



## CONCEPT NOTE

### **Mobility and labour dynamics after the EU Year of Skills: Are we fit for the future?**

**22 March 2024, 9:15-15:30 (CET)**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Launched in May 2023, the European Year of Skills provided renewed impetus to the EU's efforts to tackle labour shortages across member states. As part of the EU Skills Agenda, a key objective has been to attract skills and talent from abroad by facilitating greater access to the EU labour market.

Situated at the crossroads of labour market, migration and development policies, the skills agenda necessitates overcoming policy silos to be effective. As migration and asylum policies remain divisive and potentially decisive themes in the forthcoming European elections, the agenda stands at a critical juncture. However, wide-spread skills shortages, prevalent across member states and sectors, may present an opportunity to reframe and reclaim migration debates.

Against this background, and as the Year of Skills draws to a close, this in-person conference will take stock of its achievements and discuss future priorities. It will reflect the multi-level and multi-stakeholder nature of the skills agenda, across three thematic panels.

#### **Panel I - EU talent attractiveness in the world**

The first panel will take private sector needs as a starting point and look at the EU's talent attractiveness from a global perspective. Despite some individual EU countries performing well (Sweden, Germany), the EU as whole is lagging behind other OECD countries. While private sector needs vary across the EU, the demand for skills is pervasive across most member states. Consequently, collective action at the EU level can help mitigate the risk of member states competing for foreign talent. However, obstacles such as complex legal pathways, which vary considerably amongst EU member states, and long visa processing times, remain challenging. Despite EU-level initiatives to harmonize member state practice, and the indisputable added-value of EU mobility and the single market, member states retain major competences over legal migration. In addition, the political context in the EU, marked by the rise of the far right and tighter immigration laws in different countries, may also affect the bloc's overall attractiveness. This panel will look at where the EU's added value lies in attracting foreign talent, exploring its competitive edge over other major countries of destination.

#### **Panel II - Advancing labour mobility: How far has the EU come?**

Following the discussion on EU attractiveness and private sector needs, the second panel will focus on the effectiveness of existing EU initiatives for enhancing labour mobility and addressing labour and skills gaps. During the current political cycle, the EU took various initiatives to strengthen legal migration pathways. The 2021 revision of the Blue Card

Directive facilitated labour mobility for highly skilled migrants but excluded mid- to low-skilled workers despite critical shortages across skill levels. Acknowledging these difficulties, the EU set forth additional initiatives. These include the revision of the Single Permit and Long-Term Residents Directives, the latter of which has been unsuccessful. In 2023, it also launched the Skills and Talents Mobility Package, including the EU Talent Pool Proposal to facilitate job matching and labour market uptake. Measures to better support the recognition of qualifications, encouraging a skills-first approach, and to enhance employment prospects for mobile students were also proposed. In this context, this panel will critically assess the added value of these initiatives, keeping in mind limitations posed by national prerogatives over admission volumes and labour market tests, among others.

### **Panel III - Partnerships for skills mobility and the development agenda**

Building on the previous panels' discussions, the third and final panel will take a forward-looking approach and focus on the coherence of the Skills Mobility and Development agendas, taking into consideration realities in Europe and in other parts of the world around demography, education and existing employment opportunities. On the African continent, for instance, an increase in the working-age population represents a boon for the development of the continent, especially when education and training opportunities are provided. Yet, as suitable job opportunities are often hard to find in their countries of origin, mobility increasingly serves as a means for young people to meet their aspirations and needs. Development initiatives supporting labour mobility, help reduce the mismatch of opportunities, by promoting the skills of young migrants and allowing them to access the job market in countries of origin and destination through international partnerships. In this framework, existing and future partnerships supporting labour and skills mobility must acknowledge both the interests and priorities of origin and destination countries to maximise positive impact in territories and communities at both ends. The panel will showcase three examples of partnerships that consider and balance these interests.

### **OBJECTIVES**

This conference is co-organized by the European Policy Centre, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development, the Egmont Institute, and the Belgian development agency Enabel. Drawing on their collective expertise in policy analysis and practical experience from implementing talent partnership pilot projects, the partners aim to provide operational recommendations rooted in thorough analysis.

This conference marks the culmination of a series of expert workshops, and brings together policymakers, the business community, academia, social partners, and organizations working in third countries, for a final concertation moment. The recommendations arising from the conference will be addressed to the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union and the upcoming European Commission.