



Six ways to improve the mutual benefits of labour mobility

Policymakers are increasingly viewing skills mobility partnerships (SMPs) as a promising tool to address skill shortages and mismatches in the EU while also producing benefits for countries of origin. Yet their design can vary widely, and some initiatives are better positioned than others to generate mutual benefits. Drawing on a new global mapping, this commentary identifies concrete ways to enhance benefits for all parties, thereby supporting the fairness and sustainability of SMPs and labour mobility more broadly.

It is no secret that Europe is facing [severe and widespread labour shortages](#). But while immediate labour needs often dominate headlines, future skills needs, including those linked to the digital and green transitions, are equally pressing. Moreover, labour and skills shortages are [set to further intensify](#) across the EU, driven largely by demographic aging and population decline.

Labour migration is one [tool to ease shortages while fostering growth and innovation](#) by expanding the talent pool and facilitating access to new skills and ideas. Yet workforce pressures are not limited to destination countries. Many middle-income countries that have traditionally sent labour migrants to European countries are themselves confronting [shrinking and aging populations](#). Meanwhile, low-income countries are experiencing growth in their youth populations but often lack sufficient resources to invest in education and training systems essential to [developing globally competitive skills](#). Traditional labour migration approaches, such as employer sponsorship models, points-based systems, and bilateral labour agreements, have tended to benefit destination countries disproportionately and may contribute to [brain drain](#), with adverse consequences for countries of origin.

Against this backdrop, momentum is building behind SMPs and similar frameworks, including Global Skill Partnerships and

Talent Partnerships. These models combine skills development with mobility in ways intended to generate reciprocal benefits for both destination and origin countries. A mapping of more than 150 SMPs conducted through the EU-funded [Link4Skills project](#) reveals that SMPs indeed go a step further than traditional labour migration approaches in facilitating the fairer movement of skills. At the same time, they face several challenges that could limit their ability to achieve scale, sustainability, equity, and promised labour market outcomes.

Designing skills mobility partnerships to deliver mutual benefits

SMPs [combine skills development and mobility](#) in a variety of ways. Depending on their design, they may enable individuals to access employment-related training, language instruction, qualifications recognition, career opportunities, and/or (re) integration support. Employers, for their part, benefit from a wider talent pool and assistance with mobility processes. Countries of origin [stand to gain](#) through remittances, knowledge and technology transfer, economic investment, and/or the expansion of domestic talent pools, while destination countries are better able to fill labour shortages and strengthen their economies and social systems.

SMPs are generally intended to support a fairer global movement of skills. They typically promise a ‘triple win’ – or even a ‘quadruple’ win’ – for countries of origin, countries of destination, migrants, and employers. Compared with traditional labour migration schemes, SMPs aspire to be more balanced and development-sensitive and more equitable in sharing costs and gains.

A review of 156 SMPs in the forthcoming Link4Skills partnership inventory underscores both the scale and diversity in the design of current and recent initiatives at

the intersection of skills and mobility. This inventory maps government-to-government partnerships involving the 12 Link4Skills countries (Austria, Canada, Germany, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Morocco, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the Philippines, Poland, and Ukraine) between 2015 and April 2025, examining initiatives that combine practical skilling with mobility for some or all participants.

Some SMPs focus on facilitating the mobility of already-qualified professionals, such as nurses, by offering language training and support with credential recognition so they can practice elsewhere. Others seek to expand the global talent pool, for example by facilitating internships for current university students or young adults, or by offering multi-year apprenticeships. SMPs also take varying approaches to mobility, which can bring implications for mutual benefits. Some initiatives only focus on long-term migration, which stands to yield stronger gains for destination countries, while others opt for circular or short-term mobility or a mixture of approaches.

Although the inventory does not assess outcomes, the variation in partnership design suggests meaningful differences in how gains are distributed and who ultimately benefits. This highlights both the potential of SMPs and opportunities to strengthen them to better reflect the interests of all stakeholders.

1. Providing (re-)integration support to enhance long-term utilisation of skills

At present, the majority of SMPs mapped by Link4Skills do not explicitly provide integration or reintegration support, representing a missed opportunity to improve longer-term outcomes, whether participants continue their careers in destination countries or return home. Where integration support is included, it often focuses narrowly on language training, while reintegration components remain rare, even when return is anticipated.

Yet, evidence indicates that [successful integration](#) improves migrants' outcomes and contributions to local communities, while effective [initial onboarding in the workplace](#) supports retention by strengthening interpersonal connections and a sense of belonging. A more effective approach would involve offering – either directly or through referrals – more comprehensive integration support, which can even start during the pre-departure phase. This could combine language courses with cultural orientation, administrative assistance, networking opportunities, mentoring schemes, and soft skills training.

It is equally important to support the reintegration of those returning to their countries of origin, so that returning

migrants and origin countries can benefit from the skills gained through SMPs. This could include career guidance, connections to employment opportunities, access to further education and training, or assistance in starting a business, helping to ensure that skills acquired abroad are effectively utilised upon return.

2. Introducing flexibility in mobility duration to respond to evolving needs and aspirations

Many SMPs are constrained by their own design, leaving little scope to adapt to shifting labour markets, sectoral needs, or the preferences of employers and migrants. Strictly defined short-term or circular mobility pathways may not align with these interests, particularly given lengthy visa procedures that can limit uptake of these schemes.

Greater flexibility, rather than one-size-fits-all approaches, could make SMPs more effective and better aligned with evolving needs and aspirations. [South Korea's Employment Permit System](#), for instance, plans for all participants to return but allows employers to request a limited extension of stay for needed workers. Several SMPs offer multiple mobility options, combining short-term, return-oriented pathways with longer-term mobility opportunities.

Such flexible approaches can help balance the goals of circular migration, talent retention, and sustainable outcomes. However, where longer stays are permitted, the provision of robust integration support becomes increasingly important.

3. Incorporating remote work to harness the benefits of digital mobility

To date, SMPs have prioritised physical mobility, leaving the potential of digital mobility largely untapped. In an increasingly digital world of work, remote work could offer additional possibilities. Although still relatively uncommon, initiatives such as the [Digital Explorers – Iraq Edition](#) project have demonstrated this potential. Digital Explorers offers online training for young Iraqis in collaboration with Lithuanian companies, complemented by in-person networking and job fairs in Iraq that connect participants with local and international employers. Two related pilot projects facilitate physical mobility for work placements in the Baltic states. This could be seen as a similar approach to SMP models using “home” and “away” tracks to support access to talent in both origin and destination economies.

Incorporating remote work options within SMPs could generate longer-term benefits for all parties. Remote work could serve as an alternative to physical mobility or follow an initial placement abroad, enabling employers in destination countries to retain talent even after participants return home. This would expand access to skilled workers in a more [flexible and cost-effective way](#).

For international talent, virtual mobility would reduce relocation-related procedures and challenges, while creating livelihood opportunities within their home communities. Origin countries, in turn, could benefit from increased local spending power and reduced pressure on their labour markets. However, taxation and social benefits systems would require careful consideration to ensure transparency and fairness for all parties.

4. Better aligning migration pathways with labour market realities

Of the SMPs in the Link4Skills inventory, 62% targeted highly skilled workers, 49% engaged middle skilled workers (including current higher education students), and less than 10% addressed lower skilled workers, with some SMPs targeting multiple categories. This distribution reflects both partnership design and the reliance on [existing visa and permit categories](#), which are often tailored to high-skilled or student/trainee mobility. Yet recent EURES data indicate that many of the most widespread and severe shortages across the EU are found in [essential lower- and middle-skilled occupations](#).

Partnerships could be enabled to operate across a broader range of skill levels, which may require adapting or expanding migration pathways to include in-demand vocational and technical professions, an issue that extends beyond the purview of SMPs themselves. Germany's [Skilled Immigration Act](#), for example, broadened the definition of skilled workers to include vocational qualifications. Italy's [Flow Decree](#) establishes annual quotas for non-EU workers across specific occupations, offering a more demand-driven approach that accommodates shortage sectors. Such adjustments allow SMPs to better address labour shortages while preserving reciprocal gains. At the same time, to better reflect actual labour market needs, SMPs must also engage the private sector earlier and more systematically.

5. Enhancing skills development and recognition to grow and leverage the global talent pool

Investing in skilling to develop, rather than relocate, skilled individuals will enable SMPs to better deliver on their objective of mutual benefits and support a more sustainable skills pool for origins and destinations. This calls for further emphasis on skills development and education.

Alongside this investment, effective skills recognition is essential to ensure that mobility reaps lasting benefits by enabling individuals to continue their careers. However, many SMPs still lack robust mechanisms: the Link4Skills mapping found that 16% rely on standard recognition procedures – which are [often time- and cost-intensive](#) – and 71% do not specify how skills or qualifications will be recognised.

Addressing these gaps requires integrating skills recognition into SMP design from the outset, perhaps through joint curricula that align training and qualification systems or targeted bridging courses to facilitate recognition. Relying on standard approaches requires less investment but may present obstacles to mobility. To maximise impact, SMPs could also strengthen reintegration measures to ensure that skills gained abroad are recognised and utilised upon return.

6. Promoting more inclusive participation to advance equitable opportunities and sustainable development

SMPs typically reach individuals who have already benefitted from educational opportunities, limiting their potential to contribute to traditional development goals such as poverty reduction and social inclusion. As noted above, the majority of SMPs in the Link4Skills inventory target high- and middle-skilled participants, including those with completed professional training and recent graduates. Only a fraction of SMPs – eight in our mapping – place a focus on underrepresented groups. These targeted the participation of women, with two SMPs also targeting persons with disabilities and one additionally targeting ethnic and cultural minorities. Displaced persons remain overlooked in governmental SMPs, with none in the inventory specifically addressing individuals with protection needs.

[Intentionally incorporating](#) underrepresented groups into SMPs could help create more inclusive pathways that benefit individuals, their communities, and countries of origin or first asylum. Such approaches would also expand the pool

of available skills, helping to address labour shortages in destination countries.

From design to delivery

SMPs are a long-term, and often resource-intensive, strategy rather than a quick fix. This helps explain why many initiatives remain small in scale: only eight SMPs in the inventory planned to support the mobility of more than 5,000 individuals. As a result, SMPs currently account for a relatively small share of global skills-based mobility. Nevertheless, expanding SMPs remains a key strategy for increasing the benefits of labour mobility for all parties. Future labour mobility schemes under ICMPD's EU-funded [Migration Partnership Facility](#) will aim to further deepen mutual benefits.

Doing so will require additional investment, systematic monitoring and evaluation, and efforts to address structural challenges, including reliance on existing migration channels and persistent power asymmetries which often allow destination countries to shape priorities. At the same time, securing sustained employer-buy-in will be essential; at present, many employers express concerns about administrative complexity, the qualifications of international talent, and long-term retention, which can reduce their willingness or ability to participate.

Beyond the expansion of SMPs, the six considerations above can also enhance the capacity of these initiatives to deliver mutual benefits by growing the global pool of talent and maximising the positive impacts of labour mobility for employers, workers, destination countries, and origin countries alike.

Against the backdrop of demographic decline and rising labour and skills shortages, European governments require migration tools that meet labour market objectives in ways that are both fair and sustainable. While still limited in scale, SMPs have the potential to offer one such pathway, supporting employers while also strengthening international partnerships and contributing to broader development goals. Crucially, if designed well, SMPs can provide mutual benefits for all migration stakeholders, a growing priority for governments seeking more balanced and politically durable approaches to labour mobility.

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