



The case for a circular Blue Card for young non-EU professionals

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Abstract

Due to the challenging demographics in Europe, a new approach to labour migration to the EU is necessary. Such an approach should be more targeted and thus entail a more proactive and integrated stance. Whilst some moves in this direction have been made in recent years, more are required. This article charts one possible route to a more proactive and integrated policy by proposing the creation of European university campuses outside of Europe to act as hubs of academic, cultural, linguistic and labour exchange, similar to the American system. This approach would not only address the current labour force challenges but would also hold the potential to significantly enhance academic and cultural exchange. Many of the required elements are already in place: numerous bilateral universities, for example, already exist, such as the German Jordanian University, as do various European research and cultural institutes. Such campuses, combined with a new circular Blue Card for young non-EU professionals, would have benefits for both the member states and the selected partner countries. The article concludes by proposing the implementation of concrete test cases in the European neighbourhood.

Keywords

Labour migration, Circular migration, Cultural and academic diplomacy, Foreign policy, European Neighbourhood Policy

Introduction

As the labour force ages throughout the EU, a certain level of labour migration from outside the Union is necessary. Labour migration policy needs to take into account both the fact that labour migrants who do not return contribute to permanent brain drain for their countries of origin and that these migrants also age (de Beer 2024). Labour

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migration should therefore be selective and as targeted and circular as possible. Examples from the past and present throughout Europe can help inspire new models and approaches for the member states. For example, it is important to remember that a hard border between many southern European countries and their neighbours across the Mediterranean was not the historical norm. Seasonal migration for regular or irregular work was common. For instance, Italy and Spain only introduced travel visas for citizens of Algeria, Morocco, Senegal, Tunisia and Turkey in 1990 and 1991 respectively as part of a move to align their regulations with ‘European community norms’ (Czaika et al. 2018, 597). The rise in labour migration restrictions since has often resulted in side effects such as rising illegal migration, reduced return migration and increased use of the family reunification migration channel (Zimmermann 2014, 9). Another more recent example is the visa facilitation agreement for Ukrainians in 2017, which led to massive circular migration between Ukraine on the one hand, and Poland, Czechia and Italy, among others, on the other (EU Monitor 2017; Eurostat 2021).

This article charts an alternative pathway, that of introducing a simplified and circular Blue Card for young non-EU graduates with the necessary (language) skills from selected universities and university colleges outside of Europe. There are already numerous well-established institutions and concepts in place, especially in the fields of cultural and academic diplomacy, that could support such a move (Ang et al. 2015, 364–9; Goff 2013). Think, for example, of the Goethe Institute, with its numerous centres worldwide offering local German language courses, which play a vital role in academic and cultural exchange. Many EU member states have similar institutes, though often on a more limited scale (EUNIC 2024). Other hybrid forms of cultural and academic institutes exist, such as the Netherlands–Flemish Institute in Cairo, a hub for research and cultural and academic exchange that offers Dutch language classes and exams. Exchange initiatives such as the German Academic Exchange Service and the French Eiffel scholarships are other examples of existing avenues for academic diplomacy. To take it one step further would be to establish a direct and physical academic presence abroad, such as the French–Armenian University in Yerevan, established by bilateral treaty in 2000, which awards degrees that are valid in both France and Armenia. This is one of many examples of ‘bilateral’ universities or international campuses.

The need for more active European academic and cultural diplomacy

Academic diplomacy can go by many names, such as knowledge diplomacy, science diplomacy and so on. Essentially, these names all refer to the same idea, that is, ‘the process of building and strengthening relations between and among countries through international higher education, research and innovation’ (Knight 2022, 161). At present, academic diplomacy is quite well established in the foreign policy of certain EU member states and of the EU itself (European External Action Service 2022). There is intensive intra-European cooperation between various academic and research actors, which takes many different forms including university alliances, such as the Coimbra group, and European-wide networks in nearly all domains. Institutions such as the

Franco-Germany University, the European University Institute in Fiesole near Florence and the College of Europe are further examples. These strong networks are most visible in terms of exchange programmes, such as Erasmus+, and other tangible connections, such as the issuing of dual degrees, staff exchanges and so on. Participants often return to their home countries or move to new ones with new skills and a deeper appreciation for diverse cultures and ideas, thereby enhancing their employability in the competitive international job market.

Outside of Europe, however, the picture is different (Van Langenhove 2017, 10–18). Whilst there is a lot of academic cooperation via, for example, the Horizon Europe programme, and the EU actively pursues science diplomacy outside of Europe (Moedas 2016), the field is still more fragmented than inside the EU. As mentioned, some member states have taken active steps to establish ‘bilateral’ universities abroad, such as the aforementioned French–Armenian University, the German University in Cairo and the German Jordanian University. These universities are often closely connected to a European university. Sometimes, the European universities themselves have established subsidiaries abroad, such as the Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi, or they participate in international campuses, such as UGent at the Incheon Global Campus in South Korea. These are all laudable efforts, and they harness the power of education to enhance mutual understanding, foster innovation and build lasting international relationships.¹ If these efforts were better integrated with a more coordinated labour migration policy, it could also result in the attraction to Europe of educated migrants with the necessary (language) skills and European-recognised degrees, alongside the strengthening of the local academic landscape.

One such pathway could be through the creation of a ‘European University (College)’ system in selected partner countries, similar to the system used by American universities, for example, in Egypt, Lebanon and Kyrgyzstan. The participating local universities in these countries have solid partnerships with American universities, often receiving funding from the US, and there is an active exchange of academic staff. In terms of set-up, the arrangements are often based on a bilateral treaty. Many other American universities have branches or campuses worldwide (Long 2020).² These universities act as spaces for academic and cultural exchange (for example, via exchange semesters) and award degrees that are recognised in both the local country and the US. The EU does already have a similar set-up: the China–EU Law School in Beijing (CESL) (Wieczorek & Wang 2023, 105). CESL was founded based on an agreement between the EU and the government of the People’s Republic of China and comprises a Sino-European consortium of 13 European universities, 2 Chinese universities and the Chinese National Prosecutors College (CESL 2024; University of Hamburg 2018).

By opening up opportunities for cooperation with other member states through the existing European universities abroad, as well as by setting up institutions similar to CESL in close cooperation with local governments and existing universities, an approach similar to the American one could be achieved. Such a model would present a great opportunity for the EU, as it would foster significant academic and student exchanges.

Graduates' degrees would also no longer have to undergo a lengthy recognition process, and the graduates themselves would already be more familiar with the EU in a general sense due to, for example, their experiences in student and academic exchange programmes. The focus of these new institutions should, of course, be on the fields in which there are severe shortages of labour in Europe, for example science, technology, engineering, maths, nursing, information technology and so on, and they should, as such, offer both academic and professionally orientated programmes. In this way the institutions would ensure that skill provision is matched with European labour market needs.

As knowledge of the local language is essential for many jobs in the European labour market, such a system should also incorporate lessons for various European languages into the programmes or offer them as an optional extra, taking into account the exact context, cooperation agreement, and existing presence of European cultural and research institutions in the selected countries. Similarly, such European universities could also play an important role in assessing and recognising local degrees and certificates. In cooperation with local partners, they could also provide non-academic specialist training and certification outside of their regular programmes, especially for those sectors in which there is an evident labour shortage in Europe.

In short, these European universities abroad should become the key hubs for academic, cultural, linguistic and labour exchange with the EU. They should also act as a stepping stone for labour migration to the EU, for example, by granting graduates the right to temporarily legally migrate to the EU to work for a certain number of years via a special, time-limited, and thus circular, Blue Card system for persons under 30 (see below). As not all graduates would migrate to Europe, and as those that do would return to their home country with new and different skills, this would amount to a brain gain for both Europe and the countries of origin. Furthermore, those returning would do so with new connections and could therefore act as drivers of foreign direct investment and closer economic cooperation in their home countries, leading to better and deeper ties between Europe and the countries of origin (Dhian Ho et al. 2021, 54–5). The campuses could also actively work with local and European companies to create the proper framework for a thriving start-up and spin-off scene.

A specific circular Blue Card for young non-EU professionals

Labour markets in the EU remain a mostly national affair, which leads to various approaches to how they are organised and overseen. Certain European labour market policies, such as the recently revised European Blue Card, have proven largely ineffective due to the various different qualification requirements imposed by the member states (Peers 2021; Eurostat 2023).³ This fragmentation is also present in the field of circular migration.

Circular migration is an important and recurring discussion topic for the European Commission and international organisations (Vankova 2020, 1). There is not, however, one definition and understanding of circular migration in Europe (UNECE 2016, 3–8).

The general understanding of circular migration is that it entails repetitive, recurrent and temporary cross-border movement for short or long periods of residence in a country of destination and then a return to the country of origin (Vankova 2020, 6). So far there has not been a common approach to circular labour migration within the EU, with some exceptions, such as the circular migration initiatives implemented under the Mobility Partnerships with the Eastern Partnership countries and the Seasonal Workers Directive, which was expressly introduced to promote temporary and circular migration (Vankova 2020, 242; Passalacqua 2022, 692). Some national measures, such as the Polish simplified *Oświadczenie* (Declaration on entrusting work to a foreigner) procedure for nationals from certain countries, have however created large flows of circular migration (for example, with Ukraine). Some countries are running or have run similar (small) pilot projects, such as Belgium, which has a scheme set up in Morocco that provides information and communication technology training and circular migration permits (Enabel 2021).

The aforementioned European Blue Card could act as the inspiration for the creation of a new circular migration pathway for young non-EU professionals. A more coordinated and targeted effort to promote circular migration could help ease European labour shortages and support development in the countries of origin (Rahim et al. 2022; Zimmermann 2014, 2–3). One approach could be the establishment of a specific circular Blue Card (hereafter CBC) for young non-EU professionals—for example, for those under 30—with the necessary skills and degrees to fill certain bottleneck vacancies. The graduates of the aforementioned European universities abroad would of course be ideally placed to participate in such a programme, but it should not be exclusively available to those coming from these institutions.⁴ A somewhat similar programme exists in the UK, and the Netherlands already has a lower salary threshold for those under 30 applying for a European Blue Card (UK Government 2024; The Netherlands, Immigration and Naturalisation Service 2024).

As with the regular Blue Card, there should be a European-wide framework, with member states being able to specify details regarding the use of CBCs for their territory and set out certain extra requirements if desired. For example, each member state could decide to issue a limited number of CBCs, dependent on their population and labour shortages. Member states could also demand extra requirements, such as basic knowledge of the official language(s), hence the importance of integrating a language aspect into the aforementioned European university abroad system. Ideally, CBC holders would also fall under a specific tax and social security system, which would align with national standards so as not to undercut the local labour market and thereby ensure a stable social security system. All other national laws, including those on labour rights and minimum wage, would be applicable.

The crucial difference from many other programmes and the standard Blue Card, would be that the CBC would entail a mandatory return policy after allowing the holder to work in an EU member state for a specified amount of time (for example, four years).⁵ However, a programme should be established to help those returning to their countries of origin to develop further via, for example, an ‘alumni’ scheme. The alumni of this programme should also be able to obtain short-term Schengen visas more easily when

returning to Europe on business or for other visits. After a certain period (for example, five years), they should be able to apply for a single permit again if so desired.

Of course, such a move would require the implementation of an EU-wide minimum standard via a Directive and a comprehensive framework designed with the selected partner countries, but it would fit perfectly as part of the recent Skills and Talent Mobility package (European Commission 2023).

Conclusion

By establishing a new circular migration channel, the CBC, alongside the Seasonal Workers Directive, a more circular labour migration pattern to Europe might be within reach. The empirical data analysis carried out in multiple studies suggests that flexible policies that allow for increased circulation of migrants instead of more restrictions actually lower the number of long-stay migrants (Massey and Pren 2012, 4–5; Constant et al. 2012, 15–19; Zimmermann 2014, 9; Vankova 2020, 243). This finding should help drive the rollout of a targeted circular migration policy. The foundations for such a policy are already there. By expanding and cooperating more closely with the established European universities abroad, some pilot projects could be set up. These would preferably take place in European Neighbourhood Policy countries. For example, the EU and certain member states or regions could negotiate with the German University in Cairo and other relevant German and Egyptian authorities to enable their participation in the university and deploy a pilot circular migration project. Likewise, the EU could look to co-finance and coordinate the establishment of a European university in Serbia, Tunisia or Armenia in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy and/or accession talks. The recent move of the College of Europe to establish a campus in Tirana, Albania, shows that such initiatives are possible and are already happening. However, the link between academic diplomacy and (circular) labour migration must come to the foreground.

Authors' Note

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not reflect the views or positions of any entities to which the author is related by employment or other means.

Notes

1. Of course the term 'European' is already used in the name of various private universities in numerous countries, often without there being any formal agreement with a European university.
2. Although one must note that the quality of education highly depends on multiple factors—some 'American' universities are purely set up for profit and the term 'American' is used as a type of branding, similar to that of 'Swiss' watches. For more on this, see Long 2018.
3. It is too early to assess the impact of the recent changes to the Directive.
4. Of course, other options such as the regular single permit procedure would remain open to the graduates and nationals of these countries.
5. In this way, it would somewhat resemble the existing 'working holiday' programmes offered by Australia and New Zealand.

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