



The 'Union of Skills': attracting 'the best and the brightest' between new strategies and hard balance with human rights

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Abstract: The new EU strategy on skills aims to attract and retain talent from third countries to fill skills gaps, support higher education and strengthen competitiveness. It is worth analysing the human rights implications, highlighting positive aspects and potential critical issues.

On March 5, 2025, the European Commission published the [Union of Skills](#) strategy (hereinafter, the Strategy), aiming to enhance human capital and strengthen EU competitiveness. A key focus is to establish the EU as a global leader in talent acquisition, by attracting and retaining talent from third countries. Under the '[talent magnet framework](#)', the Commission outlines several key actions. First, the EU Talent Pool will be created to facilitate the recruitment of skilled non-EU job seekers across various qualification levels. Second, the

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EU aims to attract top researchers while preventing brain drain by offering competitive scientific careers and implementing the [European Charter for Researchers](#).

The strategy also seeks to make the European education systems appealing to international students, aiming for 350,000 non-EU students in higher education by 2030. To achieve this, initiatives like [virtual study fairs](#), [Erasmus Mundus scholarships](#), and alliances between European universities will be promoted. Additionally, efforts will be made to ease the arrival and integration of skilled third-country nationals. A visa strategy will be introduced to streamline the process for students, researchers, and high-skilled workers, improving the implementation of existing directives. Enhanced coordination between migration and education authorities will also be supported through EU funding.

The Strategy aims to address [labor shortages](#), boost innovation, and reinforce Europe's role as a competitive global hub for talent. It is structured around four main strands: (i) building skills for quality jobs and lifelong learning; (ii) upskilling and reskilling an agile workforce for digital and green transitions; (iii) circulating skills through the free movement of people within the EU; and (iv) attracting, developing, and retaining talent.

Positive implications

The above-mentioned approach ensures that economic and social rights, such as the right to work and access to quality services, are upheld for all residents within the EU, including those with lower and medium skill levels. In this sense, positive implications include:

(i) The creation of an inclusive and future-oriented higher education system. The Strategy emphasises that making European education and training systems attractive to international students supports the right to education. By increasing opportunities for higher education and career development, the EU is demonstrating its commitment to personal development and lifelong learning, building the actions under the [European Education Area](#), the [European Skills Agenda](#) and the European Research Area. This also means strengthening research and innovation, making Europe more attractive to the world's best researchers. For the first time, the European Commission intends to explore the development of a '[suitable European legal status](#) for alliances of higher education institutions' to ensure sustainable cooperation and funding, pool resources and strengthen partnerships with business and research within their innovation ecosystem. This commitment to scientific excellence is in line with the value of promoting knowledge and technological progress for the common good.

(ii) Improvement of working conditions. To compete globally, European companies and institutions may be incentivised to ensure better working conditions, fair wages, and greater protection of workers' rights, including those of foreign employees. Attracting skilled workers addresses labor market shortages, contributing to economic growth and social stability.

(iii) Facilitation of [Legal Migration Channels](#). A new visa strategy is at stake to support the arrival of students, researchers, and high-skilled workers from third countries, creating more accessible legal pathways for migration. These efforts to integrate skilled migrants may potentially lead to broader discussions about facilitating labor market access for [asylum seekers](#), addressing challenges they face in accessing reskilling and upskilling opportunities.

This approach respects individuals' rights to seek better opportunities and contributes to global mobility.

Potential risks and implications for refugee and asylum law

The Strategy puts all effort into attracting highly skilled individuals. This may lead to several risks and implications for human rights, specifically through the lens of migration and asylum law.

First, although the Strategy never mentions it, cooperation with countries of origin and transit will be crucial, and any of such agreements must respect the human rights of migrants. Even highly skilled foreign talent may be exposed to forms of exploitation, particularly in high-pressure work environments (e.g., startups with a culture of overwork), or to personal data shared by digital platforms that can be carefully managed to ensure compliance with privacy and data protection regulations.

Second, it could lead to discrimination against migrants with different skill sets, creating inequalities in access to opportunities. Migration policies favoring only highly skilled professionals could exclude or make it more difficult for vulnerable individuals, such as refugees or lower-skilled workers, to enter. One can argue that there exists a possible risk of limiting opportunities for other migrants in the selection of access to those programs, affecting the principle of equality.

Furthermore, while the arrival of talents from third countries calls for effective integration policies to prevent marginalisation and ensure access to social and cultural rights, the Strategy does not provide specific measures in this regard. Without targeted integration initiatives, refugees and asylum seekers risk being left behind, with limited opportunities to develop skills and access the labour market. This gap may undermine broader efforts to promote skills-based mobility within Europe.

Finally, while this initiative is not part of refugee and asylum policies, its implementation could have indirect implications for these areas as the special needs addressing refugees and asylum seekers. Therefore, it will be crucial to balance economic migration objectives with humanitarian commitments. Potentially, the strategy could even reinforce legal and procedural distinctions between economic migrants and refugees, influencing public perception and policy development; however, ensuring that asylum seekers' rights are upheld remains a priority, as highlighted in discussions about the [EU's asylum system](#).

Looking forward

The 'Union of Skills' Strategy promotes inclusiveness, education and vocational training, economic and social rights, research, and legal migration, supporting [human rights](#) and [EU values](#), as also emphasized by scholars. Integrating skilled individuals from diverse backgrounds fosters equality, multiculturalism, and the prevention of discrimination, while encouraging mutual respect and strengthening awareness of human rights in everyday practices. This enriches European societies and aligns with the EU's commitment to diversity and social cohesion

In this perspective, attracting foreign talent to Europe can enhance the protection of human rights, especially for skilled students and workers who have better access to information, legal support, and resources. This impact, however, relies on policies that ensure fairness and safeguard all students and workers, including less skilled or vulnerable groups. EU member states play a key role in implementing such measures ([Article 165](#) and [Article 166](#) TFEU). Recognizing potential disparities allows the Strategy to foster a more equitable framework protecting everyone in the European labor and education market.

While not directly linked to refugee law, the Strategy may influence integration, mobility, and labor access for refugees and asylum seekers. In this perspective, the possibility to guarantee real freedom of mobility and staying across Europe to long-term residents and to refugees should be considered not only a personal opportunity but a real added value for European growth.

Beyond the moral concerns, this Strategy should address the potential risk of brain drain from countries of origin to the EU, which could exacerbate social imbalances. Properly managed talent migration, however, can serve as a driver for reforms that strengthen the protection of all categories of migrants, including refugees and low-skilled students and workers.

This blog is also included in the activities of the project [COSME - Community Sponsorship for Migrants and Refugees in Europe](#), which is a [Research Project of National Interest \(PRIN 2022\)](#) titled 'Towards A European Model of Community Sponsorship for Refugees: Access, Reception and Integration'.