the European Union’s Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund and the new Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument—suggests a more ambitious approach to capacity-building than past EU initiatives.³ Connecting these schemes to longer-term investments could also help provide more tangible development benefits to partner countries.

The second is geography. The EU legal migration pilot projects, first launched in 2019, focused on mobility schemes for nationals of certain African countries, but the Talent Partnerships could be launched with countries in Africa, the Eastern Neighbourhood, the Western Balkans, and possibly others. This broader remit opens new possibilities for Member States to build on their existing networks in different regions.

The imminent unveiling of the first Talent Partnerships is an opportunity to reflect on what it will take for the partnerships to deliver on these ambitions—including how they can fit into Europe’s policy agenda around fostering economic competitiveness in the bloc, alleviating poverty and promoting sustainable development in low- and middle-income

countries, and strengthening cooperation on migration with third countries—and how they can build usefully on past experiences. Over the years, the European Union and its Member States have funded a range of mobility schemes designed to recruit third-country nationals for work or training in different sectors, such as agriculture, construction, hospitality and tourism, and information and communications technology (ICT). But the outcomes of these schemes have been mixed, revealing the difficulties of creating and scaling up this type of project, securing and maintaining buy-in from the private sector and other key stakeholders, and realising ambitions around improving and expanding legal migration opportunities for nationals of third countries.⁴

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As the European Commission and its partners prepare to launch the first Talent Partnerships, policy-makers will need to reflect on how this initiative can contribute to ambitions for attracting talent to Europe, especially in the wake of emerging labour shortages that threaten to upend Europe’s economic recovery. Drawing on lessons from the European Union’s legal migration pilot projects and other past mobility schemes, and insights from stakeholders, this policy brief explores how and under what conditions the Talent Partnerships could help meet Europe’s labour market needs and provide more tangible benefits for partner countries and migrants themselves.

2 Achieving the ‘Talent’ in Talent Partnerships: Meeting Europe’s Labour Market Needs

When launching the Talent Partnerships in June 2021, the European Commission presented them as a vehicle to help attract talent to Europe. But there is a lack of consensus on what exactly ‘talent’ means in this context and who it does and does not cover. In turn, it can be challenging to balance the dual purposes of the Talent Partnerships—contributing to Europe’s efforts to attract talent and aiding efforts to pursue deeper cooperation with third countries on migration issues. Decisions about who to partner with exemplify this conundrum: countries that are key partners in migration management efforts might not have workers with the right profiles to meet certain destination-country labour market needs, for example.

A. Where are needs most acute?

To date, ‘talent’ has tended to be synonymous with high-skilled workers in EU- and Member State-led initiatives, which have often focused on fast-growing sectors such as technology. For example, the EU legal migration pilot projects ended up focusing on recent university graduates or early-to-mid-career professionals in sectors such as ICT.⁵ And at the national level, France’s Talent Passport is open to workers with advanced qualifications, entrepreneurs, or renowned self-employed individuals or performers.⁶

But recent developments indicate that Member States could be open to defining talent more broadly—in terms of sectors, skill levels, and years of experience.⁷ At the Talent Partnerships’ soft launch in June 2021, participating Member States and stakeholders called for a broader definition of talent that could also include low- or middle-skilled workers, or even entrepreneurs. They also showed interest in using the partnerships to address demand in sectors such as health care and personal services, construction, and logistics.⁸ And additional EU-funded legal migration pilot projects launched under the Migration Partnership Framework in September and October 2021 focus on offering short-term placements to entrepreneurs from Morocco and Senegal, traineeships to young professionals from Morocco and Tunisia, and reintegration support to female seasonal workers returning from Spain to Morocco.⁹

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This shifting perspective corresponds with the labour shortages that emerged across the skills spectrum starting in mid-2021 as European economies reopened (see Box 1). At the time of writing, needs were most acute in sectors such as accommodation and food services, logistics, and construction, but as European economies reopen further, shortages are emerging in sectors projected to experience growth in the coming years, including health care and ICT.

BOX 1**Understanding Europe's Labour Market Shortages**

Public-health measures introduced to slow the spread of COVID-19, such as social distancing and lockdowns, came at a high economic cost. Employment fell from March 2020, especially in sectors such as hospitality and retail that rely on in-person contact, and European governments subsequently launched policies to support businesses, aid recently unemployed workers, and protect jobs through wage subsidies or short-time work schemes. But as vaccination rates increased during 2021, governments began to lift some of these public-health measures (such as lockdowns), enabling European economies to reopen.

In 2021, certain sectors saw growing competition for workers. In the second quarter of 2021, the EU-wide vacancy rates for accommodation and food service activities and for construction were five times higher than for the mining and quarry sector. This situation also varies by Member State. For example, during this period Germany reported its highest vacancy rates in construction (5.9 per cent). Conversely, vacancy rates were highest in the accommodation and food services sector in Austria (8.2 per cent), Belgium (8.8 per cent), Croatia (5.6 per cent), Denmark (5.5 per cent), Italy (4.2 per cent), the Netherlands (7.6 per cent), and Slovenia (6.7 per cent). And while vacancy rates were in the low single digits for some Member States, Czechia reported vacancy rates of 29.2 per cent for administrative and support service activities and 24.1 per cent for real estate activities.

The pandemic's economic disruptions are driving some of these shortages. The squeeze in hiring in the hospitality sector, for example, came after many people either lost their jobs or ended up on job retention schemes. Some displaced workers subsequently re-entered the job market, while others decided to stay home or change professions entirely in search of better wages or working conditions. But other shortages predate the pandemic. For example, the immense strain placed on health systems during the pandemic (and the disproportionate number of health-care workers sickened or killed by the disease) has exacerbated longstanding difficulties recruiting enough health-care and long-term care workers to meet rising demand from Europe's ageing populations. And while the massive switch to teleworking during the pandemic saw fresh demand for ICT professionals, technological skills have long been at a premium as Europe's digital economy grows.

Immigration policy can help meet some of these needs by allowing employers to recruit workers for jobs they find hard to fill locally and admitting people with in-demand skills. But the answer also lies in addressing why some jobs are so hard to fill and exploring avenues to attract workers (for example, by increasing pay, improving working conditions, or reorganising tasks into more family-friendly schedules) and improve productivity (including through mechanisation of some routine tasks).

Sources: Eurofound and the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, *What Just Happened? COVID-19 Lockdowns and Change in the Labour Market* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021); Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 'Job Retention Schemes during the COVID-19 Lockdown and Beyond', updated 12 October 2020; Eurostat, 'Job Vacancy Statistics by NACE Rev. 2 Activity-Quarterly Data (from 2001 onwards)', JVS_Q_NACE2, accessed 3 November 2021; Kate Hooper, 'Labor Shortages during the Pandemic and Beyond: What Role Can Immigration Policy Play?' (commentary, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, October 2021); Terence Hogarth, *COVID-19 and the Demand for Labour and Skills in Europe: Early Evidence and Implications for Migration Policy* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2021).

Europe is working to map current and projected labour market needs across the bloc at the national and local levels, but information about the supply of available workers in potential partner countries tends to be much patchier. For example, partner

countries may lack reliable and up-to-date labour market data, including on unemployment rates across sectors and regions, that could help alleviate partner-country concerns about the risk of 'brain drain' (the emigration of nationals with in-demand

skills) and facilitate matching.¹⁰ Limited information about how education and training systems in partner countries align with European standards can also create barriers that deter employers from participating, hinder migrants' labour market integration while in Europe, and stymie efforts to help returning migrants translate skills acquired abroad into employment or entrepreneurship opportunities at home.

Delivering on the European Commission's ambition to connect workers in third countries who have in-demand skills with hard-to-fill jobs in Europe will require a more systematic assessment of labour market conditions in partner countries to understand where workers may be available and how adaptable their skills and experiences are to European labour markets. For example, Germany's International Placement Services (ZAV; a division of the German Federal Employment Agency) is conducting analyses in 27 countries of origin, focusing on their educational curricula and the likelihood of credentials granted in those countries being recognised in Germany.¹¹ One important action the Talent Partnerships could take is to improve the quality of labour market data on prospective partner countries. These data are vital for working out where employers could recruit workers without exacerbating local shortages, how training systems compare, and what additional training migrant workers may need to be able to access the destination-country labour market. Collecting data on available workers and their skills profiles can also help demystify third-country labour markets for destination-country employers and make them more amenable to recruiting from these countries.¹²

Needs assessments often happen within the context of a mobility scheme, tailored specifically to the project's needs. For example, a recent project offering six-month internships in Belgium to Tunisian graduates began with extensive outreach to the private sector in Belgium and Tunisia to establish needs, skills profiles, and willingness to participate.

It next embarked on the process of advertising internship positions and processing applications, and then supporting candidates through the selection and migration process.¹³ These needs assessments can provide useful insights on labour market dynamics—for example, which sectors have compatible training that would enable someone to migrate with relative ease; which sectors and regions have a surplus of available workers; and where there are reasonable prospects for successful reintegration upon migrants' return (for example, if local employers value international training or experience). But these insights can quickly become outdated, especially once the project wraps up.

Such ad hoc needs assessments are also a missed opportunity to build the capacity of local actors (such as third-country public employment agencies) to do this work themselves, for example by investing in their data collection capabilities and ICT systems. This type of intervention would offer benefits that last beyond the lifespan of a mobility scheme, give origin countries more of a sense of ownership over these processes, and help open participation in these schemes to more third countries.

B. How can mobility schemes help address these needs?

The number of migrant workers admitted to European countries through mobility schemes tends to be small, especially when compared with regular immigration programmes. Travel restrictions related to the pandemic forced some of the EU legal migration pilot projects to reduce their migration targets, but most of the original proposals planned to move fewer than 100 people.¹⁴ Instead, the benefits of mobility schemes tend to lie in experimenting with options to meet labour market demands or new approaches to managing the recruitment of non-EU workers. However, this impact hinges on both the results of the scheme at the pilot stage (and whether

it is scaled up) and what processes are in place to monitor and evaluate outcomes and disseminate these lessons. All too often, the lessons from these projects are not taken forward or fed into future programming, leading to cycles of pilots that have high start-up costs and limited long-term impact.¹⁵

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Creating a Talent Partnership or another mobility scheme should be weighed carefully against other types of investments to improve migration or recruitment processes. Employers might prioritise interventions that make immigration processes faster and more predictable than, for example, a new government-run scheme.¹⁶ And addressing more structural barriers, such as difficulties getting qualifications recognised or addressing European employers' lack of familiarity with how foreign-acquired training compares with European standards, could ultimately provide more far-reaching results in terms of facilitating international recruitment.¹⁷ Discussions on how to design and implement Talent Partnerships should thus form part of a broader conversation across migration, education, and labour policy portfolios on how to improve European policies to attract and admit foreign talent.

With that caveat in mind, there are several ways Talent Partnerships or other mobility schemes could provide useful insights on options to address labour market needs in Europe. Mobility schemes can be used to test demand in certain sectors or along certain migration routes. For example, the Digital Explorers project sought to recruit ICT professionals from Nigeria to Lithuania—which was not a regularly utilised migration corridor—for one-year

placements with Lithuanian companies.¹⁸ Fifteen ICT professionals were recruited to work at seven Lithuanian companies, and 11 continued to work in Lithuania. The project was subsequently extended to offer six-month ICT internships in Lithuania to 11 young Nigerian women, which ultimately led to seven being employed by Lithuanian companies.¹⁹ A project evaluation indicates that the pilot helped establish new networks and processes that could facilitate further recruitment along this corridor.²⁰ The experiences of the pilot have also informed government policy. For example, project feedback about the difficulties of meeting strict qualification and work experience requirements for a work permit informed the Lithuanian government's plans to introduce a new category for people working in tech with more flexible standards for assessing work experience, education, and training.²¹ Flexibility in response to changing labour market needs is also key. The MATCH project, which offers work placements in Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands for young professionals from Nigeria and Senegal, for example, initially planned to focus on recruiting ICT specialists but subsequently expanded its scope to include interested companies in the pharmaceutical and finance sectors.²²

Mobility schemes can also provide a way for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to gain experience in recruiting internationally. Unlike large multinationals, SMEs may lack the resources or networks to recruit a worker from a third country, and participation in a mobility scheme could help bridge these gaps, subsidise costs, and familiarise employers with third-country contexts.²³ SMEs could also capitalise on this experience to build their networks and possibly expand their operations in third countries. For example, many of the companies interested in participating in the MATCH project saw it as a way to expand their presence in Nigeria or Senegal, and one company participating in the Digital Explorers project subsequently opened an office in Abuja, Nigeria.²⁴

Mobility schemes can also provide an opportunity to test new approaches to recruitment. For example, pandemic-related travel restrictions required several EU-funded pilot projects to conduct selection processes and training remotely and sometimes even facilitate remote employment, although the latter presents challenges for employers in navigating local employment and taxation laws.²⁵ Looking ahead, mobility schemes could experiment with digitising recruitment and immigration processes or training. Although limited internet access in some settings may exclude this as an option, the growing use of digital technology could expand the reach of recruitment efforts (for example, outside of major cities) and help reduce some of the high costs associated with these schemes.

Another area ripe for experimentation is a sector-based approach, in which workers in a high-demand sector could be vetted and matched with recruitment opportunities in several Member States. This would likely be feasible only for sectors that are not subject to strict national regulations to practice and where entry requirements would be broadly similar. Sectors such as ICT, for example, that are not licensed, have flexible training requirements (including industry-issued certifications), and where English is often used as a lingua franca would lend themselves well to this approach. As the European Commission weighs different options for its proposed Talent Pool, including a sector-based approach, this type of mobility scheme could help test this approach in different contexts.

Finally, mobility schemes can bring together unusual actors in the recruitment process. For example, the Digital Explorers project is led by a consortium comprising a Lithuanian government agency (Enterprise Lithuania, a nonprofit owned by the Ministry of Economy), two nonprofits based in Lithuania (AfriKo and Diversity Development Group), and a Nigerian start-up incubator (Ventures Platform Foundation). Meanwhile, the MATCH project (led by

the International Organisation for Migration) counts public employment agencies among its partners (the Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training [VDAB]; Morocco's National Agency for the Promotion of Employment and Skills [ANAPEC]; and Tunisia's national employment agency, ANETI), along with an employer association (Agoria, a Belgian employer organisation and trade association), chambers of commerce (Voka West Flanders [Belgium] and Unioncamere Piemonte [Italy]), the Netherlands-Africa Business Council, and a private recruitment agency (Aldelia). If the European Union is to pursue Talent Partnerships in different contexts, especially in countries with weaker public institutions for managing migration or recruitment, policymakers will need to replicate these types of public-private networks. Policymakers should think through how this coalition-building can align with broader ambitions for promoting good governance of migration, including regulating the activities of private recruitment agencies.

3 Achieving the 'Partnership' in Talent Partnerships: Boosting Development Benefits for Migrants and Origin Countries

Mobility schemes are often instigated with the political priorities and labour market needs of the destination country in mind, and with less focus on either the labour market profile and priorities of the origin country or possible connections to broader development priorities. Yet participation has a cost for origin-country stakeholders that may not be compensated (for example, in staff time and opportunity costs).²⁶ And with few mobility schemes being scaled up beyond the pilot stage, countries of origin

rarely see this cooperation translate into concrete legal migration opportunities for their nationals. If the Talent Partnerships are to deliver on their goal of supporting deeper cooperation with third countries on migration, Europe will need to carefully consider what tangible benefits the partnerships can offer to their partners to secure their buy-in—including financial support to cover up-front costs—and how to give partner countries more ownership of these projects' design and implementation.

When designing and implementing mobility schemes, European policymakers will also need to think creatively about how they can address origin-country concerns about incentivising the emigration of nationals with in-demand skills. These concerns are not new: interviews suggest that prior to the pandemic, some countries of origin were concerned about fostering the emigration of ICT and health-care professionals.²⁷ These concerns about brain drain could become more acute in the pandemic's wake, particularly in hard-hit sectors such as health care.

At the soft launch of the Talent Partnerships in June 2021, discussions revealed support for promoting circular migration (in which participants return to their country of origin after a defined period of work or training in the destination country) as one option to address concerns about brain drain. With circular migration arrangements, migrants can fill labour market needs in destination countries and reap the economic benefits temporarily, without requiring support for their long-term integration. Meanwhile, countries of origin can benefit from their enhanced skills upon their return, although research suggests ensuring the successful circulation of people and skills can be challenging in practice.²⁸ In determining the right approach for the Talent Partnerships, this interest in circularity should be balanced against the desires of participating migrants (who may want to stay on a longer-term basis) and employers (who

may be unwilling to cover the costs of recruiting and training a worker who will stay for only a short time).

A. Investing in capacity-building in third countries

The European Commission has described the Talent Partnerships as a framework, meaning that it could offer a way to bring together different EU initiatives and funding streams on migration and mobility issues. Currently, responsibilities and funding for migration and mobility are split across a number of EU policy portfolios, including home affairs, social policy, neighbourhood policy, foreign policy, and development assistance. The Talent Partnerships would not only tie mobility schemes with related investments in capacity-building in areas such as migration governance, education, and diaspora engagement, they would also tap both internal (intra-EU) and external (extra-EU) funds. More and better coordination is needed across EU policy portfolios and, in turn, with the activities of Member States and other donors, including development banks.

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Plans to connect mobility schemes with broader investments in capacity-building, as envisioned by the Talent Partnerships, are not unprecedented. Some degree of capacity-building is usually needed to implement mobility schemes, although not at the scale hinted at in the Talent Partnerships proposal. Issues that frequently need to be addressed include gaps in labour market information, such as national and local (un)employment trends and the profile of job-seekers, especially in countries with large informal

economies; a lack of clarity on the equivalence of destination- and origin-country training; and limited existing infrastructure to facilitate the identification and vetting of candidates for job offers.²⁹ Third countries' level of institutional capacity can help determine which are favoured by European governments as potential partners; otherwise, private recruitment agencies or training providers may end up performing some of these tasks in mobility schemes.

But mobility schemes' small scale—and, often, short time frame—limits what they can feasibly achieve on capacity-building. The overall budget for pilot projects administered under the Migration Partnership Facility, for example, ranges from 1.3 million to 3.2 million euros,³⁰ covering operational costs as well as capacity-building activities. Of course, this is a drop in the bucket when it comes to addressing structural issues such as weak education and training systems in a third country. Furthermore, funding rules for the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund place limits on what financial support can be offered to partner countries, whether at the inception stage or when it comes to capacity-building.³¹ The use of development and neighbourhood funds (via the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument [NDICI]) in the Talent Partnerships could allow for more ambitious and long-term investments in capacity-building, which could help address some of the identified structural issues. The use of NDICI funds could also allow for greater coordination between the investments made via the Talent Partnerships and larger development projects focused on priorities such as strengthening origin-country education and training systems, creating jobs for returning migrants and others in their local communities, and improving diaspora engagement.

While capacity-building activities are highly context specific, the Talent Partnerships could prioritise the following activities to help address these structural

issues and provide some tangible benefits for partner countries:

- ▶ **Building the capacity of partner-country public employment agencies and other government institutions to manage labour migration processes.** For example, Nigeria and Senegal are both interested in gaining support in areas such as collecting and managing labour market data and conducting regular labour market assessments.³² Financial and technical assistance to develop these systems, as well as peer learning, could help expand these capabilities.
- ▶ **Strengthening oversight of private actors in recruitment.** The regulation of private recruitment agencies, which play a central role in matching employers with workers in countries without established networks of public employment agencies, is another salient topic. Without close oversight, these private arrangements can sometimes lead to the exploitation of workers, for example by misrepresenting the terms of their employment or charging exorbitant fees.³³ Mobility schemes can experiment with options for public employment services to work with private recruiters to check and screen the candidates they identify and to oversee the recruitment process. Working with private recruiters that comply with local licencing and registration schemes and with industry or international standards (such as the International Organisation for Migration's IRIS system) could also help promote these rules and funnel additional support to implement and enforce them.
- ▶ **Engaging diaspora members.** Involving the diaspora more fully in Talent Partnerships could be beneficial for supporting migrants

on arrival and helping them adapt to their new environment, and for providing support as they prepare to return to their country of origin. An evaluation of the Digital Explorers project, for example, found that participants experienced intense culture shock on arrival, and participants and their employers both had to navigate intercultural differences in the workplace.³⁴ Diaspora members could help participants and employers set expectations and advise on how to tailor predeparture and onboarding services. Capacity-building in this area could include helping countries of origin and destination expand and formalise their outreach to diaspora members and exploring ways to involve diaspora groups in support for new arrivals or in broader integration strategies (such as providing input on diversity training for workplaces). Diaspora members could also help migrants prepare for their return, for example through mentoring or assisting with professional networking in countries of origin.

- **Improving reintegration services for returning migrants to ensure they can apply their skills locally.** This is especially critical for initiatives that emphasise circular migration to avoid skills waste. When designing mobility schemes, it is important to keep reintegration in mind from the start—for example, focusing schemes on sectors where demand is established in both destination and origin countries and where training is comparable, and ensuring that skills migrants develop in destination countries can be easily understood and valued by employers in their origin countries. This could even include a scenario in which destination-country employers are interested in expanding their operations in the country of origin.

Additional and more sustained funds to support capacity-building could help address barriers that come to light when designing or implementing mobility schemes and help expand the pool of prospective partners. Morocco and Tunisia are common partners for European mobility schemes, reflecting their experience in managing labour migration to Europe, established working relationships with several EU Member States, and relatively robust public employment institutions. But if Europe is to cast the net wider in its search for talent, more support could be needed up front to strengthen partner countries' public employment and migration agencies. This raises questions about whether mobility schemes should always be the focus of these Talent Partnerships, or whether standalone investments in capacity-building could create more added value in some cases.

B. Building a pipeline for talent

Plans to connect mobility schemes with direct investments in education and training could also help develop the pool of workers with in-demand skills in third countries more broadly, to the benefit of both destination countries and countries of origin. Such workforce investments could also help to address brain drain concerns, especially if this training is open to both prospective migrants and others in their local community.

Mobility schemes can offer a range of training opportunities to equip participating migrants for the workplace and bridge professional training or language gaps. Often, professional training builds on insights from employers and other private-sector actors about which skills are in demand. This type of ad hoc training can be tailored and flexible—for example, the Belgian development agency Enabel adjusted its training in line with changing employer needs during the Pilot Project Addressing Labour Shortages through Innovative Labour Migration Models (PALIM).³⁵ But the ad hoc, short-term nature of this training also means there is limited scope to

feed any innovations in the content or delivery of training into more mainstream origin-country training curricula. In some cases, mobility schemes may also offer language training. For destination countries with a less commonly spoken language, such investments could be essential for widening the pool of possible participants.³⁶ For example, the Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa project provided German language training to Moroccan and Tunisian apprentices matched with hotels in Germany, and Germany's Triple Win project offers German language training and professional training to qualified nurses from Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Philippines, and Tunisia prior to their placement with employers in Germany.³⁷ However, this type of tuition can add significantly to an initiative's overall costs, especially if the jobs entail advanced language skills.³⁸

Recent mobility schemes have started to experiment with new ways to deliver training to prospective migrants and other local students or workers, and the Talent Partnerships offer an opportunity to take this work forward. For example, PALIM has experimented with the global skill partnership model, which proposes investing in training both prospective migrants and their peers in countries of origin. The underlying rationale is that for the cost of training someone in a high-income country, it is possible to instead train multiple people in a low- or middle-income country, some of whom might migrate while others stay and use their skills locally.³⁹ Crucially, this delinks some of the project's benefits for countries of origin from the decisions of individual migrants (such as the volume of their remittances, or if they choose to return and are able to put their new skills to use).

But one challenge facing this approach is how to select a sector that both the origin and destination countries view as a priority and then offer training that could be applied in both contexts. For example,

an initiative that sought to train construction workers in Kosovo struggled to align German and Kosovar standards, curbing ambitions to enrol some programme graduates in apprenticeships in Germany.⁴⁰ This speaks to the importance of analysing labour market conditions and the compatibility of training standards up front and ensuring there are opportunities to adjust or update this information as needed during the lifespan of these mobility schemes. By contrast, PALIM focused on ICT, a field where training standards are more flexible and, thus, where training could be offered to young professionals in Morocco that would allow them to work for employers in either Belgium or Morocco. This training included ICT skills, soft skills, English language classes, and orientation on life in Belgium.⁴¹ Ultimately, most participants found jobs or additional training opportunities in Morocco, despite interest from Belgian employers, reflecting the challenges of relocating during the pandemic as well as difficulties meeting Belgian immigration requirements.⁴²

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Balancing the training and migration imperatives of the global skill partnership model is difficult. For example, the Australia Pacific Training Coalition offered subsidised, high-quality vocational training in a range of subjects in the Pacific Islands, but because this training did not keep up with Australia's changing immigration priorities, very few participants have moved to take up jobs in Australia.⁴³ By contrast, Germany's global skill partnership with Brazil, Mexico, and the Philippines to train nursing students in geriatrics with a hybrid curriculum that includes German language instruction is currently geared more towards migration to Germany than matching

trainees with local employment opportunities.⁴⁴ More work is needed to explore how to deliver high-quality training that aligns with both destination- and origin-country priorities (especially in fast-moving sectors such as ICT) and to ensure legal migration opportunities are in place for participants who wish to relocate to Europe.

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

The Talent Partnerships come at a moment where Europe is contending with labour market shortages across a variety of sectors and skill levels. Some of these shortages could resolve over time, but for others, the answer may lie in a combination of smart immigration policy reforms and investments to up-skill and retrain workers already in Europe. Mobility schemes such as the Talent Partnerships will play only a small role in meeting current and projected labour market needs unless governments commit to scaling up successful schemes significantly. Still, mobility schemes can offer a helpful way to explore approaches to recruiting workers from third countries, in parallel with broader reforms to streamline immigration procedures and address other common barriers to international recruitment, such as difficulties in recognising training and experience obtained in third countries.

Recent mobility schemes, such as the EU legal migration pilot projects, have illustrated this creativity in the way they approached recruitment from third countries and adapted to the unprecedented restrictions on travel resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. But the process of negotiating these projects also revealed some reluctance among third countries to participate, linked to both concerns about possible brain drain and frustration about the associated costs of participation, especially when pilots do not translate into sustained, longer-term opportunities or address third-country priorities.

As the European Union and its Member States prepare to launch the first Talent Partnerships, they should view this as an opportunity to revisit the fundamentals of migration partnerships with third countries. Framing cooperation around talent and linking mobility schemes with investments in capacity-building offers a chance to build partnerships rooted in priorities shared by destination and origin countries, and to move away from the transactional politics that have characterised some recent partnerships.⁴⁵ To achieve this objective, policymakers should reflect on lessons from past mobility schemes, including:

- ▶ **Explore the potential of partnerships to not only recruit but also develop talent in third countries.** Mobility schemes can provide targeted professional training or language instruction, and one priority should be to explore opportunities to build useful aspects into local curricula. The Talent Partnerships could also allow additional testing of the global skill partnership model and, specifically, ways to meet both mobility and training objectives in a cost-effective way.
- ▶ **Build a broad coalition of stakeholders from the outset of the partnership.** Member States play a core role in migration partnerships, given they determine who can be admitted to their territory and on what terms, and there may be opportunities for Member States to work together more closely in these schemes. But third-country buy-in is equally important for recruiting and selecting workers. Third countries need to be engaged early on to assess how and where workers are available to meet destination-country needs and where financial and technical assistance could support their participation in these schemes. Destination-country employers

are key stakeholders for securing offers of training or employment and covering some of the costs of recruitment, but they can also provide valuable input on selection and training to set migrants up for success on arrival. In turn, early outreach to employers in countries of origin can gauge the market for returning migrants to apply their skills locally (whether through employment, entrepreneurship, or additional training) and promote the benefits of workers' overseas experience. Trade unions and other civil-society partners can be important intermediaries to ensure that the terms of recruitment and working conditions are fair, and to provide support to migrants throughout the duration of the scheme. Finally, rolling out a matching process and accompanying professional or language training may require working with either public employment agencies and educational institutions or private recruiters and/or private training providers, depending on their capacity.

- ▶ **Look beyond the usual suspects for cooperation.** Morocco and Tunisia feature heavily in mobility schemes with European countries, reflecting both their standing as partners in tackling irregular migration to Europe and their merits as partners with experience in managing legal migration and providing public employment services. But if European policymakers are genuinely committed to expanding opportunities for talented third-country nationals to migrate, they will need to cast the net wider. If the Talent Partnerships are to respond to labour market needs, EU policymakers should consider evaluating the talent pool in a range of potential partner countries, for example, by

providing financial and technical assistance for labour market analysis in these contexts or commissioning a comparative study to dig into national and local economic conditions and training standards. In turn, if the Talent Partnerships are to provide more tangible development benefits for partner countries and participating migrants, they would benefit from assessments of where needs are most acute for capacity-building in areas such as managing legal migration and international recruitment processes, providing public employment services, or delivering high-quality education and training. In this scenario, policymakers should also weigh what constitutes success—for example, weighing progress in capacity-building alongside the number of migrants who move under the scheme—and set reasonable expectations about the timeline for seeing results (for example, from investments in capacity-building).

▶ **Consider a flexible approach to the length of stay permitted under these schemes.**

Circular migration is likely to be a feature of some mobility schemes, and in these cases, the scheme should be designed with successful reintegration in mind, including engaging origin-country employers and other local stakeholders to ensure returning migrants can use their skills. An emphasis on circular migration can also assuage concerns about potential brain drain, especially when it comes to in-demand skill sets. But in some cases, there may be a case for providing access to longer-term migration opportunities. Some migrants may want to stay on a longer-term basis, and the remittances they send may outweigh the benefits of their return, especially if

they cannot use their new skills. Employers may also be reluctant to participate and invest in training migrants through these schemes if they have no option of retaining the workers. In this scenario, policymakers concerned about brain drain could consider other safeguards such as ensuring flexibility to scale up or scale down admissions and include sectors and occupations depending on changing labour market conditions.

- ▶ **Think critically about how and where mobility schemes can fit in with other policy interventions.** These could include reforms to reduce red tape in recruitment and immigration procedures, or efforts to improve the recognition of foreign qualifications and experience. The start-up costs of mobility schemes remain high, especially given the small number of people typically moving under them. Thus, it is essential to ensure that

mobility schemes are targeted sufficiently (for example, that there is always scrutiny of how and under what conditions a scheme may offer value) and that from the outset, there are clear plans for how schemes might be scaled up or how their lessons might inform immigrant selection or future education and training policies.

Whether the Talent Partnerships deliver on their potential will hinge on the commitments the European Commission can secure from Member States, third countries, employers, and other key stakeholders, and on the funds available for necessary capacity-building. For now, there is a lack of clarity about what the Talent Partnerships will entail and how they will relate to other EU initiatives on legal migration. As these details become more concrete, strategic outreach is needed to communicate the Talent Partnerships' goals to these stakeholders and to assess how and where the partnerships could have the most impact.

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Endnotes

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