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TAPPING INTO GLOBAL TALENT - Investing in refugee talent

by Caitlin Katsiaticas

In the 'global race for talent', countries are seeking to attract the best and brightest to meet labour market needs and drive innovation and growth. National talent policies often look to attract international students, a group that is seen as a significant source of future talent. Students are sought after because their in-country academic qualifications, language proficiency, and internship or work experience are seen as gateways to easy integration and knowledge contribution in the destination country.

Parallel to this pursuit of talent, universities, student groups, and other stakeholders in Europe and elsewhere are increasingly spearheading initiatives to support the enrolment of refugee students, including through targeted [scholarships](#) and [community sponsorship](#) programmes. Bringing international students with a refugee background to campus is viewed as a [complementary pathway](#) that can help to offset low levels of refugee resettlement and thus expand opportunities for refugees. The framing of such efforts is often humanitarian and person-centred – in contrast to talent policy, which emphasises current and future economic needs in a location and the creation of a competitive environment.

Incorporating refugee students into Europe's race for global talent

There is great potential if these two approaches join forces. Increasing the enrolment and retention of refugee students from outside the continent could offer European countries and labour markets a significant pool of talented workers farther down the line, while at the same time expanding mobility opportunities that enable refugees to develop their skills and access employment opportunities. Such prospects are especially powerful given that [only 5% of refugees globally are enrolled in tertiary education](#), many are shut out of formal labour markets in first countries of asylum, and displacement has become [increasingly protracted](#) – but also because many European countries are [experiencing a shrinking pool of workers or facing skills shortages](#), challenges that attracting talent from elsewhere can help address. A focus on student mobility has the added benefit of avoiding the 'cherry picking' of refugees who are highly skilled, since receiving countries would first invest in developing refugees' skills.

What would this approach look like?

Universities can increase their enrolment of international refugee students, providing scholarships and supporting students during their studies. **Public funding** for such scholarships may play a decisive role, since each higher education institution will have its own recruitment priorities and often relies on international students as a source of income – although many universities are already engaged in welcoming refugees in other ways. The **private sector** or **local government**, in coordination with **universities**, can identify labour needs to inform the design of scholarship initiatives. **Local governments** and **student organisations** can then pave the way for student reception and integration. Meanwhile, **national migration authorities** are responsible for the migratory framework, allowing international refugee students to take up scholarships and remain in the destination country following graduation.

The range of potential actors involved highlights that strong leadership is crucial, but so is ensuring that key stakeholders are on board and collaborating with one another.

Getting out of the starting blocks

There is a clear need among employers for additional workers and among refugees for increased opportunities – and a case for investing in refugee talent from abroad. ICMPD’s practical experience in [global talent management](#) and [complementary pathways](#) reveals some important lessons for maximising the potential of this route:

Intentionally including refugees in international student attraction efforts is essential, as these prospective students are typically overlooked. Employing a proactive approach can help ensure that information reaches refugee populations and that application processes are responsive to the realities that refugees may face, such as difficulties in obtaining school records and identification documents.

Funding schemes for refugees can tip the balance, boosting international refugee enrolment. With cost a key factor in student decision-making – and a main barrier to taking up studies – scholarships have often been used to recruit sought-after students. Beyond underpinning the initial decision to make the move, monetary assistance can allow students to pursue internship opportunities, providing valuable in-country experience that can help them secure a job after graduation. Scholarships should be targeted towards refugees pursuing degrees in in-demand fields of study, as identified through analysis of local labour market needs, while also reaching refugee students of exceptional talent and motivation in any field.

Tying international refugee student attraction efforts to sectors with current labour market shortages and projected needs is critical to leveraging global talent for skills shortage mitigation. This approach will make it easier for students to find a job after graduation and remain in their country of study – something that is particularly important for refugees. International student retention is a key challenge for those trying to fill shortage positions in Europe, as illustrated by [low retention rates](#) upon graduation and beyond. However, refugees may be particularly interested in pursuing career opportunities in their country of study, meaning that they could play an especially important role in countries’ long-term talent acquisition strategies.

Supporting study-to-work pathways is central to promoting talent retention, needed to leverage the skills of newly developed talent in European labour markets and for return on investment in skills development. It is also a core element of providing international refugee students with long-term and protection-sensitive prospects. Graduates with a refugee background need legally guaranteed options to stay in their country of study, allowing their residence permit for education to be converted to one that allows them to search for and take up employment after graduation. Notably, a focus on labour shortage sectors should improve graduates’ employment prospects and reduce the need for a back-up option of applying for asylum. Seeking asylum, however, is an option if the situation in the origin country has not changed.

Providing reception and integration support is key to enabling international refugee students to settle in, dive into their studies, and stay following graduation. Universities can work with student groups, municipalities, and civil society to help them find accommodation, improve their local language skills, and adjust to their new setting, for instance via language classes and mentorship programmes. These tailored services are also important for

ensuring an [element of protection](#) for international refugee students, ensuring that initiatives are responsive to their specific needs.

Going the distance

Continued, record levels of global displacement have driven home the need to expand solutions for refugees. But it is not only an altruistic pursuit. Refugees represent a significant source of talent – and can contribute their skills and creativity given the opportunity to develop and utilise these assets.

Looking at the issue of global displacement through the lens of talent policy can bring additional actors on board and further expand opportunities. Investing in refugee talent can also provide Europe with a source of new, much-needed talent.

Teaming up to thoughtfully incorporate international refugee students into European talent management initiatives has the potential to be a win for both sides.

As the world begins to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and aims to ‘build back better’, now is the ideal time to jumpstart the conversation on the global talent-refugee nexus. Some key questions to explore include:

- ➔ What can be learned from existing refugee scholarship and community sponsorship programmes?
- ➔ How should labour market information be gathered and fed into such initiatives?
- ➔ How can adequate protection standards for students and graduates be ensured?
- ➔ How can the talent and refugee protection worlds start to speak the same dialect, or at least understand the language of the other?

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