



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

Confronting Europe's Labour Shortage:

A Strategic Blueprint to Attract Global
Talent and Reverse Population Decline

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Summary

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The EU is grappling with a looming crisis that has slipped under the radar amidst the chaos of geopolitical instability: a severe labour shortage, worsened by accelerating demographic decline. This is not just a workforce issue—it is a threat to the very fabric of Europe's future. As populations dwindle, particularly in peripheral regions, the labour deficit grows more alarming by the day.

Drawing on best practices and informed by the current political and socio-economic landscape, this policy brief argues that attracting young global talent, particularly through education, is no longer a choice but a necessity to combat depopulation and ignite economic revival. This policy brief sets forth urgent recommendations which include establishing clear migration targets, strengthening reskilling and civic–linguistic training programmes for migrants, fully digitising migration-management processes and fostering cooperation with source countries. Together, these measures should aim to build a compelling 'European Dream', attracting and retaining the skilled individuals essential for the continent's future prosperity.

Keywords Labour shortage – Demographic decline – Global talent – Migration policy – Reskilling – Public–private partnerships



Introduction

The EU is on the brink of a demographic crisis that threatens the very pillars of its economic and social stability. With its working-age population both ageing and shrinking, projections indicate a stark decline—from 65% of the population in 2019 to just 54%–56% by 2070.¹ This sharp contraction is placing immense pressure on labour markets, undermining the EU’s competitiveness and jeopardising its long-term economic growth.

This demographic shift is alarming for a society so dependent on its human capital—the crucial skills, knowledge and talent that drive public services and private enterprises alike.² A flourishing society is underpinned by the strength of its human capital, which is indispensable for economic development, social progression, and the diffusion of knowledge, technology and innovation.

Indeed, human capital has long been recognised as a fundamental driver of economic growth, as well as a catalyst for spreading innovation and technological advancements. Research consistently shows that disparities in human capital between regions explain differing levels of innovation and competitiveness—a gap that the global pandemic has only widened.³ Now, more than ever, the significance of human capital is growing, especially as the EU confronts the dual demographic challenges of population decline and population ageing.

According to Eurostat projections, the EU’s population will peak at 453.3 million in 2026, before shrinking to 447.9 million by 2050. These demographic changes, while varying across the member states,⁴ will exacerbate labour and skills shortages, particularly in rural areas, where the impacts will be most acutely felt. This ongoing demographic shift poses a serious threat to regional development, as rural areas struggle to attract investment and maintain productivity, contributing to widening regional disparities and eroding social cohesion.

¹ Eurostat, *Demography of Europe – 2023 Edition* (2023).

² E. B. C. de la Maisonneuve and D. Turner, *A New Macroeconomic Measure of Human Capital Exploiting PISA and PIAAC: Linking Education Policies to Productivity*, OECD Economics Department, Working Paper no. 1709 (Paris, 2022).

³ See M. P. Feldman, ‘Location and Innovation: The New Economic Geography of Innovation, Spillovers, and Agglomeration’, in G. L. Clark, M. P. Feldman and M. S. Gertler (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Economic Geography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 373–94; E. A. Hanushek and L. Woessmann, ‘The Role of Cognitive Skills in Economic Development’, *Journal of Economic Literature* 46/3 (2008).

⁴ Eurostat, ‘Population Predictions in the EU’ (March 2023).



The implications of these demographic changes are profound, as they represent a clear and growing threat to economic growth and societal stability. Regions facing depopulation risk falling behind and, without strategic intervention, these trends will undermine the EU's ability to remain competitive on the global stage. In this context, Christian Democratic and conservative people's parties must prioritise addressing depopulation and labour shortages, particularly in peripheral regions. This urgent need is highlighted in the Martens Centre's *The 7Ds for Sustainability: 175 Proposals for the Next Legislature*, which calls for the development of targeted strategies to attract non-EU migrants to areas suffering from depopulation.⁵

This policy brief argues that one of the most promising strategies to counter rural depopulation and stimulate economic growth lies in attracting global talent. This approach has been widely supported by academic research,⁶ which points to the significant benefits that countries, particularly the US, have experienced in terms of innovation and productivity as a result of skilled migration. However, Europe has historically lagged behind the US in attracting highly skilled migrants. That being said, some northern EU member states have implemented limited targeted policies, leveraging both public- and private-sector initiatives, to recruit young students and workers from around the world.⁷

Recognising both the policy and research gaps, this brief sets out to define the pillars of a strategy aimed at attracting and integrating young talent from across the globe. The strategy aims to address the EU's demographic challenges by enhancing its human capital and ensuring long-term economic growth.

The brief is structured into three main sections. The first explores the economic and socio-demographic advantages of attracting young global talent. The second section assesses the proactive policies currently implemented in Europe and other regions, identifying those that could serve as best practices for addressing the challenges associated with an ageing population through education and the strategic attraction of young global talent. The third section offers policy recommendations and proposals tailored for European lawmakers and stakeholders, which aim to bolster human capital as a means to mitigate demographic challenges and to foster sustainable development across the EU.

⁵ See the section entitled *Demography in Depth* in P. Hefele, K. Welle et al. (eds.), *The 7Ds for Sustainability: In Depth*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, June 2024).

⁶ T. Boeri et al., *Brain Drain and Brain Gain: The Global Competition to Attract High-Skilled Migrants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); R. Florida, C. Mellander and K. Stolarick, 'Talent, Technology, and Tolerance in Canadian Regional Development', *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe Canadien* 57/2 (2013).

⁷ F. Docquier and J. Machado, 'Global Competition for Attracting Talents and the World Economy', *The World Economy* 39/4 (2016); H. Li, 'How to Retain Global Talent? Economic and Social Integration of Chinese Students in Finland', *Sustainability* 12/10 (2020), 4161.



The power of global talent: a strategic blueprint for revitalising Europe's future

Population trends indicate that by 2040 developed regions such as the EU will have increasingly ageing and declining populations, while the global workforce will have expanded by 700 million. Notably, this increase in the workforce will predominantly occur in Asia, Africa, and Central and South America, with Europe contributing minimally.⁸ This shift highlights the critical need for the EU to remain globally competitive and innovative, as the ageing population will increase demand for healthcare services, while a shrinking workforce could hinder advancements in technology and engineering.

Consequently, attracting global talent is essential for sustaining the EU's competitiveness on the international stage. Global talent drives productivity by bringing diverse expertise and innovative ideas, both of which will be crucial as Europe shifts towards a knowledge-based economy where high-quality education and continuous skills development are paramount. An influx of skilled workers would fill critical skills gaps and address labour shortages, enhancing operational capacities for businesses and fostering economic dynamism.⁹ This would not only aid the creation of new enterprises and jobs, but also contribute to economic resilience, enabling regions to adapt more effectively to economic shifts.

Moreover, high-skilled immigrants often possess higher earning potential, which translates into increased tax revenues for host countries.¹⁰ These revenues can then be reinvested into public services and infrastructure, thereby benefiting the broader community and propelling further economic growth. Skilled migrants often occupy essential roles in the public sector, such as those in healthcare and education, thereby improving the quality and accessibility of these critical services. This is particularly vital in regions struggling with shortages of professionals in these fields.

⁸ J. Harnoss, J. Kugel and M. Finley, 'How Can Countries Attract the Global Workforce of the Future?', *World Economic Forum* (26 April 2023).

⁹ S. P. Kerr et al., 'Global Talent Flows', *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 30/4 (2016); D. M. Hart, Z. J. Acs and C. W. Spencer, 'Entrepreneurship and Policy: Toward a New Synthesis', *Research Policy* 40/8 (2011).

¹⁰ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *The Economic and Fiscal Consequences of Immigration* (2017).



Young, skilled migrants play an important role in counteracting demographic decline by balancing the age structure of the population and thereby reducing its dependency ratio, which is essential for sustaining social security systems and ensuring a productive workforce. Moreover, the integration of global talent also enriches the social fabric by introducing cultural diversity, which enhances social cohesion and boosts community life.¹¹

The economic and socio-demographic benefits of attracting young global talent are widely supported by academic research. Studies consistently show that regions with higher levels of skilled immigration experience notable productivity growth.¹² Additionally, the diversity brought about by immigration fosters economic dynamism and innovation, significantly contributing to overall growth.¹³ Skilled immigrants not only fill critical labour gaps, but also often drive entrepreneurial ventures, stimulating local economies and enhancing resilience.¹⁴

Furthermore, skilled immigrants make significant contributions to public finances through higher tax revenues, which help to sustain essential public infrastructure and services.¹⁵ Immigration is also shown to rejuvenate ageing populations, ensuring a sustainable workforce that supports economic stability.¹⁶ Additionally, skilled migrants play vital roles in enhancing public services and facilitating knowledge transfer, which are critical for maintaining competitiveness in a globalised market.¹⁷

Thus, there is undeniable evidence, strongly supported by academic literature, of the significant socio-economic benefits that the attraction of global talent brings—especially for Europe, which is currently confronting a demographic crisis. Attracting skilled migrants enhances productivity, fills critical labour shortages and drives innovation, all of which are essential for sustaining Europe's competitive edge.

¹¹ S. Castles, H. de Haas and M. J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (Red Globe Press, 2020, 6th edn.).

¹² G. Peri, 'The Effect of Immigration on Productivity: Evidence From U.S. States', *Review of Economics and Statistics* 94/1 (2012).

¹³ A. Alesina, J. Harnoss and H. Rapoport, 'Birthplace Diversity and Economic Prosperity', *Journal of Economic Growth* 21/2 (2016).

¹⁴ S. P. Kerr and W. R. Kerr, 'Economic Impacts of Immigration: A Survey', *Finnish Economic Papers* 24/1 (2011).

¹⁵ C. Dustmann and T. Frattini, 'The Fiscal Effects of Immigration to the UK', *The Economic Journal* 124/580 (2014).

¹⁶ D. A. Coleman, 'The Demographic Effects of International Migration in Europe', *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 24/3 (2008). See also, W. Lutz and S. Scherbov, 'Will Population Ageing Necessarily Lead to an Increase in the Number of Persons With Disabilities? Alternative Scenarios for the European Union', *European Demographic Research Papers* (2005).

¹⁷ A. Saxenian, *The New Argonauts: Regional Advantage in a Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). See also, F. Docquier and H. Rapoport, 'Globalization, Brain Drain, and Development', *Journal of Economic Literature* 50/3 (2012).



Winning strategies to attract and retain global talent

This section will explore key initiatives designed to attract and retain global talent, showcasing successful public–private partnerships (PPPs), transnational education (TNE) programmes, and innovative strategies implemented by both governments and private companies across Europe and beyond.

Scholarships and educational programmes

One successful example of leveraging PPPs to support global talent is the German *Deutschlandstipendium*.¹⁸ This programme epitomises the synergy between the public and the private sectors by providing both financial and non-material support to exceptionally talented students from outside Germany. Central to its success is the dual sponsorship model, whereby businesses, foundations or individuals contribute €150 per month, matched by an equal government contribution, giving a total of a €300 monthly income for each recipient. This financial aid is bolstered by non-financial support including mentoring programmes, networking events and internships provided by numerous universities and private sponsors.¹⁹ This initiative is designed not just to financially support students but to integrate them into the professional and social fabric of Germany.

In May 2023, the *Deutschlandstipendium* was supporting 30,491 scholarship holders, with a gender distribution of 53.9% female and 46.1% male recipients.²⁰ From its inception in 2011 to 2022, the programme has raised €289 million, reaching a peak of €32 million in funding in 2022. It is praised for its rapid implementation and widespread acceptance across all German federal states, supporting over 30,000 recipients in 2022 alone.²¹ This support not only aids the recipients' academic pursuits but also incentivises them to contribute to the economic and social landscape of their host regions.

¹⁸ Germany, *Federal Ministry for Education and Research*, 'The Deutschlandstipendium: What You Need to Know About the German Public–Private Scholarship'.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Germany, *Federal Statistical Office*, 'Number of Germany Scholarships Increased by 5% in 2022' (17 May 2023).

²¹ Germany, *Federal Ministry of Education and Research*, 'Infografiken'.



TNE²² programmes also merit attention. Implemented by EU member states such as Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland and Poland, TNE programmes offer a sophisticated approach to educational outreach and cultural exchange. These initiatives provide students with access to high-quality education from foreign institutions without them having to leave their home countries, thereby fostering cross-border collaboration and expanding global educational opportunities. This strategy not only exports the educational system, but also the linguistic and cultural elements of the provider country, enriching the students' educational experience.

By enabling students to receive a foreign education while studying in their home country, TNE programmes address the global demand for multicultural and multilingual education, elements that are essential in today's interconnected knowledge economy. Furthermore, such initiatives support the development of a workforce that can operate effectively across borders, which is increasingly vital for globally active businesses.

A specific instance of leveraging educational programmes to attract global talent can be observed in the International Scholarship offered by Germany's Konrad Adenauer Foundation (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung).²³ Affiliated with the centre-right Christian Democratic Union of Germany (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands), the foundation's scholarships are not based solely on academic performance, but also require civic engagement and the endorsement of democratic values and human rights. This holistic approach ensures that scholars are not only academically proficient but also well-rounded in their societal contributions. The scholarships provide comprehensive funding and facilitate engagement across universities through seminars and network-building activities.

Such engagement encourages recipients to integrate deeply into German academic and industrial culture, with the added incentive of either being able to settle in Germany or maintaining strong professional ties with the country after graduation. Despite its relatively smaller scale compared to programmes such as the *Deutschlandstipendium*, with an alumni network exceeding 14,000, the impact of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's scholarships is substantial and highlights the effectiveness of educational initiatives in attracting and retaining international talent.

²² German Academic Exchange Service, *Transnational Education in Germany* (2014).

²³ Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 'Ausländerförderung'.



Private companies for community revitalisation

The research shows that secondary education and vocational training abroad can be effectively facilitated by private companies, offering an innovative solution to educational and demographic challenges. An interesting example is the educational programme operated by *Finest Future*—a company focused on strategic consulting in education and entrepreneurship. Founded in 2020 by entrepreneurs from Finland and Vietnam,²⁴ the programme aims to drive global growth through comprehensive educational and entrepreneurial initiatives.

Finest Future has attracted thousands of international talents and students to the *Finest Bay* area in Finland. The programme provides international students with access to the Finnish educational system, starting with a preparatory period for learning Finnish or Swedish. After this initial phase, students have the opportunity to relocate and pursue their studies in Finland.

One of the programme's key strengths is its collaboration with Finnish municipalities to address the decline in young populations in local communities. By integrating foreign students through secondary and vocational training pathways, the programme ensures that these individuals can fully assimilate into European society.

In Finland, the *Finest Future* initiative aids rural communities that might otherwise face school closures due to declining student numbers. By enrolling international students who have already received Finnish language instruction, the programme facilitates rapid social integration and trains a future workforce that is highly qualified and entrepreneurial.

The programme is designed to be sustainable by focusing on training individuals who can actively contribute to the labour market. Offering two distinct pathways—secondary and vocational training—allows students to pursue their specific interests and develop their talents effectively.

A second example is *Generation*, a global programme launched by *McKinsey & Company* in 2014. *Generation* targets unemployed and underemployed young adults, offering job-specific training to address critical skills gaps in sectors such as healthcare, technology, customer service and construction. Working closely with employers, the programme customises its curriculum to meet market demands while focusing on essential soft skills such as teamwork and problem-solving. Upon completion, participants are connected with employers, thus reducing unemployment and providing businesses with skilled professionals.²⁵

²⁴ *Finest Future*, 'Education for Happiness – in Finland'.

²⁵ *McKinsey*, 'McKinsey Helps Strengthen Generation, A Nonprofit Placing People in Jobs Worldwide', 3 May 2023.



Another initiative, Work in Estonia,²⁶ focuses on attracting international talent to Estonia, particularly in the information and communications technology sector. The programme, working in partnership with companies including TransferWise and Skype, promotes Estonia as a destination for global talent and streamlines the recruitment process for international professionals. Through its online platform, Work in Estonia provides jobseekers with information on relocation, living arrangements and legal requirements, simplifying the process for both employers and foreign recruits. This initiative has been instrumental in addressing labour shortages in fields such as technology, mechanics and electronics, thereby helping Estonia to remain competitive in the global marketplace.

Talent powerhouses: government-led initiatives to attract global innovators

Several countries have strategically implemented visa programmes to attract global talent, particularly in the technology and innovation sectors, with the aim of addressing labour shortages, boosting innovation and driving long-term economic growth. These government-backed initiatives underscore the essential role of immigration policies in fostering technological advancements and maintaining competitiveness on a global scale. This section discusses some of the most successful policies that have helped nations secure their place in the global talent race.

The UK: Global Talent Visa

The UK's Global Talent Visa (formerly the National Visa Scheme), supported by the government-funded Tech Nation and key technology companies, aims to streamline the immigration process for high-calibre technology professionals. Since its inception, the programme has endorsed over 5,249 highly skilled individuals, many of whom are business founders contributing to the UK's thriving digital ecosystem. This influx of talent has significantly advanced the UK's technology sector, propelling it to a market valuation in excess of \$1 trillion in 2023.²⁷ One of the critical elements of the scheme's success is its ability to fast-track applications for those with exceptional talent or promise, thus making the UK an attractive destination for global innovators. By removing administrative bottlenecks, the scheme simplifies immigration for top-tier talent, enhancing the UK's global technology competitiveness.

²⁶ *Work in Estonia*, 'Work in Estonia Homepage'.

²⁷ *Tech Nation*, 'Tech Nation Global Talent Visa Report 2024: 10 Years of Global Talent in UK Tech', 6 February 2024.



Germany: Berlin Partner for Business and Technology

Germany's Berlin Partner for Business and Technology is a PPP designed to support the growth of both local and international startups. It provides crucial services such as visa assistance, office-space procurement and networking opportunities. In 2021 Berlin startups attracted a record €10.5 billion in investment,²⁸ a testament to the infrastructure and support offered by the initiative. Furthermore, in 2022 Berlin Partner facilitated 239 projects, which led to the creation of 8,389 new jobs and investment amounting to €1.1 billion.²⁹ This demonstrates how targeted efforts can not only attract global talents but also successfully integrate them into the local market, contributing significantly to economic growth.

Canada: Global Skills Strategy

Canada's Global Skills Strategy simplifies the process of bringing highly skilled workers into the country. In collaboration with industry leaders, the strategy streamlines work-permit applications, expediting the integration of talent into the workforce. The Global Talent Stream (a component of the strategy) has been instrumental in creating over 48,000 jobs and securing more than 12,500 paid work–study positions. Additionally, the initiative has spurred over CA\$113 million in skills training and investment.³⁰ This programme not only addresses immediate labour shortages but also strengthens Canada's long-term economic resilience by embedding global talent in its diverse workforce, particularly in sectors such as technology, finance and manufacturing.

Singapore: Tech.Pass

Singapore's Tech.Pass is a forward-thinking initiative designed to attract technology leaders, entrepreneurs and innovators to the country. Supported by both government agencies and private-sector stakeholders, Tech.Pass allows highly skilled professionals to start businesses, mentor startups and contribute to Singapore's growing technology ecosystem.³¹ The programme provides a streamlined pathway for global technology leaders to integrate into Singapore's industry, helping position the country as a leading hub for innovation. This initiative has strengthened Singapore's global reputation as a destination for top-tier talent, and it continues to foster innovation and build a competitive edge in technology.³²

²⁸ *Business Location Center*, 'Business Location Center Homepage'.

²⁹ Berlin Partner für Wirtschaft und Technologie, *Annual Report 2021* (Berlin, 2022).

³⁰ Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, 'Immigration and Economic Growth', Factsheet.

³¹ Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, *Evaluation of the Global Skills Strategy*, E7-2019 (July 2022).

³² *One-Visa.com*, 'Singapore Introduces Tech.Pass to Attract Talented Technopreneurs', 24 November 2020.



France: French Tech Visa

The French Tech Visa forms part of the broader La French Tech initiative, a government-driven effort to transform France into a global startup hub. The visa facilitates entry for international entrepreneurs, engineers and investors into the French technology ecosystem. By partnering with both startups and major technology companies, the programme ensures that international talent plays a central role in driving France's digital economy. The French Internet economy is projected to contribute \$22 billion by 2025,³³ and much of this growth will be driven by the international talent recruited through the French Tech Visa. These professionals are integral to fuelling innovation and scaling technology startups in France.

These global talent visa programmes demonstrate how targeted immigration policies, in collaboration with private-sector stakeholders, can effectively attract and retain highly skilled professionals. By creating streamlined pathways for talent integration, these programmes not only address immediate labour shortages but also bolster long-term economic growth, innovation and global competitiveness.

The Union's talent crisis: How is the EU responding?

The European Commission's 2023 report on employment and social developments³⁴ underscores the persistence of labour and skills shortages across the EU member states, drawing attention to the critical need for proactive measures. Non-EU-born workers, particularly in low-skilled sectors, are disproportionately employed in roles with persistent labour shortages, being 8.7 percentage points more likely to work in such positions than EU-born workers. This disparity emphasises the growing reliance on migrant labour to fill gaps in the workforce and the need for policies that integrate global talent into the EU labour market.

Addressing labour shortages through migration is central to the European Commission's 2022 *Communication on Attracting Skills and Talent to the EU*,³⁵ which highlighted the potential for legal migration to bolster the EU's green and digital transitions. However, the EU faces significant challenges in attracting global talent, a problem exacerbated by its shrinking working-age population, particularly

³³ *French Tech Mission*, 'A Look Back at 10 Years of French Tech', 4 July 2024.

³⁴ European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, *Employment and Social Developments in Europe: Addressing Labour Shortages and Skills Gaps in the EU; 2023 Annual Review* (July 2023).

³⁵ European Commission, *Attracting Skills and Talent to the EU*, Communication, COM (2022) 657 final (27 April 2022).



in rural and less-developed regions. The Communication stresses the urgency of filling occupational shortages by improving migration pathways for skilled workers.

The OECD Talent Attractiveness Indicator³⁶ reveals that the EU is currently underperforming in the global competition for highly skilled talent. Despite offering a high quality of life, third-country nationals often favour other OECD members, such as New Zealand, Australia, the US and Canada over EU member states. Language barriers, as well as complexities in qualification recognition, are contributing factors. Notably, of the EU member states, only Sweden ranks among the top five countries in the OECD index for highly skilled workers,³⁷ suggesting that more aggressive and coordinated efforts are needed at the EU level to improve the Union's competitiveness.

In her 2022 State of the Union address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen declared 2023 the European Year of Skills,³⁸ placing a renewed focus on attracting skilled individuals from outside the EU. This initiative is designed to enhance learning opportunities, simplify the recognition of qualifications and facilitate mobility.

In this context, the European Commission's 2023 *Communication on Harnessing Talent in Europe's Regions*³⁹ highlights the 'demographic transition' occurring across the EU. Many regions are at risk of falling into the 'talent development trap', whereby shrinking populations and the outmigration of skilled workers intensify regional disparities. As the workforce ages, these disparities are expected to grow, particularly in rural areas that struggle to attract investment and skilled labour.

In response to these reflections these strategies are initiatives such as the Talent Partnerships⁴⁰ that form part of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (2020) and the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027.⁴¹ These frameworks emphasise the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships at all levels of governance to build capacity for the integration and retention of talent.

Most recently, in November 2023 the Commission introduced the Skills and Talent Mobility Package, which aims to make the EU a more attractive destination

³⁶ OECD, 'Talent Attractiveness 2023'.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ U. von der Leyen, 'State of the Union Address 2022', European Commission, 13 September 2022.

³⁹ European Commission, *Harnessing Talent in Europe's Regions*, Communication, COM (2023) 32 final (17 January 2023).

⁴⁰ *European Commission*, 'Talent Partnerships'.

⁴¹ European Commission, *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–27*, Communication, COM (2020) 758 final (24 November 2020).



for global talent.⁴² A key aspect of this initiative is the Recommendation on the Recognition of Qualifications of Third-Country Nationals,⁴³ which seeks to simplify and accelerate the recognition process at the national level. This measure calls for coordinated efforts among the member states to provide better support services and ensure that qualifications and skills are recognised effectively across the EU.

While the EU has made significant strides with initiatives, the core challenge lies in their implementation. Many of these strategies, although ambitious, are contingent upon the active participation and goodwill of the member states. For example, the EU Talent Pool⁴⁴ remains voluntary and, to date, only a handful of countries have committed to it. The real barrier to progress, however, is the lack of political prioritisation of talent attraction and integration.

There needs to be a clear recognition that the EU's geopolitical strength and its success across virtually all policy areas are linked to its capacity to harness and develop human capital. Without coordinated and decisive action, persistent labour shortages and talent deficits will erode Europe's competitive advantage, ultimately weakening its influence and standing on the global stage in the coming decades. The future prosperity and leadership of the EU depend on prioritising talent acquisition and integration, making this issue a strategic imperative rather than a secondary concern.

Policy recommendations

Strengthen PPPs to secure Europe's talent future

To effectively address Europe's demographic challenges and labour shortages, PPPs must play a central role in attracting and integrating global talent. Collaboration among governments, private companies, educational institutions and civil society is essential to build sustainable pathways for skilled migrants and students, ensuring that they can contribute to Europe's economy and social fabric.

⁴² *European Commission*, 'Commission Proposes New Measures on Skills and Talent to Help Address Critical Labour Shortages', Press release, 15 November 2023.

⁴³ *European Commission*, 'Recommendation on the Recognition of Qualifications of Third-Country Nationals' (2023).

⁴⁴ The EU Talent Pool is a proposed initiative by the European Union to facilitate the recruitment of skilled workers from non-EU countries. The EU Talent Pool aims to be an EU-wide online platform that matches profiles of jobseekers from outside the EU with job vacancies for shortage occupations in EU member states. (See EU Regulation [establishing an EU Talent Pool - European Commission](#))



PPPs enable the pooling of resources and expertise, with governments providing policy frameworks, visa facilitation and infrastructure, while the private sector offers financial support, employment opportunities and tailored training programmes. This collaboration ensures that global talent is not only attracted to Europe but also successfully integrated into local labour markets, filling the critical skills gaps that are essential for long-term economic growth.

Moreover, public–private collaboration has proven effective in fostering innovation, increasing productivity and enhancing regional development. By working together, governments and businesses can implement reskilling and upskilling initiatives, ensuring that global talent aligns with evolving market demands. This is particularly important as Europe transitions to a knowledge-based economy, where the ability to adapt quickly to technological and economic shifts is paramount.

Successful examples in various European countries have shown that such partnerships can significantly mitigate the effects of depopulation in rural and peripheral regions. Collaboration between local governments and businesses has enabled regions to revitalise communities, preventing the closure of schools and ensuring that foreign students and workers are integrated into the local economies. These efforts not only address immediate labour shortages, but also create a sustainable pipeline of skilled workers for the future.

By scaling such partnerships and encouraging greater collaboration between public and private sectors across the member states, the EU can harmonise talent-attraction strategies and foster a more cohesive approach to integration. This will not only help tackle demographic decline but also ensure that Europe remains competitive on the global stage, as regions with robust PPPs are better positioned to attract high-quality talent and drive innovation.

Set clear migration targets and implement best practices

To fully leverage the benefits of immigration, the EU must establish clear and strategic migration targets, focusing not only on the numbers of incoming migrants, but also on their distribution across the member states in alignment with regional needs. The challenge lies in managing migration flows from regions with high unpredictability, such as North Africa. Therefore, a structured yet flexible approach is essential to ensure that migration policies are both responsive and effective under changing conditions.

A compelling model to consider is Canada's approach, which tailors its immigration strategy to both geographic and demographic needs. Each year, Immigration,



Refugees, and Citizenship Canada⁴⁵ publishes an Immigration Levels Plan, which categorises migrants into economic, family, refugee and humanitarian streams. This strategic framework allows Canada to align immigration policies with national priorities such as transitioning to a green economy, fostering digitalisation, and addressing labour shortages in crucial sectors such as healthcare, science, technology, engineering and agriculture.

For the EU, harmonising migration policies across member states would foster a more cohesive and effective approach. This could involve setting uniform standards for asylum procedures, return policies and integration practices—allowing member states to tailor policies to their specific needs, while contributing to the Union’s overall goals. Such coherence would help ensure that the EU not only meets its migration targets but also addresses labour shortages in a way that supports long-term economic and social stability.

Additionally, the EU should invest in pilot projects at the member state level to test innovative approaches to migration management. Successful programmes could then be scaled and adapted for other states. For instance, if one country demonstrates success in migrant integration through job placement or language training, that programme could serve as a model for others. These pilot projects would drive innovation and promote the exchange of successful strategies across the Union.

Finally, it is crucial for member states to actively learn from each other’s migration-management successes. If a border-control method, integration strategy or skilled-migrant recruitment programme works well in one country, it should be considered for broader adoption across the EU. The EU could facilitate this by creating collaborative platforms for sharing best practices, encouraging a more unified and efficient migration policy across all member states.

Strengthen reskilling and civic–linguistic training for migrants

To enhance migrant integration, particularly in Southern European countries heavily impacted by Mediterranean migration flows, a cohesive, standardised approach to reskilling and civic–linguistic training is essential. Italy has taken proactive steps with its Legislative Decree 20/2023, which prioritises entry for non-EU residents who have completed approved vocational and civic–linguistic training programmes in their home countries.⁴⁶ This pre-arrival preparation ensures a smoother transition into Italian society and the labour market, fostering faster and more effective integration.

⁴⁵ Canada, ‘Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada’.

⁴⁶ Italy, *Ministry of Labour and Social Policies*, ‘Criteri comuni e specifici per gli ingressi’.



Other European countries have developed similarly robust programmes. Sweden's Introduction Programme for new immigrants offers comprehensive Swedish language instruction, civic orientation and employment preparation services.⁴⁷ What makes this programme particularly effective is its personalised support, including career coaching and job placement, which has led to higher employment rates for participants compared to non-participants. This demonstrates how targeted language and vocational training can dramatically improve migrant integration.

Germany also mandates extensive integration courses for all new immigrants. These consist of 600 hours of German language training and a 100-hour orientation course covering German law, culture and history. Such programmes equip migrants with the linguistic and cultural knowledge necessary for both social and professional success. The data show a significant increase in migrants' understanding of German social systems, which reduces the likelihood of cultural conflicts and promotes smoother integration.⁴⁸

In the Netherlands, the Civic Integration Exam requires newcomers to undergo language lessons, labour market orientation and courses on Dutch society. These programmes aim to help migrants become independent and well-integrated members of society. Post-programme assessments show that participants feel more prepared for the job market and report a greater sense of connection to their communities.

Despite the successes of these national programmes, a cohesive, EU-wide approach to reskilling and civic-linguistic training is still lacking. The EU should advocate for the adoption of standardised reskilling programmes across all member states to reduce disparities in migrant integration outcomes. A harmonised framework would ensure that all member states benefit from well-integrated migrants, strengthening labour markets, enhancing social cohesion and promoting economic stability across the Union. Standardisation would also facilitate the cross-border movement of skilled workers, further contributing to the EU's overall competitiveness.

Digitalisation of the migration bureaucracy

Investing in the digitalisation of the bureaucracy related to migration management could significantly enhance the efficiency of operations. Specifically, visa processes for non-EU residents should be fully digitised, thereby eliminating the need for

⁴⁷ *Informationsverige.se*, 'The Introduction Programme' (22 August 2024).

⁴⁸ Germany, *Federal Office for Migration and Refugees*, 'Integration Courses'.



individuals living at a distance to physically travel for permit acquisition, and reducing the administrative complexities associated with paper documentation.

While the majority of EU member states have adopted online applications for residency and citizenship, there are still some exceptions, such as Bulgaria and Slovenia. Furthermore, in 10 member states, online systems are primarily used for scheduling appointments with the relevant authorities, thus still necessitating some degree of physical presence. In addition, the ability to track citizenship applications online is only available in 11 EU states.⁴⁹

Australia provides an instructive example with its digital platform, which allows foreigners to track the status of their application, update their information and check their visa status.⁵⁰ According to the *2022–23 Migration Program Report*, 142,344 places were allocated by the platform in these two years, accounting for 73% of the total, the highest proportion in the country's history.⁵¹

In this context, the EU's initiative to develop a unified, web-based platform for processing Schengen visa applications⁵² is a welcome step towards modernising the visa application process. The new rules aim to streamline procedures, mitigate risks associated with identity fraud and facilitate efficient border checks. However, it is crucial that individual member states also accelerate the digitalisation of their internal migration-management procedures. This includes everything from application submissions to status tracking and integration processes. Ensuring a harmonised digital approach across all member states will not only enhance consistency and efficiency, but also improve security and service quality throughout the Union.

Therefore, the EU should encourage member states to adopt digital platforms within a clearly defined time frame to ensure the swift and efficient transition to digital operations. This comprehensive digitalisation will better equip the EU to manage migration flows effectively, leveraging technology to support a more integrated and responsive migration-management framework.

⁴⁹ European Migration Network, *The Use of Digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence in Migration Management* (Brussels, 2022).

⁵⁰ Australia, *Department of Home Affairs*, 'Migration Program Statistics'.

⁵¹ Australia, *Department of Home Affairs*, *2022–23 Migration Program Report* (2023), 8.

⁵² *Council of the EU*, 'Council and European Parliament Agree on Rules to Digitalise the Visa Procedure', Press release, 13 June 2023.



Strategic cooperation with source countries

The EU should prioritise establishing formal agreements with key source countries to create clear frameworks for the mobility of skilled talent. These agreements should include provisions for streamlined visa processes, mutual recognition of professional qualifications and other measures that would make relocation smoother for high-skilled workers. Such strategic partnerships would not only secure a consistent influx of talent but also strengthen cultural and economic ties with partner nations, fostering long-term collaboration.

The literature on EU migration policy consistently emphasises that cooperation on migration is pragmatic and interest-driven, particularly when it comes to limiting irregular migration through ‘remote control’ strategies. This approach engages source country governments to regulate the flow of students and workers, producing mutual economic benefits. Platforms such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations—EU Dialogue on Safe and Fair Labour Migration, facilitated by the European External Action Service, serve as vital arenas for these discussions.

Additionally, South-East Asian governments actively promote migration to developed countries due to the substantial remittances sent home by expatriates, which significantly boost purchasing power in their home economies. These remittances are crucial for local development and help to maintain bilateral relations.

To expand on this, the EU should establish collaborative programmes with source countries, focusing on education, training and professional development. Joint initiatives, such as educational exchange programmes, scholarships, research grants and innovation hubs, would support both the professional advancement of individuals and the technological and economic development of the participating nations. Such programmes would incentivise high-skilled workers to engage with the EU labour market, knowing that abundant opportunities for growth and development await them.

This holistic strategy would not only help to address labour shortages but would also position the EU as a destination of choice for global talent, while reinforcing its geopolitical and economic influence.

Building the ‘European Dream’?

European countries should, like the US, enhance their strategic communication to attract global talent by articulating their own version of a ‘European Dream’. This would emphasise the unique benefits of Europe’s social market economy and its strong respect for human dignity—the core tenets of Christian Democracy.



This vision could position Europe as a prime destination for individuals who not only seek economic opportunities but are also aligned with Europe's values of inclusivity, democracy and human rights.

To this end, the OECD has developed a toolkit⁵³ designed to help regions improve their international image and enhance their ability to attract global talent. While the toolkit was primarily created for regional authorities, its recommendations offer valuable insights that could be adapted to craft a compelling narrative for the entire EU. A unified European Dream would help to define the EU's appeal, similar to how the American Dream has long attracted immigrants to the US.

One of the key strategies suggested by the OECD toolkit is 'cohesive and consistent territorial marketing', which involves uniting local stakeholders to develop a shared identity and a cohesive brand that emphasises the strengths of each region. This unified brand should be consistently communicated across all platforms, ensuring a clear and attractive message is disseminated internationally.

To craft an effective message that resonates globally, three critical considerations stand out:

1. *Lexical semantics.* The language used in EU messaging should be culturally sensitive and appealing across different contexts. Words and phrases should transcend language barriers and resonate emotionally with the global audience.
2. *Foreign language translation.* Ensuring accessibility in multiple languages is paramount. While the EU excels in language accessibility, some member states still lag behind in offering essential information in foreign languages on their platforms, which limits access to non-EU talent.
3. *Visual identity.* Branding elements such as logos, slogans and symbols must be carefully crafted to encapsulate the EU's identity. Unlike the US, whose iconic American symbols such as the Statue of Liberty are known around the world, the EU lacks universally recognised visuals that embody its values. Developing such symbols could significantly enhance Europe's visibility and make its values more tangible on the global stage.

⁵³ OECD, *Rethinking Regional Attractiveness in the New Global Environment* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023), 1–58.



The EU's existing motto, 'United in diversity', which emphasises inclusivity and pluralism, could be more strategically leveraged to highlight Europe's commitment to peace, prosperity and cultural richness. However, the challenge lies in translating these abstract values into concrete, globally recognisable symbols and narratives. Achieving this would align the EU's image more closely with those of the successful nation-branding efforts seen in countries such as the US, which have skilfully cultivated globally resonant narratives around their ideals.

By crafting a cohesive European identity, enhancing visual and linguistic accessibility, and promoting a strong, unified brand, the EU can better position itself as a destination of choice for talented individuals seeking not only economic success but also alignment with Europe's values and lifestyle.

Conclusion

The EU is approaching a critical human capital shortfall. As its workforce ages and populations shrink, particularly in rural and peripheral regions, the very fabric of Europe's societal and economic stability is at risk. Without decisive action to attract young global talent, the EU's labour shortages will worsen, regional disparities will widen and the continent's economic competitiveness will falter. This demographic decline threatens not only the economy but the broader societal cohesion that has long been a cornerstone of Europe's success.

This policy brief has outlined some key policy recommendations. However, beyond the technical aspects of policy, Europe must also focus on building a compelling narrative—the European Dream—to enable it to compete for global talent. This involves not only emphasising Europe's economic opportunities but also its values of inclusivity, human rights and social stability.

Ultimately, the EU's success in addressing its demographic crisis will depend on its ability to adapt, innovate and collaborate. Through a combination of practical policy measures and strategic branding, Europe can build a sustainable and prosperous future, driven by a diverse, skilled and integrated workforce. The road ahead is challenging, but with decisive action, the EU can turn this demographic challenge into an opportunity for renewal and growth.



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Appendix



	Programme 1	Programme 2	Programme 3	Programme 4
Project 1	<p>Strengthening PPPs to secure Europe's talent future</p> <p>Establish a coordinated PPP system in which governments streamline visa processes and private companies offer vocational training, job placements and mentorship. This collaboration should integrate skilled migrants into key sectors such as healthcare, information technology and engineering, effectively addressing labour shortages.</p>	<p>Setting clear migration targets</p> <p>Leveraging existing initiatives such as the Talent Partnerships and Skills and Talent Mobility Package, develop a framework to support member states in setting migration targets based on regional labour market needs. This framework would provide data analysis, funding and guidance, allowing member states to tailor their policies for key sectors.</p>	<p>Enhancing migration integration and through skills, digitalisation and cooperation</p> <p>Support member states by providing funding and guidance for reskilling and language training programmes tailored to meet regional labour needs. The focus should be on preparing migrants for high-demand sectors such as healthcare and technology, ensuring rapid integration into local economies.</p>	<p>Building the 'European Dream'</p> <p>Establish a Europe-wide educational campaign that showcases Europe's unique blend of innovation, cultural diversity and social welfare. By emphasising interconnectedness and balancing personal freedoms with social responsibilities, the EU could position itself as a leader in building inclusive, equitable societies.</p>
Project 2	<p>Incentivise companies to set up vocational training centres in rural regions, with local governments offering housing and relocation support, with the aim of attracting global talent and revitalising areas affected by depopulation.</p>	<p>Establish pilot projects in select EU member states to test innovative approaches for managing migration flows and talent distribution. These pilots could focus on integrating skilled migrants into sectors facing critical labour shortages, such as healthcare, science, technology and engineering, with a flexible approach that responds to regional needs.</p>	<p>Expand the EU's digital platforms to streamline visa applications and migration processes, reducing administrative burdens. By enhancing existing tools such as the Schengen visa system, the EU could improve efficiency and transparency in managing skilled migration.</p>	<p>Create talent hubs across Europe, with specialist centres focusing on high-growth industries such as green technology and digitalisation. These hubs would offer mentoring, reskilling and fast-track migration processes for skilled workers from across the globe, reinforcing Europe's image as a land of opportunity for top talent.</p>
Project 3	<p>Create innovation hubs with private technology companies to foster entrepreneurship among skilled migrants. These hubs should offer funding and mentoring, supported by streamlined immigration, to boost innovation and economic growth in Europe.</p>	<p>Enhance existing initiatives such as the European Migration Network and the European Website on Integration to focus more on the practical exchange of best practices in migration management.</p>	<p>Facilitate agreements with key source countries to streamline migration pathways, focusing on mutual recognition of qualifications and training programmes.</p>	<p>Launch a strategic global campaign promoting the European Dream that emphasises Europe's commitment to inclusivity, human rights and quality of life.</p>