

Student working holidays as a step towards youth mobility

The recent European Commission Communication [Attracting Skills and Talent to the EU](#) outlined an ambitious agenda of legislative, operational and aspirational steps to strengthen the Union's ability to attract and retain international workers. Part of its "forward-looking pillar", youth mobility was placed front and centre – a positive development in the bolstering of European Union talent policy seen in recent years.

The Communication is framed by the statement that youth mobility schemes are designed to give young people a chance to live, work and acquire experience in another country, while fostering cultural exchanges and strengthening ties between countries. It is also proposed that an EU Youth Mobility Scheme could make the EU a more attractive destination as a whole, offering the opportunity to experience the cultural, geographic and linguistic diversity that Europe has to offer. Indeed, different EU Member States have different starting positions in the global 'race for talent', pointing to the need to ensure that all Member States are seen as attractive destinations for international talent.

The Commission will explore the feasibility of developing a European Youth Mobility Scheme and is due to launch the process in the third quarter of 2022, at the European Migration Forum.

This policy brief contains some initial thoughts on the potential of an *interim scheme* to support an enabling environment for the bigger policy framework being worked on by the European Commission. A more incremental, low-risk pilot stage would allow for a "proof of concept" that international students want to travel and work in Europe, that they will take up jobs in sectors with seasonal labour shortages and that they will thereafter return to their home country to complete their studies.

Planting short-term seeds for long-term yields

It is clear that if the EU is to offset the effects of its increasingly lopsided demographics and remain competitive in the decades to come, deeper systemic change must be enacted on mobility policy now, providing comprehensive and flexible pathways for a steady flow of [skilled labour](#) into the bloc. Short-term schemes can help address key seasonal labour shortages – and may plant the seeds to help address Europe's labour needs in the longer term: If international students have a positive experience

of travelling and working in the EU, they may develop an affinity that reaps rewards after graduation, when they decide to return to the EU and apply their degree as a skilled migrant on a legal pathway. As the [OECD Indicators of Talent Attractiveness](#) point out, a range of factors influence a talent's decision regarding whether and where to move. The EU must adopt, as it were, a willingness to till the soil and plant the trees, rather than expect a ready and plentiful supply of flexible, transactional relationships.

Relatedly, it is a political necessity for EU member states to deliver on their migration diplomacy commitments to open up legal pathways for the nationals of priority countries (e.g. neighbourhood countries, those along migration routes to Europe or those with ongoing migration cooperation with the EU) to incentivise delivery in other areas such as readmission or effective border control. Youth mobility offers the EU and its Member States with a transformative path – that benefits all parties concerned with a palatable level of risk for EU Member States.

Pragmatic baby steps to build trust

It remains to be seen whether the proposed European Youth Mobility Scheme can be executed in the current (geo)political landscape, with the war in Ukraine and a fragile economic outlook, among other issues, standing as potential sources of hesitation among EU Member States. This context may limit the ability of the European Commission to follow through on the aims laid out in its recent Communication, as it would likely affect the ability of Member States to immediately appreciate the value of the Scheme and ensure buy-in.

Given this context, it would be prudent for the EU to find a way to first demonstrate proof of concept and generate substantiated results that can be used to execute the proposal at hand – and in the service of more robust Member State engagement farther down the line. It would thus be worthwhile to roll out a more targeted Student Working Holiday Scheme in parallel to pursuing the longer-term, more ambitious Youth Mobility Scheme. Doing so would enable a fruitful testing phase – identifying shortcomings in practice and undertaking experimentation that could save a significant amount of energy and time at policy and operational levels later on.

Alongside generating evidence to underpin more sound policy (objectives) going forward, such a pilot scheme would help to build trust on all sides and set a clear precedent for how to operationalise larger-scale initiatives. Moreover, it could do this while enabling EU Member States experiencing [seasonal labour shortages](#) to instantly benefit from non-EU student labour.

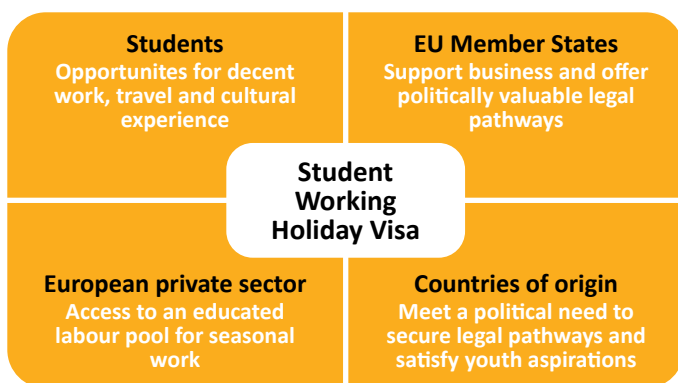
A number of Member States have, for several decades already, facilitated such working holiday travel schemes for a limited group of (mainly high GDP) countries (see table 1) – with proven results for local labour markets.

Why are working holiday visas so effective?

A working holiday visa is a temporary residence permit allowing the permit holder to take up employment to finance their travel and contribute to certain industries (e.g. hospitality, construction, agriculture). A working holiday permit holder is permitted entry for a specified, short period of time, during which they are exposed to the local culture and language, while gaining insight into the job market – and potentially establishing links with the country that may be useful after they return home.

One of the main reasons why such schemes exist in over [60 countries](#) worldwide is their win-win dynamic. While the individual is immersed in the local environment, the state and local businesses can benefit from this interaction in multiple ways (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Benefits of Student Working Holiday Visa Schemes



In the short term, the admission of these individuals **allows gaps in the local market to be filled** with a curated pool of flexible (and often highly skilled) labour – without limiting opportunities for the in-country unemployed. This is particularly important in sectors with peak seasonal needs, and for professions in which local workers may be [unwilling to take up employment](#) for one reason or another.

In the medium to long term, assuming that the permit holder's experience in the host country was fruitful, the host country stands to gain in various ways, as a connection has now been established. Even if individuals never venture abroad again, they may hold an affinity for the place visited, and could ultimately

ascend to positions where such abstract links or influences translate into tangible (commercial, cultural, sociopolitical) impact.

More directly, studies show that, among highly skilled international talent, previous exposure or personal links to a place are among the main factors influencing their choice of [migration destination](#). Amid a global race for top talent, 'work and travel' schemes deliver results because they put the destination on the map for (longer-term) potential migrants, allowing them to experience the local lifestyle and working environment before making a decision on whether to migrate.

If executed in a responsive, long-sighted manner, a broader embrace of student working holiday visas would thus represent one positive step towards addressing the labour shortages that beset EU Member States and an investment in attracting back highly skilled individuals later.

Possible scenarios for exploring a Student Working Holiday Visa scheme

- EU Member States could assess the value of issuing a special reduced-duration visa (2.5-3 months) for targeted tertiary students from priority countries during their summer vacation, a period when Europe traditionally experiences labour shortages in several sectors.
- Initial attention could be paid to the European Commission's first round of priority countries for Talent Partnerships (Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia), where proximity to the EU would also make travel costs more affordable for the students concerned.
- Tertiary students could be selected for participation before their final academic year, to ensure that they have an incentive to return home and complete their studies.
- Additional qualifying criteria such as language proficiency may also be considered, as is the case in the [US programme](#).
- An additional potential target could be tertiary students from countries with existing visa liberalisation schemes (i.e. a 90-day Schengen visa), who would benefit from greater protection against exploitation via the right to work legally for a specified period.
- Substantial value could be added later by a multi-country scheme, which, if not covering all EU Member States at the beginning, could be piloted by a few leading states. This could see quotas agreed across states and efficiencies in processing the requisite visas.

Recommendations

- **Conduct desk research and analysis of the available options** to understand how current EU Member State schemes operate (e.g., those of [France](#) or [Spain](#)) and elicit scenarios for roll-out, including potential quotas, target group profiles, monitoring mechanisms and implementation options, to ensure that the scheme is circular in nature with very high return rates.

- **Design a pilot** based on the outcomes of the desk research and analysis and engagement with EU Member States. The pilot should track participants to evaluate the value of their experience and the benefit brought to EU employers, as well as the capacity of the programme to ensure the protection of workers' rights.
- **Pilot the initiative among a cohort of EU Member States** for the 2023 summer season, to test the validity of prevailing assumptions – for example, that migrant students possess the necessary skillsets to meet in-country demand, will take up work in sectors lacking in labour and will return in line with the delimited visa conditions.

Table 1: Existing European Country Youth Mobility Schemes

Country	Duration	Age	Argentina	Australia	Brazil	Canada	Chile	Colombia	Hong Kong	Israel	Japan	Mexico	New Zealand	Peru	Russia	South Korea	Taiwan	United States	Uruguay
Schengen countries																			
Austria	6 months / 1 year	18-30	x	x		x	x		x	x	x		x			x	x		
Belgium	1 year	18-30		x		x							x			x	x		
Czech Republic	2 years	18-30		x		x*	x			x	x		x			x	x		
Denmark	1 year	18-30	x	x		x	x				x		x			x			
Estonia	1 year	18-30		x		x							x						
Finland	1 year	18-30		x									x			x			
France	1 year	18-30 or 35	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x**	x			x
Germany	1 year	18-30	x	x		x	x		x	x	x					x	x		x
Greece	1 year	18-30		x		x***													
Hungary	1 year	18-30		x			x		x		x		x***			x	x		
Iceland	1 year	18-30		x							x								
Italy	1 year	18-30		x					x				x			x			
Latvia	1 year	18-30		x		x							x						
Lithuania	1 year	18-30				x					x		x			x			
Luxembourg	1 year	18-30		x		x	x						x			x	x		
Malta	1 year	18-30		x									x						
Netherlands	1 year	18-30	x	x		x			x				x			x			
Norway	1 year	18-30	x	x		x***					x		x						
Poland	1 year	18-30				x	x				x		x			x	x		
Portugal	2 years	18-30	x	x		x	x				x		x	x		x		x	
Slovakia	1 year	18-30		x		x					x		x			x	x		
Slovenia	1 year	18-30											x						
Spain	1 year	18-30		x		x					x		x						
Sweden	1 year	18-30	x	x		x	x		x				x			x			x
Switzerland	1 year	18-30		x		x	x												
Non-Schengen countries																			
Andorra	1 year	18-30		x															
Croatia	1 year	18-30				x							x						
Cyprus	1 year	18-25		x															
Ireland	1 year	18-30	x	x		x****	x		x		x		x			x	x	x	
Romania	1 year	18-30														x			
Exceptions to standard	* Up to 35 years / 1 year		<i>Source: Authors' compilation</i>																
	** 4 months																		
	*** Up to 35 years																		
	**** Up to 35 years / 2 years																		