



GS4S Working paper series (D7.3)
Working paper no. 6

What role can mobility schemes play in addressing skills shortages in Europe?

This working paper is part of the Horizon Europe project GS4S - Global Strategy for Skills, Migration and Development (gs4s.eu).

Project deliverable: D7.3 in T2.2.1 and T2.2.3

Authors: Kate Hooper, Jasmijn Slootjes

Reviewers: Tesseltje de Lange, Colleen Boland

Language editor:

Suggested citation (APA): Hooper, K., Slootjes, J. (2025). What role can mobility schemes play in addressing skills shortages in Europe? Global Strategy for Skills, Migration and Development (GS4S). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14959232>



What role can mobility schemes play in addressing skills shortages in Europe?

Kate Hooper,* Jasmijn Slootjes*

Abstract:

This working paper assesses the recent evolution of mobility schemes and partnerships in the European context, exploring the implications for using these initiatives to address skills shortages. Taking recent academic literature that has focused more on skills development and training as a starting point, this paper generates a typology that reviews mobility schemes based on the skills needs they are trying to address and the type of mobility they seek to support, ranging from short-term visits to long-term training or work placements. Building off this typology, the paper also includes short case studies of recent / ongoing mobility schemes, examining how they approach mobility and skills development and their outcomes to date.

Keywords: Labour migration, skills development, training, pilot projects, mobility schemes, migration partnerships, Talent Partnerships, Global Skill Partnerships, Skills Mobility Partnerships

Acknowledgement: This paper is part of the Horizon Europe project GS4S - Global Strategy for Skills, Migration and Development (gs4s.eu). The funding from the European Union is gratefully acknowledged. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union, Horizon Europe or the Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

* Migration Policy Institute Europe, Residence Palace, 155 Rue de la Loi, 3rd Floor, 1040 Brussels, Belgium, Email: khooper@migrationpolicy.org



Contents

1. Introduction.....	4
2. Methodology	5
3. Europe’s growing focus on mobility schemes	6
3.1. The EU legal migration pilot projects	7
3.2. The Talent Partnerships	9
3.3. The second and third generations of MPF-funded projects.....	11
4. Defining and categorizing mobility schemes.....	12
4.1. Unpicking existing typologies for mobility schemes.....	13
4.2. Reviewing mobility schemes with a skill shortage lens	16
5. Assessing recent outcomes of mobility schemes	18
5.1. Recent lessons from three case studies.....	19
5.1.1. MOVE_GREEN	19
5.1.2. Women as Financially Independent Rural Actors (WAFIRA).....	20
5.1.3. Digital Explorers.....	21
5.2. What insights can mobility schemes offer on addressing skills shortages?.....	22
5.3. Opportunities to improve the evidence base on outcomes	25
6. Conclusions	26
7. References	28



1. Introduction

As Europe grapples with an ageing workforce and chronic skills shortages, attention has turned to the role that immigration can play in easing these labour market pressures. Over the last decade and a half, the number of mobility schemes for work or training between Europe and third countries has expanded considerably. At the EU level, the Commission has provided funding and coordination for a series of legal migration pilot projects launched in 2017 (European Commission, 2017a) and more recently, several Talent Partnerships with Bangladesh, Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, and Tunisia. And at the national level, several Member States have implemented targeted mobility schemes with non-EU countries, with a notable example being Germany's Triple Win and Global Skill Partnership projects.

Defined broadly, mobility schemes offer participants the opportunity to relocate temporarily to another country for a work placement or training. The duration of this stay can vary hugely; some mobility schemes offer very short trips of a few days or weeks (which may not even require a visa), others promote time-limited internships or circular migration, while others offer access to long-term training or employment opportunities. As this paper will discuss, there is also considerable variety in the skills development opportunities offered through mobility schemes, including the Global Skill Partnership model which offers training both to prospective migrants and locals who will not relocate. Mobility schemes typically do not create new pathways, instead utilizing existing work or study visas and seeking to facilitate access to mobility opportunities by offering services to match and train participants to qualify for relevant visas. Yet the numbers moving through mobility schemes remains very small, especially when compared either to overall permits issued for employment or numbers moving through other mobility arrangements such as preferential trade agreements (PTAs).¹

Labor shortages in both countries of destination and origin can factor into the design of mobility schemes, for example informing which sectors to focus on for short- or medium-to-long-term opportunities in destination countries or the push to avoid “brain drain” in partner countries for workers in priority sectors such as healthcare or the green economy. But geopolitical considerations also play an important role in deciding which countries to partner with, which can lead to unresolved tensions in the design and implementation of mobility schemes. For example, the Talent Partnerships have prioritized third countries that are cooperating on migration management and returns with the European Union (European Commission, 2022). Legal migration opportunities can be used as an incentive for cooperation on more sensitive negotiations around migration management and returns or trade (e.g. the EU-India free trade agreement, where additional legal migration opportunities is one area that could move along negotiations on trade

¹ From 2020 to 2023, more than 4.8 million first permits were issued for employment purposes across the EU (Eurostat, 2024). Recent research shows that PTAs are increasingly playing a role in migration governance, with 70% of all PTAs signed in the last decade including provisions on international migration (Lavanex, Lutz, and Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, 2023).





(Chandrasekar, 2025)). But retrofitting these agreements to align with labour market needs can be challenging, especially where education and training standards remain far apart.

Mobility schemes have attracted growing investment and political commitments in Europe, with a growing focus on their potential to address current and emerging skills shortages. Yet the evidence on their outcomes to date let alone how these schemes could meaningfully address shortages at scale remains thin. This evidence gap—and the lack of clarity for policymakers and practitioners alike about how to balance investments in migration policies with other investments in skills development or productivity—is an animating concern for the Global Strategy for Skills, Migration, and Development (GS4S) project, of which this working paper is part.

This working paper explores the state of play for government-led mobility schemes in Europe, examining first how mobility schemes have evolved in Europe and how skills shortages have become a growing consideration in their design and implementation, before moving to consider how to define and categorize mobility schemes in this context.² Building on a review of the grey literature and interviews with key stakeholders, the working paper then examines the outcomes of mobility schemes in relation to addressing skills shortages and lessons learned, with a focus on three recent mobility schemes. Finally, the working paper offers some initial lessons on the potential of mobility schemes to address skills shortages going forward.

2. Methodology

The working paper builds on a desk review, a mapping of mobility schemes and partnerships, and stakeholder interviews informing three case studies. The desk review drew on grey literature, including relevant Commission/government documents, reports or working papers, project documents, and mid-term or final evaluations of mobility schemes as available. The desk review focused on examining recent developments in the design and implementation of mobility schemes and partnerships, evidence on mobility schemes' outcomes (including analysing quantitative data as available), and implications for how mobility schemes might contribute to addressing skills shortages.

The mapping exercise, meanwhile, was carried out in two phases, first creating a simplified matrix that mapped 47 mobility schemes, and then pulling out several initiatives for further analysis in a second phase. From this shortlist, the working paper identified three mobility schemes for inclusion as short case studies in the paper. To keep the mapping exercise manageable, we set the search parameters to focus on mobility schemes or partnerships dating from or after 2007 (i.e. including two full cycles of the Multiannual Financial Framework). The mapping focused on mobility schemes for work or training to Europe (but not exclusively, if we identified compelling examples outside of this corridor) and on those lasting three months or more, which would require

² This paper focuses on government-led mobility schemes, while a separate working paper produced under the GS4S project addresses B2B partnerships (Poeschel, F., Boland, C., de Lange, T., Ruhs, M., & Saka-Helmhout, A., 2025).





a work permit or - when longer than three months - single permit for the purpose of residence and work under Directive 2011/98/EU in the EU context.

Together, the desk review and mapping exercise informed the creation of a new typology of mobility schemes. As discussed below, this typology focused on two understudied elements that were highly relevant to the project's focus on addressing skills shortages, namely what skills needs mobility schemes were trying to address and the desired length of stay in the destination country, which ties back to considerations of shortages in both countries.

The three case studies identified for the working paper were selected based on the quality of available evidence, their ability to speak to the four elements of the typology, the diverse insights they could offer on skills development and facilitating access to mobility opportunities, and their recency (as a means to contribute new insights to the literature). The three mobility schemes were studied drawing on project documents, mid-term or final evaluations as available, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in managing and implementing the mobility schemes (n=5) to learn more about how the mobility schemes were designed and implemented and their outcomes (as available). Finally, the working paper reviewed the findings of these initial assessments and the desk review to pull out lessons for how mobility schemes could inform efforts to address skills shortages.

3. Europe's growing focus on mobility schemes

Over the last decade, the European Commission has stepped into a more proactive role to facilitate legal migration from third countries. This builds on longstanding work at the EU level to develop common policies around entry and residence for third-country nationals, including several directives that touch on admissions of third-country nationals for employment (e.g. the Blue Card Directive (2021/1883), the Intra-Corporate Transferee Directive (2014/66), the Students and Researchers Directive (2016/801), the Seasonal Work Directive (2014/36), and the Single Permit Directive (2011/98 recasted 2024/1233)).

But the Commission's political and financial backing for mobility schemes and partnerships is more recent. Partnerships on migration can be traced back to the Global Approach to Migration (later Global Approach to Migration and Mobility, or GAMM) in 2005, which prioritised partnerships with the EU's neighbourhood to address thematic priorities around irregular migration, legal migration, and protection (Council of the European Union, 2005). There was some limited funding set aside for mobility schemes under the 2004-2008 AENEAS programme, for example, prior to the great recession. However, the 2015-16 migration and refugee crisis prompted the EU to revisit how it cooperated with third countries, launching the Migration Partnership Framework which among other things brought about a renewed political and financial commitment to mobility schemes with third countries (Collett & Ahad, 2017). Reflecting the EU's shared competence on immigration, the Commission's support has taken the form of funding for mobility schemes and other legal migration initiatives as well as efforts to coordinate the engagement of EU Member States with third countries on migration issues (with mixed success).



Curbing irregular migration has been a key motivation for launching and supporting mobility schemes, as part of the European Union's broader focus on addressing the "root causes" of migration by connecting migration policies with foreign aid (Niemann and Zaun, 2023), even though there is little evidence to suggest that these investments have an effect on irregular migration (Engberg-Pederson, Vammen, and Lucht, 2023; Beirens, Le Coz, Hooper, Popp, Schneider & Süß, 2019). With such small numbers moving in practice through these schemes, the benefit is more likely to be found in the incentive for partner countries to cooperate on migration issues more generally with the EU. More recently, as Member States confronted tight labour markets and difficulties sourcing skilled workers, the opportunity to address skills shortages and mitigate the effects of shrinking workforces has been cited (European Commission, 2021). Again, given the context of small numbers moving, however, any effects are likely to be very limited. Reviewing how the Commission and other EU actors have framed mobility schemes and partnerships over the last decade points to an evolution in their ambitions for what this cooperation might achieve.

3.1. The EU legal migration pilot projects

The Commission announced its legal migration pilot project initiative in September 2017, which was opened to several countries of origin and transit in Africa: Ethiopia, Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, The Gambia, and Tunisia (European Commission, 2017b). The concept note highlighted that the pilots should offer temporary migration opportunities for work, informed by labour market analysis in both countries, with projects also permitted to "include elements of vocational training". There was some tension in the note about the duration of permitted stay: on the one hand, the note emphasized the preference for temporary migration and that the case for long-term recruitment would need to have "due regard to third countries' possible concerns related to brain drain", but on the other hand, the note also acknowledged that more circular forms of migration would only be appropriate for sectors that experience seasonal peaks in demand.

The desire to reduce irregular migration animated this proposal. In the concept note, the project's stated objectives were:

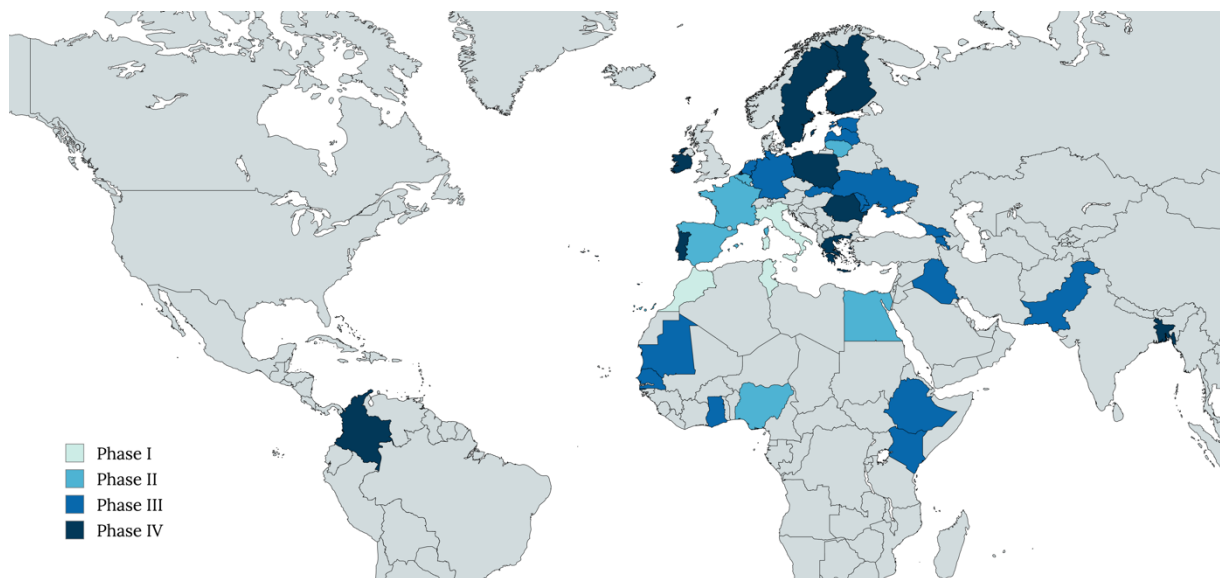
- [to] "facilitate, or continue, cooperation with the third-countries concerned on a comprehensive management of migratory flows, including on issues such as prevention of irregular migration and readmission of irregular migrants"
- [to] "reduce irregular migration flows by offering additional safe and lawful alternatives to persons wishing to migrate for work or study to facilitate cooperation with third countries on managing migration flows"
- [and to] "contribute to addressing labour shortage gaps in certain sectors of the labour market of Member States" (European Commission, 2017b).

Notably, several of the partner countries identified in the proposal were signatories to EU Mobility Partnerships or Common Agendas on Migration and Mobility or were cooperating on returns (Hooper 2021).



There were some limited precedents for this type of initiative at the EU level, such as the EU-funded projects under the AENEAS programme that ran from 2004 to 2006 (European Commission, 2007). But since then, mobility schemes had been instigated and driven by several Member States without input from the EU, such as Germany's Triple Win project for recruiting nurses which was established in 2013, (GIZ, 2024). Amid the growing political salience of migration and with the prospect of EU funding, several Member States signed up to create new pilot projects with third countries.

Figure 1. Countries participating in EU-funded mobility schemes, 2019-present



Source: MPF, n.d.-b.

The first generation of projects launched were narrow in scope, usually targeting fewer than 100 people. Many of these projects ultimately struggled to achieve their targets for employer sign-ups or moving people due to the travel restrictions put in place under the COVID-19 pandemic (Hooper, 2021). The PALIM project, for example, was unable to relocate any of its 120 trainees to Belgium due to these restrictions (MPF, n.d-g).

Beyond these unexpected restrictions, projects also ran into other issues that thwarted their successful implementation. Pilots were typically funded for three years, yet the ambitions of these projects proved almost impossible to deliver within that timeframe, especially in contexts where the design required coordination among multiple stakeholders at different levels, where implementing partners had less robust networks, or where local partners needed support for capacity building (Hooper & Sohst, 2024; Rasche, 2021). These activities included scoping out appropriate sectors and the right actors to cooperate with on mobility, matching, and training issues; signing up employers; selecting the right candidates and providing appropriate training; and creating an efficient matching process—all of which might require an iterative design process to successfully implement. The high start-up costs often translated to a high per-person cost that



could be difficult to justify, especially where pilots did not meet their stated mobility or recruitment targets (Hooper, 2021; Hooper & Sohst, 2024). And with funding only allocated for a pilot phase, there was sometimes little clarity about what a second phase could entail or crucially how to reduce and share costs with the private sector in a more sustainable way (Hooper & Sohst, 2024).

3.2. The Talent Partnerships

The European Commission first announced the Talent Partnerships in its September 2020 Communication on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. Framed as a “reinforced and more comprehensive approach” that could build on the limited scope of mobility schemes to date, the Commission described the Talent Partnerships as offering a “comprehensive EU policy framework” with accompanying funding that would combine mobility schemes for work or training with investments to build capacity in related areas including “labour market or skills intelligence, vocational education and training, integration of returning migrants, and diaspora mobilisation”, noting that this focus on education would “help to support and reinforce investment in local skills” (European Commission, 2020). At this stage, the Commission did not specify which countries would be prioritized, instead identifying the EU’s Neighbourhood, Western Balkans, and Africa as regions to first focus on (European Commission, 2020).

The Talent Partnerships were formally launched in June 2021 at a high-level event organized by the European Commission. The steering paper for this high-level launch event struck a notably different tone to the concept note for the legal migration pilot projects launched three and a half years prior. It opened with a paragraph that made the case for labour migration to the European Union, referencing shrinking workforces as growing numbers of workers retire and the presence of skills shortages in sectors such as agriculture and healthcare, and argued for greater coordination on this topic (European Commission, 2021). Only in the second paragraph did it acknowledge the role of mobility schemes as an incentive in broader negotiations with third countries around migration management and tackling irregular migration (European Commission, 2021).

Migration management, returns, and the broader status of cooperation with third countries was still a key consideration in the Pact and the Talent Partnerships, described by one scholar as “control-oriented cooperation” (Andrade, 2020). But the tight labour market during the post-pandemic recovery brought to bear new incentives for pursuing this type of cooperation. Following a decline in labour demand during the pandemic in 2020, the recovery in the months after the crisis led to an unprecedented rise in the job vacancy rate in the EU, surging from 1.7% to 3.1% and surpassing the pre-pandemic rate of 2.3% recorded in Q4 2019 (Eurostat, 2024a). The pandemic and the subsequent recovery period particularly exacerbated existing labour shortages in sectors like healthcare, construction, and information and communication technology (Adăscăliței and Weber, 2021). The mobility envisioned under these Talent Partnerships was also extended to students and graduates as well as workers, pointing to a growing focus on skills development as a desirable outcome of the partnerships.



But the Talent Partnerships initiative has proved difficult to operationalise, with the timeline for launching the first Talent Partnerships pushed back several times since 2021. The process for launching Talent Partnerships envisions significant preparatory work among different stakeholders, including engagement with Member States to agree on priority countries for cooperation and engagement with Member State and third-country stakeholders to identify labour market needs and compatibility with local labour market dynamics and training standards and pin down the design of a possible partnership. While Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia stayed on the list of priority countries, there was turnover on the rest of the list as negotiations with some countries were paused (for e.g. Senegal) due to a lack of cooperation on other migration priorities such as returns while negotiations with others (for e.g., Bangladesh, and Pakistan) moved forward (European Commission, 2022; Council of the European Union, 2024). One challenge was articulating the added value of an EU approach on mobility to Member States, especially in a context where many Member States have established close bilateral relations with priority third countries.

At the time of writing in January 2025, there are five Talent Partnerships underway with Bangladesh, Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, and Tunisia. But there is relatively little public information about their status or when people might start moving under the aegis of the Talent Partnership, including an outdated Commission website that only references partnerships with Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia (European Commission, n.d.).³ The selection of these partners speaks to the importance of cooperation on migration management and returns.⁴ As one study notes, if addressing labour market needs was the primary impetus for selecting partner countries, it is likely that the European Commission would have looked to other countries (e.g. India or the Philippines) with more established migration corridors and large talent pools in sought-after sectors such as care and ICT (de Lange, 2024). The framing around the Talent Partnerships has also evolved over time. Launched at a time when reports of hiring difficulties and skill shortages were widespread, their implementation is now taking place in a changed economic and political landscape. Shortages in the labour market have eased slightly since the immediate post-pandemic recovery period, as evidenced by job vacancy and unemployment rates in the EU returning to pre-pandemic levels (Eurostat, 2024a; Eurostat 2024b). Additionally, the war in Ukraine has led to the arrival of millions of displaced individuals seeking protection in the EU: as of November 2024, over 4.2 million non-EU citizens from Ukraine were under temporary protection, creating a significant new local workforce to integrate into the EU labour market (Eurostat, 2025). While the fundamentals of shrinking workforces and skills gaps remain unchanged, the case for labour migration as a policy response has become more complex as Member States navigate hardening public opinion towards migration (European Commission, 2024) and the need to help economically inactive populations and new arrivals access the labour market.

³ In early January 2025, this webpage's only reference to specific Talent Partnerships was: "In the Communication on Attracting skills and talent the Commission announced that it would launch the first Talent Partnerships with North African partners, in particular Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia for their implementation to start by end of 2022" (European Commission, n.d.).

⁴ For a discussion of how migration management and returns dominates EU cooperation with Egypt, for example, see: Abdel Fattah, Rietig, & Fakry, 2021.



3.3. The second and third generations of MPF-funded projects

Alongside the Commission's ongoing work to implement the Talent Partnerships, it has also continued to channel funding towards the Migration Partnership Facility. As part of the MPF's broader work to support the external dimension of EU migration policy, it provides funding to mobility schemes administered under a competitive call for proposals, prioritizing Talent Partnership countries.⁵

The lines between these MPF-funded projects and the Talent Partnerships can be fuzzy. There can be a tendency to label some of these projects as Talent Partnerships, even while the status of the overall 'Talent Partnership' remains unclear. A portion of the Migration Partnership Facility prioritizes projects with the five Talent Partnership countries (Migration Partnership Facility [MPF], n.d.-a).⁶ But in practice, there is much greater geographic diversity in the legal migration and mobility projects launched since 2022; indeed a notable share do not include any of these five countries (MPF, n.d.-b).

The newer generations of MPF projects – launched in 2021 and more recently, 2024 – illustrate how EU-backed mobility schemes have evolved since 2017. More Member States have signed up to mobility schemes. In the first phase, which corresponded with the legal migration pilot projects being launched although the projects went live in 2019, there were four Member States: Belgium, France, Lithuania, and Spain. (Germany participated in a non-MPF-funded pilot project, titled 'Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa' [THAMM].) Since then, the list has expanded to include Estonia, Germany, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, and Slovakia (MPF, n.d.-b). And while the MPF is prioritizing applications for Talent Partnership countries, the list of third countries participating also expanded from Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, and Tunisia to include Armenia, Ethiopia, Georgia, Ghana, Iraq, Kenya, Moldova, Pakistan, Senegal, and Ukraine (MPF, n.d.-b).

The design of the MPF projects has also evolved. A review of the newer generations of MPF projects points to a more expansive definition of mobility, ranging from very short-term visits that do not require a visa (such as Belgium's entrepreneur mobility project with Senegal, PEM-WECCO) to circular migration opportunities to long-term employment opportunities at destination, that are open to a mixture of qualified professionals, students or recent graduates, and entrepreneurs (MPF, n.d.-b). Skills development has become more of a focus (as discussed below), with experimentation in how training is designed and delivered, including training opportunities for non-migrants in countries of origin. There is also greater diversity in the sectors and skill levels targeted by more recent projects, including for example, several projects targeting green skills. However, the design of these schemes is also shaped by the availability of destination-country work related visas to

⁵ See Call for Proposals – Migration Partnerships – Lot 2: <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/calls-for-proposals/cfp-migration-partnerships>.

⁶ Nigeria and Senegal are listed as two eligible countries due to their consideration as Talent Partnership candidates, although as noted above, negotiations were subsequently paused tied to cooperation on returns. However, they still feature in some MPF-funded pilot projects, such as Nigeria's participation in the Digital Explorers project. (MPF, n.d.-a).





facilitate entry, which in the EU are more readily available for “high-skilled” workers (Beirens, Le Coz, Hooper, Popp, Schneider & Süß, 2019).

4. Defining and categorizing mobility schemes

The review above illustrates both the evolving ambitions for mobility schemes at the EU level and how the task of defining mobility schemes has become more complex. As global skill partnerships entered vogue, more mobility schemes have experimented with offering a dual track approach where some trainees migrate and some stay behind (sometimes referred to as ‘home’ and ‘away’ tracks) (Clemens, 2015). For example, Germany is running a Global Skill Partnership for training nurses in the Philippines, while Belgium has been testing the GSP model in its THAMM project, the PALIM project, and an ongoing project on care workers in Morocco (GIZ, n.d.; CGD, n.d-a; CGD, n.d.-b; MPF, n.d.-c). The impetus for creating the GSP approach lay in the desire to mitigate concerns about brain drain by investing in the talent pool of countries of origin to in effect create a ‘surplus’ of qualified workers who could access employment in either destination or origin-country labour markets. But one odd consequence of this development is that a guarantee of mobility opportunity is no longer central to the design and implementation of a growing number of “mobility” schemes.

Another development is that the scope of mobility opportunities has expanded considerably. Mobility schemes and partnerships used to focus on work placements either on a circular basis or for long-term employment. But there is now a greater use of mobility schemes for training placements or short-term networking or site visits. Opportunities are now open to participants with a range of different experiences and skill levels, such as established entrepreneurs, qualified professionals, workers without formal qualifications, recent graduates, and current students (for example, see: MPF, n.d.-b). However, the numbers moving remain small.

Finally, an added note of confusion lies in the prevalence of similar policy initiatives that offer mobility opportunities and different terminology used (e.g. mobility scheme, partnership, pilots). For example, there is the EU Talent Partnerships initiative, the Global Skill Partnership (GSP) model detailed above, and IOM’s Skills Mobility Partnerships (SMPs) framework, which IOM defines as agreements (usually state-led at the bilateral or multilateral level) that “place skills development at the heart of their efforts” (IOM, n.d.). The SMPs framework highlights five elements: (1) formal state cooperation; (2) multistakeholder engagement, (3) training, (4) skills recognition, and (5) migration or mobility (IOM, n.d.) Plausibly, a mobility scheme funded by the EU that follows the GSP model could thus fall under all three labels, illustrating the potential confusion.



Figure 2. Overview of key terminology used to characterise mobility opportunities

EU Talent Partnerships	Global Skill Partnerships	IOM Skills Mobility Partnerships
Agreements between EU Member States and partner countries that aim to better align labour market and skills needs through funding support and policy frameworks	Migration model founded on a bilateral agreement between partner countries, providing training in origin countries for both potential migrants and local individuals who will remain.	Bilateral or multilateral state-led agreements that centre skills development efforts and span mobility, training, and skills recognition initiatives

4.1. Unpicking existing typologies for mobility schemes

A sizeable grey literature has sprung up to try and define and categorise mobility schemes, focusing on different elements of their design. But in doing so, authors often introduce their own labels for mobility schemes, which can just add to the problem of competing terminology. For example, Sauer and Volarević split the difference in the labels for mobility schemes, coining the term “Transnational Skills and Mobility Partnership”, which covers skilled labour mobility and training partnerships at destination and origin – but arguably by introducing a new term they further muddy already cloudy definitional waters (Sauer and Volarević, 2020).

This grey literature includes several different approaches to categorising mobility schemes, whether looking at the location of training, or who runs the scheme and the intended market. Skills development and more broadly the development benefits of mobility schemes have received a great deal of attention in this literature to date. Yet in practice, the tangible development benefits of recent mobility schemes, especially when defined in relation to poverty reduction, are not obvious (de Lange, 2024).

One approach categorises mobility schemes based on where they offer skills development. For example, Hooper (2019) draws a contrast between ‘traditional’ mobility schemes where the skills development opportunity is provided through professional experience or training in the destination country, and the global skill partnership model where skills development is provided through training offered in the country of origin (Hooper, 2019). However, this approach does not distinguish further between types of mobility schemes that the ‘traditional’ category, losing some analytical depth as a result. Under this typology, further distinctions are drawn between the target group, with ‘traditional’ models focusing on qualified professionals and GSPs focusing on students or recent graduates, and the benefits for countries of origin. Here, a distinction is drawn between the ‘traditional’ model, which highlights the potential for skills transfer of participating migrants and remittances they may send, and the GSP model, which focuses on the skills development of migrants and non-migrants who receive training. Whereas the former is shaped by individual decision-making and circumstance, the latter’s benefits accrue irrespective of whether



participating migrants choose to return to their country of origin or engage in other types of skill transfer.

Clemens, Dempster, and Gough meanwhile draw on a review of partnerships in Germany to produce a more in-depth analysis of mobility schemes organised under two development categories (Clemens, Dempster, and Gough, 2019). These two categories are “preventing harm”, which the authors describe as offering incidental development benefits (e.g. remittances or skills transfer) but “not actively and directly seek[ing] to spur development in the country of origin in the short term”, and “building institutions”, which involves setting up new training institutions or investing in existing training institutions to build the skills development capacity of origin-country authorities. Under the first category “Preventing Harm” there are two sub-categories: (1) skilled migration partnerships, which focus on mid- or highly skilled professionals and offer up to a year of training alongside a work placement to achieve skills recognition and (2) destination training, which target people with fewer formal qualifications and offer up to three years of technical and vocational training. The second category “Building Institutions” covers investments in origin-country training capacity, with most training happening in countries of origin prior to moving to Germany.

Sauer and Volarević’s typology bridges the two approaches above, by looking both at where training is delivered and providing a more nuanced breakdown of the different types of mobility schemes (Sauer and Volarević, 2020). Under their typology, they identify three categories of mobility scheme: (1) skilled labour mobility; (2) training partnerships (which offer training at destination); and (3) vocational education and training (VET) partnerships (which offer training in the country of origin, and would include the GSP model). As part of this typology, they also examine the recognition of qualifications and the benefits of the mobility scheme (labelled as an implicit or explicit ‘Triple Win’). As the authors note, however, the distinction between the three categories can be blurry for schemes that blend elements of training and mobility.

Schneider’s analysis of labour mobility and training schemes in Germany meanwhile distinguishes between who initiates the scheme and the mobility approach (Schneider, 2023). Under the ownership bucket, Schneider distinguishes between state-led projects, regional or sectoral stakeholder projects, philanthropic or nonprofit projects, and intra-corporate projects (which would take place within a multinational). This examination of ownership offers a useful lens into the motivations and design of different schemes, although it is complicated by the prevalence of public-private partnerships behind some mobility schemes. For mobility approaches, Schneider identifies four types: (1) recruiting skilled workers for the German labour market (with recognition of qualifications); (2) VET in Germany for the German labour market; (3) VET in the country of origin for either the German or the origin-country labour market; and (4) individual skills and mobility support for prospective migrants. This last category is a new addition by Schneider to the literature, covering measures that support people to find work or training in Germany on their own (e.g. job offers, networking, training courses, or counselling).



Finally, the OECD’s analysis of Skills Mobility Partnerships brings in financing of training as an analytical category, alongside the categories of where training is located and the development benefits for countries of origin. The analysis thus dives into the use of official development assistance (ODA) funding, what employers pay for, and what prospective migrants pay for themselves – which is highly relevant in a context where high start-up costs and a lack of agreement about how to reduce and share out these costs has prevented many mobility schemes from moving beyond a pilot phase (Hooper, 2019). However, the resulting typology is fairly complex, and Sauer and Volarević criticise its approach to classification including the decision to mix together specific projects and more general admission categories (Sauer and Volarević, 2020).

Table 1. Overview of existing typologies for mobility schemes

Typology	Purpose of the Typology
Hooper (2019)	Draws a distinction between ‘traditional’ models, where skills development is provided in the destination country, and the GSP model, where these opportunities are offered in the country of origin
Clemens, Dempster, and Gough (2019)	Highlights key lessons from Germany’s experience and sheds light on the benefits and drawbacks of mobility schemes, categorised by their level of development impact
Sauer and Volarević (2020)	Offers a more nuanced breakdown of mobility schemes and their benefits between skilled labour mobility schemes, training partnerships, and VET partnerships
Schneider (2023)	Differentiates initiatives by project ownership to explore how this influences the motivations and design of mobility schemes
OECD’s Analysis of Skills Mobility Partnerships	Introduces financing as an analytical framework and develops a typology based on financing model, training location, and development benefits for countries of origin

Together, these analyses offer rich insights into how different mobility schemes approach the issues of upskilling and providing development benefits for countries of origin. But as time goes on, some of these categories have become less clean-cut. For example, most mobility schemes offer some degree of training at destination and in origin countries, even if the focus is on acquiring a job offer or internship, while more private- and civil-society actors have joined governments and international organizations in setting up and administering these schemes, blurring the lines of



who ‘owns’ a scheme. It is also notable that while several of these typologies distinguish between mobility for work or for training, it stops there. This overlooks, for example, the duration of different mobility offers, such as short-term visits, circular migration, and longer-term work or training placements. There is also little insight into the ease of accessing mobility opportunities, despite this ostensibly being one rationale for setting up schemes in the first place. Finally, it is also notable that while this literature explores the desired market for mobility schemes and how and where skills are developed, there is less attention paid either to the specific skills needs they could fill or to the preferences of participants themselves about how long they stay in the destination country and/or opportunities to return or remain at the end of the scheme.

4.2. Reviewing mobility schemes with a skill shortage lens

As skills shortages grow amid looming demographic decline, more attention needs to be paid to the ways in which mobility schemes could help address different skills needs. Even at the pilot phase, mobility schemes can offer useful insights into different labour market needs, skills mismatch and training options, and the experience of selecting, recruiting, and relocating people for work or training – all of which could be fed back into mainstream policies. The shift towards looking at Talent Partnerships and other initiatives as a tool to help address pressing labour market concerns points to the need for analysis that can consider elements relating to skills needs, skills development, and mobility settings.

Exploring the potential of mobility schemes to respond to skills shortages requires looking beyond what skills development is offered to consider the type of skills needed and on what timeline. When setting up a new mobility scheme, the timeline for recruiting and relocating participants (including securing a visa) has often proved to be unpredictable (Rasche, 2021; Hooper & Sohst, 2024), which is difficult for employers to sign up to if they are seeking to fill specific, time-sensitive vacancies. Employers with predictable and recurring vacancies, whether in sectors with seasonal peaks in demand (such as hospitality or agriculture) or in sectors with pervasive shortages (such as healthcare), may have more flexibility to accommodate this uncertainty. This also intersects with destination- and origin-country preferences for duration of stay, which are typically tied to labour market dynamics and economic priorities.

With these considerations in mind, this working paper proposes a new typology that considers two key dimensions. The first is the type of movement preferred: short-term mobility with return emphasized or long-term mobility that could lead to an extended stay in the destination country. The second dimension is the skills need that the mobility scheme seeks to address. While some mobility schemes are designed with the intention of filling current vacancies with qualified workers, whether in seasonal agriculture, healthcare, or ICT, others seek to expand the potential talent pool by equipping participants with new skills. This latter category might take the form of a formal training program – or it could take the form of a professional exchange or mentoring program that seeks to build the skills of young professionals or entrepreneurs. Table 2 sets out these dimensions in more detail.





Table 2. Exploring how mobility schemes approach duration of stay and skills needs

		What skills need is it addressing?	
		Building new skills	Filling job vacancy
What is the preferred duration of stay at destination?	Short-term mobility	Professional exchange or short-term internships	Seasonal work placements
	Long-term mobility	Training placement	Long-term work placement

The first category, professional exchange or short-term internships, covers mobility schemes that offer short-term mobility opportunities focused on building new skills for participants. For example, the MOVE_GREEN project offered four-month training placements for young graduates from Morocco in the green economy or renewables sectors in Andalusia, Spain, which comprised a mixture of skills training and site visits to relevant companies and entrepreneurs, as well as some pre-departure Spanish language training and orientation (Migration Partnership Facility, n.d.-d.). The Belgian development agency Enabel's Projects for Entrepreneurial Mobility (PEM) with Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire offer another example of this time-limited exchange, offering short business trips for Senegalese or Ivorian entrepreneurs to visit entrepreneurs in Belgium (Enabel, n.d.). Depending on the duration of the trip and national policies, participants may either be able to enter on a Schengen visa, where the receiving employer may require a work permit for the training or need to apply for a student or trainee residence permit if they stay longer than three months.

The second category, training placements, covers mobility schemes that offer more extensive and formalised training to build new skills for the participants. For example, the Young Generation as Change Agents (YGCA) project which ran from 2019 to 2021 covered both the costs of a master's degree and associated living costs, Spanish language training, and business development support for 98 Moroccans at 21 Spanish universities (Migration Partnership Facility, n.d.-e). Participants would typically apply for a student visa and residence permit.

The third category, seasonal work placements, seeks to fill a specific job vacancy on a short-term basis (less than nine months). Given the prevalence of seasonal worker programmes, this category is less common, but one example is the Women as Financially Independent Rural Actors (WAFIRA) project, which provides additional programming to women from Morocco working in seasonal agriculture in Spain to support income-generating activities in Morocco (Migration Partnership



Facility, n.d.-f). Here, participants would typically apply for a seasonal work and residence visa and permit.

The fourth category, long-term work placements, covers mobility schemes that seek to connect job-ready professionals with an employment opportunity in the destination country. To prepare the candidate for the destination-country labour market, there may be a training component, but the focus is on providing a concrete work placement in the professional's existing field. For example, Germany's Triple Win programme recruits nurses from several partner countries for employment in German healthcare or long-term care facilities. The Federal Employment Agency's International and Specialized Placement (ZAV) places the candidates, while the German development agency GIZ helps candidates qualify for the work visa and take up their job through German language training, support for getting their qualifications recognized, and offering broader orientation services (GIZ, 2024).⁷ Participants would need to apply for a work and residence visa and permit, which depending on the terms of the job (e.g. salary level) and the qualifications or skills and experience of the candidate could include an EU Blue Card.

As with the other typologies outlined above, the diversity inherent in the design of mobility schemes means that these four types are not always mutually exclusive. For example, the Digital Explorers project offers a trainee track for entry-level data analysts that offers training in countries of origin and in the Baltics, as well as a work placement track that connects experienced professionals with job opportunities (Digital Explorers, n.d.). The Digital Explorers project is also poised to introduce another track offering short networking trips to the Baltics for tech leaders and entrepreneurs. Looking ahead, there is growing interest in train-to-hire models, where employers agree to hire someone who then undergoes a period of training to learn relevant skills, primarily in the refugee labour pathway space. Should this model work and be rolled out further, it will offer another example where the distinction between training and work placement becomes fuzzier.

5. Assessing recent outcomes of mobility schemes

Most mobility schemes end up staying in the pilot phase. Relatively few have made it past the pilot phase, whether through being scaled up in terms of numbers of beneficiaries or scope or by having successful elements 'mainstreamed' into migration or development policy. The reasons for this track record are numerous, but reflect both the challenges of delivering on ambitious mobility and skills development targets in a short period of time and the ongoing debate about how to manage and share high per-capita costs associated with these targeted interventions.

As more projects come online, there has been a notable improvement in the quality of monitoring and evaluation efforts. For example, prior to the 2019 migration pilot projects, there were relatively

⁷ At time of writing (January 2025), participating countries in the Triple Win project were Bosnia and Herzegovina, India (Kerala and Telangana states), Indonesia, Jordan, the Philippines, and Tunisia. There is also a separate Triple Win project operating in Vietnam, which offers nursing training placements in Germany.





few evaluations for mobility schemes that had been made publicly available, or which tracked useful metrics such as employment outcomes over time (Hooper, 2019). By contrast, recent MPF-funded projects have undergone mid-term and end evaluations, while ICMPD is also taking steps to conduct its own evaluation of MPF-funded projects. A further step will be exploring how to publicize and apply these lessons elsewhere, for example to tackle barriers to mobility more generally or to inform broader investments in skills development.

5.1. Recent lessons from three case studies

A review of recent mobility schemes offers more granular insights into their design and implementation, especially in relation to addressing skills shortages. Three case studies were selected based on their recency – all three projects are either ongoing or recently concluded, offering an opportunity to contribute new findings to the literature – and their breadth, covering all four areas identified in the typology above. One of the case studies is in a priority sector for GS4S (digital technology), while another is in clean energy (a fast-growing sector, that indirectly has implications for demand within construction) and another is in agriculture (offering insights into mobility for essential yet low-wage work). Using a desk review of published project documents (including where available, mid-term or end evaluation materials) and interviews with implementing agencies, this section offers a snapshot of how different mobility schemes are approaching the issues of skills shortages and skills development, and lessons learned to date.

5.1.1. MOVE_GREEN

The MOVE_GREEN project ran between 2021 and 2024, offering short-term training opportunities in Andalusia for recent graduates from north Morocco with a background in engineering and renewable energy. The project was implemented by the Andalusian Municipality Fund for International Solidarity (FAMSI), in partnership with the Federation of Local Authorities in Northern Morocco and Andalusia (AN^MAR) and the Andalusian Association of Renewable Energies (CLANAR), with a budget of 2.2 million Euros. While the first phase focused on recruiting participants with a master's degree (Bach+5), the second phase was opened to participants with a bachelor's degree (Bach+3), which both eased recruitment challenges and fostered a more diverse cohort that was open to either employment as an engineer or starting a business in the renewable energy sector on return (K. Hooper, personal communication, 22 January 2025). Of the 42 participants in the project, 33 were female, which was notable in a historically male-dominated sector (K. Hooper, personal communication, 17 December 2024).

The project offered training split across three phases. Prior to departure, participants were provided with two months of Spanish training (primarily online and offered by the Cervantes Institute) and some technical training in renewable energy (by a local private training centre). On arrival in Andalusia, participants then took a four-month training course that was delivered at the International University of Andalusia (UNIA), with some site visits to local companies and entrepreneurs organized by CLANER. During the project, the training was adjusted to accommodate the needs of the second placement (with UNIA training split into introductory and



advanced phases) and to offer 15 participants a one-month internship with local companies, which eventually led to a job offer for one of these candidates. Finally, on return, they received support to find work or set up a business in the renewable energy sector. At the time of writing, the project had provided financial support for three businesses set up by nine participants (out of eight business ideas presented), in energy efficiency, installation of renewable energy sources, and solar-powered motorbikes and scooters (K. Hooper, personal communication, 22 January 2025).

The study visa used for this project allowed for participants to engage in training as well as a short internship. But the resources and time required to apply for the visa were considerable, with Spanish government partners stepping in to help secure appointments at the consulate in Morocco or chase on visa processing as needed (K. Hooper, personal communication, 22 January 2025). Most participants returned to Morocco, in line with its intended design, but one found employment in Spain and another in France, while nine were pursuing further studies in Spain or France (K. Hooper, personal communication, 22 January 2025). While the final evaluation of the project is ongoing, discussions are underway about the potential for a new phase of the project, including the type of training offered (and whether this should focus more squarely on entrepreneurship) and the profile of participants (and whether this next phase should continue to focus on recent graduates or made available to participants with vocational training).

5.1.2. Women as Financially Independent Rural Actors (WAFIRA)

The Women as Financially Independent Rural Actors or WAFIRA project, which ran from October 2021 to February 2025, aims to help Moroccan women participating in seasonal migration for agriculture in Spain to set up income-generating activities in their home community (MPF, n.d.-f). The project was implemented by the Secretary of State for Migration (SEM) in Spain's Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), in partnership with the Spanish Agri-Food Cooperatives-Andalusia and the Agence Nationale de Promotion de l'Emploi et des Compétences (ANAPEC), with a budget of 3.2 million Euros. The training was delivered to selected candidates prior to departure, during their stay in Spain, and on return to Morocco. The focus on Moroccan women reflects the selection priorities for Spain's GECCO circular migration scheme, which has prioritised the recruitment of women with families for many years.

The WAFIRA project selected candidates who were already participating in Spain's GECCO circular migration scheme, with a focus on candidates based in northern Morocco (the Rabat-Salé-Kénitra and Tangier-Tétouan-Al Hoceima administrative regions) who were employed at a farm belonging to the Cooperativas Agro-alimentarias de Andalucía network (who was one of the project's implementing partners) and had completed multiple campaigns in Spain. This scope narrowed the pool of candidates down to about 1,200 people (out of about 16,000 people from Morocco moving to Spain annually for employment in seasonal agriculture), of which 600 people attended the





information sessions, and eventually 287 candidates were selected for participation.⁸ The selection process for the WAFIRA project occurred independently of the GECCO administration; the coordinators confirmed that the candidates were all greenlit to move to Spain under GECCO, but otherwise had no direct involvement in either the recruitment or the visa application process (K. Hooper, personal communication, 3 February 2025). The majority of the women were aged between 25 and 45, and while most intended to remigrate to Spain as a way to support their families, they viewed setting up a successful enterprise as providing a potential alternative to working on seasonal agriculture campaigns (K. Hooper, personal communication, 27 January 2025.).

The training offered by the project focused on developing the participants' entrepreneurial skills through modules on financial education, entrepreneurship principles (e.g. networking, marketing, and sales), developing a business idea and pitch, and setting up and running a business (e.g. registration process and fundraising opportunities in Morocco, and support for the new business) (ILO, 2025). The project also provided for participants to attend a series of events with different female entrepreneurs in Spain who shared insights into their own entrepreneurial journeys (ref SEM). Almost all participants were illiterate, which required ILO and other implementing partners to design training modules that could be delivered in person or remotely through videos or podcasts in Moroccan Arabic (accessed through a QR code on their smartphone), and communicate using WhatsApp audio (K. Hooper, personal communication, 27 January 2025.). Discussions are ongoing about a potential second phase of the WAFIRA project, both to expand the offer along the Spain-Morocco corridor and potentially, to expand the scope to offer technical assistance to other countries or corridors.

5.1.3. Digital Explorers

The Digital Explorers project was first established in 2019 to recruit ICT professionals in Nigeria for job opportunities and training placements in Lithuania. A second phase was launched in 2023 that expanded the scope of the project to include Estonia and Latvia as destinations and Kenya and Armenia as origin countries, which runs until early 2026. Digital Explorers II is implemented by OSMOS (in Lithuania), in partnership with the Estonian Centre for International Development (ESTDEV) and the Latvian Startup Association (Startin.LV), with a budget of 3.5 million Euros. Digital Explorers II offers a trainee track for data analysts with placements available locally and in the Baltics, and a professional track for back-end and front-end developers and DevOps engineers, with discussions ongoing about including a third track that offers short exchange trips for tech entrepreneurs. There is also a separate Digital Explorers project operating in Iraq; however, this focuses on training Iraqi data analysts without a mobility component.

In this second phase, the project aimed to place some participants in traineeships in the Baltics and others in traineeships in their country of origin. At time of writing, the project had placed 55

⁸ Candidates were selected based on a rating that came from a questionnaire based on the ILO's entrepreneurship manual, which collects information on different entrepreneurial competences. (K. Hooper, personal communication, 27 January 2025.)



people in traineeships (aiming for 62 total) with local companies in Armenia, Kenya, and Nigeria, accompanied by online training delivered by a college in the Baltics. Most participants have been retained by the employers to date. The project has offered a smaller number of traineeships in the Baltics: at time of writing, 20 traineeships had been completed in Estonia, with seven traineeships underway in Lithuania, and work ongoing to set up two traineeships in Latvia, an additional 20 traineeships in Estonia for Kenyan participants, and four remote placements with Baltic companies (K. Hooper, personal communication, 28 February 2025). The project also aims to match some professionals with placements in Lithuania, yet at time of writing had only recruited one candidate for a remote position, reflecting a more challenging hiring environment and employers looking to other talent pools such as recent arrivals from Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia (K. Hooper, personal communication, 21 January 2025).

The geographic breadth of the project and its different tracks means that several visas have been used depending on the context. For the professional track, the Blue Card is used; however, as the evaluation for the first phase notes, the strict rules for qualifying for a Blue Card (such as paying at least 1.5 times the average Lithuanian salary) can deter employers from extending a job offer (Digital Explorers, 2022). For the trainee track, the approach has differed by country. In Estonia, 20 Kenyan interns travelled on student visas arranged by local university partners (covering both training at a local academic institution and a short internship at an Estonian company), whereas in Lithuania, at the time of writing, seven Nigerian interns were due to move on trainee visas that are tied to the specific internship with a Lithuanian company (K. Hooper, personal communication, 21 January 2025). During the first phase of Digital Explorers, difficulties accessing a visa led to the Lithuanian government creating a trainee visa and the establishment of visa centres in Abuja and Lagos (Digital Explorers, 2022). However, these two centres have since closed, requiring Nigerian candidates to first obtain a visa to enter South Africa for a visa appointment at the Lithuanian consulate before returning to Nigeria to pick up the visa before then travelling to Lithuania for their six-month internship (K. Hooper, personal communication, 21 January 2025).

5.2. What insights can mobility schemes offer on addressing skills shortages?

The three case studies offer rich insights into how mobility schemes can help promote skills development, with important implications for governments as they seek to address skills shortages. Between the three, skills development opportunities are offered in a range of different settings and formats, whether to upskill participants for a future placement, deliver training as part of a placement, or to support skills transfer and income generating activities on return. Alongside developing technical skills in select sectors (e.g. digital technology or engineering), the schemes have also offered more general skills building on topics such as financial education or setting up a business that are more transferable.

To date, many mobility schemes have focused on upskilling highly educated participants, such as recent university graduates or early/mid-career professionals, reflecting both the availability of work visas (which prioritize “high-skilled” workers) and the preferences of destination-country employers. This can create tensions with countries of origin who are worried about losing skilled





members of their workforce, especially in sectors that are growing rapidly, experiencing local demand, and/or require significant investments in training. But the Talent Partnerships and other initiatives could offer the opportunity to expand participation to participants with lower levels of education. In the case of Bangladesh, for example, persistent skills gaps and mismatch suggests that future programming could focus on upskilling that is more aligned with global labour market needs and can offer internationally recognized accreditation (Fattah, Botros, Gaber, & Boland, 2024), and thus potentially open up access to more mobility opportunities in the medium term. labour migration opportunities down the line. In the meantime, while focused on seasonal migration, the WAFIRA project offers a novel example of how to work in a low-literacy setting in both countries of origin and destination to build skills and support income generation activities on return.

Working closely with employers can ensure that skills development opportunities are tailored to the needs of the local labour market. However, a design challenge in the context of mobility schemes is ensuring that training is applicable and sought after by different employers in different settings, to accommodate different scenarios for migrating or working locally. For the benefits of this training to be felt beyond the life cycle of a pilot, it is also important to explore ways for this training to be taken forward by other actors and ‘mainstreamed’ into their activities. For example, in a proposed second phase of the WAFIRA project, ILO and other partners would provide technical assistance to help ANAPEC provide this training and open it up to all circular migrants (K. Hooper, personal communication, 27 January 2025). The experience of participating in some of these government-led mobility schemes could also encourage some companies to explore setting up business-to-business partnerships for skilling.⁹

Brain drain remains a sensitive issue for partner countries, especially in fast-growing sectors such as clean energy or healthcare. The discussions about mobility and selection criteria for participants in the context of the MOVE_GREEN project point to the nuances of this debate. In a second phase of the project, participation was opened up to young graduates with slightly lower levels of education (Bach+3) following concerns about drawing from a small pool of talent (Bach+5) with minimal accommodations needed for training (K. Hooper, personal communication, 17 December 2024). But while the project was designed with short-term mobility in mind, several participants ended up emigrating anyway for study or work opportunities after the project ended, illustrating the importance of being realistic about people’s desire to move and the extent to which this desire could or should be curbed. Concerns about brain drain and competition for talent have sparked growing interest in the GSPs approach, yet to date, projects have struggled to establish the ‘home’ and ‘away’ tracks successfully, with pilots often running into issues around creating training that is transferable to both contexts, securing sufficient job offers for prospective migrants, or enticing sufficient numbers to stay.

⁹ For a discussion of the potential of these business-to-business (or B2B) partnerships, see Poeschel, Boland, de Lange, Ruhs, & Saka-Helmhout, 2025.



Private-sector engagement remains challenging for many government-led mobility schemes, especially as economic and political winds shift. The second phase of the Digital Explorers project came at a time when the hiring boom in the tech sector was waning and when the number of available workers rose as refugees with tech skills arrived from Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. As a result, it has been challenging to secure many traineeships or job offers for Nigerian or Kenyan candidates in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Participation can be most appealing to small or medium-sized enterprises without much experience in international recruitment, who can gain experience in hiring internationally while benefiting from administrative support and subsidies through the project (Stefanescu, 2020). But the unpredictable timeline for hiring workers can turn off employers, as can the actual costs of hiring and training workers through this pathway, particularly if the concept is seen as ‘unproved’, and uncertainty about their responsibility towards workers and their families after arrival (Stefanescu, 2020; Hooper & Sohst, 2024).

Mobility schemes can also shed light on the challenges that prospective migrants face when applying for visas – which is a critical yet often overlooked element when thinking about ways to utilise immigration to address skills shortages. Visa processing times can be unpredictable, which can deter employers looking for more certainty around recruitment timelines. In the MOVE_GREEN project, for example, organizers relied on support from the Spanish government to help expedite visas (K. Hooper, personal communication, 22 January 2025), similar to Belgium’s Enabel agency who also turned to government and embassy contacts to try and expedite the processing of Schengen business visa applications for its PEM Wecco and PEM N’Zassa projects in Senegal and Cote d’Ivoire (K. Hooper, personal communication, 18 December 2024). In a February 2025 report on Global Skill Partnerships, the World Bank highlighted the importance of ensuring reasonable and timely access to visas as part of program design, noting how visa delays otherwise risk derailing programs and discouraging migrant and employer participation (Acosta, Özden, Lebow, Rodriguez, and Dahlgren, 2025).

The two phases of the Digital Explorers project illustrate both the barriers to mobility that otherwise qualified professionals can encounter and the potential scope for mobility schemes to test out and advocate for workarounds. The first phase of the project revealed the challenges of securing Lithuanian visas for trainees, the bureaucratic procedures involved, and the impacts of uncertain visa processing times (Digital Explorers, 2022). The project organizers then successfully advocated for the creation of a trainee visa in Lithuania and the creation of visa desks in Abuja and Lagos to speed up visa processing times (Digital Explorers, 2022). However, the visa desks were later closed, requiring candidates to travel to South Africa for a visa appointment before returning to Nigeria to collect the visa and travel on to Lithuania (K. Hooper, personal communication, 21 January 2025). Given that most mobility schemes utilise existing work or study visas, they can offer an important window for identifying barriers to accessing visas and potential accommodations that could mitigate these challenges, whether through changes to migration policy (e.g. expediting procedures under the Talent Pool regulation), investing in additional visa processing capacity, or tweaking consular guidance.





A final takeaway is the need to design pilots with a post-pilot vision in mind – and flexibility about what scale could look like, especially as needs evolve. Relatively few mobility schemes have been extended and/or scaled up over the years, reflecting issues such as the difficulty of securing private-sector buy-in and high startup costs with no consensus on how to share these out (Hooper, 2021). Success might mean that the project itself continues in the same or a similar format, or it could mean that key lessons and competencies are fed back into mainstream migration pathways, skills development, or development investments. For example, while discussions about a potential second phase for the WAFIRA project are ongoing, one of the goals is to help Moroccan authorities build their capacity to administer these trainings to a much larger group of circular migrants as part of their new entrepreneurship mandate (K. Hooper, personal communication, 27 January 2025). And as discussed above, the Digital Explorers project illustrates the potential impacts that a mobility scheme can have on visa processing and migration pathways themselves. This speaks to the importance of tracking lessons from mobility schemes and thinking about ways to communicate these lessons to decision-makers leading immigration, development, and education and training portfolios.

5.3. Opportunities to improve the evidence base on outcomes

As more mobility schemes are launched, there is an opportunity to grow the evidence base on how and where these projects can contribute to goals such as addressing skills shortages, expanding skills development opportunities, promoting skills transfer, or expanding access to legal migration pathways. This will require reflecting on current monitoring and evaluation procedures and identifying avenues for improvement, and pinpointing opportunities to circulate lessons learned to a wider audience working on mobility and skills development issues.

As discussed above, the motivations for establishing a mobility scheme can be multifaceted and at times, implicit rather than explicit. For example, the desire to improve cooperation with certain countries on the migration file can shape the selection of partner countries, yet this motivation may not be fully acknowledged in a public setting. This creates a conundrum for researchers examining the impacts of a mobility scheme and whether it met its objectives, and can lead to evaluations focusing on more visible impacts (such as the number of people moving or receiving training) and paying less attention to more behind-the-scenes impacts such as relationship building or encouraging greater political engagement on other parts of the migration file. Engagement around sensitive migration-related issues may happen in a closed-door setting, and understandably, policymakers may be reluctant to disclose specific information about this engagement while the lack of access makes it difficult to ascribe correlation or causation.

The reluctance to engage fully with what constitutes value for money in mobility schemes also adds to the challenges for researchers. Mobility schemes come with a high price tag, especially at the pilot phase. For example, the Pilot Project Addressing Labour Shortages through Innovative Labour Migration Models (PALIM) moved 120 people with a budget of just over 1.2 million Euros, while the Enhancing Tunisian Youth Employability through Professional Internships in Belgian Companies project moved 31 people with a budget of approximately 350,000 euros—both roughly breaking





down to between 10-11,000 euros per person. As noted, relatively few schemes have been scaled up to a point where costs can come down significantly and/or the need for public funding is substantially reduced (Hooper, 2019). One exception to this is the Triple Win project, where German employers pay a service fee to cover the costs of services provided by GIZ as well as the costs of travel and recognition of qualifications (GIZ, 2021). Given the use of public funds, it is important both to articulate the full range of desired outcomes for the mobility scheme and to think carefully about how these resources are used and the potential optics around for example subsidizing the recruitment of workers for employers.

These insights into the value of mobility schemes could be enhanced by a longer-term perspective on outcomes and impacts. Evaluation may lack the resources to track how participants fare over time after the mobility scheme concludes, beyond a snapshot of employment outcomes or entrepreneurial activities a few months after their participation. Resource constraints can also make it difficult to assess the extent to which participants could apply the skills they developed during their participation either in origin- or destination-country contexts. While employment in a related field can be a helpful indicator, for example, an interview or survey to dig into questions about the skills developed, whether they are putting their skills to use fully, and their future ambitions can offer much more nuance about skills transfer. One interesting example is the first evaluation of New Zealand's Recognized Seasonal Employer program, which used a baseline household survey prior to departure in Tonga and Vanuatu with subsequent interviews conducted six, 12, and 24 months later, provided rich insights into the development benefits at the household level (e.g. household income and spending, housing quality, well-being, and school attendance rates) and at the community level (e.g. local investments by overseas workers and skills development) (McKenzie and Gibson, 2010).

6. Conclusions

As governments and private-sector stakeholders explore ways to address skills shortages, mobility schemes and partnerships can offer useful insights into the potential impacts of immigration. While small-scale – typically moving fewer than 150 people – the resources allocated to mobility schemes have allowed for experimentation with delivering different types of training and, to a lesser extent, exploring ways to improve access to visas. But more work is needed to capture and circulate these lessons among policymakers managing immigration, development, and education and training portfolios so that the benefits of this experimentation can be felt more broadly. This knowledge generation and sharing will be a key objective for the GS4S consortium over the next two years as part of its work to identify different strategies to address skill shortages in the digital, care, and construction sectors.

Mobility schemes and partnerships are being accompanied by greater investments to assess labour market needs and skills availability. For example, negotiations to set up Talent Partnerships have involved several preparatory roundtables to identify priority sectors, compatibility of training, and necessary capacity-building. The challenge is that this requires significant engagement and





potentially, significant investment where partner countries lack this capacity. As a result, EU Member States can end up prioritizing cooperation with established partner countries (such as Morocco and Tunisia) instead of exploring talent pools in other countries where skills availability and prospective development benefits may be greater. But as skills shortages become more acute and more people seek out international mobility opportunities, there is a compelling case for destination- and origin-country governments to work together to improve labour market information and map training systems to mitigate risks around brain drain or skills waste.

Partner-country and development actor concerns about brain drain have informed the design of recent mobility schemes, whether through a greater focus on circular migration or through investments in the GSP model. But more work is needed to realise the potential of the GSP model, which to date has struggled to establish equally successful ‘home’ and ‘away’ tracks. In the meantime, as skills shortages become more acute, the inherent tensions between countries of origin seeking to limit brain drain, destination-country employers seeking to recruit long-term hires, and migrants themselves who may prioritise overseas employment or training opportunities, are likely to continue playing out in mobility schemes.

The skills development piece of mobility schemes has seen considerable innovation, but less attention has been paid to the experience of accessing visas– despite numerous studies suggesting that uncertainty around processing times and related costs can deter employers from hiring internationally. Several of the mobility schemes referenced in this working paper encountered issues with accessing visas in a timely fashion, yet experimenting with ways to speed up processing or tackling other barriers to access does not yet feature prominently either in project design or in project evaluations. As mobility schemes bring in more countries of destination and origin, this represents a missed opportunity to understand what barriers prospective migrants can encounter when trying to access work or study opportunities and where different policy adjustments could combine to make this process smoother and more predictable for prospective migrants and their sponsors alike. At the EU level, for example, these insights could inform the ongoing implementation of the procedural requirements of the recast Single Permit Directive (2024/1223) and the negotiations on the Talent Pool, which at time of writing still included a proposal for expedited procedures for Talent Partnership participants (European Commission, 2023).

While mobility schemes can offer valuable and perhaps underutilised insights into tackling skills shortages, they are expensive and resource-intensive, especially given the small numbers typically moving. These costs should be front of mind when considering project design, both in terms of identifying pathways to reduce and share costs among different stakeholders and for delivering value by disseminating lessons learned among immigration, development, and training stakeholders. Through collecting information about skills needs, skills availability, and training compatibility, pilots could also lay the groundwork for wider investments to support mobility for work or study that could eventually facilitate more direct hiring or training opportunities. This speaks to the importance of understanding the comparative advantages and trade-offs of mobility schemes vis-à-vis other policy options to address skills shortages.





7. References

Abdel Fattah, D., Botros, J., Gaber, N., Boland, C. (2024). The Potential Skilling, Upskilling, and Reskilling Opportunities for the Migration and Mobility of Workers, with a Specific Focus on Gender Aspects of Workers in the Countries of Origin. Global Strategy for Skills, Migration and Development (GS4S). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14523918>.

Abdel Fattah, D., Rietig, V., & Fakhry, A. (2021). Egypt, the EU, and Migration: an Uncomfortable Yet Unavoidable Partnership. (DGAP Report, 18). Berlin: Forschungsinstitut der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V.. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-75831-1>

Acosta, P., Özden, C., Lebow, J., Rodriguez, L., & Dahlgren, E. (2025). *Global Skill Partnerships for Migration: Preparing Tomorrow's Workers for Home and Abroad*. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/ec7bae47-3efe-459f-b566-e236a7ddd32a>.

Adăscăliței, D. & T. Weber. (2021). "The pandemic aggravated labour shortages in some sectors; the problem is now emerging in others". Eurofound blogpost, 20 July 2021. <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/blog/2021/pandemic-aggravated-labour-shortages-some-sectors-problem-now-emerging-others>.

Andrade, P. (2020). "EU cooperation on migration with partner countries within the New Pact: new instruments for a new paradigm?" EU Immigration and Asylum Law and Policy blogpost, 8 December 2020. <https://eumigrationlawblog.eu/eu-cooperation-on-migration-with-partner-countries-within-the-new-pact-new-instruments-for-a-new-paradigm/>.

Beirens, H., Le Coz, C., Hooper, K., Popp, K., Schneider, J., and Süß, J. (2019). *Legal migration for work and training: Mobility options to Europe for those not in need of protection*. The Expert Council's Research Unit/Migration Policy Institute Europe.

Center for Global Development (CGD). N.d.-a. "Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa (THAMM)." Retrieved 10 January from: <https://gsp.cgdev.org/legalpathway/towards-a-holistic-approach-to-labour-migration-governance-and-labour-mobility-in-north-africa-thamm/>.

CGD. N.d.-b. "Pilot Project Addressing Labour Shortages Through Innovative Labour Migration Models (PALIM)." Retrieved 10 January from: <https://gsp.cgdev.org/2021/06/30/pilot-project-addressing-labour-shortages-through-innovative-labour-migration-models-palim/>.

Chandrasekar, A. "It's Time to Upgrade the EU-India Relationship." Centre for European Reform blogpost, 7 February 2025. <https://www.cer.eu/insights/its-time-upgrade-eu-india-relationship>.





Clemens, M., Dempster, H., and Gough, K. (2019). *Maximizing the Shared Benefits of Legal Migration Pathways: Lessons from Germany's Skills Partnerships*. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development.

Collett, E., & Ahad, A. (2017). *EU Migration Partnerships: A Work in Progress*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/TCM-EUMigrationPartnerships-FINAL.pdf>

Council of the European Union. (2024). "Update on the state of play of external cooperation in the field of migration policy." 5484/24. Unpublished update, 6 February 2024. <https://migration-control.info/documents/151/5484-2024.pdf>

Council of the European Union. (2005). "Global Approach to migration: Priority actions focusing on Africa and the Mediterranean." Note from the Presidency to the European Council, 15744/05, Brussels, 13 December 2005. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15744-2005-INIT/en/pdf>.

Digital Explorers. (n.d.) "Digital Explorers II." Retrieved on 16 January from: <https://digitalexplorers.eu/projects/digital-explorers-ii/>.

Enabel. (n.d.) "PEM Entrepreneurship: The Matchmaker between Senegalese / Cote d'Ivoire Entrepreneurs and Belgian Entrepreneurs". Retrieved on 16 January from: <https://stories.enabel.be/pem-entrepreneurship/index.html>.

Engberg-Pedersen, L., Vammen, I. M. S. & Lucht, H. (2024). Can European foreign aid motivate people to stay in Africa? The root causes policy debate and irregular migration. *Development Policy Review*, 42, e12761. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12761>

European Commission. (2024). "Europeans' opinion about the European Union's priorities." Standard Eurobarometer 102 – Autumn 2024.

European Commission. (2023). "Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council Establishing a Talent Pool." COM(2023) 716 final. Brussels. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/d74d42e8-96b7-416b-b5b7-b3b7334317d8_en?filename=Regulation%20establishing%20an%20EU%20Talent%20Pool_en.pdf.

European Commission. (2022). "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Attracting Skills and Talent to the EU." COM(2022) 657 final. Brussels. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2022%3A657%3AFIN>

European Commission. (2021). High Level Launch Event on Talent Partnerships, 11 June 2021, Steering Paper. Unpublished background paper.





European Commission. (2020). “Communication from the Commission on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum.” COM(2020) 609 final. Brussels. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2020%3A609%3AFIN>

European Commission. (2017a). “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Delivery of the European Agenda on Migration.” COM(2017) 558 final. Brussels. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/651b20ad-9a55-4fac-871e-60c506078afe_en?filename=20170927_communication_on_the_delivery_of_the_eam_en.pdf.

European Commission. (2017b). “Concept note: Pilot projects legal migration”. <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/storage/files/pilot-projects-concept-note.pdf>.

European Commission. (2007). “New programme to cooperate with third countries in the areas of migration and asylum with a budget of €380 million for 2007-2013.” Memo, 24 June 2007. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_07_253.

European Commission. (n.d.) “Talent partnerships”. Retrieved 10 January 2025 from: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/legal-migration-resettlement-and-integration/talent-partnerships_en.

Eurostat. (2024). “First permits by reason.” tps00710. Last updated 23 October 2024. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00170/default/table?lang=en&category=t_migr.t_migr_man.

GIZ. (2024). “Sustainable recruitment of nurses (Triple Win)”. <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/41533.html>

GIZ. (2021). “Triple Win Programme – Recruiting nurses from abroad sustainably.” (Eschborn: GIZ). https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/vor-ort/datei/triple-win-factsheet-englisch_ba066707.pdf.

GIZ. (n.d.). “Global Skills Partnerships.” Retrieved 10 January 2025 from: <https://global-skills-partnerships.de/en/program/>.

Hooper, K. (2021). *How Can Europe Deliver on the Potential of Talent Partnerships?* Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/europe-talent-partnerships>.

Hooper, K. (2019). *Exploring New Legal Migration Pathways: Lessons from Pilot Projects*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/TCM_MigrationPilotProjects-FINAL%20WEB.pdf.

Hooper, K. & Sohst, R. (2024.) *Competing for Talent: What Role Can Employment- and Skills-Based Mobility Projects Play?* Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.





<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-mobility-projects-2024-final.pdf>.

International Labour Organisation (ILO). 2025. *Guide sur les Parcours de Formation et d'Accompagnement: Projet WAFIRA*. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/Guide%20sur%20le%20parcours%20VFIN_0.pdf.

International Organisation for Migration (IOM). N.d. "Skills Mobility Partnerships (SMPs): Towards a Global Approach to Skills Development"

de Lange, T. (2024). "An evaluation of the implementation of policy coherence for development in the case of legal migration pathways to the EU." In I. Ioannides & K. Eisele (Eds.), *Assessing policy coherence for development across internal and external EU policies: A call for action. Ex-post evaluation*. Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/762857/EPRS_STU\(2024\)762857_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/762857/EPRS_STU(2024)762857_EN.pdf).

McKenzie, D. & Gibson, J. (2010). "The Development Impact of a Best Practice Seasonal Worker Policy." The World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 5488, Impact Evaluation Series No. 48. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1718246.

Migration Partnership Facility (MPF). (n.d.-a). "Call for Proposals – Migration Partnerships." Retrieved 10 January 2025 from: <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/calls-for-proposals/cfp-migration-partnerships>.

Migration Partnership Facility (MPF). (n.d.-b). "MPF Projects." Retrieved 10 January 2025 from: <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/mpf-projects>.

Migration Partnership Facility (MPF). (n.d.-c). "The Global Skills Partnership serving talents in the care sector (GSP Soins)". Retrieved 10 January 2025 from: <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/mpf-projects/72-the-global-skills-partnership-serving-talents-in-the-care-sector-gsp-soins/preview>.

Migration Partnership Facility (MPF). (n.d.-d). "(E)Co-development for innovation and employment in green and circular economy between Andalusia and Morocco (MOVE_GREEN)." Retrieved 16 January from: <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/mpf-projects/26-e-co-development-for-innovation-and-employment-in-green-and-circular-economy-between-andalusia-and-morocco-move-green>.

Migration Partnership Facility (MPF). (n.d.-e). "Young Generation as Change Agents (YGCA)." Retrieved 16 January from: <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/mpf-projects/18-young-generation-as-change-agents-ygca/preview>.



Migration Partnership Facility (MPF). (n.d.-f). “WAFIRA – Women as Financially Independent Rural Actors.” Retrieved 16 January from: <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/mpf-projects/34-wafira-women-as-financially-independent-rural-actors/preview>.

Migration Partnership Facility (MPF). (n.d.-g). “Pilot Project Addressing Labour Shortages through Innovative Labour Migration Models (PALIM).” Retrieved 24 February from: <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/mpf-projects/17-pilot-project-addressing-labour-shortages-through-innovative-labour-migration-models-palim/preview>.

Niemann, A., & Zaun, N. (2023). “Introduction: EU external migration policy and EU migration governance: introduction.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(12): 2965-2985. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2193710>.

Poeschel, F., Boland, C., de Lange, T., Ruhs, M., & Saka-Helmhout, A. (2025). Engaging the private sector in Global Skills Partnerships: exploring the potential of international Business-to-Business approaches. *Global Strategy for Skills, Migration and Development (GS4S)*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14764638>

Rasche., L. (2021). *EU Talent Partnerships: Fit for Purpose?* Hertie School Jacques Delors Centre Policy Brief, 16 June 2021. https://www.delorscentre.eu/fileadmin/2_Research/1_About_our_research/2_Research_centres/6_Jacques_Delors_Centre/Publications/20210615_EU_got_talent_Rasche.pdf.

Sauer, M., and J. Volarević. (2020). *Transnational Skills and Mobility Partnerships (TSMP): Contextual factors, conceptual design and application*. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung. https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/Migration_fair_gestalten/IB_Studie_tQMP_Sauer_Volarovic_2021_en.pdf

Schneider, J. (2023). *Labour migration schemes, pilot partnerships, and skills mobility initiatives in Germany*. Background paper to the *World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies*. April 2023. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/1b03278725f9fff007a3b91dc9301135-0050062023/original/230331-Schneider-Background-Paper-FINAL.pdf>.

GS4S Working paper series (D7.3)

Working paper no 6



What role can mobility schemes play in addressing skills shortages in Europe?

About GS4S

GS4S seeks to better understand global skills shortages in selected sectors (Digital, Care and Construction) and strengthens evidence-based and multi-level policies on labour migration governance. The project provides new knowledge on alternative and equitable ways for addressing skills shortages in six regions (EU, EEA, Western Balkan, Middle East and Northern Africa, West Africa, and South/South-East Asia).

www.gs4s.eu



Funded by
The European Union