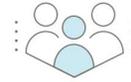




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EU-PASSWORLD
WIDENING COMPLEMENTARY PATHWAYS LINKED TO
COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP

A EUROPEAN APPROACH TO LABOUR AND EDUCATION PATHWAYS UNDERPINNED BY SPONSORSHIP

WORKSHOP REPORT

Friday, 13 October 2023, 11:00 – 12:30

Canadian Mission to the European Union, Avenue des Arts 58, 1000 Brussels

1. Background

On 12 and 13 October 2023, the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI), the European Commission (EC) and the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) co-convened the event *Building Resilient Community Sponsorship Programs in Europe and Beyond*. On the second day of the meeting, a workshop engaged key stakeholders in a strategic brainstorming about the future of skilled-based pathways to Europe for people in need of international protection.

At a crucial moment in time to consolidate complementary education and labour pathways, this interactive session brought together a multiplicity of actors engaged in their design and piloting to distill and exchange key learnings from the implementation of [EU-Passworld](#), [Displaced Talent for Europe \(DT4E\)](#), and other projects co-funded by the [European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund \(AMIF\)](#); jointly reflect on quick wins and long-term priorities; start shaping a common vision and action agenda for skilled-based pathways to Europe; and identify opportunities for collaboration across EU Member States. Participants paid particular attention to the opportunities of including community sponsorship as a programmatic component in these pathways.

The workshop was structured in two parts. It started with a round of brief interventions by different stakeholders reflecting on the potential of skilled-based pathways to Europe, what is standing on the way of programmes at scale, and quick wins and long-term solutions that should be actively explored at the national, EU and global levels. A discussion in break-out groups followed, where participants identified realistic but ambitious actions towards developing sustainable and scalable skilled-based pathways, proposing ideas for collaboration among EU Member States and thinking about the role of community sponsorship.

2. EU Context

Global momentum behind education and labour pathways for people in need of international protection has been growing steadily since 2018. In Europe, the EC's [2020 Recommendation on Legal Pathways to Protection in the EU](#) encouraged EU Member States to “consider improving access to universities for young people in need of international protection by enabling them to qualify as a student, taking into account their specific needs” and “consider working in partnership with the private sector, employers, trade unions and civil society to develop innovative international labour mobility schemes for those in need of protection.”

Three years on, we see countries in Europe with established programmes, some States testing different policy approaches through pilot initiatives, and others actively thinking about opening new education or labour pathway schemes.

Skilled-based pathways not only leverage the talent of people in need of international protection, but also fill skills gaps across Europe. According to the EC's latest estimates, by 2030 there will be 62 million job vacancies and 5 million less young people across the EU. Even with active labour market policies, there would still be 50 million workers needed, a gap that will also pose significant challenges for national welfare systems.

The EC is actively promoting complementary education and labour pathways through several types of actions, although it can of course not do this alone as it is Member States who decide who enters their territory, and civil society and local communities who welcome and support beneficiaries of these programmes.

- ✓ **Political commitment:** The EC dedicated a session to labour pathways during the [2022 High Level Forum on Legal Pathways to Protection and Resettlement Cooperation](#), and focused again on this issue at the [European Migration Network Spanish Presidency Conference](#) on legal migration to the EU that was held on 16 and 17 November 2023 in Madrid. A key priority is to promote partnerships between labour migration and humanitarian stakeholders. Policy siloes can only be overcome by raising awareness, sharing knowledge, creating trust and addressing misconceptions.
- ✓ **Financing:** AMIF funding is facilitating the achievement of concrete results on the ground, allowing to start and scale up pilots and to expand the number of admissions each year. The 2020 AMIF call included skilled-based complementary pathways for the first time, as did the 2023 call.
- ✓ **Common infrastructure:** On 15 November 2023 the EC presented a [proposal](#) to establish a EU Talent Pool, a job matching platform that will connect EU employers with potential candidates. This should allow to better manage supply and demand and help address labour shortages in all sectors and at all skills levels, as there is an urgent need for all types of talent across the EU. The Pool will help third-country nationals get a job offer, including people in need of international protection, who will require targeted outreach and support to benefit from the Pool.

3. Quick wins: Leveraging Short-Term Opportunities to Open or Expand Skilled-Based Pathways

Participants identified the following short-term priorities to accelerate the growth of education and labour pathways:

3.1. Make the most of the 2023 Global Refugee Forum to galvanize political commitment and funding

When the Forum last convened in December 2019, skilled-based pathways were in their infancy. This year's Forum is thus a crucial moment to present to the world the new experiences that now exist in Europe. In addition to drawing attention to recent achievements and showing political support by European States, the GRF can serve to renew the commitment of the large number of actors engaged in education and labour pathways, inviting new partners to join and to contribute creative solutions to transform pilots into programmes.

The [Multistakeholder Pledge on Skills-Based Complementary Pathways](#) and relevant [pledging frameworks](#) provide an opportunity to focus not only on increasing the number of pathways and

expanding them to benefit more people in need of international protection, but also to invest in the infrastructure that will set a solid foundation for scalability in the medium and long term (documentation; recognition of qualifications; language learning), allowing us to move from proof of concept to robust, sustainable and permanent pathways.

Given how deeply intertwined different types of complementary pathways are, GRF pledges could link different types of pathways in one pledge (e.g. education and labour; skilled-based pathways and community sponsorship) and flag the relevance of such pathways for several multi-stakeholder pledging frameworks. Funding commitments should also be a priority, particularly those targeting refugee communities and refugee-led organizations (RLOs).

3.2. Connect the dots through strategic communication and engagement to find new champions

The private sector across Europe is interested in skills-based pathways because there is a significant need for talent in all countries. However, the discussion about labour market shortages and legal migration for work is still too disconnected from efforts to expand pathways for people in need of international protection. This happens at all levels of society, from ministries to kitchen tables.

Communication strategies, information campaigns and innovative messaging targeted at each of the diverse stakeholders engaged in education and labour pathways can in the short term break existing siloes and draw bridges between these two worlds. This means not only rethinking the broader narrative and specific stories we tell about why education and labour pathways are worth investing in, but also what channels and messengers we use to reach a specific audience, and what kind of arguments, data, content and medium resonate most with whom and why.

For instance, the ‘safe and legal pathways’ argument may inspire some counterparts to act, but not others; widespread awareness-raising about labour shortages is needed, but specific messages may differ depending on who we are talking to; and a more convincing explanation must be provided for how developing a skilled-based pathway for a small number of beneficiaries in a far-away place can ultimately support existing initiatives helping displaced people who are already in the country.

All of the above will also help to identify new champions. These could be government officials; individual employers; recruitment agencies; trade unions; employer or alumni associations; specific universities; higher education institution networks; student bodies; refugee-led and diaspora organizations; or individuals in unlikely places. Champions must be empowered through long-term relationship building to act as ambassadors for skilled-based pathways, and they must also be properly equipped to make the case to their peers and bring them on board. The fragmentation of competences across different government departments and stakeholders makes the need for individuals or groups of people who have ownership of a given pathway particularly crucial.

3.3. Leverage the power of networks

The key role that networks play in human mobility in general and [complementary pathways in particular](#) is well known. Stakeholders working to grow skilled-based pathways should be more intentional about leveraging networks as an effective strategy for rapid scale-up.

For instance, transnational networks (both personal and professional) will allow us not only to drive employers and workers in need of international protection to the EU Talent Pool, but also to identify and refer eligible candidates in countries of first asylum to concrete opportunities once a pathway is operational.

Making the most of networks also means expanding existing ones to foster new connections among relevant stakeholders and across professional siloes, linking for instance academics with civil society organizations working in the municipality where their university is based.

3.4. Deliver on pilots to show that the potential of skilled-based pathways is real

At this critical juncture for the future of education and labour pathways, it is essential to meet the modest targets of existing pilots to prove that there is capacity to manage larger numbers of beneficiaries. The opportunities of skilled-based pathways at scale are clear, but if arrivals don't happen it is impossible to guarantee a minimum level of certainty and convince key stakeholders to take risks and invest in more and larger pathways.

For example, Italy's latest labour migration quota for 2023-2025 is [452,000 visas](#), out of which 750 are reserved for refugees. These are small numbers, but only by filling the allocated quota as quickly as possible will we promote trust among employers and show the Italian government that there is both demand and capacity to expand the pathway.

3.5. Do not start from scratch and seize the moment

Although complementary pathways are a relatively new policy area, in every European country there is a wealth of relevant know-how that can provide the starting point for a new education or labour pathway, particularly in areas such as the socio-economic inclusion of migrant and displaced populations already in the country.

For instance, Italy's experience engaging communities in welcoming refugees through Humanitarian Corridors can be [adapted](#) to welcome and support refugee workers, and the same is true of existing multi-stakeholder efforts to [mobilize companies to support refugee integration](#) and to [include migrants and refugees in Italy's labour market](#) through projects such as [PUOI](#). Other examples are [Germany's Western Balkans Regulation](#) or the EU's decision to grant Temporary Protection status to Ukrainians, providing [access to key integration services and employment](#).

Participants noted that mapping existing infrastructures, resources, assets, networks and champions and who is doing what is always helpful before designing a new pathway.

The example of Italy also shows that broader policy reform processes (of the labour migration system in this case) provide unique opportunities to establish skilled-based pathways for displaced people that should not be missed.

3.6. Document, monitor and evaluate

A low-hanging-fruit to promote the growth of existing education and labour pathways and the development of new programmes in other countries is to invest in documentation, monitoring and evaluation of existing experiences in order to identify good practices and transferable models. For instance, the University of Bologna is working on an evaluation of [UNICORE](#), and Belgian EU-Passworld project partners are keeping close track of how the policy design choices made for the pilot edition of the education pathway are unfolding in practice.

3.7. Create and curate knowledge exchanges to build the capacity of key actors – among peers and across policy siloes

Platforms where policy-makers, practitioners and other public and private stakeholders with relevant expertise (regular migration, labour mobility, ethical recruitment, resettlement and humanitarian admissions) can share learnings and good practices about skilled-based pathways,

have informal dialogues on relevant issues and build their capacity should be encouraged. Such processes are also key to create feedback loops between policy design and practical implementation, develop common tools, and identify what pathway elements or phases could be standardized, including through EU action or common approaches by EU Member States.

4. The Long Game: Addressing Structural Challenges to Realize the Potential of Skilled-Based Pathways to Europe

After focusing on short-term actions, participants moved on to discuss how sustainable and scalable education and labour pathways to Europe could look like by 2030. They focused on structural bottlenecks to be addressed in order to realize that vision and identified opportunities to work together. The following actions were suggested:

4.1. Start by adapting existing legal frameworks to identify areas for policy reform

Complementary pathways are, by definition, hybrids that exist in the grey area between international protection and regular migration – a space that provides a fertile ground for policy innovation, but where dilemmas emerge depending on the legal framework chosen to develop a specific pathway.

For example, when an existing labour migration channel is used to develop a labour pathway for people in need of international protection, beneficiaries do not have the same rights and entitlements as recognized refugees. This often means that they have to renew their residence permit on a yearly basis and comply with a number of requirements; that they must meet certain income, housing and healthcare insurance conditions to apply for family reunification; and that they have limited access to post-arrival welcome and integration supports. Similarly, education pathways built around existing international student visa frameworks often require that students prove that they have sufficient means of subsistence for the whole duration of their studies; offer limited or no access to family reunification in practice; and are linked to temporary legal statuses that can result in precarious situations for pathway beneficiaries. Using humanitarian channels leads to a different set of policy dilemmas, including issues related to additionality, front-end capacity and scalability.

Skilled-based pathway pilots typically address the above trade-offs through government discretion, flexibility and pragmatism, but these case-by-case approaches are rarely scalable. However, the use of exemptions, adaptations and practical solutions can be an effective strategy to identify areas where broader regulatory reform or policy change is needed.

4.2. Invest in shared infrastructure at global, EU and national level

The main obstacles slowing down the growth of skilled-based pathways are well known to practitioners in all countries. Common barriers to scale include documentation; language learning; recognition of qualifications; long, expensive and intricate visa processes; disconnection between pre-departure and post-arrival support; and limited institutional capacity.

Participants agreed on the value of investing in common platforms and processes in countries of first asylum – a ‘Gate to Europe’ where people in need of international protection would be screened for multiple pathways to different EU Member States. Standard Operating Procedures and other tools that facilitate the collaboration among all relevant stakeholders while streamlining who does what should also be prioritized. Actions aimed at raising the awareness and building the capacity of front-end actors are also key, given the urgent need to grow the ecosystem of organizations who can identify and refer eligible candidates to skilled-based pathways and the importance of pre-departure information provision, orientation and training to set education and labour pathway beneficiaries up for success.

4.3. Make skilled-based pathways more diverse and inclusive

Scale and sustainability will remain elusive unless education and labour pathways move beyond their current focus on post-graduate university degrees and high-skilled jobs. This is why it would make sense to conduct labour market assessments before a pathway is designed; to link the programmes offered through education pathways to economic sectors with labour shortages; and to prioritize engagement with higher education institutions offering vocational education and training such as technical colleges and schools of applied sciences, as they typically focus on skills that are in high demand across Europe.

A second priority is to pilot train-to-hire models and to engage companies, international organizations and higher education institutions in pre-departure trainings, including language courses. This approach will be tested in Italy next year as part of an uncapped pathway where candidates must just complete a specific professional training and socio-linguistic course to work and reside in Italy – a track with potential for significant scale beyond the three-year quota of 750 visas mentioned above.

4.4. Explore innovative financing approaches

Participants agreed on the need to test new financing modalities for education and labour pathways, as lack of dedicated human and financial resources is one of the most persistent structural bottlenecks standing on the way of pathway development.

Revolving Loan Funds (RLFs) appear as a promising option for both types of pathways, as explored in this EU-Passworld [mapping report](#) or shown by initiatives such as [Pathway Club](#). An approach also advanced in the report is corporate sponsorship of education pathways – a model that should also lead to better alignment with labour market needs and offer more sustainability and predictability to students once they graduate. Further synergies between education and labour pathways (or the combination of an education and a labour component in a single pathway) should also be explored.

Ultimately, reaching financial sustainability will require bringing new types of partners into the field of complementary pathways, as well as refining our investment case for focusing on such a small number of beneficiaries abroad while there is still so much to do to include migrants and displaced people already in Europe in national higher education systems and labour markets. This should also address legitimate concerns about existing resources being diverted to develop boutique initiatives with low impact.

5. The role of community sponsorship in developing education and labour pathways to Europe that work at scale

In its [2020 Recommendation on Legal Pathways to Protection in the EU](#), the European Commission reaffirmed that community sponsorship should play “a structured role in welcoming and integrating those in need of international protection” and underpin resettlement, humanitarian admissions and complementary pathways for education and work. Since then, projects such as [EU-Passworld](#) have been piloting different policy approaches to education and labour pathways supported by sponsorship – either as wrap-around welcome and integration support for beneficiaries or as a pathway in and of itself for refugee students or workers, as we see in countries like Canada or the United States. At the same time, EU-Passworld project partners are testing to what extent engaging receiving communities in skills-based pathways can make the latter more sustainable and scalable.

Participants converged around the following priority actions to make the most of the interaction between education or labour pathways and sponsorship.

5.1. Leverage community sponsorship to promote collaboration among all actors engaged in skilled-based pathways and ensure a durable welcome

When community sponsorship underpins an education or labour pathway, it is more likely that there will be a sustained connection to, and meaningful communication with, the local community welcoming students or workers. This link can in and of itself become a key factor in the success of a given pathway programme, turning newcomers into community members by offering them opportunities to socialize and feel that they belong.

Preliminary evidence from Ireland, where the [existing community sponsorship scheme](#) has been adapted in two distinct ways to support education and labour pathways in development since 2022, confirms this hypothesis.

5.2. Focus on what communities do best to address the specific needs of students and workers

Ongoing efforts in several countries to connect sponsorship to skilled-based pathways highlight that students arriving through education pathways and workers arriving through labour pathways have different needs, and addressing these should be the starting point of programme design. For instance, while socialization with other students and avoiding isolation during semester breaks is key for education pathway beneficiaries, accompanying family members of workers is a top priority when developing the sponsorship component of labour pathways.

There are also common needs where community engagement has a clear value added that should be leveraged, for instance finding accommodation through social networks, word-of-mouth information or private hosting opportunities; supporting language learning; and helping newcomers access local services.

Lived experience is always an invaluable asset in programme design and implementation, as the inspiring work of Talent Beyond Boundaries [alumni](#) shows. An area with lots of potential but so far not sufficiently explored is how to engage students and workers who have benefitted from skilled-based pathways, as well as relevant diaspora networks, as sponsors of newly-arrived students and workers. How to better engage sponsors during the pre-departure phase should also be carefully analyzed.

5.3. Unpack how community sponsorship supports higher education institutions and employers

The sharing of roles and costs that sponsorship offers is undoubtedly an attractive proposition for higher education institutions and employers. Partnering with local communities provides reassurance that the specific needs of students and workers will be met by trusted partners, and that beneficiaries will have all they require to succeed. The positive stories of individual students and workers should in turn motivate higher institutions and employers to engage in the pathway in the long term, welcoming a larger number of students or workers every year or getting their peers on board, thus ensuring programme sustainability and scalability.

The benefits of sponsorship could be unpacked and communicated to higher education institutions, employers and other actors engaged in skilled-based pathways through tailored tools such as guidebooks, case studies, audiovisual testimonies and trainings. These standard resources should prepare users to become sponsors or to interact with them, clearly explaining the division of roles and responsibilities. Two targeted products addressed at higher education institutions and employers will be developed in 2024 in the context of the EU-Passworld project.

5.4. Make the most of the link with skilled-based pathways to diversify and re-energize existing community sponsorship programmes

Sponsorship turns campuses and workplaces into welcoming communities, exposing new audiences to the reality of forced displacement and bringing higher education institutions and employers closer to local communities thanks to the cross-pollination of contacts and networks.

This link can, at the same time, help expand community-led welcome and integration initiatives and bring flexibility to existing approaches by injecting new resources; broadening the pool of potential sponsors; and diversifying volunteer profiles through new types of sponsor groups anchored in higher education institutions and workplaces.

The focus of skilled-based pathways on ability, rather than vulnerability, as well as the distinct needs of students or workers, are an opportunity to lower the entry barrier for new actors, including peer students and workers, setting up a solid basis for the growth of community sponsorship initiatives.