



From Afterthought to Asset

Leveraging integration policy
to attract and retain talent

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Executive summary

Skills gaps are rapidly emerging as one of the most serious constraints on Europe's long-term competitiveness. Labour migration is one of the clearest levers available to close this gap, alongside investments in the resident workforce, but only if countries are able to attract migrants in the first place and retain them after they arrive. Europe is struggling on both fronts: It attracts a smaller share of highly educated migrants than competitors such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, and only 8.1 per cent of migrant workers across ten European countries remain with their employer for more than three years, reducing returns on investments in recruitment and training. As a result, talent attraction and retention are increasingly moving to the centre of the policy debate on how to address skills shortages.

Integration policymaking, which in many European countries focuses on refugees and other migrant groups rather than labour migrants, is an important missing link. Mounting evidence suggests that integration policy can support both talent attraction and retention goals. Integration frameworks can signal to prospective migrants that a country's institutions are ready to support them, potentially shaping destination choices, while language learning opportunities, soft-landing services, and support for migrants' families are strongly associated with higher retention. Yet this evidence has not been translated into policy: Most national integration strategies as well as the European Union's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021–2027) overlook the links between integration and skills or labour shortages, and none explicitly recognises integration's role in attracting or retaining labour migrants specifically. Thus, while the field of labour migration and mobility schemes increasingly regard integration support as a crucial tool, integration policy has yet to fully recognise and embrace this link.

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Despite this gap in national and EU-level strategies, valuable lessons are already being learned via individual, often smaller-scale projects. Targeted mobility schemes such as Germany's Triple Win programme and Finland's Talent Boost programme combine recruitment with integration support from the outset, with Triple Win reporting retention rates of more than 90 per cent. Malta's mandatory predeparture course, in place since early 2026, and Flanders' forthcoming integration course for labour migrants, which will similarly start prearrival, show that a small number of jurisdictions are beginning to engage with labour migrants before or shortly after arrival, rather than only once it is clear they will settle long term. These initiatives hint at what a more deliberate approach could achieve, even as they remain the exception rather than the rule.

Closing this gap is a matter of purposeful, strategic redesign, not full reinvention: Many of the necessary building blocks already exist within the integration field. This report identifies the following four design choices as key levers for aligning integration policy with talent attraction and retention strategy:

- ▶ the timing of support, from predeparture through to long-term settlement;
- ▶ the division of responsibility across public authorities, employers, and civil society;

- ▶ the target groups for support, including accompanying family members as well as the principal worker; and
- ▶ the format through which services are delivered and connected to the wider integration system.

Repositioning integration policy to better support talent attraction and retention is also a strategic opportunity for the integration field itself, not just a service it could provide to the skills agenda. Engaging more explicitly with the skills and competitiveness debate could help elevate integration on the policy agenda, secure more durable funding and political support, and reposition it as essential economic and social infrastructure. In doing so, integration policymakers could cultivate productive new partnerships, including with employers and economic ministries; strengthen the evidence base; and explore policy tools only now emerging in this increasingly high-impact area. More fundamentally, with Europe facing demographic decline, intensifying global competition for skills, and polarised migration debates, treating integration as a core pillar of European skills strategy is rapidly becoming a necessity.

1 Introduction

Skills gaps increasingly threaten Europe's long-term competitiveness.¹ A majority of firms in the European Union (51 per cent) reported that a shortage of skilled workers was a major obstacle to investment in 2024, up from 38 per cent in 2016.² Such challenges are particularly prominent in sectors driving economic productivity and innovation, as well as in areas critical to achieving top policy priorities such as the green transition. The economic stakes are high: Population projections suggest the EU workforce could decrease by up to 18.8 million people by 2050, which if unaddressed could result in a 9 per cent decrease in the European Union's gross domestic product (GDP).³ Along with investments in the domestic workforce (such as upskilling and productivity measures), labour migration is one of the clearest policy levers available to help countries close this gap—if they are able to attract and retain the workers they need.

To date, Europe has struggled to attract its share of global talent: The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has found that, despite rising shares of newcomers having a tertiary education, EU countries attract a smaller proportion of highly educated migrants than key competitors such as the United States, Canada, and Australia.⁴ More broadly, Europe has struggled to establish itself as a top destination for workers in occupations across sectors and skill levels.⁵ Retention is a similarly pressing challenge: Across ten European countries, only 8.1 per cent of migrant workers remain with their employer

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- 1 European Union, *The Future of European Competitiveness* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2025); European Commission, 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The Union of Skills' (COM [2025] 90 final, 5 March 2025).
 - 2 European Investment Bank, *Investment Report 2024/25: Innovation, Integration and Simplification in Europe* (Luxembourg: European Investment Bank, 2025), 9.
 - 3 European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion, *Employment and Social Developments in Europe. Unlocking the Potential of People: Promoting Higher Employment in the EU* (Brussels: European Commission, 2025), 16.
 - 4 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and European Commission, *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023).
 - 5 Alexandre Judes, 'Despite the EU's Efforts at Attracting Foreign Workers, They'd Still Rather Go Elsewhere', Indeed Hiring Lab, 22 August 2023.

for more than three years, undermining the returns on significant investments in their recruitment and training.⁶

While major efforts to address skills shortages are underway across various policy domains—from automation to labour migration—integration policy remains an underutilised lever. National integration strategies and the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021–2027) overlook the role integration policies can play in addressing skills shortages by helping countries attract and retain foreign talent.⁷ This is a missed opportunity.

Integration policy, if used to its full potential, could be a valuable asset in Europe’s efforts to build a globally competitive workforce. Strong integration infrastructure can signal to prospective migrants that a country’s institutions are ready to support their relocation and to make settlement manageable, predictable, and sustainable. In an increasingly competitive talent market, such signals can shape destination choices. In addition, by enabling newcomers to navigate daily life, learn the local language, and build social ties, integration policies can boost worker retention and support social cohesion—helping individuals thrive while sustaining public support for labour migration. Yet across Europe, labour migrants are often excluded from mainstream integration programmes, and other forms of support that are available to labour migrants are often small scale, short term, and fragmented.

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Addressing this gap represents a significant opportunity: By better leveraging existing integration tools and aligning them with skills and talent strategies, policymakers could deliver quick wins that improve outcomes for migrants, employers, and receiving societies alike.

This report argues for a more ambitious role for integration policy—not as a downstream social measure, but a central pillar of Europe’s response to demographic decline and its wider competitiveness and skills agendas. It begins by mapping the evidence on how integration policy shapes the attraction and retention of foreign talent, and the EU, national, and local policy landscape. The report then sets out concrete design choices policymakers should weigh when seeking to close this gap, drawing on recent innovations and practical initiatives to tweak, target, and scale what already works. Finally, the study concludes with a discussion of what engaging more with the skills agenda would mean for integration policymakers and the field overall.

6 This finding was based on a ten-country survey of more than 1,100 managers. See Mile Vasić et al., ‘Migrant Workers and Workforce Integration: Challenges for Managers in European Companies’, *Strategic Management* 28, no. 2 (2023): 64–77.

7 An MPI Europe mapping of national integration strategies across all EU Member States conducted in 2026 found that only five (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, and Slovakia) contained an explicit mention of labour and skills shortages. See also the European Commission, ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027’ (COM [2020] 758 final, 24 November 2020).

2 What does the evidence say about how integration policy shapes talent attraction and retention?

Integration policy's role in attracting and retaining labour migrants has received limited policymaker attention, despite growing evidence that the conditions it creates can shape migrants' decisions about both their destination and whether to remain long term. The OECD's Indicators of Talent Attractiveness framework, for instance, identifies inclusiveness, family environment, quality of life, and future prospects as key dimensions of destination choice.⁸ Integration policy directly influences several of these conditions—from facilitating access to services and host-country language learning opportunities, which can improve quality of life and future prospects, to supporting accompanying family members. As such, integration policy has an essential role to play not only in supporting migrants after arrival but in shaping whether prospective workers view a destination as a viable place in which to build a life.

A growing body of empirical research seeks to explore this relationship between integration policy, related conditions, and pull factors for international talent. While research seeking to draw a causal link between individual policy measures and destination choice remains limited and mixed,⁹ studies do show that for migrants choosing between multiple destinations, countries tend to be more attractive

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if they possess conditions that enhance immigrants' ability to settle and use their skills, such as recognition of foreign qualifications, portability of social security rights, and pathways to permanent residence. And according to a cross-country analysis by the World Bank, such favourable post-entry rights and conditions are associated with greater high-skilled migration, suggesting they can affect the composition of migrant inflows in addition to general attractiveness.¹⁰ These conditions should be understood as elements of a wider settlement environment, rather than integration policies in a narrow sense. Conversely, perceptions of exclusion or hostility—whether driven by political discourse, reports of discrimination, or weak prospects for long-term inclusion—can undermine a country's appeal to foreign talent, particularly for workers with the most in-demand skills and the greatest freedom to choose among destinations.¹¹ Robust integration

8 OECD, 'Talent Attractiveness 2023', accessed 13 January 2026.

9 For instance, a study published by the National Bank of Belgium in 2022 found that a European country having more developed integration policies had mixed effects on immigration inflows; it can act as a pull factor for highly skilled migrants from other EU countries, but showed no significant effect on third-country nationals. For non-EU migrants, the effect varied by policy type: The existence of pathways to permanent residence increased inflows, while anti-discrimination policies appeared to reduce a country's attractiveness, which the study's authors suggest could be taken by some prospective migrants as a signal of the presence of discrimination and lower levels of integration in the country. See Céline Piton and Ilse Ruyssen, 'Integration Policies and Their Effects on Labour Market Outcomes and Immigrant Flows' (working paper 411, National Bank of Belgium, Brussels, 2022).

10 However, pathways to permanent residency can also reduce the overall skill composition of inflows by attracting migrants across all skill levels. See Mathias Czaika and Christopher R. Parsons, 'The Gravity of High-Skilled Migration Policies' (KNOMAD working paper 13, Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development, World Bank, 2016).

11 Evidence on international students suggests that changing political climates can affect intentions to remain. For instance, a 2025 study found that if the median voter is on the right of the political spectrum, international students' willingness to stay in the country is reduced by one-quarter, with the effect becoming even more pronounced during election years. See Reinhard A. Weisser, 'Run, Graduate, Run: Internationally Mobile Students' Reactions to Changing Political Landscapes in Europe', *Public Choice* 206 (2025): 455–487.

provisions can function as a signal that a country's institutions are prepared to welcome and assist newcomers, giving prospective migrants confidence that settling there will be a predictable experience rather than one characterised by uncertainty. Such signalling is likely to carry growing weight in destination choices as competition for talent sharpens.

The available evidence is stronger on the role of integration measures in driving labour migrants' long-term retention—an equally important but less visible component of talent policy, given that recruitment does not automatically translate into long-term settlement. In the Netherlands, for instance, nearly 70 per cent of 'knowledge migrants' from outside the European Union/European Free Trade Association leave within five years.¹² Long-term retention depends on whether migrants are able to build a viable professional and social life in the destination country. Host-country language proficiency stands out as a core factor in retention,¹³ enabling workers to navigate their workplaces, access training opportunities, progress in their careers, and participate in social and civic life. Social integration—including everyday interactions with neighbours, participation in community organisations, and access to mainstream social networks—can also foster the trust, predictability,¹⁴ and sense of belonging associated with stronger intentions to remain.¹⁵

Importantly, decisions about whether to migrate to and stay in a country are often made not by individuals but by households, meaning that integration policies and associated conditions for a worker's family members matter too. For highly skilled migrants, the ability of one's spouse or partner to participate in the local labour market can be a significant factor in decision-making: In a 2022 survey of partners of highly skilled international employees, 94 per cent of respondents reported that countries where their partners can work easily would be attractive or very attractive future relocation destinations, while 66 per cent said they would probably or definitely not relocate to a country where obtaining a work permit for a spouse or partner is difficult.¹⁶ National-level data corroborate this finding. In the Netherlands, for example, highly skilled migrants with an employed partner were approximately 18 percentage points more likely to remain after five years than those whose partner was not employed, and data from Norway show that a spouse's labour market outcomes are related to a principal labour migrant's likelihood to stay.¹⁷ The implications extend beyond individual workers' retention: Accompanying partners are themselves often highly educated

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12 Statistics Netherlands, 'Labour Migrants with a Partner in Work Are More Likely to Stay', updated 8 January 2025.

13 See, for instance, Dina Sirotkina and Nilay Kılınç, *The Linguistic Integration of Highly Educated Migrants in Finland* (Helsinki: Helsinki Institute of Urban Regional Studies, 2025); Danny Shin Kai Ung et al., 'Global Migration and Factors Influencing Retention of Asian Internationally Educated Nurses: A Systematic Review', *Human Resources for Health* 2, no. 17 (2024).

14 Bo Kamstra, 'Social Integration of Labour Migrants. Inequalities Between Labour Migrants' Social Integration Spill-over to Job Satisfaction: An Intersectionality Perspective' (working paper, Tilburg University, 2023).

15 Dilek G. Yunlu, Hong Ren, Katherine Mohler Fodchuk, and Margaret Shaffer, 'Home Away from Home: Community Embeddedness and Expatriate Retention Cognitions', *Journal of Global Mobility* 6, no. 2 (2018): 194–208.

16 Permits Foundation, *International Dual Careers Survey Report 2022: Part 2. Feedback from Partners of Highly-Skilled International Employees* (The Hague: Permits Foundation, 2022).

17 OECD, *Recruiting Immigrant Workers: The Netherlands 2016* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2016); Jonathan Chaloff, 'An Overview of Family Migration in OECD Countries: Scale and Characteristics' (presentation at the European Migration Network [EMN] Ireland Conference 'Migrant Family Reunification: Policy and Practice', Dublin, 27 November 2017).

and experienced,¹⁸ meaning that restrictive rules or limited integration support for this population can leave a substantial pool of human capital underused. A whole-of-family approach—including access to employment, language learning, skills recognition, and other integration support for accompanying family members—thus holds potential to strengthen Europe’s appeal to international talent, improve retention outcomes, and ensure that countries benefit more from the skills immigrant households bring with them.

There is a strong business case to be made for such policies as well. When migrants can use their skills, progress in their careers, and participate fully in host communities, employers are better able to realise the value of international recruitment and labour markets are less likely to lose skills through early departure or underemployment. In short, while integration policy cannot change wider structural conditions that make a country’s labour market attractive—such as wages, working conditions, and opportunities for career progression—it can reduce friction in settlement and help ensure that labour migration investments yield long-term benefits for workers, their families and employers, and receiving communities.

3 Tracking integration’s slow rise up the skills agenda

Despite this mounting evidence of the connections between the fields of talent and integration policy, the latter remains largely overlooked as a lever for attracting and retaining labour migrants and addressing skills shortages. The fact that most EU Member States’ national integration strategies and the European Union’s Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021–2027) do not link integration to addressing skills and labour shortages is not merely a symbolic oversight: Strategies and legal frameworks of this kind shape government priorities and access to funding, ultimately determining whether integration measures can in practice be leveraged to address Europe’s skills needs. The tides are beginning to shift, however. The integration policy field is starting to recognise its role in addressing labour shortages (though not talent attraction and retention specifically), labour migration policy is increasingly embracing integration considerations, and individual labour mobility projects are demonstrating the value of supporting workers’ integration.

The European Union, despite overlooking the potential role of integration in attracting and retaining talent in the current Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, has increasingly featured integration in labour migration and skills policies. The clearest signal is the Union of Skills, the Commission’s 2025 strategy for competitiveness and skills, which explicitly states that ‘a key factor for attracting talent is creating the right conditions in Europe for their integration and supporting family life’ and commits the Commission to reviewing the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion to strengthen integration and family reunification measures for skilled workers and researchers.¹⁹ This marks the first time the European Union has framed integration as a precondition for talent attraction, rather than a downstream social concern.

18 Evidence from a 2010 survey across 54 host locations found that 84 per cent of accompanying partners had tertiary or college-level qualifications and 79 per cent had established a career before relocating, yet only 36 per cent were able to continue that career after migration. See Yvonne McNulty, ‘Re-examining Organisational Support for the Trailing Spouse during International Assignments: A Comparison of Practical, Professional, and Social Support’ (working paper, Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management, Dunedin, 2010). A more recent survey by the Permits Foundation found that 88 per cent of partners of highly skilled migrants held a bachelor’s degree or higher. See Permits Foundation, *International Dual Careers Survey Report 2022: Part 2*.

19 European Commission, ‘Communication from the Commission ... The Union of Skills’.

This shift is echoed unevenly in the European Union’s legal migration instruments. Talent Partnerships go furthest, naming integration in the destination country as a core objective alongside skills matching and fair recruitment, though integration is not framed as a tool for talent attraction and retention.²⁰ The recast Blue Card Directive, on the other hand, waives integration conditions for family reunification, on the assumption that highly qualified workers already have a ‘favourable starting point’—treating integration as a barrier to remove rather than a lever to boost talent attraction and retention.²¹ Other policy measures pay little if any attention to integration. The EU Talent Pool, the bloc’s international recruitment platform, shows how far the shift still has to go; it is limited to pre-arrival recruitment, with no integration support after workers arrive in Europe.²² Considered together, integration is starting to mostly appear in soft law, and it is treated inconsistently—an investment in Talent Partnerships, a hurdle in the Blue Card, and an overlooked opportunity in the EU Talent Pool—suggesting rhetorical recognition of its importance has outpaced operational consistency.

A look at national policies across the European Union reveals relatively limited recognition of integration’s potential role in skills policy. Only five Member States—Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, and Slovakia—explicitly link integration to efforts to address skills or labour shortages in their national integration strategies, and even these focus solely on activating the untapped potential of migrants already residing in the country, such as by connecting integration measures to shortage occupations. None of them consider integration’s potential to attract or retain new labour migrants from abroad—a significant missed opportunity at the national level, where labour migration policy is implemented. Member States also vary in terms of whether labour migrants are required, or even eligible, to take part in integration programmes. Austria, Germany, Italy, Latvia, and Malta (plus Flanders within Belgium) require labour migrants, or a subset of them, to meet some form of integration obligation. The scope of what is required and the conditions attached vary significantly (for example, number of hours of instruction or level of language proficiency required),²³ as do the target groups for these requirements.²⁴ In a second group of Member States (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, France, Greece, and the Netherlands), integration obligations only apply once a migrant

20 European Commission Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, ‘[Talent Partnerships](#)’, accessed 24 August 2026.

21 European Parliament and Council of the European Union, ‘[Directive \(EU\) 2021/1883 of 20 October 2021 on the Conditions of Entry and Residence of Third-Country Nationals for the Purpose of Highly Qualified Employment, and Repealing Council Directive 2009/50/EC](#)’, *Official Journal of the European Union* 2021 L 382 (28 October 2021), recital 50.

22 European Parliament, ‘[Texts Adopted: European Parliament Legislative Resolution on the EU Talent Pool](#)’ (P10_TA [2026] 0058, 10 March 2026).

23 Germany, for example, has a general integration course that combines German language instruction and civic content over 525 hours, and participants are required to reach a high level of German proficiency (B1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). By comparison, Malta requires the completion of two 10-to-12-hour modules on civic integration, plus sector-specific skills validation for workers in certain occupations, concluding with a 20-minute interview to assess participants’ English proficiency and comprehension of the civic modules. See Federal Republic of Germany, *Gesetz über den Aufenthalt, die Erwerbstätigkeit und die Integration von Ausländern im Bundesgebiet* (*Aufenthaltsgesetz*), accessed September 21, 2026; Identità, ‘[Expatriates Unit—Non EU-Nationals / Single Permit / Pre-Departure Course for First Time Applicants](#)’, accessed 21 September 2026.

24 In Germany, the integration course obligation applies to any person who received a residence permit after 1 January 2005 and who either has an insufficient level of German or is receiving income support. Blue Card holders, skilled-worker permit holders, and the self-employed are exempted from this requirement, though they may participate in the integration course if they wish. In Malta, by contrast, the requirement applies to a much narrower group of first-time Single Permit applicants. See Federal Republic of Germany, *Aufenthaltsgesetz* § 44a; Identità, ‘[Expatriates Unit](#)’.

transitions to long-term residence, typically after five or more years. The remaining countries—the majority of EU Member States—have no integration requirements at all for labour migrants.²⁵

This breakdown points to a clear pattern: Most Member States do not treat integration as a key element of labour migration, and where integration obligations exist, they are rarely designed to support talent attraction or retention. In cases where integration measures are linked to long-term residence, a status typically attainable only after five or more years, these measures kick in after a migrant has already chosen to settle long term as a bar to pass in order to do so, too late to influence that decision. Only two

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jurisdictions require labour migrants to complete integration measures before or shortly after arrival: Malta, where a predeparture integration course has been mandatory for first-time Single Permit applicants since January 2026, and at a subnational level in Flanders, where a mandatory, tailored integration course that can be started predeparture is set to launch in Autumn 2027.²⁶

But while EU and national strategies have been slow to recognise integration as a tool for attracting and retaining labour migrants, a number of targeted mobility schemes and pilot projects have built integration support into their design from the outset—and explicitly framed it as the basis for successful talent attraction and retention. Germany's Triple Win programme, which has placed more than 8,000 nurses from Bosnia and Herzegovina, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Tunisia, and Vietnam in German health-care facilities since 2013, states outright that its goal is 'to ensure long-term professional and social integration of nursing staff in Germany—as the basis for satisfying and successful employment'.²⁷ The programme combines predeparture language and vocational training with continued integration support and qualification recognition assistance after arrival. The most recent internal evaluation of the programme, covering 292 nurses who had spent at least six months in Germany, found that 91.4 per cent were still employed by their original employer and approximately 80 per cent reported being satisfied or very satisfied overall—outcomes that programme implementers directly attribute to the integration and recognition support provided.²⁸

The fact that this linking of integration and talent attraction and retention is most visible at the individual programme or pilot project level is itself revealing. These schemes tend to remain small in scale, sector specific, and are often dependent on time-limited EU or bilateral funding, meaning the lessons they generate rarely feed back into mainstream labour migration or integration policy. If integration's role in

25 MPI Europe mapping of migrant integration policy strategies in the European Union found that the following do not require labour migrants to complete integration courses: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden, plus the Belgian regions of Brussels and Wallonia.

26 Government of Malta, Ministry for Home Affairs, Security, and Employment, *Malta Labour Migration Policy: Implementation, Second Phase* (Valletta: Government of Malta, 2025); EMN Belgium, 'Flanders Will Launch Tailored Integration Trajectory for Third-Country Workers' (news release, 29 September 2025).

27 German Federal Employment Agency and German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ), 'Triple Win Programme', accessed 21 September 2026; German Federal Employment Agency and GIZ, 'Triple Win: Facilitating the Recruitment of Foreign Skilled Workers' (brochure, German Federal Employment Agency Regional Directorate for Baden-Württemberg, 2025).

28 German Federal Employment Agency and GIZ, 'Programm Triple Win: Vermittlung von Pflegekräften und Auszubildenden nach Deutschland' (presentation, Eschborn/Bonn, April 8, 2025); German Federal Employment Agency and GIZ, 'Triple Win'.

attracting and retaining talent is to be meaningfully addressed, the insights these projects generate need to be embraced more systematically within national integration strategies and EU frameworks.

In sum, integration policy as a tool to support talent attraction and retention is often overlooked, applied inconsistently, or used for other objectives at both the EU and Member State levels. The EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion does not explicitly link integration and skills shortages, the Blue Card Directive treats integration as a barrier to be waived rather than an asset, and most national integration obligations are triggered only once a migrant has already committed to long-term settlement, too late to influence attraction or retention. It is precisely at these levels of governance, where the bulk of funding, legal frameworks, and policy priorities are set, that the most work is needed to tap into integration policy's fuller potential. Individual projects such as Triple Win already demonstrate that integration support from predeparture through to post-arrival can improve labour migration outcomes for workers and employers alike, so the task ahead is not to reinvent the wheel. Rather, policymakers should seek to systematically capture lessons from such projects and translate them into the design of mainstream national integration strategies and EU frameworks—a shift from treating integration as an afterthought in talent policy to recognising it as a central asset.

4 Key policy design choices

Integration policy holds untapped potential as a tool for getting ahead in the global competition for talent—but only if it is designed for that purpose. This is not simply a matter of doing more integration policy, but of doing it differently. The four design choices discussed in this section, focused on timing, actors, scope, and format, help determine whether integration measures can boost talent attraction and retention.

A. *When should integration support take place?*

The timing of integration support is one of the clearest missed opportunities in policy design. Support can begin before migrants depart, on arrival in the destination country, during the initial settlement period, or only when they transition to long-term residence. Each option serves different goals. Most EU Member States that have integration requirements for labour migrants focus on the last stage—the transition to long-term residence—which as Section 3 points out is after workers have already decided to come and stay, negating such measures' potential to attract and retain talent. Of those deviating from this approach, Malta's mandatory course for first-time Single Permit applicants occurs predeparture and is framed around 'attracting talent' and 'retention and stability';²⁹ and Flanders' yet-to-be-launched course can begin pre-arrival, designed to support workers 'from the start of their stay'.³⁰ It remains to be seen if other European governments follow suit.

Early support is more prominent in labour migration policies and mobility initiatives. Thirteen Member States offer some form of pre-arrival support as a strategic tool for talent attraction, though only five—

²⁹ Government of Malta, Ministry for Home Affairs, Security, and Employment, *Malta Labour Migration Policy*.

³⁰ EMN Belgium, 'Flanders Will Launch Tailored Integration Trajectory'.

Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Ireland, and Italy—extend this to language and cultural orientation rather than assistance purely with migration procedures.³¹ Targeted mobility schemes such as Germany’s Triple Win and Finland’s Talent Boost programmes offer a model for combining recruitment with integration efforts from the outset to foster attraction and retention. Triple Win has used integration measures, such as predeparture language training combined with ongoing workplace and social support, as a deliberate retention strategy. In addition to impressive placement and retention figures (see Section 3), 90.8 per cent of participants have said they would recommend the programme to family and friends, potentially contributing to further recruitment.³² Talent Boost, recognised as an EU good practice, takes a similar approach by offering early and ongoing support, combining one-stop-shop settlement services, spouse integration and employment support, English-language public services, and professional mentoring, explicitly designed to anchor international talent in Finland long term.³³ These practices represent a handful of frontrunners but demonstrate the benefits of beginning integration measures before arrival.

Importantly, talent attraction and worker retention raise different timing considerations, and policy should attend to both. Attraction is mostly driven by pre-arrival support as well as the promise of a supportive environment at destination, not by services workers will only encounter years later

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(e.g., if they become long-term residents). Retention, by contrast, appears to be influenced predominantly by migrants’ experiences in the first weeks and months after arrival. Insights from the WORK in AUSTRIA platform, which seeks to support the recruitment and retention of skilled workers (see Box 1), show this starkly: This initial period is the most volatile in a labour migrant’s journey, and migrants are considerably more likely to leave if settling in feels more complicated or slower than expected.³⁴ Early, practical support can thus help determine whether arrival turns into longer-term stay, while assistance offered later may reach migrants only after they have struggled for a period and fail to reach those who have given up.

That said, pre-arrival measures alone cannot be relied on to secure retention: A randomised trial found no effect of pre-arrival information sessions on Filipino migrants’ social integration in the United States, while a separate study found pre-arrival cultural orientation only improved retention when it was substantive and explicitly linked to continued support after arrival.³⁵ The clear recommendation stemming from these experiences is to sequence integration measures deliberately. Predeparture engagement can be used to attract workers and shape their decision to migrate, while well-resourced, continuous support, especially in the first months after arrival when the risk of early departure is highest, can boost retention. Pre-arrival measures not followed by post-arrival assistance should at best be viewed as incomplete, and at worst as setting expectations among labour migrants and employers that risk going unmet.

31 EMN, ‘New and Innovative Ways to Attract Foreign Talents in the EU’ (Joint EMN–OECD Inform, February 2025), 14.

32 German Federal Employment Agency and GIZ, ‘Programm Triple Win’.

33 European Commission, ‘Talent Boost Programme’ (good practice case study, Harnessing Talent Platform, November 2025).

34 Author interview with a representative of the WORK in AUSTRIA programme, 8 January 2026; Austrian Business Agency, ‘WORK in AUSTRIA—Your Personal Guide’, accessed 13 January 2026; Austrian Business Agency, ‘WORK in AUSTRIA—Talent Hub’, accessed 21 January 2026; Austrian Business Agency, ‘WORK in AUSTRIA—About Us’, accessed 21 January 2026.

35 Toman Barsbai et al., ‘Social Integration Effects of Pre-Migration Information Sessions in the Philippines’, J-PAL, accessed 21 January 2026; Toman Barsbai et al., ‘Information and Immigrant Settlement’ (working paper no. 2021-30, Institute of Public Finance, University of Innsbruck, 2021); Dana Maulenova, ‘Combating International Student Attrition through Pre-Arrival Cultural Adaptation Protocols’, *International Journal of Novel Research and Development* 3, no. 4 (2023): 314–321.

Malta shows how the logic of early and ongoing support can work at a national scale. All first-time Single Permit applicants must complete a mandatory predeparture course before they are issued a permit, and those who go on to complete a more in-depth post-arrival integration course become eligible for permit renewals of up to two or three years, rather than the standard one year.³⁶ By rewarding continued post-arrival engagement with greater permit security, this approach both incentivises integration and creates a structure for migrants to continue working towards that aim well beyond their first weeks, in line with the policy goal of ‘retention and stability’. Because the policy is still relatively new, having come into force in January 2026, it is not yet possible to measure its effects on retention. In the years to come, these outcomes should be evaluated, as should any potential trade-offs (for example, does the introduction of what some might view as an additional hurdle for labour migrants affect Malta’s attractiveness as a destination?).

B. *Who is responsible for labour migrants’ integration?*

The next design choice is which stakeholder(s) should be responsible for labour migrants’ integration. While the integration of refugees is highly regulated in most EU Member States, with clear rules on who designs, finances, implements, and coordinates support, most Member States take a more laissez-faire approach to whether and from whom labour migrants receive integration support. In most countries, responsibility for their integration is scattered across actors and policy levels, with no clear allocation of roles.³⁷ Employers, the actors who are closest to labour migrants on a daily basis and who arguably benefit most from their attraction and retention, have historically mostly been bystanders rather than participants in integration policy.³⁸ This is a political question, not merely an administrative one: A 2007–08 EU task force examined how employers should be involved in immigrant integration and help share the costs, and nearly two decades on the question remains unresolved, even as demographic decline and intensifying skills shortages make sustainable labour migration more pressing.³⁹

The patchwork of actors involved in labour migrants’ integration is in part a reflection of the fact that no single actor can deliver comprehensive integration support; different actors bring complementary, nonsubstitutable strengths.⁴⁰ Making this division of responsibilities work in practice requires deliberate vertical and horizontal coordination, with funding structured to sustain multiactor partnerships rather than solitary initiatives.⁴¹ Canada’s Atlantic Immigration Program illustrates what this can look like in practice: The programme’s architects attribute its success not to employer obligations alone but to the combination of employer responsibility, funded third-party settlement services, and federal-provincial coordination, with

36 Government of Malta, Ministry for Home Affairs, Security, and Employment, *Malta Labour Migration Policy*.

37 Micheline van Riemsdijk and Scott Basford, ‘Integration of Highly Skilled Migrants in the Workplace: A Multi-Level Framework’, *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 23, no. 2 (2022).

38 Elizabeth Collett and Karolina Sitek, ‘Making Migration Work: The Role of Employers in Migrant Integration’ (working paper 30, European Policy Centre, Brussels, May 2008).

39 The task force pointed out that this may cause discrimination against labour migrants as hiring them comes with additional responsibilities and costs on top of already-cumbersome visa procedure, that mandatory cost-sharing could be limited to large companies with sufficient resources, and that employers in some companies already pay into national training funds that could be used for integration purposes. See Collett and Sitek, ‘Making Migration Work’.

40 As noted in a 2008 European Policy Centre study: Government agencies are best placed to inform migrants about public services, local institutions to provide language courses and skills training, trade unions to advise on employment conditions, recruitment and relocation agencies to support the pre-departure stage, employer associations to pool resources and support qualification recognition, and civil society and migrant networks to serve as access points into the wider community. See Collett and Sitek, ‘Making Migration Work’, 36.

41 Collett and Sitek, ‘Making Migration Work’.

employers and settlement services functioning as complements rather than substitutes for one another.⁴² Another example of a successful multiactor partnership is Germany's Triple Win programme, which is implemented by the Federal Employment Agency's International Placement Services and the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ), in cooperation with public institutions in participating countries of origin. Its employer-pays model places recruitment and mobility costs on employers rather than workers or public authorities, helping to support sustainable and accessible recruitment.⁴³ As skills shortages intensify, leaving the division of labour to chance is no longer a viable default.

Governments must also choose between making stakeholder involvement mandatory or relying on incentives to foster voluntary engagement. How obligations and incentives are designed can matter as much as whether they exist. Japan's Specified Skilled Worker programme requires employers to design a support plan for each foreign worker they recruit, but without meaningful government oversight, researchers have found little evidence that these plans are substantively implemented.⁴⁴ In Canada's Atlantic Immigration Program, by contrast, employers are legally required to refer new arrivals to a funded integration service provider, and this combination of obligation and funded infrastructure has been credited as a factor in the programme's success, sufficient to see it converted from a pilot into a permanent programme in 2022.⁴⁵ Notably, studies have found that when employer involvement in workers' integration is voluntary, it produces highly uneven outcomes, often caused by differences in firm size and resources rather than migrants' needs.⁴⁶

Colleagues and managers benefit from active support and training as they adjust to a more diverse workforce, just as migrants benefit from support as they adjust to new surroundings.

Whether a workplace provides a constructive environment for integration depends strongly on working conditions: Evidence suggests employers should invest in conditions that foster both social and broader integration, including opportunities to interact with colleagues, practise the language, and learn about the host country.⁴⁷ Importantly, integration is not something migrants accomplish alone by adapting to an unchanging workplace; it is a two-way process, and colleagues and managers benefit from active support and training as they adjust to a more diverse workforce, just as migrants benefit from support as they adjust to new surroundings.⁴⁸ This support should be tailored to individuals' intersecting characteristics, such as gender, seniority, and role, rather than a one-size-fits-all model.⁴⁹ In practice, this could take the

42 Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Office of Immigration and Multiculturalism, 'Atlantic Immigration Program: Employer Designation Guidelines' (guidelines, January 2022).

43 German Federal Employment Agency and GIZ, 'Triple Win Programme'.

44 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'What Is the SSW?', accessed 31 August 2026; interview with Higuchi Naoto described in Kimie Itakura, 'Japan's Incremental Immigration Reform: A Recipe for Failure', Nippon.com, 25 August 2023.

45 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Research and Evaluation Branch, *Evaluation of the Atlantic Immigration Pilot* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2020).

46 van Riemsdijk and Basford, 'Integration of Highly Skilled Migrants'.

47 Marko Valenta, 'The Workplace as an Arena for Identity Affirmation and Social Integration of Immigrants', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 9, no. 2 (2008).

48 Faiza Yasmeen, Alan Petersen, and Helen Forbes-Mewett, 'Social Integration in the Workplace: Barriers and Challenges of Pakistani Migrant Women in Australia', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 47, no. 1 (2026): 64–82; Jasmijn Slootjes and Thomas Kampen, '“Is My Volunteer Job Not Real Work?” The Experiences of Migrant Women with Finding Employment Through Volunteer Work', *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 28, no. 5 (2017): 1900–1921.

49 Yasmeen, Petersen, and Forbes-Mewett, 'Social Integration in the Workplace'.

form of structured buddy or mentoring schemes that pair newcomers with more experienced colleagues, workplace-specific language training delivered during paid hours, and updated training for managers and human resources professionals on practices that reflect the changing make-up of the organisation.⁵⁰

Public authorities have a distinct and necessary role that formalising employer responsibilities cannot replace. Authorities can use incentives and partnerships to support employers, publish guidelines and information, and set an example as employers in their own right—some of Europe’s largest.⁵¹ Public procurement procedures and public-private partnerships offer a further platform to raise standards in the private sector, as do funding and coordinating multistakeholder partnerships and extending support for labour migrants beyond admission, since highly skilled migrants are often wrongly assumed not to need such assistance.⁵² A robust, sustainable division of labour depends on public authorities remaining active partners and funders in this space, not on other actors absorbing responsibilities as the state steps back from them.

C. *Who should receive integration support?*

With integration policy generally overlooking labour migrants, and available supports instead part of labour mobility programmes’ recruitment strategies, these resources—from language training and cultural orientation to settlement assistance—are more readily accessible to some labour migrants than others. Depending on the context, this may be recipients of certain visas, participants in specific mobility schemes, or other subgroups of high-skilled immigrants. Even within this narrower, better-served group, however, talent attraction strategies commonly deliver integration supports solely to the principal worker—the person who receives the job offer, applies for the permit, and is counted in recruitment targets. Yet because migration decisions are often made by and affect whole households (see Section 2), this approach can neglect factors known to influence whether workers initially accept an employment offer abroad and whether they stay long term, including the viability of family reunification, a partner’s right to work, and the ability of family members to access services.⁵³

An alternative is a whole-of-family approach, extending labour market access and integration support not only to labour migrants but also their accompanying family members. While not an integration policy measure itself, the revised EU Blue Card Directive reflects this logic, explicitly identifying favourable family reunification conditions and spouses’ access to work as fundamental elements in attracting highly qualified workers from third countries.⁵⁴ Such an approach creates a potential triple win: It can help labour migrants build sustainable lives in destination countries, improve employers’ ability to retain workers they recruit, and unlock the skills of accompanying partners who might otherwise remain unemployed or work below their

50 van Riemsdijk and Basford, ‘Integration of Highly Skilled Migrants’; Collett and Sitek, ‘Making Migration Work’, 28 and 61.

51 Collett and Sitek, ‘Making Migration Work’, 36.

52 Collett and Sitek, ‘Making Migration Work’, 36 and 8.

53 In a 2021 Permits Foundation survey of global mobility professionals across 64 organisations, 91 per cent of respondents said their organisation’s ability to attract workers with desired qualifications increased when a host country allows partners to work, and 84 per cent reported that their ability to retain talent increased. See Permits Foundation, *International Dual Careers Survey Report 2022: Part 1. Feedback from Global Mobility Professionals* (The Hague: Permits Foundation, 2022).

54 ‘Directive (EU) 2021/1883 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 October 2021 on the Conditions of Entry and Residence of Third-Country Nationals for the Purpose of Highly Qualified Employment, and Repealing Council Directive 2009/50/EC’, *Official Journal of the European Union* 2021 L382/1 (28 October 2021).

qualification level.⁵⁵ The scale of this untapped potential is considerable. Nearly half of all new permanent migrants to OECD countries in 2024 moved for family reasons, with 34 per cent migrating to reunite with family already in the host country and 10 per cent arriving as accompanying family members of labour migrants.⁵⁶ A 2021–22 survey by the Permits Foundation across more than 100 countries further highlighted the scale of this pool of skills that integration policies could better mobilise: 88 per cent of surveyed partners of highly skilled international workers held a bachelor's degree or higher, and while most wanted to work, 53 per cent were unemployed after relocation.⁵⁷

The first priority for policymakers should be ensuring timely family reunification and labour market access for spouses and other accompanying family members. A country is less likely to be attractive as a destination if workers must wait months to reunite with their families or if their spouses must navigate separate, burdensome work permit procedures. In addition, such delays can undermine spouses' long-term employment and language outcomes.⁵⁸ Several European countries offer models of streamlining labour

A country is less likely to be attractive as a destination if workers must wait months to reunite with their families or if their spouses must navigate separate, burdensome work permit procedures.

market access for accompanying family members: Luxembourg has removed labour market tests for certain family members, for example, and Ireland now grants eligible spouses and partners automatic access to employment without requiring a separate employment permit.⁵⁹ Digitalising applications and simplifying procedures can further reduce unnecessary delays.⁶⁰

However, labour market access is only one piece of the puzzle. Even with the right to work, many spouses and accompanying family members struggle to secure employment commensurate with their qualifications and experience due to language barriers, weak professional networks, or difficulties obtaining recognition of foreign qualifications. There is a gendered dimension to this phenomenon: Women constitute the majority of accompanying partners for labour migrants in the European Union and often face additional obstacles to labour market integration.⁶¹ Formal employment rights should be complemented by active, locally delivered support to help accompanying family members find employment aligned with their qualifications. For instance, Copenhagen's municipal Career Programme for Accompanying Spouses offers

55 Research on highly skilled migrant partners in the United Kingdom, for example, found that many experienced downward occupational mobility despite having the right to work. See Stefanie Föbker, 'This Is Not a Career Move – Accompanying Partners' Labour Market Participation After Migration', *Comparative Migration Studies* 7, no. 6 (2019).

56 OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2025* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025).

57 This Permits Foundation survey of 730 spouses/partners of highly skilled international employees was conducted between October 2021 and April 2022 and covered 67 nationalities and 103 host countries. See Permits Foundation, *International Dual Careers Survey Report 2022: Part 2*.

58 OECD, 'How to Strengthen the Integration of Migrant Women?' (Migration Policy Debates No. 25, OECD Publishing, Paris, November 2020).

59 EMN, *Family Reunification of Third-Country Nationals: State of Play of Law and Practice* (Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2025); OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2025*.

60 EMN, *Family Reunification of Third-Country Nationals*.

61 Female spouses make up 60 to 80 per cent of family migrants in the European Union and often hold high levels of education, yet they rarely challenge unfavourable qualification recognition decisions, likely due to marginalisation, financial barriers, and limited information. See Irina Isaakyan and Anna Triandafyllidou, '“Enchanted with Europe”: Family Migration and European Law on Labour-Market Integration', in *Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers' Integration in European Labour Markets: A Comparative Approach on Legal Barriers and Enablers*, eds. Veronica Federico and Simone Baglioni (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021).

free, tailored career guidance and job search support in Greater Copenhagen, with separate pathways for partners with and without higher education.⁶² Employers can also directly support their international employees' spouses, whether through structured pre-arrival communications, support for dual-career planning, or other means.⁶³

A variety of actors have a role to play in building out a whole-of-family approach as a standard component of talent policy, rather than a benefit reserved for a small subset of highly qualified professionals. Integration policymakers should bring labour migrants and their accompanying family members into existing integration systems and ensure they can access mainstream integration and employment services from the outset, rather than relying on isolated relocation benefits or voluntary assistance from employers. National talent portals and one-stop shops should seek to serve accompanying partners, not just principal applicants, providing clear information and referrals to local services for language learning, qualifications recognition, and career guidance. And employers can facilitate participation and help cover the costs of these support mechanisms, without acting as the sole gatekeepers to integration assistance. Austria's Carinthian International Center offers one practical model, with personalised support for dual-career couples that combines language training, qualification recognition, skills development, career guidance, and employer matching.⁶⁴ Scaling such practices would strengthen a society's attractiveness to and retention of migrant talent, while making better use of the skills accompanying partners already bring to European labour markets.

D. How should integration services be delivered and connected?

A final key design choice for policymakers seeking to use integration policy to attract and retain foreign talent is how support is delivered. Across Europe, support services are provided through digital platforms, local one-stop shops, employer- or sector-led initiatives, or a combination of these models.⁶⁵ Each has different strengths. For instance, digital tools can provide accessible information on a destination country before arrival and at scale, while locally delivered, in-person services can offer personalised support and directly connect migrants to local institutions. The question for policymakers is not simply what services should be provided and to whom, but whether they are using the right delivery channels to effectively reach labour migrants and their family members.

One-stop shops are an increasingly common approach to creating a welcoming environment for foreign talent and supporting integration. The model has long been used to facilitate the integration of migrants of various kinds in Europe, simplifying access to administrative procedures, residence and registration requirements, and practical guidance on living and working in the destination country.⁶⁶ In recent years,

62 International House Copenhagen, 'Copenhagen Career Program for Accompanying Spouses', accessed 31 August 2026. See also City of Helsinki, 'The Spouse Program', accessed 31 August 2026; Together Abroad, 'Expatriate Spouse Career Program: Empowering Spouses for a Bright Future in the Netherlands', accessed 31 August 2026. A comparable cross-sector model is the International Dual Career Network (IDCN), a Danish nonprofit association of companies, nongovernmental organisations, and academic institutions that operates in 15 locations worldwide and supports the professional integration of employees' partners through career guidance and professional and social networking. See IDCN, 'About IDCN', accessed 31 August 2026.

63 Permits Foundation, *International Dual Careers Survey Report 2022: Part 1*.

64 Carinthian International Center, 'Dual Career Program', accessed 13 January 2026.

65 EMN, 'New and Innovative Ways to Attract Foreign Talents'.

66 Dirk Gebhardt et al., *How to Guide: Setting Up a One-Stop-Shop for Migrant Integration* (Brussels: Eurocities, 2022).

more tailored ‘talent hubs’ have emerged to support the attraction and retention of skilled workers. These local and regional centres offer in-person or hybrid services that extend beyond recruitment and residence procedures and may offer multilingual, accessible information for newcomers, cultural orientation, family support, and referrals to local services, including language courses.⁶⁷ In the Netherlands, 11 physical Expat Centres aim to support highly skilled migrants and their families, offering fast-track residence procedures, municipal registration, and tailored support. While the scope of services varies across centres, several also provide cultural orientation, promote Dutch language learning, and facilitate connections to local services.⁶⁸ The strength of the one-stop-shop model lies in co-locating key administrative steps and providing face-to-face, multilingual assistance and mentoring, which can reduce friction during the critical early months after arrival.

Digital platforms have emerged as a complementary resource, consolidating key information and facilitating access to services for labour migrants. Centralised websites can provide reliable, standardised information before migrants arrive in a country and help them navigate the different stages of relocation and settlement.⁶⁹ Alongside national portals, city- and region-specific platforms can tailor this information to local labour market conditions and settlement realities. Riga’s municipally backed Live Riga website, for example, includes a work-focused section that combines local job search and relocation information for prospective international workers.⁷⁰ Sector-specific platforms can also facilitate recruitment for particular in-demand occupations, as illustrated by France’s La Mission French Tech website and Ireland’s recruitment hub for medical consultants.⁷¹ Such platforms can reduce information barriers, reach prospective workers before departure, and extend support beyond major cities, in which physical centres tend to be concentrated. However, they generally cannot address the full set of dynamic, individual-specific challenges labour migrants may face upon arrival, including finding housing, accessing health care and social services, and building local networks.

Despite the growing use of one-stop shops, digital platforms, and other soft-landing services, significant opportunities remain to use these tools more strategically to support labour migrants’ long-term integration and retention. Whether services are delivered in person or digitally, their scope should extend beyond initial recruitment and administrative support with migration processes to systematically incorporate integration-oriented elements and referrals to mainstream systems, including language learning opportunities, social

67 Examples include Talent Hubs in Finland, the FIT Programme in Germany, International House Leuven in Belgium, International House Vilnius in Lithuania, Barcelona International Welcome in Spain, and International House Gothenburg in Sweden. See Silkkitie, ‘Start Your Silkkitie Journey!’, accessed 13 January 2026; Healthcare Staffing Solutions, ‘About’, accessed 13 January 2026; Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, ‘Special Grants for 2022 Allocated to Talent Hub Regional Cooperation Models that Develop Immigration of Experts’ (news release, 19 April 2022); German Academic Exchange Service, ‘“FIT” - Promotion of International Talents for Integration into Studies and the Labour Market’, accessed 13 January 2026; International House Leuven, ‘Homepage’, accessed 13 January 2026; GoVilnius, ‘Work & Live’, accessed 13 January 2026; Barcelona City Council, ‘Barcelona International Welcome’, accessed 13 January 2026; Move to Gothenburg, ‘International House Gothenburg’, accessed 13 January 2026.

68 As of 2025, the Netherlands had 11 Expat Centres offering accelerated procedures to help highly skilled migrants and their accompanying family members find housing and complete municipal registration. See I Amsterdam, ‘Official Expat Centres in the Netherlands’, updated 17 April 2025.

69 A 2025 EMN mapping of initiatives to attract foreign talent to the European Union identified such platforms in 11 European countries: Belgium, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Sweden. See EMN, ‘New and Innovative Ways to Attract Foreign Talents’.

70 Live Riga, ‘Work in Riga’, accessed 31 August 2026.

71 La French Tech, ‘La Mission French Tech’, accessed 31 August 2026; Public Jobs, ‘Medical Consultants’, accessed 31 August 2026.

and cultural orientation, and support for family members. Germany's forthcoming Work-and-Stay Agency⁷² illustrates both the potential and the current limitations of this approach: The platform is intended to streamline immigration processes for skilled workers from outside the European Union, but its current design focuses largely on administrative processing rather than connecting workers and their families to longer-term integration support and mainstream systems.

In short, a common weakness among existing systems is often not their format, but their fragmentation. While it is unrealistic to expect every one-stop shop and digital platform to offer all possible forms of support, they should serve as entry points into a wider integration ecosystem. WORK in AUSTRIA's digital one-stop shop illustrates how such a platform can connect labour migrants with a variety of resources, including personalised relocation guidance, targeted settlement information, and access to online language learning (see Box 1). Such an approach requires the active involvement of integration policymakers, alongside migration authorities, employment experts, local government, employers, and civil society, to align service offerings and establish reliable referral pathways. Crucially, referral pathways are only meaningful if labour migrants and their family members are eligible for and have practical access to the mainstream integration and employment services to which they are referred.

BOX 1

WORK in AUSTRIA: Embedding integration in talent attraction

Operated by the Austrian Business Agency, a subsidiary of the Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy, WORK in AUSTRIA is a digital one-stop shop that aims to support the attraction and retention of international skilled workers by assisting them and their employers through recruitment, immigration, and early integration.

Language learning, practical guidance, family support, a talent matching hub, and community engagement form the core of WORK in AUSTRIA's integration offerings. Migrants can access free, digital, self-paced German courses at multiple levels. A modular personal guide provides tailored information on the country's social security and health-care systems, taxation, culture, and everyday life, with optional counselling for more complex questions. Recognising that family integration is crucial for talent attraction and retention, the programme also offers guidance on family members' employment, education, and settlement options, including access to the online Talent Hub, a job board where Austrian employers can post vacancies. Complementing these resources, WORK in AUSTRIA has community-building initiatives and targeted follow-up to maintain contact with candidates and their families, fostering networks and ongoing support during the early integration period.

This model illustrates how integration-related services can be effectively embedded within a tool whose primary purpose is talent attraction. By combining pre-arrival support with a whole-of-family approach; incentivising voluntary participation through a variety of free, online, and self-paced courses; and complementing these with more personalised, social measures, the programme strengthens both the attractiveness of Austria as a destination and the long-term retention of international skilled workers.

Sources: Author interview with a representative of the WORK in AUSTRIA programme, 8 January 2026; Austrian Business Agency, 'WORK in AUSTRIA—Your Personal Guide', accessed 13 January 2026; Austrian Business Agency, 'WORK in AUSTRIA—Talent Hub', accessed 21 January 2026; Austrian Business Agency, 'WORK in AUSTRIA—About Us', accessed 21 January 2026.

72 Work and Stay Agency, 'Work-and-Stay-Agency', accessed 13 January 2026.

5 Conclusion: Integration policy reimagined to meet Europe's skill needs

Europe's skills shortages cannot be addressed through training, intra-EU mobility, or labour migration measures alone. Integration policy is an essential, yet still underused, component of an effective skills strategy. Its effects on talent attraction and retention depend on how it is designed and delivered to labour migrants. Integration requirements that are excessive, costly, or disconnected from migrants' practical needs can deter workers who have other destination options, while measures that are accessible, proportionate, and practical can make relocation more achievable and increase workers' likelihood of build lasting lives and careers in Europe. In a context of demographic decline, intensifying global competition for skills, and increasingly polarised migration debates, integration is not only a social imperative but a core pillar of European competitiveness.

This gap is the result not of limited evidence on the value of supporting labour migrants' integration but of the inadequate application of this evidence. The absence in EU and national integration strategies of explicit links between integration and the attraction and retention of labour migrants shows the crux of the missed opportunity: Policymakers, employers, and other stakeholders have not only underinvested in this group's integration but fundamentally overlooked how doing so would benefit European economies and societies more broadly.

Crucially, closing this gap does not require reinventing the wheel. The research and on-the-ground insights discussed in this report point to four policy design lessons, each of which builds on tools and practices that already exist within the integration field.

- ▶ **Offer integration support early and on an ongoing basis.** While most EU Member States that have integration requirements for labour migrants only apply those when a migrant transitions to long-term residence, this can mean that associated supports (such as language courses) only become available and/or prioritised years after arrival, at which point the decision to come and stay has already been made. Instead, engaging with labour migrants before or shortly after arrival, as Malta and WORK in AUSTRIA do and as Flanders plans to do, can enable integration measures to shape migrants' decisions about whether to come to and stay in a country.
- ▶ **Leverage different stakeholders' strengths via shared responsibility.** Employers are the actors closest to labour migrants on a daily basis but have historically been treated as bystanders rather than participants in integration policy. Employer support for international hires' integration has also generally been voluntary and, as a result, uneven. Better policy design should include formalising employers' role in supporting the integration of international hires, following the logic visible in Germany's Triple Win cost-sharing model and Canada's Atlantic Immigration Program's focus on the coordination of comparative strengths across public authorities, employers, and civil society.
- ▶ **Support both principal workers and their accompanying family members.** While many labour migrants may receive assistance with recruitment, admission, and initial relocation, supporting their broader professional and social integration can both signal a welcoming environment and support longer-term retention. Accompanying family members should also be part of the integration

equation, both because their ability to access employment and build fulfilling lives can be a deciding factor in whether sought-after workers choose to come to and remain and because many partners are themselves highly qualified, bringing valuable human capital that could go to waste without labour market access and tailored integration support. A whole-of-family approach should thus be standard, offering language training, qualification recognition assistance, career guidance, and local integration services to accompanying family members and principal migrants alike.

- **Make the most of different service delivery methods and connect immigrants to wider support systems.** One-stop shops and digital platforms, such as the Netherlands' Expat Centres and the WORK in AUSTRIA portal, show how integration-related information and support can be embedded within talent attraction infrastructure, rather than delivered as a separate, later add-on. A key value-add of such resources is that they connect workers and their families to mainstream integration services, rather than leaving support to end once workers' initial administrative needs are met. However, referral pathways are meaningful only if labour migrants and their accompanying family members are eligible for and able to access the services to which they are referred.

What these four lessons share is that they do not ask policymakers to build new integration infrastructure from scratch. Europe already knows a great deal about what works for different groups of migrants and their families. Predeparture language training, qualification recognition processes, family reunification support, one-stop-shop models, and employer engagement strategies have all been tested and refined across EU Member States and beyond, albeit often for other purposes or other groups of migrants. The barrier to progress has thus not been a shortage of tools but a lack of purposeful policy design and awareness, within both the integration field and the skills and labour migration community, of the role integration policy can play in shaping who comes and who stays. Retrofitting existing instruments with this purpose in mind, and sequencing, targeting, and connecting them deliberately, is therefore a matter of strategic redesign not costly reinvention.

Repositioning integration policy as a tool to help Europe address skills shortages is also a strategic opportunity for the integration field itself. Engaging more directly with the skills and competitiveness agenda could raise integration higher in the policy hierarchy, strengthen the case for sustained funding, and open new partnerships with employers, economic ministries, and labour market institutions, while integration policymakers bring essential evidence and expertise on what drives long-term settlement that these actors currently lack. This exchange thus runs both ways: Integration expertise could help sharpen the design of skills strategies, while the skills agenda offers integration policy new partnerships, a stronger evidence base, and policy tools only now emerging in this increasingly high-impact area.

This repositioning matters more, not less, in the current political climate. Rising scepticism towards migration is narrowing the space for proactive skills strategies, even as labour market needs are acute and well documented, and policies framed purely around economic necessity risk falling on deaf ears with anxious publics. Integration policy is uniquely positioned to bridge this gap: It can act simultaneously as a tool to promote economic competitiveness and as a mechanism to build public perception of labour migrants as integrating into and bringing value to receiving societies, which is key to sustaining labour migration over the long term. As Europe revisits its skills and legal migration frameworks, integration policy should not be treated as a downstream social add-on but rather as a strategic asset for competitiveness, talent attraction and retention, and social cohesion.

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