

Final

Improving the Economic Migration Framework to Attract and Retain Qualified Talent in Flanders

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Foreword

This document provides a diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of the Flemish framework for management of economic migration and recommendations for possible areas of reform. Flanders is an advanced and dynamic region with a degree of autonomy and competence in determining its economic migration framework under the Belgian federal system which makes it unique in the European context. It is able to position itself to attract talent and to adjust its economic migration regime to improve attraction of sought-after profiles and support their retention and productive participation in the Flemish labour force.

The work leading to this report was undertaken in the context of a project funded by the European Union via the Technical Support Instrument and implemented by OECD in cooperation with the European Commission's Reform and Investment Task Force (SG REFORM) which seeks to support the design and implementation of institutional, administrative, inclusive and growth-enhancing reforms in EU Member States across a variety of policy areas. A steering group, composed of representatives from the Department of Work, Economics, Science, Innovation and Social Economy (WEWIS), the European Commission, and the OECD, provided support and oversight of the project, from start to completion. The role of the steering group in the preparation of this report was limited to advisory functions to ensure the independence of the analytical work and results.

The International Migration Division in the Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs at the OECD worked with WEWIS to develop the recommendations included in this report. From July 2023 to February 2025, meetings were held with stakeholders across Flanders to gather views and understand where reform could improve the labour migration framework. The consultations were the broadest ever conducted in Flanders on this policy issue, with more than 80 actors consulted across the range of involved institutions and stakeholders national, regional and local.

To develop these recommendations, initial meetings took place to identify key issues and the needs and expectations of the main Flemish stakeholders engaged in the immigration system, public, private and third-sector. Intermediate meetings were held to review findings and to discuss possible measures. An international workshop was held in March 2024 with a range of participating government officials from OECD countries to discuss relevant practices, of which some are included in this report.

The report also presents some of the first empirical analyses of retention and outcomes of economic migrants in Flanders. Initial project findings were discussed at SERV in June 2024 and the draft recommendations in a workshop in Brussels in November 2024. The findings were also presented at the OECD Working Party on Migration in June 2024.

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This report was prepared by the International Migration Division of the OECD Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs. The work was conducted with technical support from the European Commission's Reform and Investment Task Force (SG REFORM). The report and underlying project were co-ordinated by Jonathan Chaloff and Hanafi Tessa. The report was drafted by Dries Lens and Ninke Mussche (University of Antwerp) and Jonathan Chaloff. Hanafi Tessa and Mattheus Webster provided input to the report. The report benefited from valuable contributions from Jean-Christophe Dumont and from the OECD Working Party on Migration.

The OECD expresses its gratitude to the many stakeholders from Flanders and from Belgium who provided input to the report through participating in interviews, meetings and workshops. These included inter alia representatives from the Department of Work, Economics, Science, Innovation and Social Economy (WEWIS), the public employment service of Flanders (VDAB), Myria, the Social and Economic Council of Flanders (SERV), Enabel, NARIC Flanders, the Belgian National Social Security Office, as well as other Flemish and Belgian agencies, regional actors such as international houses, and many civil society, social partners, and private actors.

The OECD team also expresses gratitude to the many officials and experts from other OECD countries who participated in workshops and provided input to the report, in particular representatives from the Netherlands, Australia, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Ireland, Finland, Estonia, Canada and the regional governments of Quebec and Emilia-Romagna.

Special thanks are due to the representatives of WEWIS and VDAB who supported the OECD throughout the project by providing extensive comments and exchanges throughout the project period, in particular Chris Gaasendam of WEWIS. Special thanks are also extended to Francesca Nastri from the European Commission Reform and Investment Task Force.

Executive summary

Flanders has a tight labour market, with the highest vacancy rate in the EEA and one of the lowest unemployment rates. Shortages are evident across various sectors, encompassing highly qualified occupations, trades professions, as well as hospitality and domestic services. Despite being highly regulated, unionised, and with high social charges on employment, employers are actively seeking to hire across all skill levels.

There is undeniably reserve capacity within the labour force, particularly among older, less educated, and migrant workers. Activation policies have targeted these groups with some success, but current needs are likely to continue to exceed any available supply within the region. Both inter- and intra-regional mobility remain low, with disparities in labour market outcomes persisting, especially between the Belgian regions, but also within Flanders. Reskilling efforts are underway, but there too seem to be limits to how much this can address demand.

All indicators suggest that the Flemish labour market remains very tight for the time being. Flanders also faces unfavourable longer term labour force prospects, as the total labour force is not expected to grow between 2024 and 2035 due to ageing cohorts, while youth cohorts diminish and the workforce ages. Given the urgent nature of shortages in the labour market and considering that activation policies and measures encouraging labour mobility take time to have impact, labour migration is expected to become more important over the coming years.

Growing labour demand in Flanders has already resulted in significant immigration for employment purposes. Most of the almost 20 000 first residence permits issued annually for employment purposes are issued to EEA nationals, who are not subject to any restrictions. Non-EEA labour migrants (with work and residence permits) comprised 4 000 first issued permits in 2023 – about 1 worker per 1 000 working-age inhabitants. This is much lower than neighbouring Netherlands (2.9), but also Germany or France (1.7).

Although they are admitted on the basis of clear and urgent demand in a context of a tight labour market, non-EEA labour migrants mostly do not remain in Flanders or even in Belgium. After three years, half of them have left, and a little over one-third stay for five years. Stay rates among labour migrants are lower in Flanders compared to the Netherlands. Labour migrants who remain in Flanders tend to stay in employment: after five years, 97% of labour migrants are not drawing benefits.

Residence permits do not tell the whole story of non-EEA migrant workers. Flanders also receives temporary non-EEA labour migrants, primarily posted from other EEA countries to Flanders. These comprised more than 33 000 individuals in 2023, out of a total of 150,000 posted workers. Not all of this posting is for short term work. Close to one in five postings of non-EEA nationals lasted more than three months, and one in five workers performed repeat spells of employment in Flanders over three years. This suggests that there is a part of posting which is substituting work permit migration, since it is faster and more flexible than the single permit process.

Flanders hosts more than 20 000 non-EEA international students, but they do not make the same contribution to the skilled labour force as they do in other European destinations. Students have relatively low stay rates; only 22% were in Flanders five years after arrival, which is similar to the Netherlands but well below France and Germany. Those who do stay have high levels of qualified employment and high wages.

Despite the development of its own labour migration policy following the 2014 state reform, Flanders' labour migration processes are not optimised for recruitment, and stakeholders in Flanders struggle to

attract and recruit sought-after profiles through non-EEA labour migration. The labour migration framework in Flanders is complex to use for employers and for candidates, restrictive in terms of eligibility and involves long processing times. It is uncertain for less skilled occupations and can take six to nine months even when successful – even for highly-remunerated highly-skilled recruits.

The long processing times for single permit applications are partly attributable to the involvement of multiple authorities at federal, regional, and local levels in the permit process, alongside a sequential processing approach. Staff shortages have contributed to prolonged waiting periods before file processing even starts. The inclusion of the admissibility phase in the work permit assessment artificially prolongs maximum processing times, resulting in unpredictability for both employers and workers.

Stakeholders express concerns that the lengthy procedure causes Flanders to miss out on economic activity and growth, as labour migrants opt to work in other countries, particularly neighbouring ones like the Netherlands and Germany, and multinationals opt not to expand employment at their Flemish operations. At the same time, workers frequently experience disruptions in their legal residence and employment status, even when their employers have submitted correct and timely applications. While highly skilled profiles receive single permits valid for up to three years, other workers must undergo a repetitive and burdensome annual renewal process.

To address long processing times, the regional authorities responsible for work permit applications have been allocated additional staff, and similar reinforcements are anticipated for the federal authorities which handle residence permit applications. Processing times for work authorisation at the regional level have significantly decreased in 2024-25 following the integration of new case handlers. However, processing times for residence authorisation at the federal level have increased.

Unlike many other OECD countries, including neighbouring countries like the Netherlands, where highly remunerated labour migrants are easily approved while applications for lower-wage migrants are usually rejected, Flanders enables a broader range of labour needs to be addressed through migration. Flanders' shortage occupation list for migration purposes is highly appreciated by stakeholders as it reflects the real needs of the Flemish labour market. Still, the migration shortage occupation list is perceived as overly rigid and social partners feel that their input on the labour market is insufficiently incorporated.

The labour market test favours recruitment from within Flanders, Belgium and the EEA, and facilitates support from the Flemish public employment service in identifying potential candidates, but at nine weeks (increased in May 2024 from six weeks), it is one of the longest in the OECD and deemed excessive in light of the tight labour market. Moreover, forthcoming restrictions on the labour market test channel, which exclude unskilled occupations and occupations not on the VDAB shortage occupation list, may further impede this pathway for potential candidates.

The rigid shortage occupation list for migration purposes and long labour market test pathways, as well as the total exclusion of all non-skilled occupations from labour migration as of late 2023, may be contributing to the recourse to posting of non-EEA workers to fill vacancies at lower skill levels. In contrast, the limited use of posting in the agricultural sector may be partly due to the easy access and fast processing of work permit applications for seasonal workers in Flanders.

The single permit application procedure is complex, and application is led by the employer. The authorities generally do not communicate directly with non-EEA workers regarding their labour and residency rights. Non-EEA workers are dependent on their employers for employment and information about their permit, but also quite often for accommodation. This can create conditions conducive to ongoing exploitation, as recent cases of abuse and exploitation of labour migrants attest. Under the current system, the repercussions of permit revocation also primarily affect non-EEA workers and not employers, and job-changes are almost as complex as initial recruitment. Consequently, workers may

hesitate to report unfair employment practices or voice grievances, knowing that their employment and residency in Belgium are contingent upon their employer's decisions.

In response to recent cases of abuse, both federal and regional authorities have intensified their vigilance in protecting labour migrants from exploitation and other fraudulent practices. This includes introducing additional grounds for refusal and withdrawal of single permits, as well as implementing more robust pre-approval checks and increased social inspections afterwards. This increased vigilance, however, may extend the already long processing times by focusing review of labour migration applications on the risk of abuse at the expense of client service. The new migration code, under discussion at the federal level, proposes a range of measures aimed at reducing workers' dependency on their employers and providing better information to labour migrants about their social and labour rights.

An important bottleneck in the current labour migration process lies in the recognition of foreign qualifications, especially for regulated occupations such as nursing. The recognition procedure encompasses both a protracted academic recognition process and a lengthy procedure for accessing regulated occupations. The surge in applications in recent years has not been matched with an increase in human resources in NARIC Flanders, and processing times often exceed 6 months for nursing diploma applications. Partial competencies are not recognised. In cases where a foreign degree is not recognised or recognised at a lower level, applicants are directed to seek further education at higher education institutions which each apply their own standards in determining credit for prior learning. Tailored bridging courses are lacking, and there is little coordination between recognition authorities and higher education institutions. Moreover, professional recognition at the federal level, which grants access to regulated occupations, is also protracted, involving numerous stakeholders and administrative steps.

The reception and support provided to non-EEA workers and their families in Flanders includes limited soft landing initiatives which are primarily decentralised. Small and medium-sized companies without in-house relocation services struggle to provide support to foreign employees they have recruited. The Flemish government has recently made some progress in organising a more structured transition by providing additional financial support to service centres for non-EEA labour migrants and their employers.

Access to housing is a significant issue, especially due to the tight rental market in Flanders. Housing legislation is not designed to favour or authorise co-housing, which limits options for many labour migrants. The new Flemish decree on temporary housing standards for foreign workers introduces more flexibility but has only been adopted by Antwerp, leaving the rest of Flanders without tailored housing solutions.

The existing civic integration programme – conceived primarily for non-labour migrants, and optional for labour migrants – provides a valuable platform for non-EEA labour migrants to acquire information about their rights and develop Dutch language skills. Participation rates are relatively modest: only one-third of labour migrants take part in the programme, with an even lower share successfully completing it. Flanders is taking active steps to enable labour migrants to start an on-line Dutch course from abroad and continue it once they arrive in Flanders.

The post-graduation orientation year is crucial for international students transitioning to labour migrant status, as employers cannot apply for a single permit for non-EEA students who have not yet graduated. However, in practice, the 12-month orientation period only ensures an uninterrupted stay if a single permit application is submitted within the first three to six months due to the length of the procedure. Any residence interruption— which is common—resets the prior student residence period when calculating total stay in Belgium for permanent residence eligibility, forcing graduates to wait several more years before they can apply.

Flanders boasts numerous factors that should make it an attractive destination for potential migrant workers with the skills in demand, including its robust and diverse economy, strategic location, high quality of life and public facilities, high quality and low price of the schooling system, strong social security system, and widely spoken English language, amongst others. However, under the current system, the region is not able to compete with neighbouring countries for global talent. Not only are firms less disposed to recruit, and highly qualified candidates less likely to endure the slow and inefficient labour migration process, but employers may be resorting to employing posted workers. This denies Flanders the fiscal benefits of acquiring an employed labour force and places the workers in a situation more susceptible to exploitation with greater challenges in terms of monitoring compliance.

1 Context for labour migration to Flanders.

With Dutch as its official language, Flanders (Vlaanderen) is the northern region of Belgium. The Flemish Region covers 44% of the Belgian territory and hosts 58% of the population (6.8 million inhabitants).¹ It is made up of five provinces (Antwerp, Limburg, Western Flanders, Eastern Flanders, and Flemish Brabant) and 300 cities and municipalities. It is economically the most important region, contributing to close to 60% of the Belgian GDP, 76% of the country's foreign trade, and 60% of the country's household consumption. Flanders also concentrates close to 60% of employment in Belgium.²

This chapter presents the context for labour migration in Flanders. Section 1.1 discusses recent labour market trends and specificities of the Flemish labour market. Section 1.2 continues by highlighting the contribution of migration to demographic change and population growth. Sections 1.3 and 1.4 delve into labour and skill shortages, exploring their origins and consequences. Lastly, section 1.5 explores the potential of labour migration in mitigating labour shortages.

1.1. Labour market conditions and specificities of the Flemish labour market

Relative to other OECD countries, Flanders (Belgium) has a very high tax wedge³, high level of employment protection⁴, and relatively large wage compression⁵. Spending on active labour market policy is well above the OECD average in Flanders.⁶ The share of employees who are members of a

¹ Statistics Belgium (2024). Structure of the Population, [Structure of the Population | Statbel \(fgov.be\)](#) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

² National Bank of Belgium (2024). Regional accounts, [NBB Statistics](#) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

³ OECD (2024). Tax wedge (indicator), [Tax wedge | Tax | OECD iLibrary \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](#) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

⁴ OECD (2024). Employment Protection Legislation: Strictness of employment protection legislation: regular employment, OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics (database), [Employment Protection Legislation: Strictness of employment protection legislation: regular employment \(Edition 2021\) | OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics | OECD iLibrary \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](#) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

⁵ OECD (2024). Wage levels (indicator), [Wage levels | Earnings and wages | OECD iLibrary \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](#) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

⁶ OECD (2024). Labour market programmes: expenditure and participants, OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics (database), [Labour market programmes: expenditure and participants | OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics | OECD iLibrary \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](#); Federal Planning Bureau (2024). Key Labour market Indicators, [BE2020 - Indicators](#) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

trade union is, with 50%, among the highest in the OECD⁷, and the coverage of collective bargaining agreements is 96%⁸. Collectively bargained minimum wages are high and due to the high coverage, they effectively act as minimum wage floors. The social partners play a key role in many areas of policy development and implementation.

With 56% of the population aged 30-34 holding a tertiary degree, Flanders boasts one of the most highly skilled populations in the EEA⁹, comparable to top performers such as the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. In contrast, the share of early school leavers and NEET (not in education, employment or training) among the youth population is among the lowest in the EEA.¹⁰ High collectively bargained entry wages and relatively knowledge-intensive production have meant that many jobs require tertiary education in Flanders: around 51% of the workers are employed in high-skill occupations. At the same time, however, Flanders' share of low-skilled employment (8.8% of total employment in 2021) is more extensive than in many other EEA countries, particularly compared to Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland and Germany (where it makes up between 3% and 7% of total employment).¹¹

Labour market conditions in Flanders are currently rather favourable in international comparison.¹² With an employment rate of 79.7% in 2022, Flanders has a relatively high proportion of its working-age population (25-64 years old) in employment, well above the average for EU countries (76.7%) and Belgium overall (75.4%). For comparison, France had a lower employment rate of 76%, while the rates in the Netherlands (83.2%), Germany (81.8%) and the Nordic countries (Finland: 80.2%, Norway: 82.2%, Sweden: 84.3%) were significantly higher (see Figure 1.1).

⁷ OECD (2024). Trade Unions: Trade union density, OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics (database), [Trade union density | OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics | OECD iLibrary \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](#) [Trade union density | OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics | OECD iLibrary \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](#) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

⁸ OECD (2024). Trade Unions: Collective bargaining coverage, OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics (database), [Collective bargaining coverage | OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics | OECD iLibrary \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](#) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

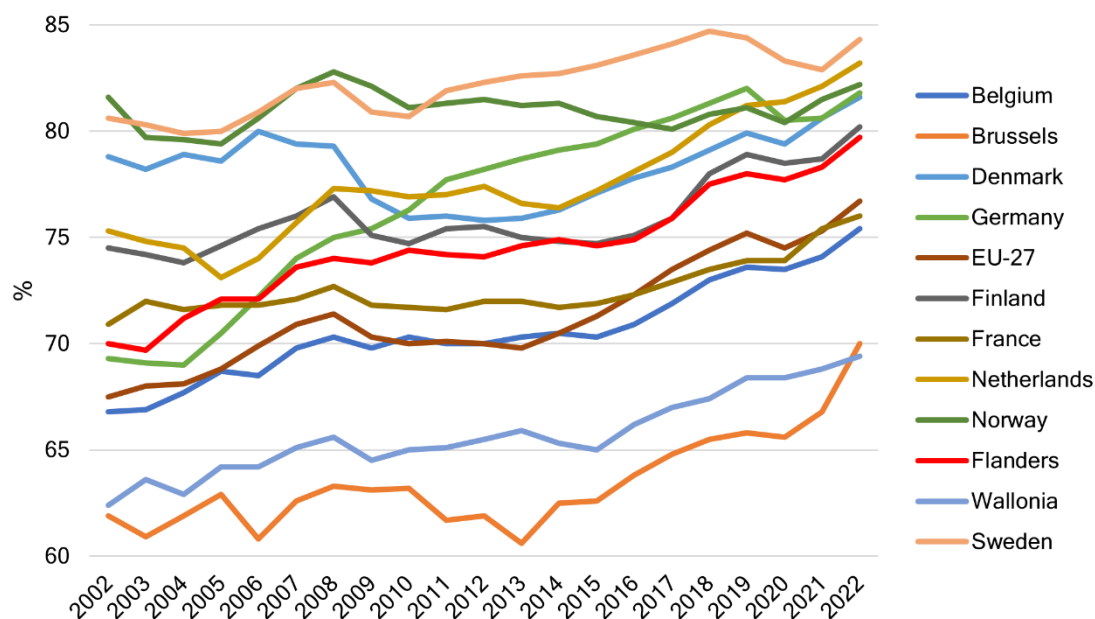
⁹ Unless specified otherwise, the term 'EEA' in this chapter includes Switzerland.

¹⁰ Policy Research Centre Work (2024). Flanders in Europe - Education, [Vlaanderen binnen Europa: Opleiding - Steunpunt Werk](#) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

¹¹ Policy Research Centre Work (2024). Flanders in Europe – Job characteristics, [Vlaanderen binnen Europa: Jobkenmerken - Steunpunt Werk](#) (Accessed on 18 January 2024; OECD (2019). OECD Skills Strategy Flanders: Assessment and Recommendations, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris.

¹² The definitions regarding employment and unemployment discussed in this chapter are those of the International Labour Office (ILO) for the purpose of international comparison. The only exception is Figure 1.4, where the definitions are derived from administrative data.

Figure 1.1. Employment rate in Flanders and selected EEA countries, 25-64y, 2002-2022



Note: The employment rate is the share of persons employed in the total population

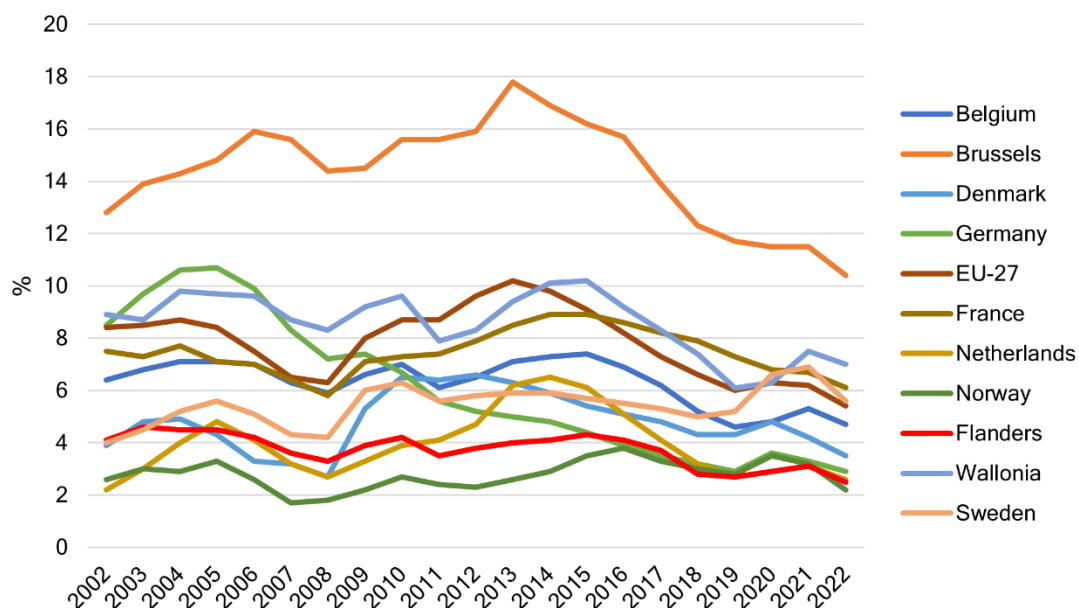
Source: Policy Research Centre Work – Flanders in Europe, based on Eurostat-Labour Force Survey.

Although Flanders' employment rate continues to lag behind the best performing countries, it has risen substantially over the past two decades. In 2002, the employment rate for Flanders stood at 70% increasing to 74.1% in 2012 and then to 79.7% in 2022. The increase of 9.7 percentage points over the period 2002 to 2022 was slightly higher than the average increase across EU countries (9.2 percentage points) and exceeded the increase for all best performing countries, with the exception of Germany.

In recent years, the Flemish labour market has also been characterized by a historic decrease in the unemployment rate. At 2.5% in 2022, Flanders had one of the lowest unemployment rates among EEA countries, on par with Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway (see Figure 1.2). In 2022, nearly one in three unemployed individuals in Flanders have been in unemployment for one year or longer. While this proportion is notably lower than the EU average of 43%, it surpasses that of Denmark (16%), the Netherlands (28%), Norway (29%), and Finland (29%).¹³

¹³ Policy Research Centre Work (2024). Flanders in Europe - Unemployment, [Vlaanderen binnen Europa: Werkloosheid - Steunpunt Werk](#) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

Figure 1.2. Unemployment rate in Flanders and selected EEA countries, 25-64y, 2002-2022



Note: The unemployment rate is the share of unemployed people in the labour force (employed + unemployed).

Source: Policy Research Centre Work – Flanders in Europe, based on Eurostat-Labour Force Survey.

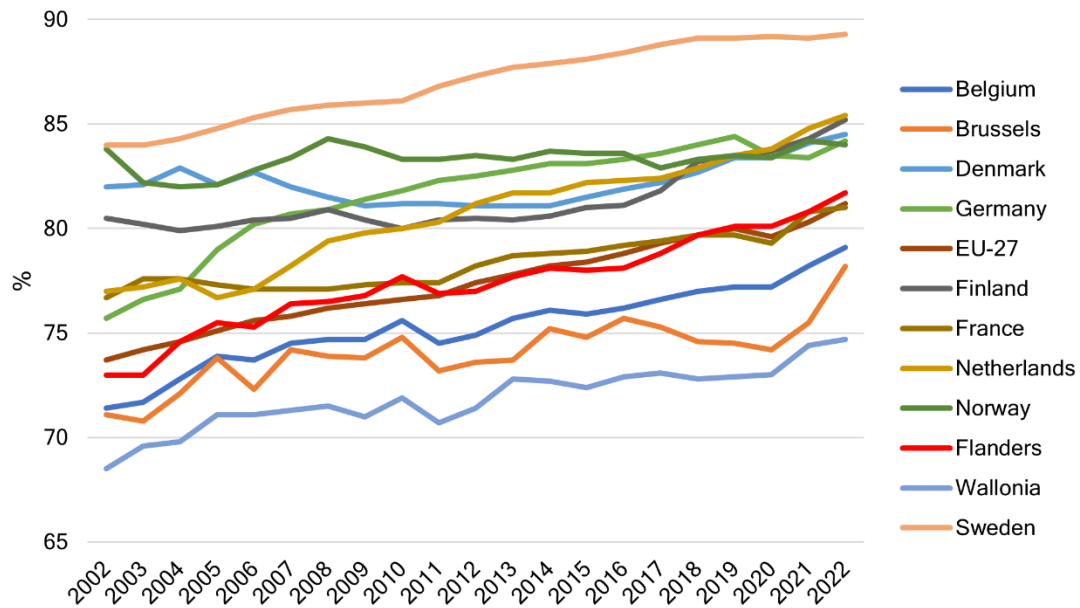
Flanders combines high employment with low unemployment, showing that labour supply issues are holding down the employment rate. Indeed, Flanders experiences a relatively low activity rate, at 81.7% among those aged 25-64 in 2022. While the activity rate in Flanders is higher than the overall figure for Belgium and similar to the EU average, it nevertheless remains considerably lower than the activity rates observed in Germany (84.2%), the Netherlands (85.4%), and the Nordics (see Figure 1.3).

The main categories of non-economically active individuals in Flanders comprise students, homemakers, (early) retirees, social assistance beneficiaries, and individuals with disabilities.¹⁴ Particularly noteworthy is Flanders' significant proportion of non-economically active individuals who abstain from seeking employment due to illness or disability, at 5.6% in 2021 (compared to the 4.3% EU average).¹⁵

¹⁴ Vansteenkiste, S., & Sourbron, M. (2023). De niet-beroepsactieven in Vlaanderen ontleed. Een profielschets van huisvrouwen en arbeidsgeschikten. *Over.Werk*, Tijdschrift van het Steunpunt Werk, 33(1), 5-14.

¹⁵ Policy Research Centre Work (2024). Flanders in Europe – Labour reserve, [Vlaanderen binnen Europa: Arbeidsreserve - Steunpunt Werk](#) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

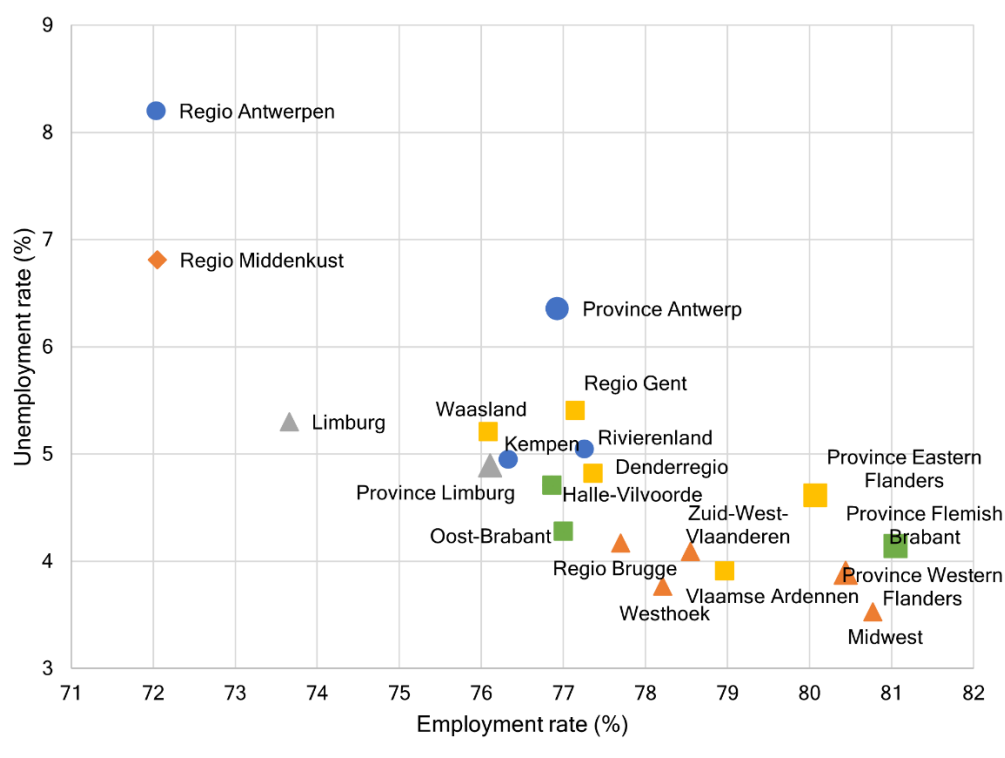
Figure 1.3. Activity rate in Flanders and selected EEA countries, 25-64y, 2002-2022



Note: The activity rate is the share of active population (employed + unemployed) in the total population.
Source: Policy Research Centre Work – Flanders in Europe, based on Eurostat-Labour Force Survey.

Persistent regional variations exist in labour market conditions. In 2021, unemployment in Western Flanders remained below 4%, contrasting with the unemployment rate in Antwerp province, which exceeded 6%. The employment rate varies as well, with Flemish Brabant boasting an employment rate of 81%, whereas the Limburg province lagged behind at 76% (see Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4. Employment and unemployment rate in Flemish provinces and reference regions, 25-64y, 2021



Source: Policy Research Centre Work – Flemish Labour Account, based on administrative data (RSZ, RSVZ, RIZIV, RVA, Statbel, CBSS, and BISA).

Women, the elderly, and migrants (foreign-born) have particularly benefited from recent advancements in the Flemish labour market (see Figure 1.5). Yet, there remains considerable room for improvement (see Figure 1.6).¹⁶ For women in employment, Flanders is among the EEA countries with the highest incidence of part-time work. In 2022, 39.4% of women aged 25-64 were working part-time. Only Germany, Austria and the Netherlands reported higher shares (47.3%, 51% and 61.3%, respectively).¹⁷ At the same time, the proportion of underemployed part-time working women, who express a desire to work more hours, is relatively low at 3.9% of the total employed population.¹⁸

Employment rates for older workers in Flanders remain lower compared to other EEA countries, particularly for those aged 60-64 (40.6% in Flanders vs. 48.5% EU). Early retirement among the older working-age population is high in Flanders and provides an important explanation for relatively low

¹⁶ Botterman, S., Geraert, F., & Vansteenkiste, S. (Red.) (2023). Trendrapport 2023: Kwetsbare groepen op de Vlaamse arbeidsmarkt (Werk.Rapport 2023 nr.1). Brussel/Leuven: Departement Werk en Sociale Economie/Steunpunt Werk.

¹⁷ Policy Research Centre Work (2024). Flanders in Europe – Job characteristics, [Vlaanderen binnen Europa: Jobkenmerken - Steunpunt Werk](#) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

¹⁸ Policy Research Centre Work (2024). Flanders in Europe – Labour reserve, [Vlaanderen binnen Europa: Arbeidsreserve - Steunpunt Werk](#) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

employment among the elderly.¹⁹ The seniority premium is also among the highest in the EEA, making older workers relatively expensive as earnings rise steeply with age.²⁰

Notably, employment rates for individuals with lower educational attainment in Flanders are low and have not improved over the past decade, standing at 51.3% in 2022. This is much lower than the EU average of 57.6% and far behind neighbouring countries such as Germany (64.9%) and the Netherlands (67.6%). The unemployment rates for individuals with lower education (5.9%) are more than double those of the medium-educated (2.8%) and over three times higher than the unemployment rate for the highly-educated (1.6%). However, unemployment among the less-educated population in Flanders remains lower than in many other EEA countries (with an EU average of 11.4%). This suggests that the unfavourable employment outcomes for the low-educated in Flanders are primarily due to high economic inactivity within this group.²¹

Migrants born outside the EU also face challenges in the Flemish labour market, with lower employment rates compared to most other EEA countries in absolute terms (64.3% in Flanders vs. 67% EU). Despite recent improvements, employment rates for non-EU born migrants trail those of Belgian-born individuals by 17 percentage points. This gap is among the widest in the EEA, exceeded only by the Netherlands, Belgium overall, and Sweden. In Flanders, non-EU-born migrants face higher levels of unemployment compared to the native-born population and, among women, higher levels of inactivity as well. Among migrant women in Flanders, involuntary part-time employment is also more prevalent than among native-born women.²² Additionally, the native-born children of immigrants exhibit lower activity rates compared to children of Belgian-born individuals.²³

¹⁹ OECD (2019). *Pensions at a Glance 2019: OECD and G20 Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris; Scholiers, B. & Vansteenkiste, S. (2018). *Uittredeleeftijd in Vlaanderen neemt versneld toe, maar kaap van 65 jaar nog niet in zicht*, Werk.Focus.

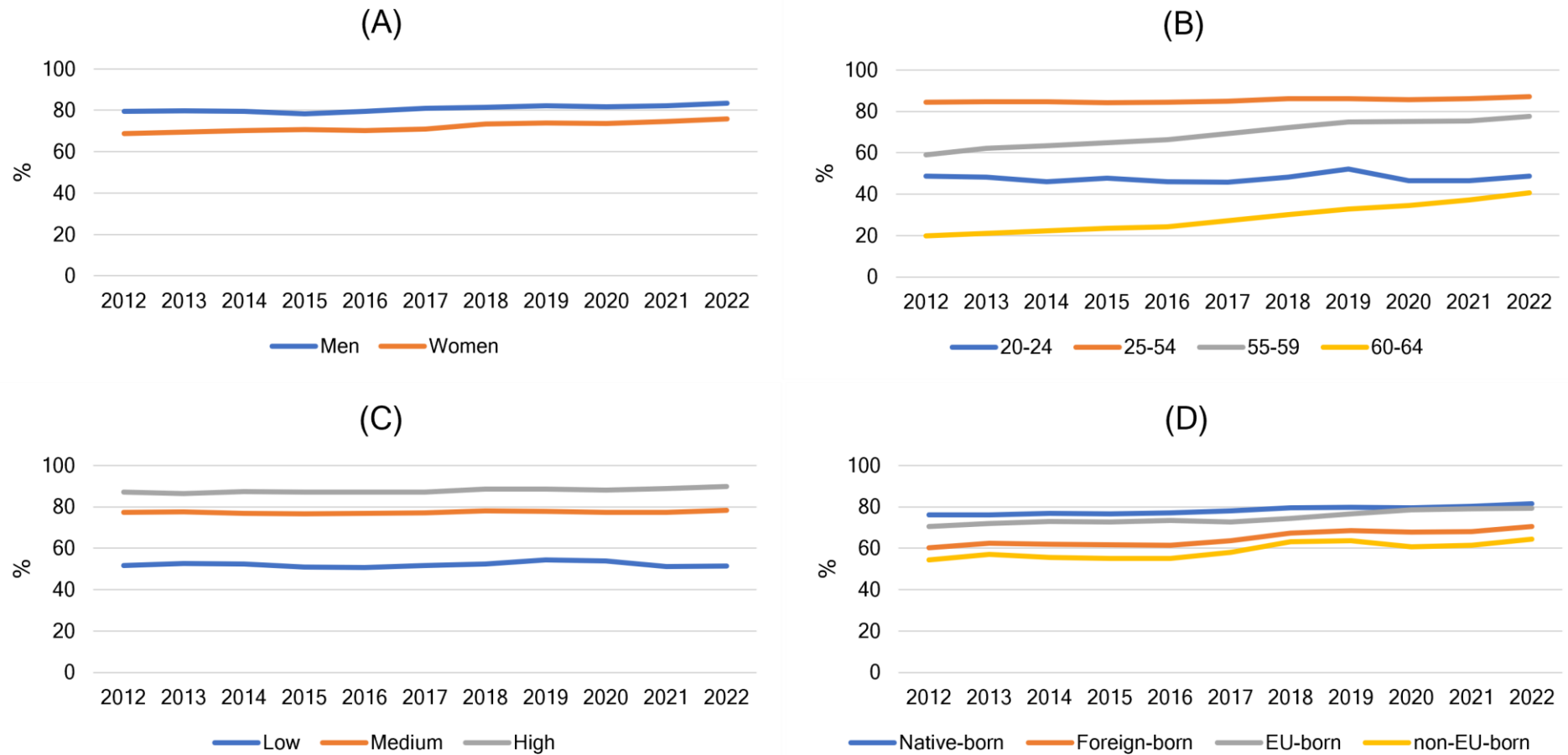
²⁰ OECD (2019), *Working Better with Age, Ageing and Employment Policies*, OECD Publishing, Paris; De Coen, A., Forrier, A., & Sels, L. (2015). The impact of age on the reservation wage: the role of employment efficacy and work intention: a study in the Belgian context. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 34(3), 83-112.

²¹ OECD (2020). *The Future for Low-Educated Workers in Belgium*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

²² Penders, I., Debroey, R., & Vansteenkiste, S. (2023). Een verborgen genderkloof: de rol van deeltijds werk in de arbeidsmarktparticipatie van vrouwen en mannen. *Over.Werk, Tijdschrift van het Steunpunt Werk*, 33(2), 20-35.

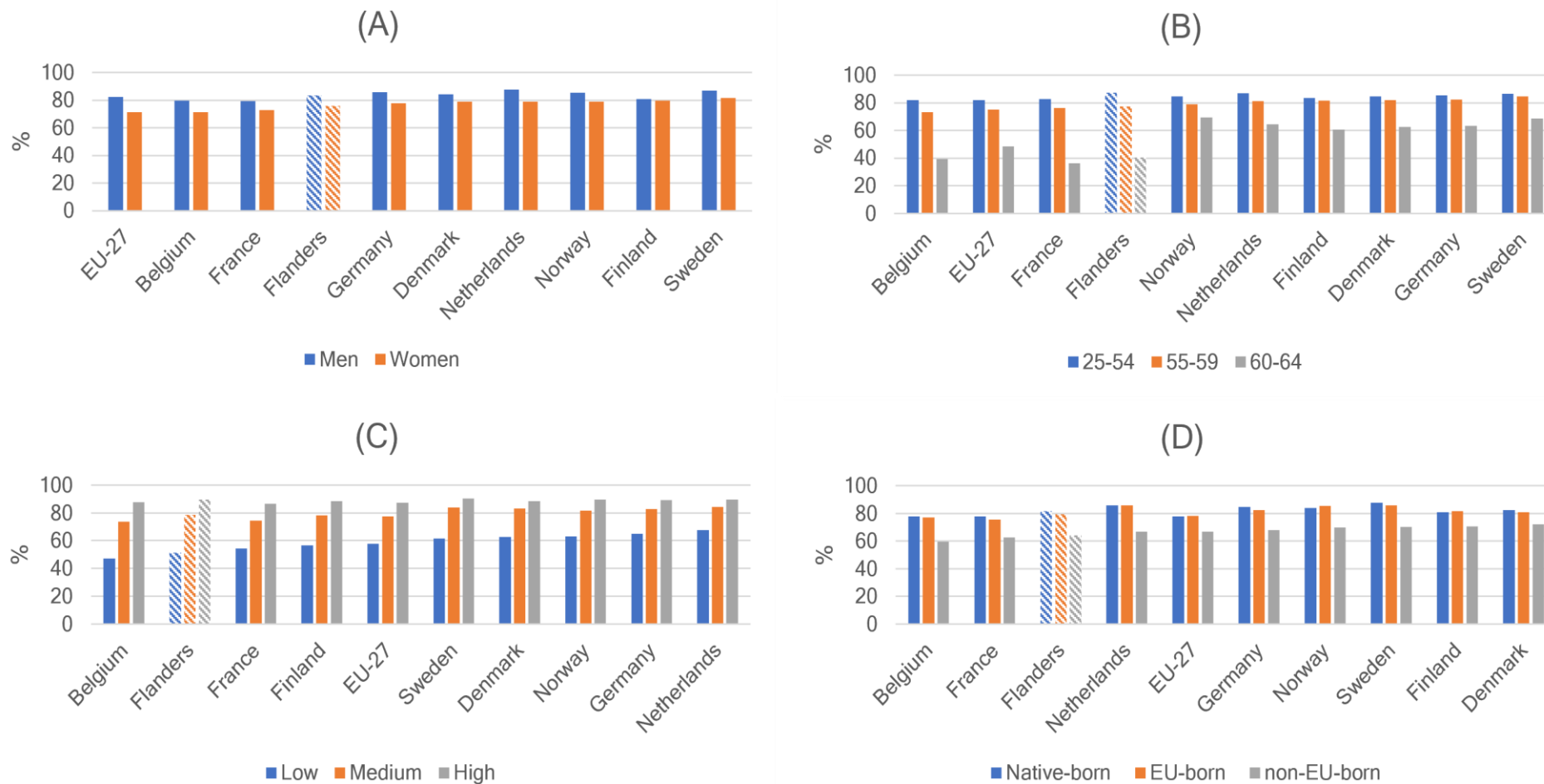
²³ OECD (2023), *Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children in Flanders, Working Together for Integration*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Figure 1.5. Employment rates by sex (A), age (B), level of education (C), and country of birth (D), Flanders, 25-64y, 2012-2022



Note: Low: at most lower secondary education (ISCED levels 0-2); Medium: at most upper secondary education (ISCED levels 3-4); High: tertiary education (ISCED levels 5 and above).
 Source: Policy Research Centre Work – Flanders in Europe, based on Eurostat-Labour Force Survey.

Figure 1.6. Employment rates by sex (A), age (B), level of education (C), and country of birth (D), Flanders and selected EEA countries, 25-64y, 2022

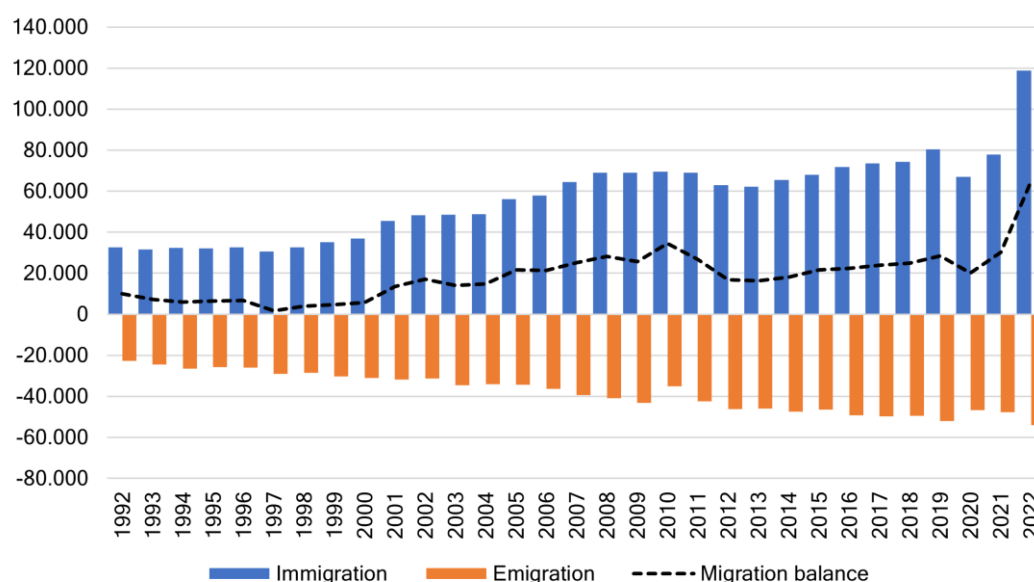


Source: Policy Research Centre Work – Flanders in Europe, based on Eurostat-Labour Force Survey.

1.2. Demographic context

Despite the current favourable employment situation, demographic developments have exerted pressure on the Flemish labour market. Since 1970, Flanders, like other EEA countries, has witnessed a significant decline in birth rates, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, the size of cohorts entering the labour market has been diminishing since the mid-1990s. Concurrently, the international migration balance between 1999 and 2023 has shown a marked increase (see Figure 1.7), along with the demand for labour fulfilled through (temporary) intra-EEA labour mobility (see section 2.3). In terms of international immigration relative to the population, Flanders positioned itself in the middle ranks among the EEA countries in 2021.²⁴

Figure 1.7. Immigration, emigration, and net migration, Flanders, 1992-2022



Note: In 2022, 40,769 of the counted immigrations involved Ukrainian nationals

Source: Statistics Flanders – International Migration

Labour market conditions in the future might be strongly affected by long-term demographic trends. The Federal Planning Bureau and Statistics Belgium regularly forecast demographic indicators and population growth in Belgium and its regions. Their report published in January 2023 provides projections for the Belgian population spanning from 2022 to 2070.²⁵ In line with trends observed in other EEA countries, Flanders is grappling with an aging population. The old-age dependency ratio, which measures the proportion of individuals aged 64 and above relative to those aged 15-64, has increased from 22% in 1992 to 34% in 2023. Projections indicate a further rise to approximately 46% by 2070. While this increase is less dramatic compared to forecasts for many other EEA countries like

²⁴ Statistics Flanders (2024). International Migration, [International migration | Flanders.be \(vlaanderen.be\)](https://www.vlaanderen.be/international-migration) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

²⁵ Statistics Belgium (2024). Population projections, [Bevolkingsvooruitzichten | Statbel \(fgov.be\)](https://www.statbel.fgov.be/bevolkingsvooruitzichten) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

Germany, France, and the Netherlands²⁶, the aging population phenomenon is poised to significantly impact future labour market dynamics, primarily through a slowdown in growth and aging of the working-age population.

The substantial acceleration of aging, marked by the labour market exit of the baby boomer generation in the period 2020-2030, is not adequately compensated for by the labour market influx of the small cohorts born after 2000. Consequently, following positive growth since 1999, the working-age population (20-64y) was projected to shift to a negative trend between 2024 and 2030. However, the negative trend was partially mitigated by the inflow of refugees from Ukraine. Updated forecasts predict a stabilization of the working-age population between 2025 and 2030. From 2031 onward, the working-age population in Flanders is expected to resume growth, persisting at least until the conclusion of the forecast period in 2070. By 2050, the projection foresees around 4.01 million individuals aged 20 to 64 in Flanders, signifying an increase of 3.3% compared to the year 2023.

Changes in net migration wield a significant influence on demographic dynamics within the labour market. Projections for Belgium under a neutral migration scenario, where immigration and emigration balance each other, reveal that the shift to a neutral migration balance from 2018 promptly triggers a contraction of the Belgian labour force in the subsequent years, attributed to demographic developments over the preceding decades. The initial contraction, around 20,000 individuals annually in 2020, is expected to intensify to approximately 30,000 individuals annually by 2030, followed by a subsequent decline to a contraction of over 20,000 individuals annually from 2035 onward. While the annual decrease may seem modest, the cumulative deficit implies an overall contraction of the labour force by approximately 8.5% between 2020 and 2035, with the primary decline concentrated in the age category of 24-54 years.²⁷

This implies that there can be a role for migration to stabilise labour supply. Indeed, the level of migration is already a primary factor influencing demographic developments. Figure 1.8 suggests that net migration has contributed substantially to the growth of the population in Flanders over the last two decades. In fact, high levels of net migration since the 2000s consistently accounted for over 50% of population growth.²⁸

The positive migration balance over recent decades has contributed to a strongly rising foreign-born population in Flanders. According to Statistics Belgium figures, the number of foreign-born residents has risen from around 400,000 in 2002 to approximately 1 million in 2023. This growth has outpaced the total population growth, so that the share of foreign-born residents in the total population has climbed from 7% in 2002 to 15% in 2022.²⁹

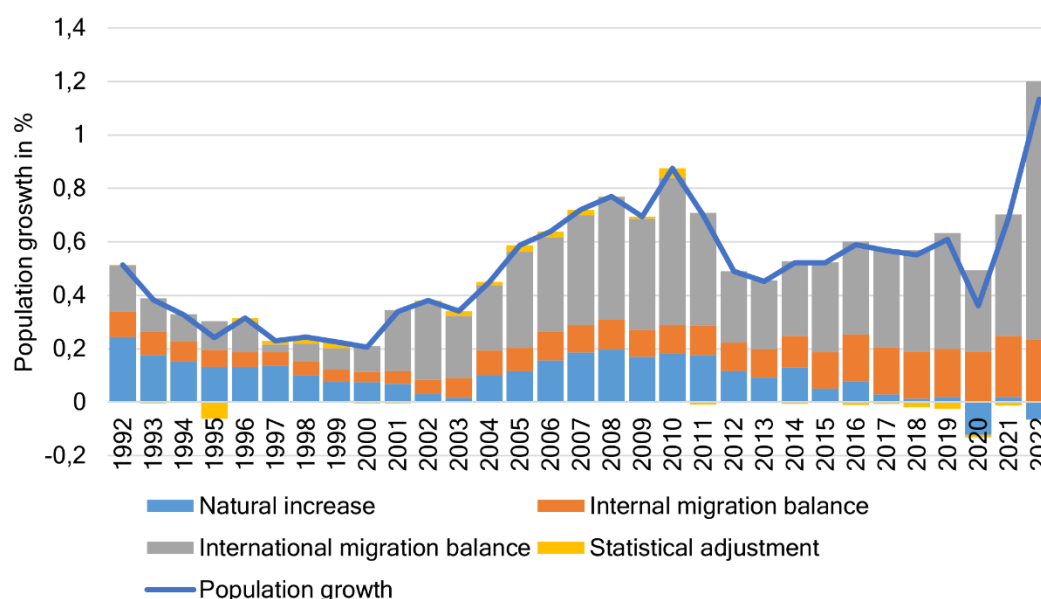
²⁶ Eurostat (2024). Demographic balances and indicators by type of projection, [Statistics | Eurostat \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&plugin=1) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

²⁷ Neels, K., Maes, J., Biegel, N., & Wood, J. (2020). It's the demography, stupid! Arbeidsmigratie in een context van structurele ontgroening en arbeidsmarktuittrede van de babyboomgeneratie. *Tijdschrift voor Arbeidsvraagstukken*, 36(2); Duyck, J., Paul, J.M., & Vandresse, M. (2018). *Perspectives démographiques 2016-2060: Analyses de sensibilité, scénarios alternatifs et effets budgétaires et sociaux*. (Vol. Working Paper 1-18). Brussels: Federal Planning Bureau.

²⁸ According to projections, population growth in the Flemish Region will remain robust with an average annual increase of 27,000 residents between 2022 and 2070, slightly lower than the preceding 30 years, during which there was an annual growth of 30,000 residents. The primary contributors to this growth are anticipated to be the internal migration balance (migration from other regions) and the international migration balance (international immigration). Projecting the future extent of migration, however, remains challenging, primarily due to geopolitical uncertainties. See Statistics Belgium (2024). Population projections, [Bevolkingsvooruitzichten | Statbel \(fgov.be\)](https://statbel.fgov.be/en/themes/population) (Accessed on 18 January 2024).

²⁹ Statistics Belgium (2024). Origin, [Origin | Statbel \(fgov.be\)](https://statbel.fgov.be/en/themes/population) (Accessed on 23 January 2024).

Figure 1.8. Population movement and its components, Flanders, 1992-2022



Note: Natural increase refers to the changes in a population that occur due to births and deaths, while internal migration involves movements between regions. International migration pertains to movements across borders, whether incoming (immigration) or outgoing (emigration). The balances in these aspects are calculated by subtracting the respective numbers (births-deaths, internal migration movements, international immigration-emigration) within a specified reference year.

Source: Statistics Belgium – Population movement.

1.3. Labour shortages and mismatch

Demographic developments and high economic growth, which followed the long 2008-2014 economic recession, have sharply increased labour shortages in Flanders. Since 2014, all indicators of shortage have shown a strong upward trend, experiencing a temporary decline in 2020 due to the COVID-19 crisis, but reaching a record-high peak in 2022, with a slight alleviation in 2023.

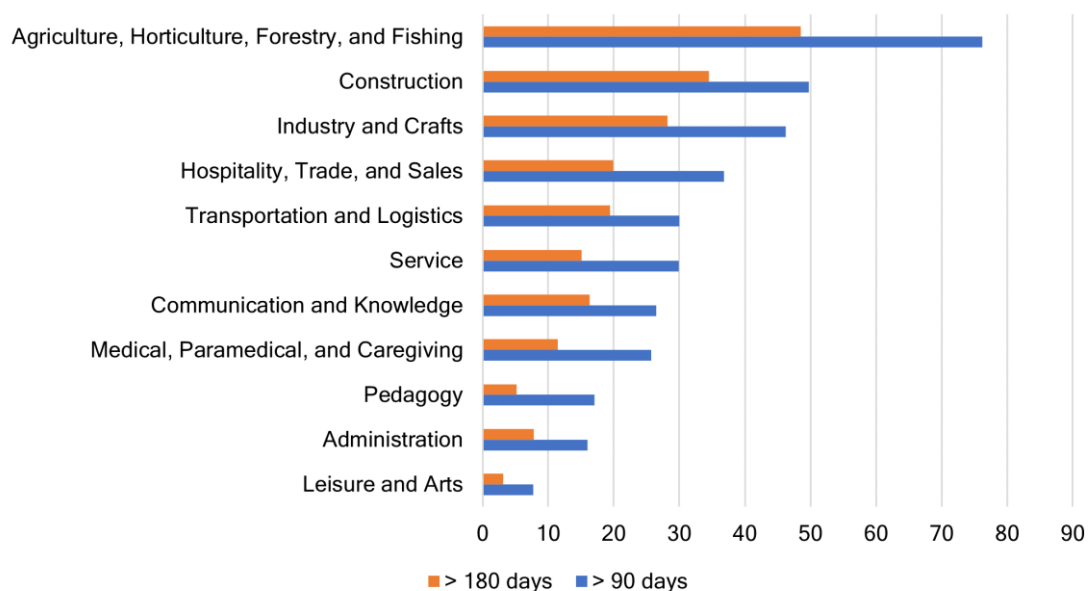
The monthly average number of vacancies received by VDAB (which covers only a part of the labour market, see Box 1-1) more than doubled from 13,000 in 2014 to 27,000 in 2023. The monthly average for the total number of open job vacancies experienced an even more significant surge, increasing by 179% from 25,000 in 2014 to 70,000 in 2023. The number of open vacancies has universally increased across all occupational groups. As of 2023, the highest numbers of open vacancies were observed in professions such as cleaning and maintenance staff, construction workers and technicians, agricultural, horticultural, forestry, and fishing workers, nurses and caregivers, salespeople, specialized administrative workers, educational and managerial staff in schools, and hospitality staff.

Furthermore, the average duration of a vacancy has risen. The proportion of bottleneck vacancies, defined as vacancies lasting longer than 90 days, increased from 16% of the total in 2014 to 34% in 2022. Meanwhile, the percentage of severe bottleneck vacancies, lasting longer than 180 days, increased from 7% to 19%.³⁰ In 2022, vacancies lasting longer than 90 days accounted for approximately 76% in agricultural, horticultural, forestry, and fishing occupations; 50% in construction occupations; 46% in industrial and crafts occupations; 37% in hospitality, trade and sales; and 30% in

³⁰ Compilation by the OECD based on a data request made to VDAB on 12 February 2024).

transportation and logistics occupations. These same occupational groups also exhibited the highest proportions of vacancies lasting longer than 180 days (see Figure 1.9).

Figure 1.9. Share of (severe) bottleneck vacancies by occupational group, Flanders, 2022



Note: In certain cases, a high proportion of bottleneck vacancies can also result from a lengthy recruitment process. For some occupations, the number of vacancies is relatively low, which affects the proportion of bottleneck vacancies. When calculating bottleneck vacancies, no differentiation is made between filled and cancelled positions. Vacancies for shortage occupations cancelled within 90 days due to the absence of suitable candidates are not classified as bottleneck vacancies.

Source: VDAB.

Box 1-1. Statistics on vacancies

The two main providers of data on vacancies are the Flemish public employment service (VDAB) and Statistics Belgium.

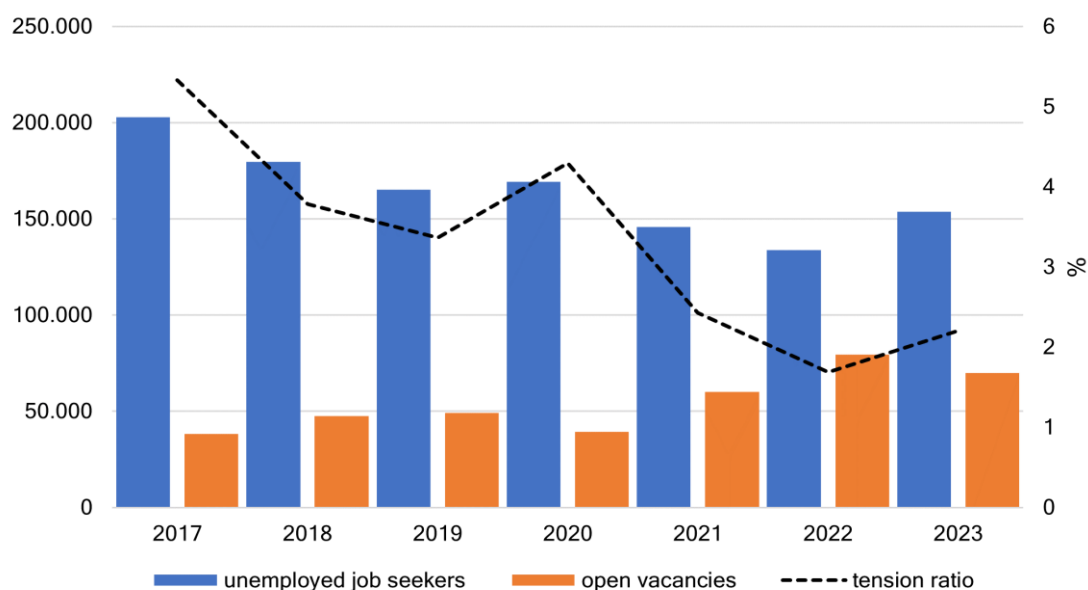
All statistics in this chapter on job vacancies from VDAB are based on regular economic channels directly reported to VDAB, including those outside of Flanders. These channels cover jobs with indefinite or long-term contracts (excluding self-employed positions), work and learning combinations, and short-term contracts (excluding temporary assignments and student jobs). Vacancies for temporary assignments, self-employed positions, student jobs, and those reported through recruitment and selection agencies are not included to maintain accuracy and comparability. While the VDAB vacancy database allows for a detailed analysis of job offerings from Flemish employers, it has limitations. The main limitation is that the VDAB database only covers a portion of the total job market. Job offers advertised in newspapers or conveyed through informal channels (such as internal staff, spontaneous applications, schools) are often not reported to VDAB and therefore not included in the figures presented here.

Statistics Belgium complements VDAB data with a detailed analysis of job vacancies based on representative employer surveys which are conducted on a quarterly basis. The survey population consists of enterprises with at least one employee. Activities of households, self-employed and extraterritorial organisations and bodies (embassies, consulates, European institutions, WCO, NATO) are not included. Since 2014, all enterprises from sections B to S from the NACE rev 2 are analysed. A job vacancy is defined as a paid post that is newly created, unoccupied, or about to become vacant, for which the employer is taking active steps and is prepared to take further steps to find a suitable candidate from outside the enterprise concerned; and which the employer intends to fill either immediately or within a specific period of time. A vacant post that is only open to internal candidates is not considered as a 'job vacancy'. An 'occupied post' is a paid post within the organisation to which an employee has been assigned. The job vacancy rate (JVR) measures the proportion of total posts that are vacant, according to the definition of job vacancy above.

Source: VDAB – Arvastat, [Arvastat \(vdab.be\)](https://www.arvastat.vdab.be/); Statistics Belgium – Job Vacancy, [Job vacancy | Statbel \(fgov.be\)](https://www.statbel.fgov.be/en/themes/employment/job-vacancies)

Alongside a surge in open vacancies, the labour market in Flanders has experienced a notable decrease in the number of unemployed job seekers, leading to increased labour market tightness (see Figure 1.10). Whereas at the end of 2017 there were still 5.3 unemployed job seekers per open vacancy, by 2022, this had dropped to 1.7 unemployed job seekers. For highly educated individuals, the tension ratio was even lower, at 1.2. In 2023, the tension ratio saw a slight increase to 2.2, signalling a modest easing of tightness on the Flemish labour market.

Figure 1.10. Monthly average number of unemployed job seekers vs. open vacancies (left axis), and tension ratio (right axis), Flanders, 2017-2023



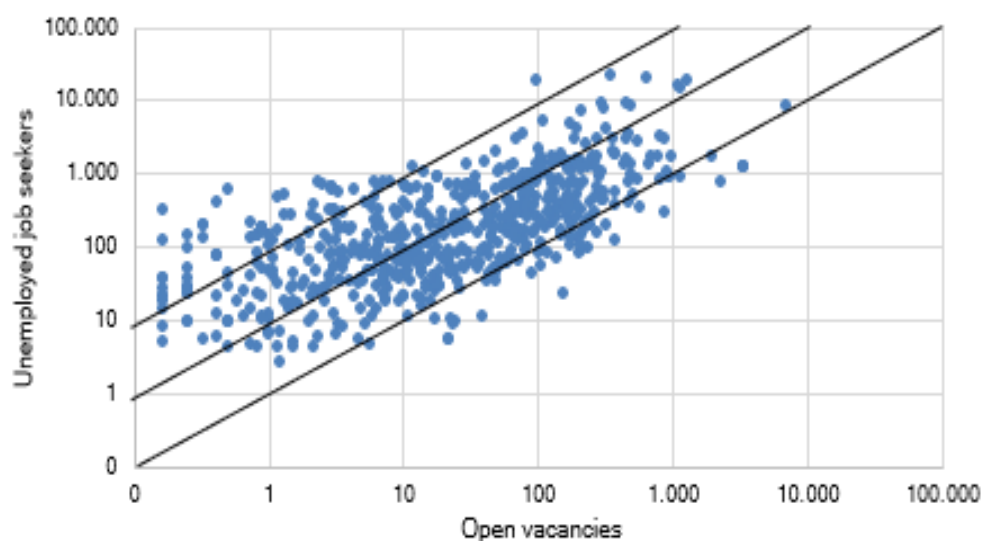
Note: Unemployed job seekers refer specifically to individuals in mediation with VDAB. Vacancies are limited to those originating from regular economic channels without temporary assignments and those directly reported to VDAB (see Box 1-1).

Source: VDAB – Arvastat.

The tension ratio of 2.2 spans across all of Flanders. Figure 1.11 visually represents the fluctuation in tension ratios among different occupations.³¹ These ratios categorize occupations into four groups: those with fewer than one candidate per vacancy (comprising 11% of the total), fewer than ten candidates per vacancy (58%), fewer than 100 candidates per vacancy (34%), and fewer than 1000 candidates per vacancy (8%). The most critical category (tension ratio < 1) primarily includes (para)medics and nurses, construction workers and technicians, industrial technicians, teaching and managerial staff in schools, as well as employees in fruit cultivation and butchers. In the second category (tension ratio < 10), occupational groups such as (technical) managers, various production workers, hospitality staff, metalworkers, bank and insurance experts, sellers, transport and logistics personnel, electricians and electromechanics, ICT professionals, machinists and crane operators, as well as cleaning and maintenance personnel, are found.

³¹ Note that the count of job seekers per occupation relies on self-declared occupational preferences provided by individuals registered with VDAB. There is uncertainty regarding the accuracy of these declarations, as job seekers may not always list their actual occupations. Additionally, job seekers have the option to list multiple occupations; a job seeker who listed nurse and caretaker is counted in both occupations.

Figure 1.11. Monthly average number of open vacancies vs monthly average number of unemployed job seekers per occupation, Flanders, 2023



Source: VDAB – Arvastat.

These occupations all face a shortage of available job seekers in the Flemish labour market. Labour shortages can result from various factors, including not only quantitative aspects but also qualitative dimensions and issues related to working conditions. The VDAB's published list of shortage occupations for the 2023 situation provides some answers to the cause of shortages (see Box 1-2). Out of the 241 shortage occupations, 56% arose from quantitative causes, often from a simple imbalance between the supply and demand for labour. On the other hand, 75% of the occupations had qualitative causes that may stem from a skills mismatch, where the skills possessed by the available workforce do not align with the specific needs of employers. Additionally, working conditions, such as low wages, poor benefits, or challenging work environments, played a crucial role in 51% of the occupations. Notably, the list highlights that 13% of the shortage occupations arise from a blend of quantitative, qualitative, and working condition factors. Furthermore, 55% are ascribed to a combination of two factors, while only 31% are associated with a single factor.

Box 1-2. Methodology of the VDAB shortage occupation list

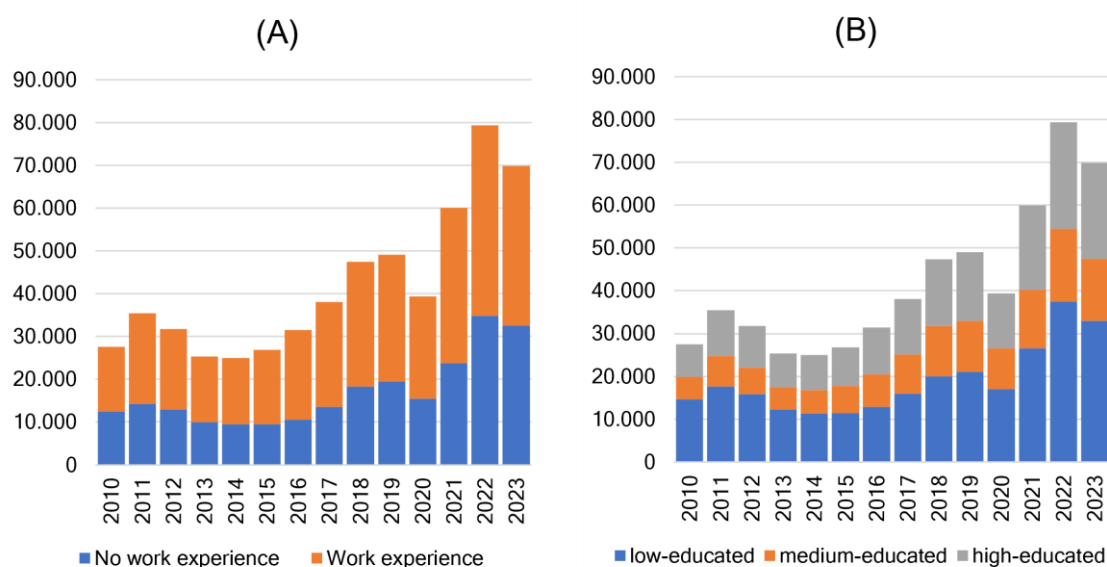
The yearly VDAB investigation into shortage occupations is based on two pillars: a quantitative analysis of VDAB data on job vacancies and job seekers, and a qualitative survey involving VDAB experts and relevant sector organizations. All occupations listed must adhere to specific criteria. Firstly, VDAB must receive a minimum of 50 job vacancies from the standard economic sector or at least 150 agency orders for a particular profession. Secondly, one of the following conditions must be satisfied: (1) the ratio of job seekers to vacancies falls below the median value for jobs in the standard economic sector, (2) the indicator for prolonged vacancy duration surpasses the median value for standard sector jobs, or (3) the percentage of filled vacancies falls below the sector median. The third criterion necessitates positive feedback from labour market experts. Occupations lacking adequate vacancies may still qualify if they meet all three conditions from the second criterion and receive positive expert recommendations.

Source: VDAB (2020). Wanneer is een beroep een knelpuntberoep? Methodologie VDAB.

Specific technical skills and a diploma or a certificate appear to be major reasons for why some vacancies are harder to fill than others. At the same time, it is noteworthy that 47% of the open vacancies in 2023 did not require any work experience, and 49% did not mandate more than a lower secondary education degree (see Figure 1.12). Hence, many shortage occupations in sectors such as transportation, construction, manufacturing, or personal and community services do not require a lengthy educational investment.

Dutch language requirements pose a notable challenge, however, even for lower-skilled positions. In 2021, eight out of ten vacancies received by VDAB mandated (very) good Dutch language skills, limiting opportunities for migrant job seekers. Additionally, certain sectors such as construction, personal services, hospitality, sales, food processing, agriculture, healthcare, and education may struggle to attract local job seekers due to factors such as low wages, undesirable working conditions, or negative perceptions and stigma. In a context of relatively generous unemployment benefits, it is challenging to incentivise unemployed individuals to pursue these occupations.

Figure 1.12. Number of open vacancies by required work experience and education level, Flanders 2010-2023



Source: VDAB – Arvastat.

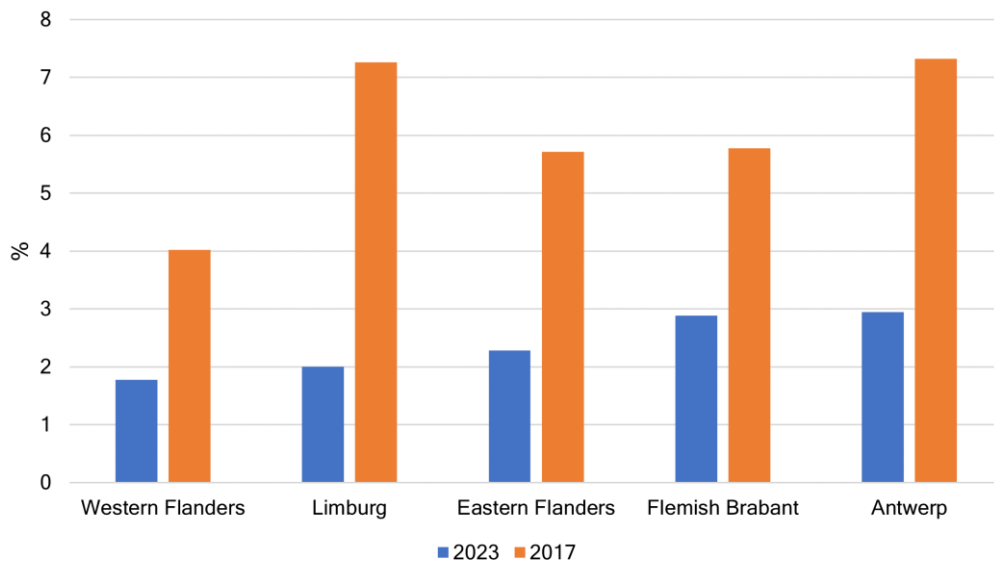
The regional disparity in Flanders reappears in vacancy and shortage statistics. In Western Flanders, the situation is particularly critical, with a tension ratio of 1.8 in 2023 (see Figure 1.13). Limburg has experienced a significant reduction in its tension ratio since 2017, making it the second province with the tightest labour market in 2023. Conversely, the labour markets in Antwerp and Flemish Brabant are less strained, with an average of 2.9 unemployed job seekers per open vacancy. Local variations among occupations experiencing labour shortages are also noteworthy. For example, the shortage of candidates for preschool or primary school teaching positions, with 5 candidates per vacancy, is a less urgent issue in Limburg. In contrast, Eastern Flanders has a mere 0.5 job seeker per vacancy interested in these teaching roles. Disparities between provinces and regions are also evident in other occupations, such as roofers, butchers, or R&D technicians in electricity and electronics. The regional gap in demand and supply is particularly pronounced for industrial occupations, with nine out of the top twenty jobs exhibiting the largest differences in tension ratio between provinces falling within this category. Western Flanders consistently stands out as the province with the tightest labour market, emphasizing the significant demand for technically skilled personnel in the province.³²

The persistent unemployment disparities across provinces in Flanders are also attributed to low labour mobility. Apart from residents of Flemish Brabant province who frequently commute to Brussels, the number of commuters to a province different from their residence remains limited to at most a few percent of the working population. The insufficient mobility within Flanders are often attributed to structural barriers such as the language barrier, traffic congestion, or the relatively high level of home ownership.³³

³² VDAB (2024). Occupation in numbers, [Beroepen in Cijfers | VDAB](#) (Accessed on 2 February 2024).

³³ Duprez, C., & Nautet, M. (2019). De economische stromen tussen de Belgische gewesten. NBB, Economisch Tijdschrift.

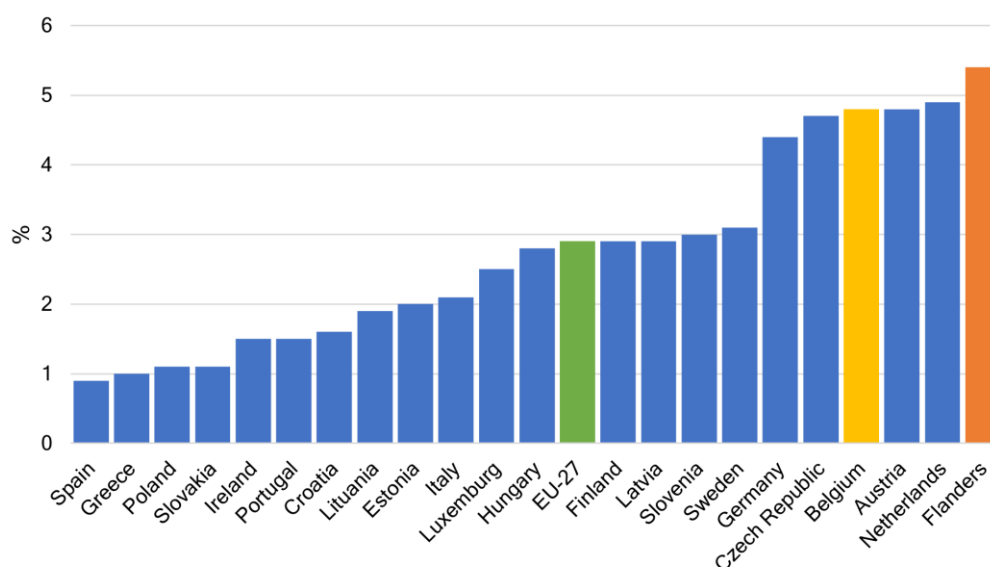
Figure 1.13. Tension ratio by Flemish province, 2017 and 2023.



Source: VDAB – Arvastat.

Job vacancy statistics, gathered by Statistics Belgium (see Box 1-1), offer supplementary insights into the extent and composition of labour demand. Much like VDAB vacancies, these job openings exhibit a notable upward trajectory. From 2014 to 2022, the number of job vacancies surged by 172%, rising from around 51,000 to 138,000. The job vacancy rate, which compares the number of job vacancies to the total number of jobs within an enterprise, serves as a valuable indicator of *unmet* labour demand. Over the years, the job vacancy rate in Flanders has steadily increased, from 2.3% in 2014 to 5.4% in 2022. This means that 5.4% of jobs in Flanders were vacant in 2022, the highest value in the EU, followed by the Netherlands, Austria and Belgium overall (see Figure 1.14)

Figure 1.14. Percentage of job vacancies in relation to the number of posts (job vacancies and occupied posts), Flanders and EU countries, 2022

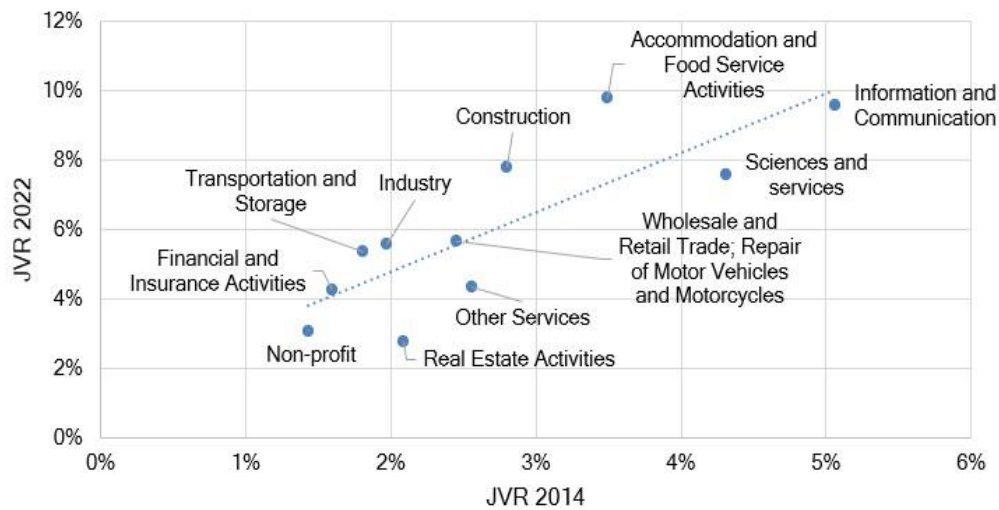


Note: The data for Denmark and France is not available

Source: Eurostat & Statistics Belgium – Job Vacancy Statistics

There are 4.6 times more job vacancies in large and medium-sized enterprises than in small enterprises (less than 10 employees). Despite this, the job vacancy rate remains higher in small enterprises at 7.4%, compared to 5.1% in large and medium-sized enterprises. Furthermore, there are 5.4 times more job vacancies for permanent positions than for temporary positions, yet the job vacancy rate remains significantly higher for temporary positions at 21.6%, compared to 4.7% for permanent positions. Job vacancy rates are higher for certain sectors, led by accommodation and food service activities, information and communication, professional, scientific, and technical activities, and construction (see Figure 1.15). Across all sectors, job vacancy rates experienced growth from 2014 to 2022. However, the most substantial increases were observed in transportation and storage, industry, accommodation and food service activities, and construction.

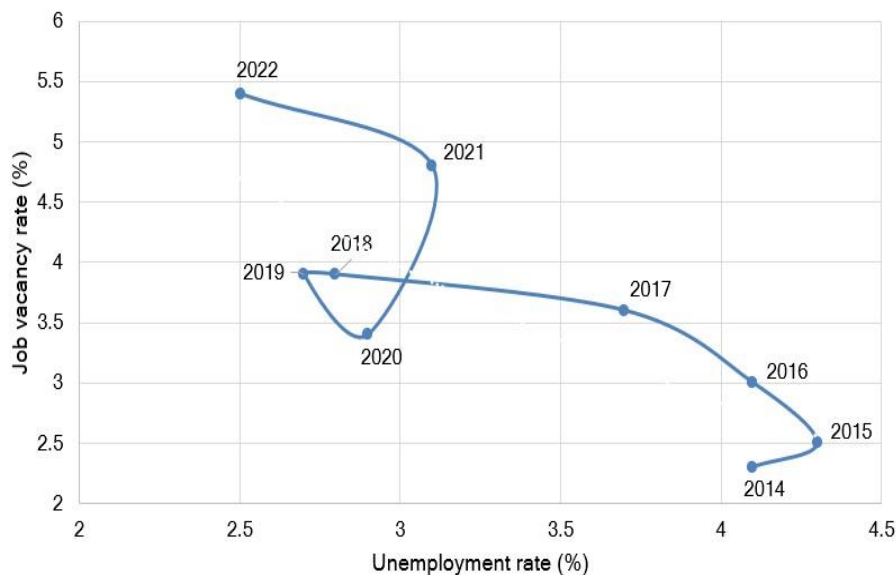
Figure 1.15. Job vacancy rate by sector, Flanders, 2014 and 2022



Source: Statistics Belgium – Job Vacancy Statistics.

The Beveridge curve serves as a commonly utilized tool in discussions regarding labour market mismatch, illustrating the relationship between the job vacancy and unemployment rates. In Flanders, the Beveridge curve suggests an uptick in qualitative labour market mismatches in recent years (see Figure 1.16). Between 2014 and 2020, movements followed the average curve. However, from 2020 to 2021, both unemployment and vacancies increased simultaneously, indicating a rise in qualitative labour market mismatches. This appears to be a temporary increase due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as in 2022, the trend returned to the average curve.

Figure 1.16. Beveridge Curve, Flanders, 2014-2022

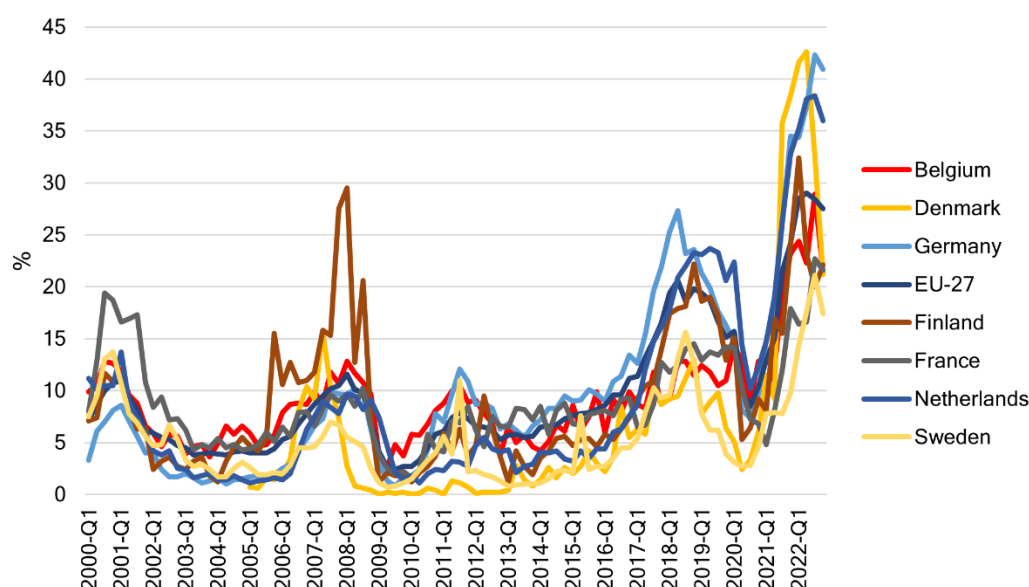


Source: Statistics Belgium – Job Vacancy Statistics, Policy Research Centre Work – Flanders in Europe

1.4. Consequences of labour shortages

All indicators suggest that the Flemish labour market remains very tight for the time being. The adverse effects of increased labour shortages are evident in the notable rise in the proportion of businesses encountering production impediments. When surveyed in the fourth quarter of 2022 as part of the Eurostat Business and Consumer Surveys, 21.4% of employers in the Belgian manufacturing industry indicated that labour shortages hold back their production (see Figure 1.17). In the previous quarter, this figure stood even at 28.9%, and it had fluctuated between 2.7% and 14.4% between 2000 and 2020. This places Belgium slightly below the EU average and well below the Netherlands and Germany. However, it is expected that employers in Flanders are more frequently facing labour shortages than in Belgium overall.

Figure 1.17. Percentage of companies in the manufacturing industry facing production constraints due to a lack of labour, Belgium and selected EU countries, 2000-2022



Source: Policy Research Centre Work – Mismatch: tightness on the labour market, based on Eurostat business and consumer surveys.

Results of the Manpower Talent Survey, an employer survey conducted by the private sector, paint a similar picture. In 2023, 80% of the employers in Belgium reported difficulties filling jobs due to lack of available talent, compared with an average share of 78% in EU countries. Belgium is just outside the top ten EU countries where employers appear to face more difficulties in recruiting skilled labour.³⁴

The available evidence indicates that labour shortages in Flanders are both acute and widespread. The tightness in the labour market is not solely a cyclical phenomenon but certainly also possesses a structural dimension, arising from an escalating demand for replacements of retiring individuals aged 55 and over, as well as a delayed entry of young individuals into the workforce. Projections by the Policy Research Centre Work anticipate that the total net outflow of individuals aged 55 and over will increase from 269,000 persons between 2017-2022 to around 397,000 (equivalent to 13.3% of the working-age employed population) between 2022-2027, and will then remain stable between 2027-2032. In other

³⁴ Manpower Talent Survey (2024). Talent Shortage, [Talent Shortage \(manpowergroup.com\)](https://www.manpowergroup.com) (Accessed on 25 January 2024).

words, the replacement demand created by the retirement of older cohorts will peak in Flanders over the next decade, because older cohorts moving into retirement are larger than those which follow them.³⁵

While a rising number of job vacancies is anticipated across almost all sectors, variations in future recruitment needs are expected to be significant.³⁶ Over the period from 2022 to 2030, the business services sector (including the rapidly growing consultancy sector) is expected to exhibit the highest demand, with approximately 40,000 yearly vacancies. Following closely behind is the social services sector (encompassing nurses and caregivers), with an estimated 34,500 vacancies. Additionally, the services related to buildings sector (including domestic service workers operating under the service voucher system³⁷), are projected to have around 30,600 vacancies. Sectors such as retail, construction, transportation, and logistics are each expected to have between 25,000 and 30,000 vacancies during this period. In relative terms, when measured against the sector's employment, the hotel and tourism sector exhibit the highest recruitment demand, followed by services related to buildings, business services, and the ICT sector.

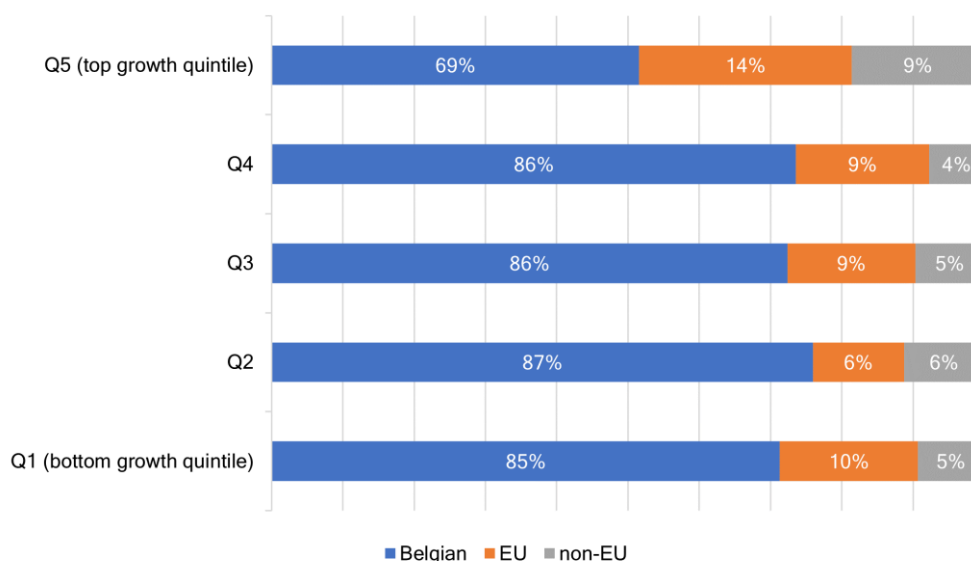
Evidence regarding the distribution of new hires across sectors between 2014 and 2019 indicates that foreign-born workers (both from within and outside the EU) in Flanders tend to gravitate towards employment opportunities in expanding sectors. As depicted in Figure 1.18, the proportion of migrants among all entries in the top growth quintile (23%) significantly exceeded that in lower quintiles. The primary sectors within the top growth quintile, demonstrating a notable reliance on migrants to fill their new vacancies, included temporary employment activities, food and beverage service activities, crop and animal production and related service activities, as well as services related to buildings and landscape activities (which encompass domestic service voucher workers).

³⁵ Policy Research Centre Work (2024). Replacement demand 55+, [Vervangingsvraag 55+ - Steunpunt Werk](#) (Accessed on 25 January 2024).

³⁶ Neefs, B., & Vansteenkiste, S. (2022). De aanwervingsbehoefte in de Vlaamse sectoren richting 2030. *Over.Werk. Tijdschrift van het Steunpunt Werk*, 32(1), 29-40; Policy Research Centre Work (2024). Sector projections, [Sectorprojecties - Steunpunt Werk](#) (Accessed on 25 January 2024).

³⁷ In 2004, Belgium implemented a comprehensive system of social vouchers on the non-care domestic service market, called "dienstencheques". Since 2016, the regions have jurisdiction for the follow-up and implementation of the service voucher scheme, which in Flanders is managed by WEWIS. The scheme subsidises a restricted list of household services including cleaning, washing, and ironing.

Figure 1.18. Migrants as a percentage of new hires in growing and declining sectors, Flanders, 2014-2019



Note: Quintiles were determined using growth rates in total employment from the period spanning 2014 to 2019. Seasonal workers are not accounted for in this figure (see section 2.3.1).

Source: DynaM – NSSO and HIVA-KU Leuven.

1.5. The expected role of labour migration in meeting labour shortages

To address (impending) labour shortages, which are deemed urgent by all relevant stakeholders, Flanders has set out an overall labour market strategy and government programme.³⁸ In this context, labour migration is identified as one of the strategies to meet the demand for workers, alongside efforts to boost employment rates among groups with lower participation rates.

The primary focus of activation and upskilling policies is on the (long-term) unemployed. Yet, given historically low unemployment, the Flemish government is increasingly prioritising the activation of individuals who are not (yet) active in the labour market. Target groups are the sick and disabled and (newly arrived) migrants, particularly migrant women. This shift presents a challenge due to the relatively limited unmet demand for employment in Flanders. The groups categorized as ‘labour market slack,’ which encompasses individuals available for work but not actively seeking employment, and those seeking work but not immediately available, constitute only 3.8% of the non-economically active population in Flanders. In comparison, the EU average was 8.4% in 2021. This indicates that a larger proportion of the non-economically active population in Flanders has a less direct connection to the

³⁸ Flemish Government (2019). Regeerakkoord van de Vlaamse Regering 2019-2024, [Regeerakkoord van de Vlaamse Regering 2019-2024 | Vlaanderen.be](#); Minister of Work and Social Economy (2019). Beleidsnota 2019-2024. Werk en sociale economie, [Beleidsnota 2019-2024. Werk en sociale economie | Vlaanderen.be](#); SERV (2022). VESOC-werkgelegenheidsakkoord iedereen nodig, iedereen mee, [VESOC-werkgelegenheidsakkoord iedereen nodig, iedereen mee. 40 maatregelen voor de Vlaamse arbeidsmarkt | Vlaanderen.be](#).

labour market compared to many other EEA countries. Consequently, a more substantial effort is required to integrate them into the labour force.³⁹

An additional component of the overarching strategy to address labour shortages involves promoting intra-regional and cross-border mobility. Employment rates in Brussels and Wallonia are among the lowest in the EU (see Figure 1.1). The substantial labour demand in Flanders, coupled with a sizable pool of job seekers in Brussels and Wallonia, presents an opportunity to further enhance commuting patterns.⁴⁰ To facilitate this, VDAB has forged collaboration agreements with Actiris (Brussels) and Forem (Wallonia), establishing joint action plans. These plans include automatic exchange of vacancies, facilitating workplace learning for job seekers from other regions, proactively guiding job seekers towards Flemish vacancies, and implementing specific initiatives such as language training and job application training.⁴¹ Simultaneously, Flanders is investing in disseminating job vacancies to French and Dutch job seekers through collaborations with France Travail (Northern France) and UWV (the Netherlands).

While it is challenging to precisely quantify the extent of the labour shortage anticipated in the upcoming decade, relying solely on activation and upskilling policies, along with intra-regional mobility, may not be sufficient to meet the expected demand. Consequently, an increased reliance on recruiting foreign workers is considered a partial solution in most scenarios.

Going forward, to comprehensively guide policy decisions on the necessity and potential scale of labour migration in the upcoming decades, Flanders could benefit from a stronger evidence base. The Policy Research Centre Work is taking steps towards identifying future short- and long-term labour market needs through integrated labour market projections at the sector, occupation, and skill levels. Sector federations and organizations also do labour market projections (e.g., Be The Change – Agoria). Demographic projections from Statbel and the Federal Planning Bureau help to anticipate future labour market needs, but they rely on cohort-component methods, which are limited by simplified assumptions about migrants' labour market outcomes (see Box 1-3). Notably, basic information on labour migration stocks and flows by category, on stay rates, and on occupational pathways and outcomes remains difficult to obtain, irregularly published and not widely disseminated.

³⁹ Sourbron, M., & Vansteenkiste, S. (2022). De onvervulde arbeidswens van Vlaanderen in Europees perspectief. *Over.Werk. Tijdschrift van het Steunpunt Werk*, 32(1), 18-28; Vansteenkiste, S., Sourbron, M., Scholiers, B., Van Onacker, E., De Graeve, P., & De Smet, R. (2019). Een inclusieve benadering van het arbeidspotentieel van de Vlaamse bevolking op basis van enquête- en administratieve data (Werk.Rapport 2019 nr.1). Leuven: Steunpunt Werk.

⁴⁰ In 2019-2020, 51,533 Brussels residents, constituting 15.4% of the employed population in Brussels, commuted to the Flemish Region for work. Similarly, 56,371 Walloons, representing 4.8% of the employed population in Wallonia, worked on the other side of the language border in 2019-2020. See Department of Work and Social Economy (2023). *Interregionale tewerkstellingszones op basis van een vraag- en aanbodanalyse*, [Interregionale tewerkstellingszones op basis van een vraag- en aanbodanalyse | Vlaanderen.be](#) (Accessed on 26 January 2024).

⁴¹ Furthermore, starting in 2024, the concept of 'suitable employment' in Belgian unemployment legislation will be revised, allowing job seekers to be compelled to accept job offers in another region, adhering to standard limits concerning travel time/distance and job suitability.

Box 1-3. Anticipating tomorrow's need for labour migration: from cohort-component projection to dynamic microsimulation

The potential impact of international migration on future population prospects in Belgium and Flanders has been extensively documented. The majority of projections use classic cohort-component projections, in which the aggregated distribution of the population by age and gender is projected based on plausible assumptions regarding expected changes in birth rates, mortality rates by age and gender, and assumptions about the magnitude of international net migration and the profile of these migrants by age and gender. Since the analysis relies on aggregated numbers by age and gender, differentiation based on additional characteristics is challenging unless a specific distribution is imposed on the aggregated results based on additional assumptions. As a result, these projections typically rely on simplifying assumptions, such as that immigrants immediately adopt the same activity and employment rates as the residential population. However, such assumptions are unrealistic, as labour market participation and employment vary significantly by migration characteristics (place of birth, category of entry, migration generation, and duration of residence).

The available data infrastructure has surpassed this classical methodology. Based on census and registry data, numerous demographic (age, gender, and household composition), migration (origin, generation, duration of residence), and other labour market-relevant features (education level, field of study, work experience) are available at the individual level. The longitudinal nature of registry data also allows determining, based on such characteristics, the chances of future demographic changes and labour market transitions. These transition chances can then be applied at the individual level to the relevant risk populations to simulate population and labour market dynamics, differentiated by these characteristics - *ceteris paribus* or in response to changed policies.

Given the demographic outlooks in Flanders (Belgium), it appears advisable to structurally establish the necessary data infrastructure for microsimulation models, allowing for the differentiation of labour market dynamics based on migration background and assessing the impact of policy measures, to establish not only an evidence-based labour market policy but also an evidence-based labour migration policy.

Source: Neels, K., & Wood, J. (2019). Arbeidsmarktbeleid in een context van diversiteit: (gegevens)infrastructuur voor de toekomst. Over.werk : tijdschrift van het Steunpunt Werk, 29(1), 130-135.

2 Evolution and characteristics of labour migration to Flanders

This chapter provides a quantitative analysis of labour migration to Flanders in recent years, with a focus on labour migration from outside the EEA⁴², which falls under the jurisdiction of the Flemish government. Section 2.1 discusses the evolution of total migration flows to Flanders and the importance of labour migration in these flows. Section 2.2 discusses labour migrants' characteristics, their propensity to stay in Flanders and their employment outcomes, comparing them with migrants entering through other channels. These sections draw upon data from first-issued residence permits to distinguish labour migrants from other migrant categories (see Box 2-1). It is important to note that, as per the Belgian migration system, residence permits are typically required for migrants intending to stay 90 days or longer, meaning that shorter stays for the purpose of work are not captured. Flanders receives many temporary non-EEA labour migrants, often posted from other EEA countries. Section 2.3 uses data on short-term work permits and postings for Flanders to analyse these temporary labour migration and mobility flows. Finally, based on residence permit and enrolment data, Section 2.4 presents an overview of international students in Flanders because they can become labour migrants if they stay and find employment.

Obviously, many immigrants from non-EEA countries who come for reasons other than employment (family, humanitarian) also have good skills and are part of the labour market. Enhancing the labour market integration of immigrants who did not arrive for employment and making better use of their skills has been one of the priorities of the Flemish Government in recent years, but with limited success to date (see section 1.1). An analysis of these flows, their management and their labour market contribution, is beyond the scope of this report.⁴³ Owing to data limitations, this report also does not encompass irregular migrants – individuals entering Belgium without valid documents or overstaying the duration of their residence permit – despite their likely substantial contribution to labour supply in Flanders, especially in sectors such as construction, domestic services, and hospitality.⁴⁴

⁴² Unless specified otherwise, the term 'EEA' in this chapter includes Switzerland.

⁴³ For a discussion, see OECD (2023). Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children in Flanders, Working Together for Integration, OECD Publishing, Paris.

⁴⁴ Using mortality data, Surkyn et al. (2022) estimate the total number of non-registered inhabitants of Sub-Saharan African and North-African origin *living in Belgium* between 2012 and 2016 around 80,000 people, less than 1% of the total Belgian population. See Surkyn, J., Ahmad Yar, A.W., Ceylan, D., Vanthomme, K., & Bircan, T. (2022). An analysis of mortality rates for estimating undocumented migrants in Belgium (Deliverable 7.2). Leuven: HumMingBird project 870661– H2020.

Box 2-1. Data sources on labour migration to Flanders

In Belgium, the Federal and Flemish Government collect administrative data on (labour) migration. By request, these administrative databases can be linked using the individual national registration number.

At the **federal** level, the **National Register (NR)** serves as the primary source for population and migration data in Belgium. It comprises the population register (Belgians and foreigners with a permanent residence permit), register of aliens (foreigners with a temporary residence permit for more than 3 months), and waiting register (asylum seekers). Municipalities, diplomatic/consular posts, and the Immigration Office (IO) provide and update data in the NR. Based on NR data, Statistics Belgium calculates official population figures and international migration data (see section 1.2). Since 2010, the NR has been collecting reliable information on first-issued residence permits for both EU and non-EU citizens. Foreigners entering the territory must declare their arrival at their commune of residence and are issued a residence permit (for non-EU citizens, based on the type of visa they hold) or residence title (for EU citizens, based on their self-declared reason for migration). The IO provides statistics on first-issued residence permits for Belgium, but not separately for the regions.

A crucial resource for the longitudinal monitoring of labour market outcomes is the **Crossroads Bank for Social Security (CBSS)**. It compiles administrative data from various governmental departments, particularly those related to social security, and covers all residents registered in the NR. Beyond demographic details and migration history (including first-issued residence permit) sourced from the NR, the CBSS gathers comprehensive individual and household-level information on the labour market status (employment, unemployment, social assistance, retirement, sickness, invalidity and disability, child allowances), job characteristics (wages, sector, labour regime), and educational attainment (with lower quality data for migrants). An important limitation of the CBSS data, as used within this chapter, is that it only offers information on individuals' labour market status as of the final day of each year, without details on their status throughout the year.

At the **regional** level, the **Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration (CBCI)**, the digital monitoring and tracking instrument employed by the Flemish Agencies for Integration, contains data on recently arrived migrants. Every month, the CBCI is updated with a list derived from the NR, encompassing all recently arrived adult migrants in Flanders who fall within the target group of the civic integration policy - essentially covering most newcomers with the prospect of permanent residency in Belgium. The CBCI serves as a client tracking system, incorporating information on newcomers' intake meetings, civic integration trajectory, and background characteristics sourced from the NR (including first-issued residence permit). It is important to note that the statistics on first-issued residence permits based on CBCI data can differ from those reported by the IO. This is because CBCI data specifically focus on newcomers who receive a first residence permit for more than three months and settle in the Flemish Region, as part of the civic integration policy's target group.

The **Work Permit Database**, managed by the Department of Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy (WEWIS), captures information on all applications for work permits and professional cards in Flanders. It covers permit details (including processing times and decisions, type of permits and procedure, category of labour migration, and occupation), employer information (location, legal form, sector, firm size), and worker characteristics (sex, age, nationality). This database is used for the analysis in chapter 3.

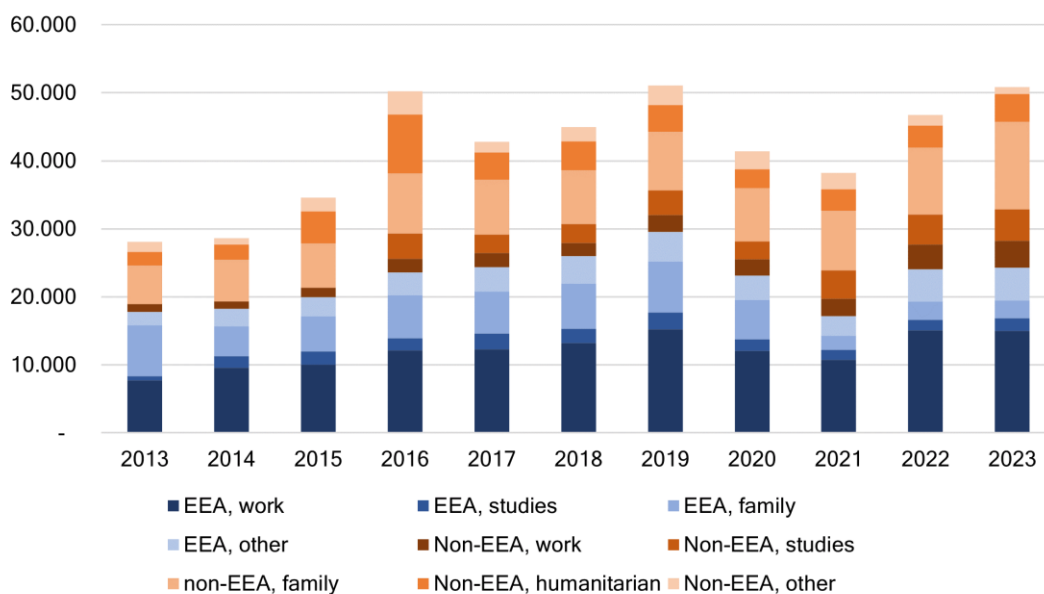
2.1. The composition of migration flows

According to data from the CBCI (see Box 2-1), recent years saw migration of *adults of working age* to Flanders ranging between 30,000 and 50,000 annually (see Figure 2.1).

Free movement migrants have consistently dominated this inflow, comprising close to half (48%) in 2023. After a consistent increase in free movement between 2013 and 2019, there was a notable decline during the COVID-affected years 2020-2021, with only partial recovery by 2022-2023. In 2023, free movement inflows stood at 24,000, below the 30,000 recorded in 2019. Most of these intra-EEA migrants moved for labour market prospects, and the proportion declaring work reasons upon arrival has increased from 52% in 2019 to 62% in 2023.⁴⁵

Migrants from countries outside the EEA can be categorized into family migrants (25% of the total inflows in 2023), labour migrants (9%), study migrants (8%), and humanitarian migrants (8%). Unlike the flow of EEA migrants, the volume of these four categories from countries outside the EEA has increased in recent years. Specifically, from 2019 to 2023, the inflow of labour migrants increased by 60%, rising from 2,500 to 3,900. Correspondingly, the number of family migrants to labour migrants (not shown in the figure) also increased from 341 in 2019 to 983 in 2023, while the number of family migrants to study migrants increased from 53 to 96. Their combined share in total non-EEA family migration remains relatively limited, however, at 9% in 2023.

Figure 2.1. Migration inflows by nationality and category of entry, Flanders, 2013-2023



Note: Individuals aged between 18 and 64 at the time of settlement. Ukrainian nationals with Temporary Protection Status are not included. Non-EEA migrants who migrated for study reasons are only included from 2016 onwards.

Source: Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration.

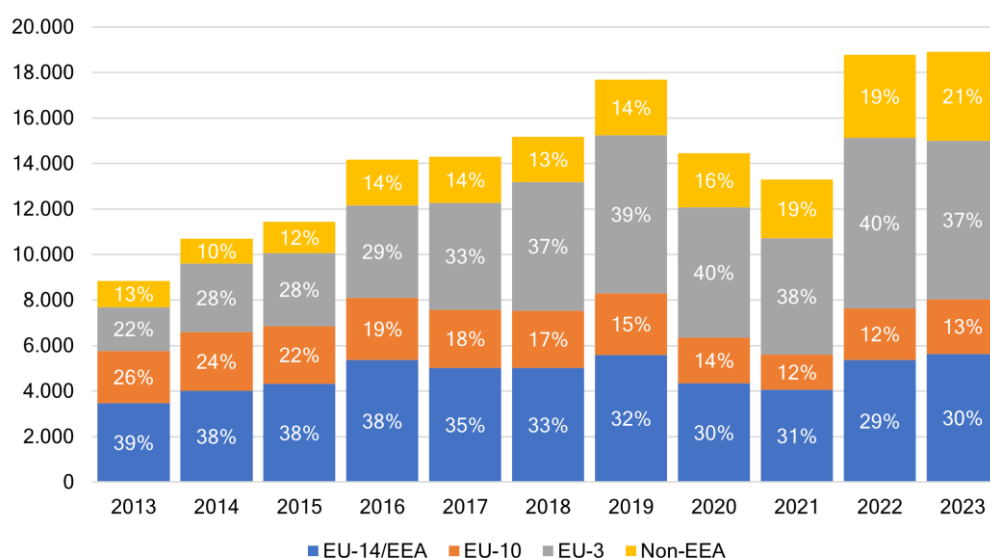
Figure 2.2 illustrates the composition of *labour migration* flows to Flanders by nationality from 2013 to 2023. In 2023, out of approximately 19,000 labour migrants, around one in five (21%) were non-EEA

⁴⁵ According the OECD IMO data (figures for 2023), the proportion of EEA migrants moving to Flanders for work-related reasons is higher than in Finland (53%), but lower than in Denmark (65%) and Sweden (77%).

citizens, while eight in ten were EEA citizens.⁴⁶ Thus, the bulk of labour migration to Flanders originated from within the EEA. However, intra-EEA labour migration has been stabilizing: since 2010 for EU-10 migrants (countries that joined the EU in 2004, mainly from Poland), since 2016 for EU-14/EEA migrants (mainly from the Netherlands), and since 2019 for EU-3 migrants (countries that joined the EU after 2004, mainly from Romania). At least part of this stabilization is due to a shrinking labour force and improved economic conditions in Central and Eastern European countries.

Correspondingly, there has been an increase in extra-EEA labour migration in recent years. Between 2019 and 2023, the number of incoming non-EEA labour migrants rose by 60%, and this growth is expected to continue in the coming years.⁴⁷ In 2023, the inflow of non-EEA labour migrants to Flanders was equivalent to about 1 worker per 1,000 working-age inhabitants. This is lower than the figures for 2022 in neighbouring Netherlands (2.9), but also Germany or France (1.7). The figure is far below the United Kingdom (3.9 per 1,000 working-age population in 2022), Luxembourg (8.1) or Ireland (9.7).⁴⁸

Figure 2.2. Labour migration inflows by nationality, Flanders, 2013-2023



Note: Individuals aged between 18 and 64 at the time of settlement.

Source: Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration.

The limited labour migration so far appears to have mitigated potential concerns about its impact on the labour market. The only empirical study on the economic effects of immigration to Belgium, conducted by the National Bank in 2020⁴⁹, found no adverse impacts on native-born individuals in terms of wages, unemployment, participation, net income, or welfare. Immigrants previously established in the country,

⁴⁶ These figures only include EEA citizens who have declared to the municipality that they migrated for work-related reasons, representing 54% of the total on average over the 2013-2023 period.

⁴⁷ Neels, K., Maes, J., Biegel, N., & Wood, J. (2020). It's the demography, stupid! Arbeidsmigratie in een context van structurele ontgroening en arbeidsmarktuitreide van de babyboomgeneratie. Tijdschrift voor Arbeidsvraagstukken, 36(2); Statistics Belgium (2024). Population projections, [Bevolkingsvooruitzichten | Statbel \(fgov.be\)](https://www.statbel.fgov.be) (Accessed on 16 February 2024).

⁴⁸ OECD (2022). International Migration Outlook 2022, OECD Publishing, Paris.

⁴⁹ National Bank of Belgium (2020). The economic impact of immigration in Belgium. Economic review.

who may be more substitutable by newcomers, were more likely to experience negative effects from immigration. Due to data limitations, this study focused on overall migration to Belgium and did not distinguish between labour migration and migration for other (e.g., family or humanitarian) reasons.

2.2. Labour migrants who need a residence permit

2.2.1. Characteristics of non-EEA labour migrants

Data from the CBCI provides additional insights into the characteristics of non-EEA labour migrants and their families compared to other migrant groups (see Annex Table 1-B).

). Firstly, nearly eight out of ten labour migrants who settled in Flanders between 2019 and 2023 were male, a gender distribution distinct from other migrant categories, except for EEA labour migrants and non-EEA humanitarian migrants who also showed a male dominance. Conversely, family members of labour migrants exhibited a predominantly female makeup, with women comprising 84% of this group.

While there were no large differences in age distribution across migrant categories, compared to other groups, labour migrants were slightly overrepresented in the 30-39 age group and underrepresented among those aged 18-29. This trend plays out even stronger for the accompanying family of labour migrants. In terms of settlement patterns, compared to other categories of entry, labour migrants and their families displayed a preference for Flemish major cities like Antwerp and Ghent. They also more often settled in Flemish Brabant, while being underrepresented in Limburg and Western Flanders.

The primary nationalities of non-EEA labour migrants were Indians, Turks, Moroccans, Chinese, and UK citizens. Among family migrants to labour migrants, the top five nationalities also included Indians and Turks, in addition to Japanese, Brazilians, and US citizens. Within the cohort of labour migrants, the proportion of women varies notably among the primary nationalities, ranging from 8% among Turks to 36% among Brazilians. Various nationalities also tend to concentrate in specific provinces: Turks are predominantly found in Antwerp, Eastern Flanders, and Limburg; Indians are more commonly located in Antwerp and Flemish Brabant; Moroccans tend to settle in Antwerp and Western Flanders; Chinese migrants are clustered in Limburg and Flemish Brabant; and Filipinos are primarily situated in Western Flanders and Limburg.

CBCI data also offer insights into the *self-reported* skills of labour migrants and their accompanying families when they arrive in Flanders, including their educational attainment and language skills. Note however, that these data are only available for the subset of migrant newcomers who express an interest in participating in the civic integration trajectory and undergo an intake assessment with one of the Flemish Integration Agencies (see section 3.5.5). Despite this limitation, the CBCI remains one of the most comprehensive sources of data on migrants' skills at arrival (see Box 2-1).

Annex Table 1-B presents the skill characteristics of *civic integration participants* by category for the cohort of migrants settling in Flanders between 2019 and 2023. Non-EEA labour migrants and their family members demonstrate notably higher levels of educational attainment compared to other migrant groups. Approximately 75% of labour migrants and 77% of their family members possess tertiary education levels upon intake, a proportion surpassed only by EEA and non-EEA study migrants (84% and 91% respectively). For comparison, based on data from the Belgian Labour Force Survey 2021, 44% of native-born adults in Flanders were tertiary educated.

The estimated Dutch language learning capacity, used by integration counsellors to allocate new migrants to the most suitable language learning track, is an important proxy of language skills and cognitive abilities. Nearly nine out of ten non-EEA labour migrants are assigned to the fastest language learning tracks. The same goes for their family members. Given the limited Dutch language proficiency upon arrival, the estimated language learning capacity will primarily reflect skills in other languages as

well as cognitive abilities. Indeed, almost all labour migrants and their family members exhibit fluent or good proficiency in either English, French, or German, with the majority being proficient in English.

Finally, unlike other migrant groups such as family migrants or humanitarian migrants, non-EEA labour migrants typically have employment at the time of participating in the intake assessment. Consequently, they often need to balance employment with attending integration training (see section 3.5.4).

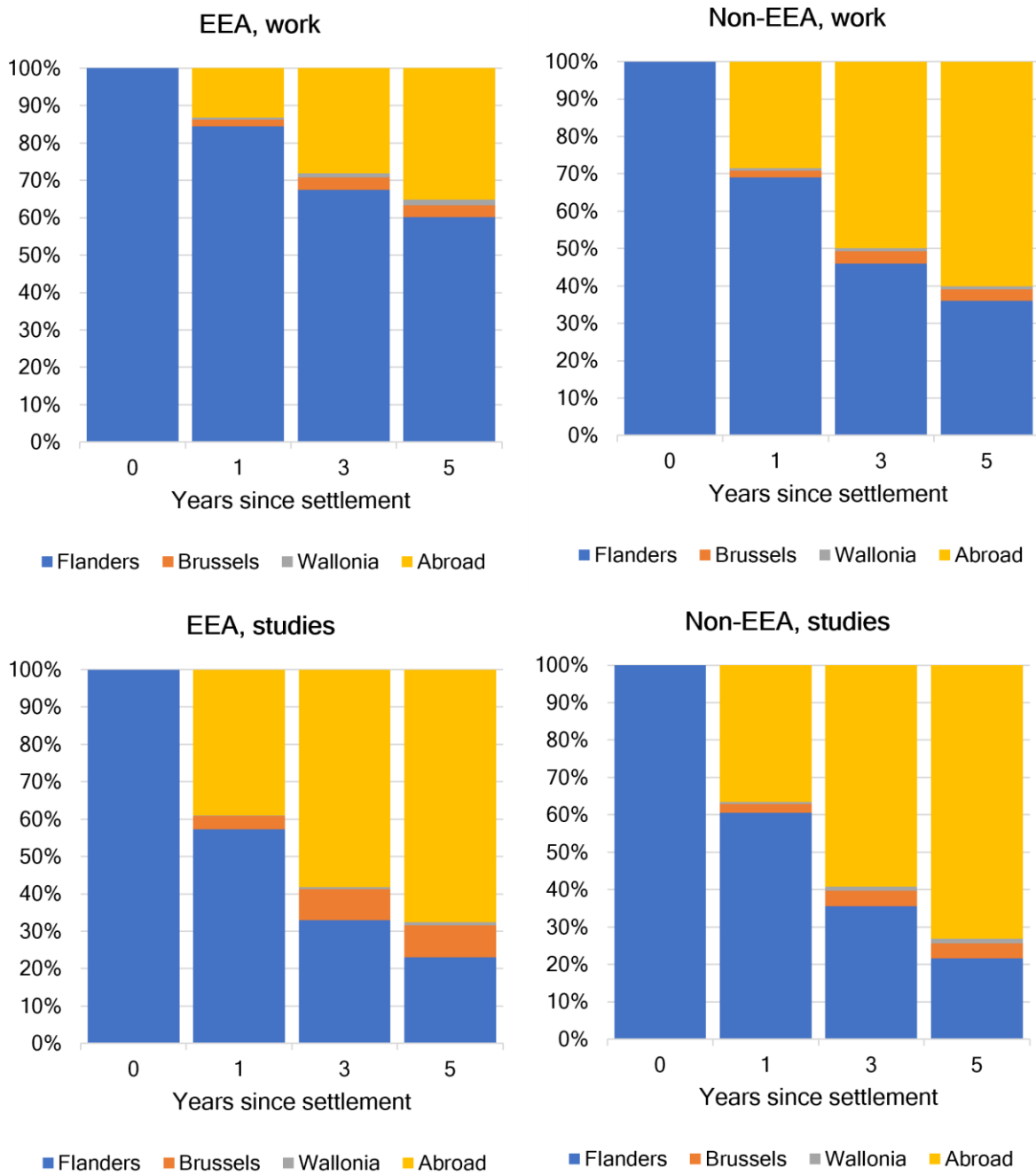
2.2.2. Stay rates of non-EEA labour migrants

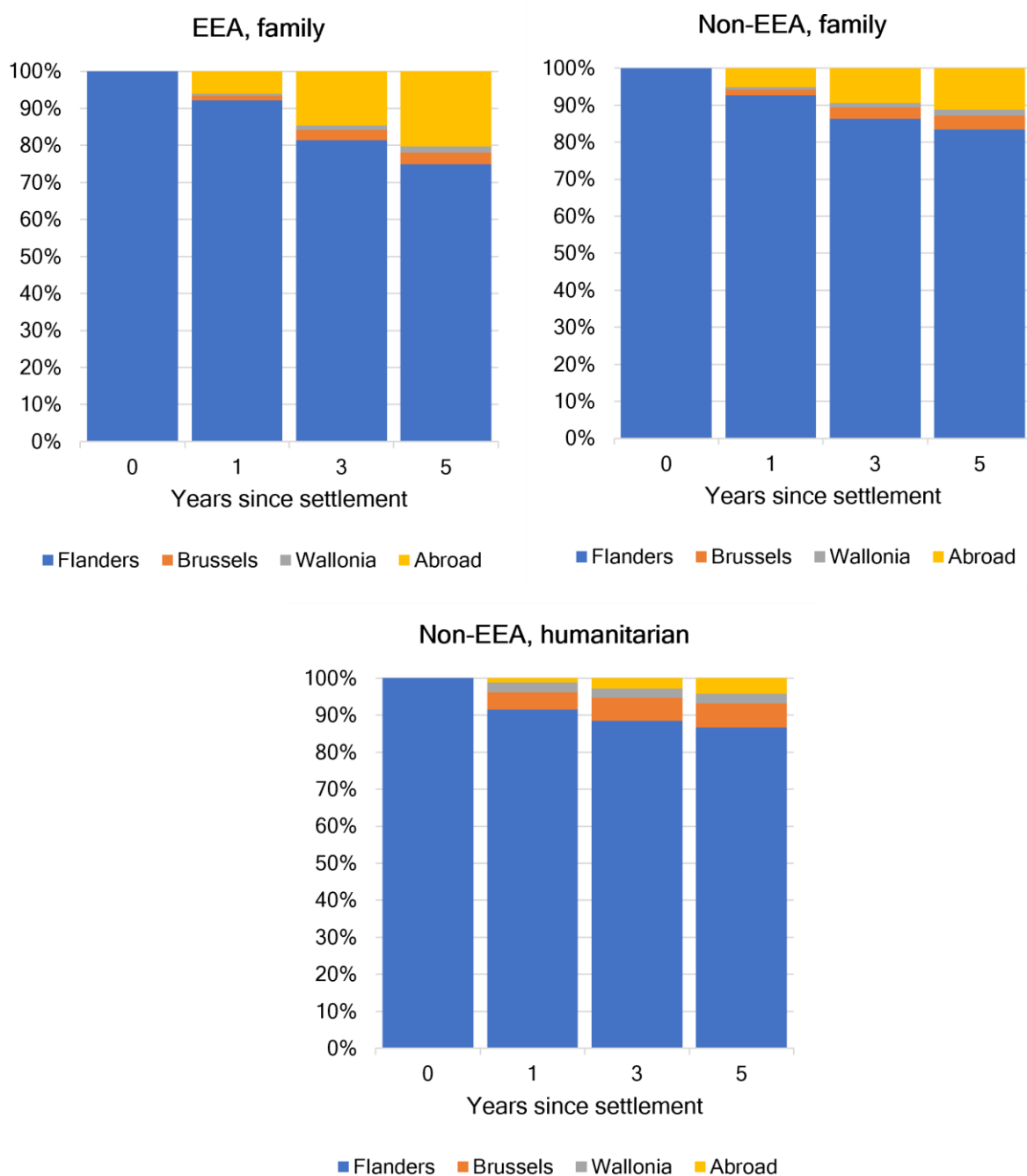
Inflows do not always result in permanent residency, and many past labour immigrants have not remained in Flanders. Stay rates for various migrant groups are illustrated in Figure 2.2, using data from the CBSS, which encompasses first-issued residence permit information (see Box 2-1). Among non-EEA labour migrants who arrived between 2015 and 2016, 69% were still in Flanders after one year, 46% after three years, and 36% after five years. Only a fraction of those leaving have relocated to other regions (Brussels or Wallonia), with most leaving Belgium altogether. Clearly, stay rates among non-EEA labour migrants are lower compared to EEA labour migrants, with respectively 60% remaining in the region after five years. The contrast is even greater with EEA family migrants, and non-EEA family and humanitarian migrants, where between seven to nine in ten remain in Flanders after five years. Only EEA and non-EEA student migrants exhibit even lower stay rates compared to labour migrants, with respectively 23% and 22% remaining for five years (see section **Error! Reference source not found.** f or further discussion).

Stay rates among non-EEA labour migrants are lower in Flanders compared to neighbouring Netherlands, where Statistics Netherlands reports stay rates of 75-77% after one year, 50-53% after three years, and 38-42% after five years for the 2015 and 2016 arrival cohorts.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ See [Dashboard Migratiemotieven](#) (Accessed on 27 November 2024).

Figure 2.3. Stay rates by years since settlement, by nationality and category of entry, 2015-2016 settlement cohort, Flanders





Note: Individuals aged between 18 and 64 at the time of settlement. Settlement is year of first occurrence in the National Register.
Source: Crossroads Bank for Social Security.

2.2.3. Employment outcomes of non-EEA labour migrants

Non-EEA labour migrants who remain in Flanders do exhibit favourable employment outcomes. Based on CBSS data, Figure 2.4 illustrates how the labour market status of various migrant groups evolves over the five years following their initial settlement. Two important points must be considered when interpreting the results. Firstly, the available CBSS data only allows us to determine whether individuals were employed or receiving benefits *on the last day of each year*, lacking information on their labour market status throughout the year. Secondly, the CBSS data solely captures *employment for which*

Belgian social security contributions were made. Various forms of employment, such as informal workers, posted workers, cross-border workers, as well as international civil servants and diplomats, for which generally no Belgian social security contributions are paid, are classified under the ‘unknown’ category. The ‘unknown’ category also includes economically inactive individuals who are neither employed nor receiving benefits, such as homemakers, students, pensioners, or those solely relying on other sources of income.

Figure 2.4 illustrates that a considerable proportion of migrant newcomers – irrespective of nationality or entry category – initially remain unknown to Belgian social security institutions (i.e., not classified as employed, unemployed, or inactive with benefits) upon settling. Across all groups, this proportion diminishes as their duration of residence increases. However, it is essential to bear in mind during interpretation that among EEA and non-EEA labour migrants (where employment as posted workers, cross-border workers, and workers at supranational institutions is more prevalent), the ‘unknown’ category likely encompasses more employed individuals. Conversely, among EEA and non-EEA family and humanitarian migrants, the category is more likely to consist of economically inactive individuals.

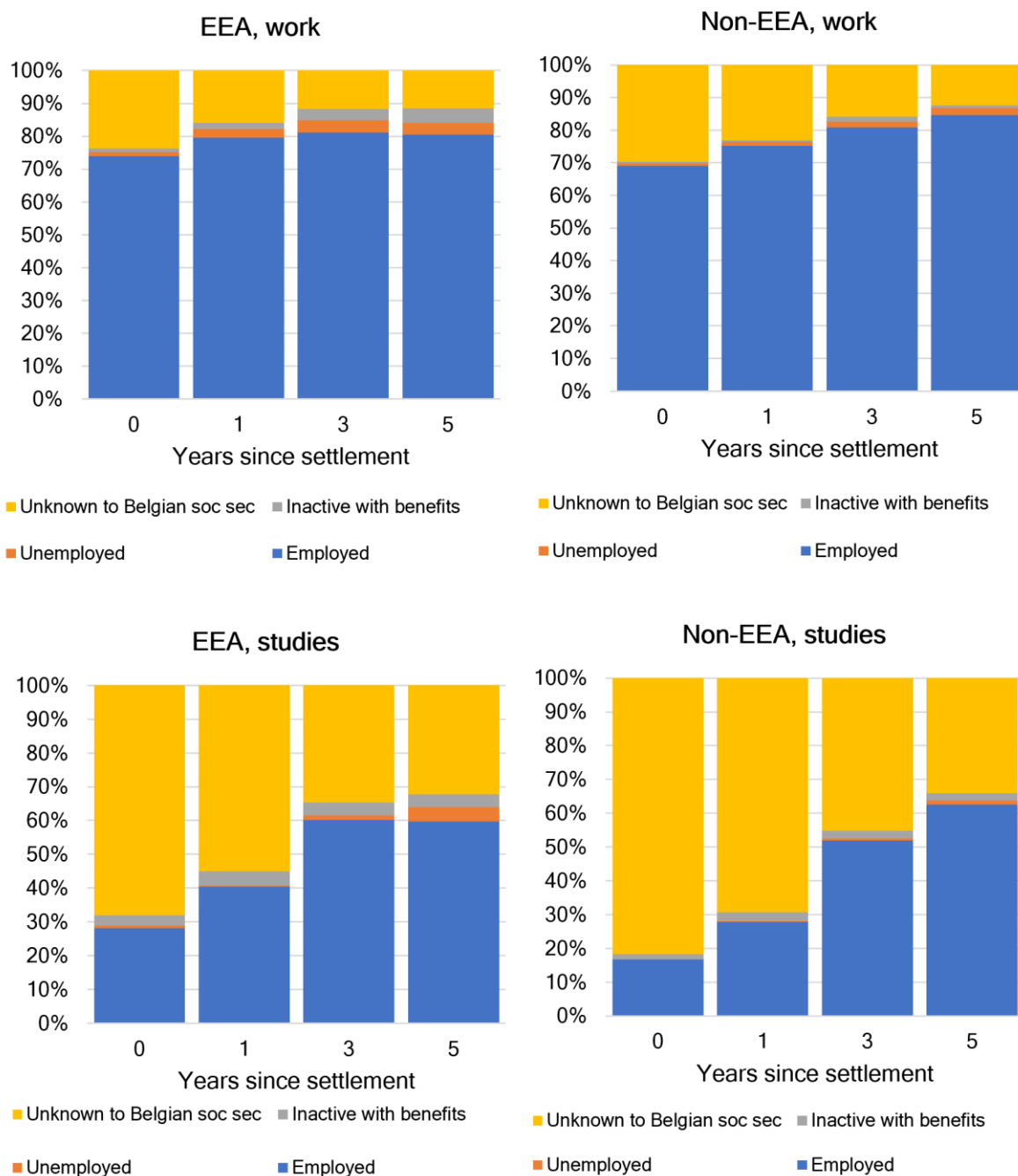
The figure illustrates that upon settling in Flanders, approximately seven in ten non-EEA labour migrants are employed as local hires, while the other third are in ‘unknown’ positions (most likely because they were posted to Flanders and not paying Belgian social security contributions).⁵¹ As posted workers are inclined to become local hires when they remain in Flanders for more years, over time, the administrative employment rate increases to around 85% five years after settlement. At the same time, benefit dependency (such as unemployment or other social insurance benefits) remains very low among labour migrants, at 3% five years after settlement. Non-EEA labour migrants who stay in Flanders thus tend to exhibit relatively favourable employment outcomes when compared to other migrant groups, both from within the EEA and from outside the EEA. Only EEA labour migrants demonstrate employment rates five years after arrival that are almost similar to those of non-EEA labour migrants. Among the native-born in Flanders aged 18 to 64, at the end of 2021, 76% were employed, 7% were on social benefits, and 17% were unknown.⁵² Therefore, also when compared to the native-born population, the employment outcomes of non-EEA labour migrants appear positive.

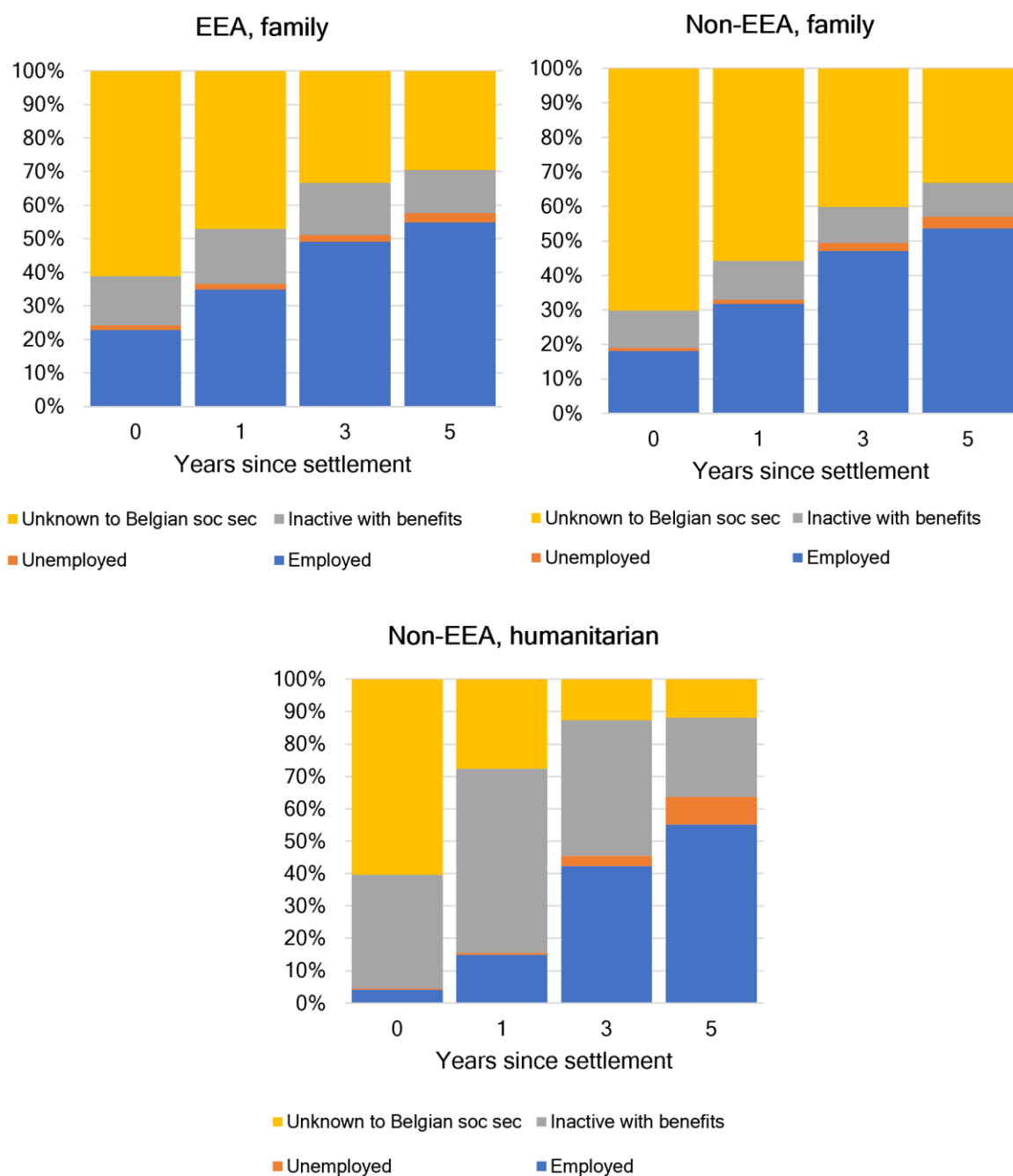
In terms of employment quality (see Figure 2.4) non-EEA labour migrants frequently occupy full-time, white-collar positions upon arrival, particularly in sectors such as information and communication, professional, scientific and technical activities, and education (non-profit). Consequently, they earn significantly higher gross daily wages compared to other migrant groups. These disparities largely persist up to five years after settlement, with only EEA and non-EEA student migrants who partly manage to catch up.

⁵¹ Further analysis (available upon request) on data from the CBSS linked with Work Permit Data confirms that administrative employment rates among non-EEA labour migrants are significantly lower among those who are intra-company posted to Flanders compared to those who are locally hired.

⁵² These figures are based on an analysis of CBSS statistics. See: [Datawarehouse | Webtoepassing globale cijfers \(fgov.be\)](#) (Accessed on 16 May 2024).

Figure 2.4. Labour market position of stayers by years since settlement, by nationality and category of entry, 2015-2016 settlement cohort, Flanders





Note: Individuals aged between 18 and 64 at the time of settlement. Settlement is year of first occurrence in the National Register. Labour market outcomes are only observed for those staying in Flanders during the 5-year follow-up.
Source: Crossroads Bank for Social Security.

2.3. Temporary labour migrants who do not need a residence permit

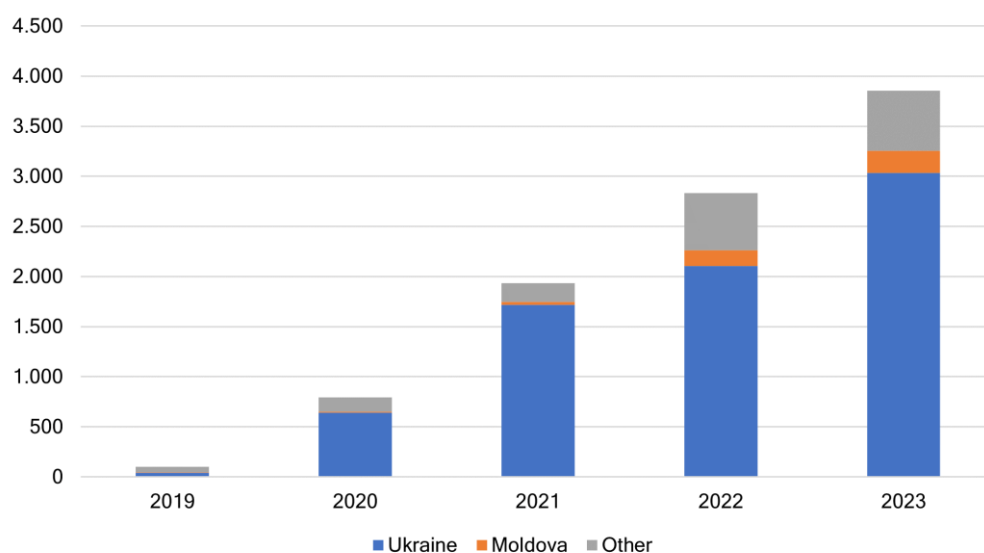
Labour migration flows based on Belgian migration data – as reported above – are associated with stays of more than 90 days. Shorter stays for the purpose of work, including cross-border and frontier work, seasonal work and posted work are not captured in these data, as these migrants generally do not settle in Flanders. However, as this section elaborates, temporary labour migration flows are clearly significant in Flanders, even if non-EEA nationals are considered.

2.3.1. Seasonal workers

For years, foreign seasonal workers in agriculture exclusively originated from EEA countries. As early as 2006, the occupation of fruit picking assistant was recognized as a shortage occupation in Belgium. Occupations listed as scarce in the 2006 shortage occupation list allowed nationals from Central and Eastern European countries to migrate to Belgium, even preceding the phase of free movement of workers. This transitional phase concluded for most member states in 2009 and for Romania and Bulgaria in 2013. With labour access from new member states no longer restricted, the influx of seasonal workers from these countries saw a significant rise. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, between 40,000 to 48,000 EEA citizens were active in Flanders as seasonal workers each year.⁵³ However, during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, EEA seasonal workers showed decreased inclination to travel to Belgium. Many of these Central and Eastern European countries are experiencing tight labour markets and robust economic growth. Recent local measures aimed at retaining Central and Eastern European workers in their home countries further disincentive emigration.

Consequently, there has been a surge in approvals for seasonal work from non-EEA nationals compared to previous figures. In 2023, close to 4,000 work permits for seasonal work were approved by the Flemish region (see Figure 2.5).⁵⁴ Ukrainian seasonal workers, in particular, have increasingly filled in for Polish and Romanian workers. Since the outbreak of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, many Ukrainian seasonal workers are working and residing in Poland. Another remarkable feature is that while Ukrainian seasonal workers in the past were mostly men, since the outbreak of the war, the gender balance has shifted in favour of women, likely due to men being subject to mandatory military service.

Figure 2.5. Number of issued works permits for seasonal work, by nationality, Flanders, 2019-2023



Source: WEWIS, Work Permit Database.

⁵³ Fries-Tersch, Sioland et al. (2021). Intra-EU mobility of seasonal workers: Trends and challenges. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

⁵⁴ Since 2019, seasonal work is no longer included on the migration shortage occupation list, as it does not fit the category of mid-skilled work. Requests for seasonal work are now subject to a labour market test category (see section 3.1.3).

2.3.2. Posted workers

Posted workers are employees who are sent by their employer to carry out a service in another EEA country on a temporary basis.⁵⁵ Their legal situation is ‘split’: even though the posted workers are performing work in the host country, they do not shift residence there and stay connected with their home country as the employment agreement is concluded there and remain subject to the social security system of the home country. At the same time, posted workers become mobile to work in other member countries by executing service contracts for their employer and are subject to the labour legislation of the receiving country.⁵⁶ This makes posted workers different from EEA citizens who migrate based on the free movement of workers, as posted workers stay only temporarily in Flanders or Belgium and – in principle - do not integrate into its labour market. They acquire no residence.

Belgium is one of the main host Member States of posted workers in the EEA, together with Germany, Austria, and France.⁵⁷ Posting has evolved into an important form of employment within various labour-intensive sectors, notably in the construction and road freight transport sectors (see below). Data from Belgium’s national posting declaration tool, LIMOSA (see Box 2-2), reveals that Flanders is the primary receiving region. In 2023, out of 950,000 *postings* to Belgium, 62% were registered with a place of work in Flanders, 7% in Brussels, 20% in Wallonia, and 7% in a combination of regions.

In 2023, approximately 624,000 postings by around 151,000 posted workers were registered in the Flemish region. Of these workers, approximately 37% held EU-14/EEA nationalities, with the highest representation from the Netherlands, followed by Germany, Portugal, and France. Another 38% held nationalities from EU-13 countries (which joined the EU after 2004), with Poland being the most prominent, followed by Romania. Figure 2.6 suggests that the number of EEA nationals posted to Belgium saw a significant increase between 2013 and 2017, but began to decrease thereafter. Similar to the stabilization observed in the free movement of workers (as discussed above), demographic dynamics and economic growth in central and eastern European countries influence these trends.

Simultaneously, there has been a strong rise in the number of non-EEA nationals posted from another EEA country to work in Flanders.⁵⁸ In 2023, close to 33,000 non-EEA workers were posted to Flanders, constituting 22% of the total. This figure is particularly notable given that posting in the road freight transport sector – previously the second most important sector for non-EEA workers after construction – is no longer registered in LIMOSA as of 2022. The primary nationalities among posted non-EEA nationals include Ukrainians (9,053 workers in 2023, with 80% posted from Poland), Brazilians (4,648 workers, 96% from Portugal), Belarusians (4,205 workers, 89% from Poland), and Bosnians and Herzegovinians (2,173 workers, 77% from Slovenia). Collectively, these four groups accounted for six out of ten posted non-EEA nationals in 2023. However, additional nationalities are increasingly being reported in LIMOSA, including Serbians, Kosovars, Turks, Indians, Albanians, Azerbaijanis, Guineans, Georgians, and Moldavians. Often, they are sent from the same main sending countries (Poland, Slovenia, Portugal, but also Lithuania, the Netherlands, Croatia, Germany, and Slovakia).

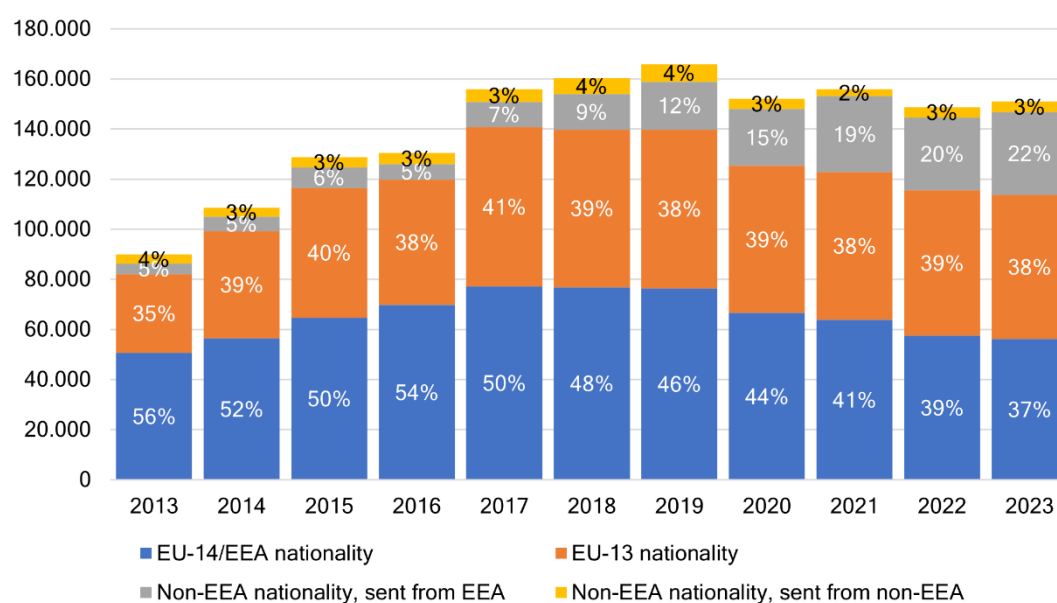
⁵⁵ Self-employed persons can also post themselves to another Member State.

⁵⁶ For an overview of the legal basis, see: [Legal basis posting | Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue \(belgium.be\)](#) (Accessed on 13 February 2024).

⁵⁷ De Wispelaere, F., De Smedt, L., & Pacolet, J. (2023). Posting of workers. Report on A1 Portable Documents issued in 2021. European Commission report.

⁵⁸ The mobility of third-country nationals as posted workers across the EU was facilitated by the European Court of Justice in the Vander Elst case of 1994 (Case C-43/93). In its ruling, the Court determined that TCNs holding valid work and residence permits in one Member State are entitled to be posted for work in any other Member State across the EU. See: Lens, D., Mussche, N., & Marx, I. (2022). A hole in the wall of fortress Europe: The trans-European posting of third-country labour migrants. *International Migration*, 60(2), 160-176.

Figure 2.6. Number of incoming posted workers by nationality and sending country for non-EEA nationals, Flanders, 2013-2023



Note: Incoming postings restricted to those who reported Flanders as their main place of work. Comparability over time is hampered by registration inconsistencies (see Box 2-2). When considering non-EEA nationals, it is important to differentiate between those directly posted to Flanders from outside the EEA and those posted via an employer established in another EEA country. The figure indicates that the former scenario is significantly less common in scale (accounting for 3% of the total in 2023).

Source: NSSO-LIMOSA.

Undoubtedly, non-EEA posted workers constitute a significant group in Flanders' current labour migration landscape. As will be demonstrated in chapter 3, Flanders issued approximately 17,000 work permits and single permits to non-EEA nationals in 2023. With almost 33,000 non-EEA workers posted to Flanders in 2023, posting has become increasingly important alongside traditional labour migration. However, these numbers cannot be compared in a straightforward way, since posted workers do not necessarily supply the same full-year equivalent labour contribution as work-permit holders. A work permit grants the worker a continuous right of residence for one year (up to three years for highly skilled individuals), but this is not the case with posting. Posted workers often engage in shorter service jobs and enter the country multiple times a year. An analysis based on LIMOSA microdata confirms that posting for non-EEA nationals is primarily a form of short-term mobility, with workers engaged in circular patterns, commuting between their home country and Belgium.⁵⁹ In 2020, half of the non-EEA workers posted to Belgium by their EEA employers had only one posting that year, while one in five workers had more than three postings. During the same period, one-third of postings by non-EEA nationals to Belgium lasted less than one week, while approximately 22% of postings extended beyond three months. Posting also demonstrated 'stickiness', with nearly one in four non-EEA workers who were posted for the first time in 2018 also being posted in 2019, and one in five also being posted in 2020 (though often not with the same client). These posted workers appear to have some attachment to the Belgian labour market, or their employer appears to have a strong relationship with demand in Belgium. Whether posting is complementary to direct hire, or is a substitute, is not clear from the data.

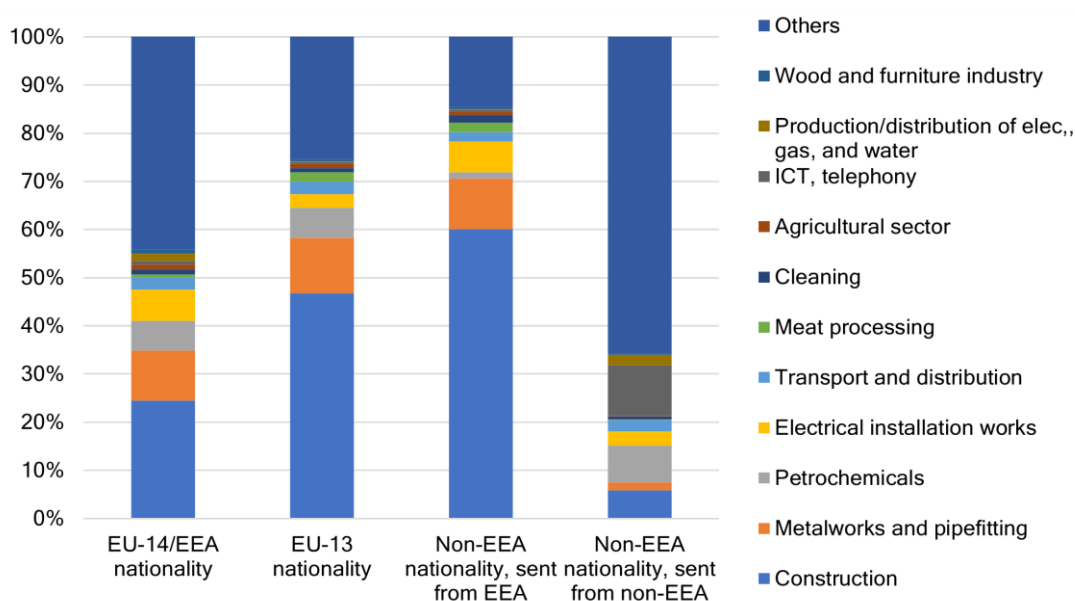
⁵⁹ Lens, D., Marx, I., & Mussche, N. (2022). Posted work: what is its economic importance in Belgium?. *Reflets et perspectives de la vie économique*, 601(1), 13-30.

The overwhelming majority (97%) of non-EEA posted workers is male. Self-employment, where workers post themselves to Flanders, remains relatively uncommon (10%) among this group, though it is on the rise. Notably, the sectoral distribution of non-EEA posted workers differs significantly from that of labour migrants who enter through the traditional work permit regime. Figure 2.7 reveals that nearly six in ten non-EEA posted workers are engaged in the construction sector. Additionally, 10% work in the metalworks and pipefitting sector, and 6% in electric installation works.

Legitimate concerns arise regarding the particularly vulnerable position of non-EEA posted workers compared to both migrant workers and posted workers who are EEA citizens. Their heightened dependency on their employer, not solely for employment but also for the renewal of their work and residence permits in the sending country, combined with the nature of posting marked by subcontracting chains and limited enforcement, renders this group especially susceptible to exploitation and abuse.⁶⁰

Simultaneously, the practice of working with non-EEA posted workers has clearly gained popularity among Flemish employers. A recent study, based on interviews with Belgian employers and sector organisations, highlights that cost-cutting (with social security contributions paid in the sending country) emerges as a dominant motive for employers.⁶¹ However, it is not the sole factor. Employers also turn to postings to alleviate worsening shortages in low- and medium-skilled occupations, enhance flexibility in their workforce, and capitalize on the motivation of posted workers to undertake tasks that local residents are less inclined to pursue. Chapter 3 delves deeper into how stringent entry criteria for labour migration, particularly for low- and medium-skilled workers, coupled with the arduous work permit application process, may enhance the appeal of hiring non-EEA posted workers for Flemish employers.

Figure 2.7. Sectoral distribution of posting by nationality and sending country, Flanders, 2023



Note: LIMOSA operates with 17 specific sectors in which employers can register their workers. A weak point is that LIMOSA also has a rest category called 'others', which reduces the capacity to compute accurately the importance of all sectors. Some posted workers register in the 'others' category for lack of a proper sector listed, but employers may also choose to register in 'others' to evade administrative and fiscal responsibilities associated with sectors such as construction.

Source: NSSO-LIMOSA.

⁶⁰ European Labour Authority (2023). Report on the cooperation practices, possibilities and challenges between Member States – specifically in relation to the posting of third-country nationals.

⁶¹ Lens D., Mussche N. and Marx I. (2022) The different faces of international posting: why do companies use posting of workers?, *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 28 (1), 27–45.

Box 2-2. Data source on labour mobility to Belgium and Flanders

At the federal level, the National Social Security Office (NSSO) introduced the LIMOSA registry in 2008 to monitor the posting of workers to Belgium. Foreign employers are required to submit a LIMOSA notification before posting any workers to Belgium. There are strict (penal) sanctions for service providers if they fail to make the on-line registration, or if workers do not have their registration proof with them at work.

Certain categories are exempt from a LIMOSA notification, such as workers in the road freight transport sector (since 2022), those attending scientific events, scientists and researchers participating in research programs, top managers coming to Belgium for events, workers installing goods, athletes participating in international competitions, international officials, employees of international organizations, and businesspeople. Self-employed individuals not engaged in the construction, meat processing, or cleaning sectors have also been exempt since 2019. Due to these interruptions in registration, it is important to interpret the changes in the numbers on posting in this chapter with caution.

LIMOSA data include characteristics of the posted worker (age, nationality, self-employed status), the foreign employer (country of origin), the Belgian client (region of settlement), and the posting job (region of employment and sector of activity). In this chapter, the region of employment is used to identify posting to Flanders.

2.4. International students

In addition to several kinds of labour migration, migrants who come to Flanders to study also deserve attention in an assessment of labour migration: if international students stay after graduation and find employment, they can be regarded as highly educated labour migrants. In fact, they may stand out among labour migrants due to two favourable characteristics: as local graduates, they possess a formal qualification that is readily recognised by employers, and they might have acquired some knowledge of the local language and culture during their studies. Therefore, international students can be considered a potentially important source of skilled labour migration.⁶²

2.4.1. Stocks and characteristics based on enrolment data

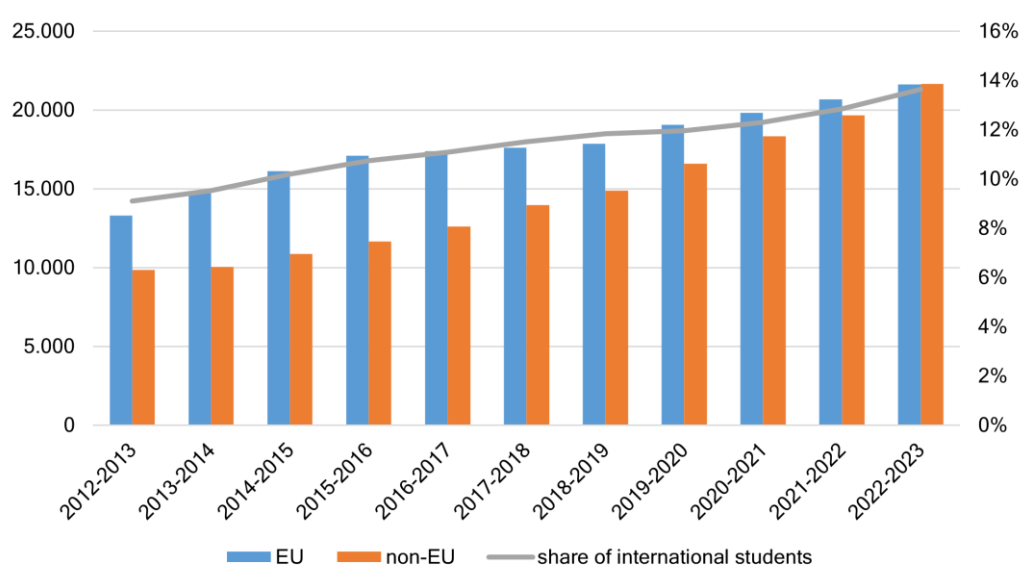
Enrolment data from the Department of Education and Training shows that the student population in Flemish higher education institutions is becoming increasingly diverse in terms of international backgrounds. In the academic year 2022-2023, approximately 43,000 tertiary students had an international background, marking a notable increase from 23,000 in 2012-2013. International students accounted for 14% of the total student body in 2022-2023, a proportion surpassing that of France and

⁶² In a study on the economic effects of internationalization in Flemish higher education, De Witte and Soncin (2021) estimated a net positive effect of internationalization. In terms of direct contributions, students make private social contributions, such as through student jobs, amounting to nearly EUR 48 million. Additionally, tuition fee income totals close to EUR 57 million, while non-tuition fee income from spending reaches almost EUR 630 million. Moreover, the long-term benefits outweigh the costs, with estimated long-term net benefits ranging between EUR 4.2 and 5.6 billion. See: De Witte, K. & M. Soncin (2021). Do international classes pay off? A cost-benefit analysis of the internationalization of higher education in Flanders, *Higher Education*, 82(3), 459- 476.

Germany but falling below that of the Netherlands.⁶³ As depicted in Figure 2.8, half of the international students in 2022-2023 held non-EU nationalities.

The proportion of non-EU students is notably higher at universities, accounting for 10%, compared to university colleges (“hogescholen”) where it stands at 3%. Among universities, Leuven University has the highest share of non-EU students, followed by Hasselt University and Ghent University. Non-EU students are also unevenly distributed across educational levels. They make up 3% of students in short-tertiary and bachelor programs, 10% at the master’s level, and 32% at the doctoral level for the academic year 2022-2023. The most popular fields of study for non-EU students are Applied Sciences, Commerce and Business Administration, Sciences, Economic and Applied Economic Sciences, and Industrial Sciences and Technology.

Figure 2.8. Number of international students by nationality, Flanders, 2012-2023



Note: International students are identified on the basis of their nationalities, i.e. foreign students.
Source: Flemish Department of Education and Training.

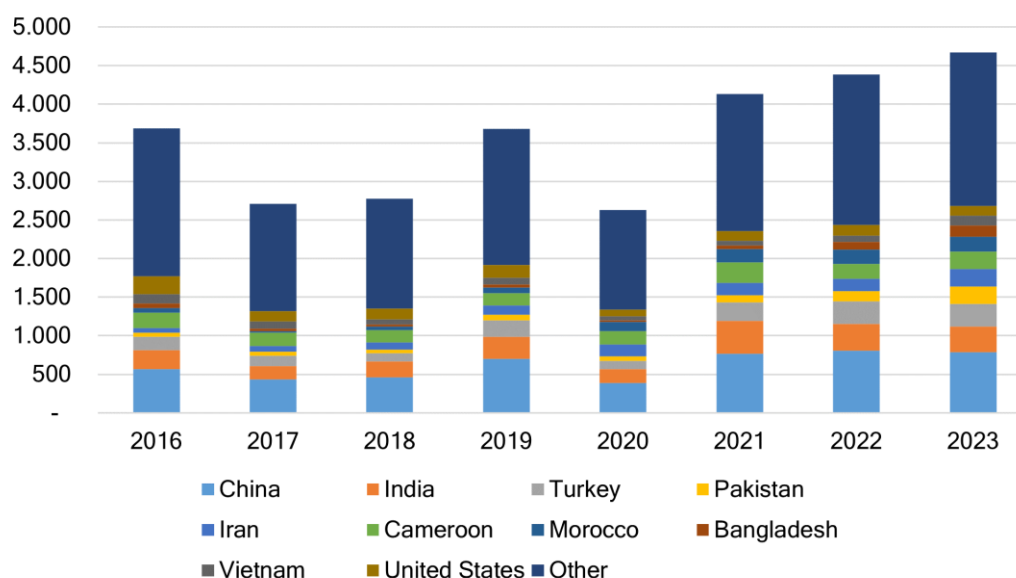
2.4.2. Flows and characteristics based on residence permits

Data from the CBCI (see Box 2-1) also illustrates a noticeable increase in the influx of non-EEA migrants moving to Flanders for educational purposes. The number of first-issued permits rose from 3,700 in 2016 to nearly 4,700 in 2023 (see Figure 2.9). Analysis of arrivals between 2021 and 2023 (see Annex Table 1-B) reveals an equal distribution between genders, with 50% males and 50% females. Among these migrants, 80% fell within the 18-29 age bracket, with an additional 20% aged between 30-39. Upon settlement, the majority of study migrants were concentrated in urban centres such as Leuven, Ghent, Antwerp, and Hasselt, closely linked to university locations (see below). Predominant nationalities among study migrants include Chinese (17% of study permits in 2023), Indians (7%), Turks (6%), Pakistanis (5%), and Iranians (4%).

⁶³ See: OECD (2024), International student mobility (indicator). doi: 10.1787/4bcf6fc3-en (Accessed on 25 February 2024). Note however that for most OECD countries, international students are defined as students who have obtained their upper secondary education abroad, whereas the figures for Flanders use information on citizenship rather than on the country of upper secondary completion.

In Flanders (as well as other Belgian regions), study permits are initially issued for a duration of 12 months and must be renewed annually for the duration of the studies.⁶⁴ There is no maximum limit on the duration of study permits, including renewals. Students typically need to demonstrate language proficiency before enrolment. For programs taught in English, French, and Dutch, proficiency at CEFR B2 level in the respective languages is generally required.

Figure 2.9. Number of first issued residence permits for study reasons to non-EEA nationals, by nationality, Flanders, 2016-2023



Note: Individuals aged 18 and above at the time of settlement.

Source: Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration.

Study permit holders are granted automatic access to the labour market and are permitted to work up to a maximum of 20 hours per week during the academic year and without restrictions during school holidays. While there is no comprehensive data on employment while enrolled, Figure 2.4 shows that one year after entry – presumably, while still in study – about 20% are employed. In most OECD countries, about one-third of students work the maximum hours allowed.

Previous cohorts of non-EEA students in Flanders exhibited relatively low stay rates. Among those who obtained their first study permit in 2015–2016, 36% were still residing in Flanders three years after their initial admission, and only 22% remained after five years (see Figure 2.3). These figures compare unfavourably to the five-year stay rates of international student cohorts from 2015 in France (43%), and Germany (63%).⁶⁵ Stay rates in Flanders are closer to those in the Netherlands, which nonetheless attracts a significantly larger number of international students. In the Netherlands, 36% of international students remained three years after admission, and 23% remained after five years.⁶⁶ Notably, the stay

⁶⁴ The Immigration Office can send a demand for proof of continued progress to both the applicant or the higher education institution and they have 15 days to send in the required documents.

⁶⁵ OECD (2022). Retention and economic impact of international students in the OECD. International Migration Outlook 2022, OECD Publishing, Paris.

⁶⁶ See [Dashboard Migratiemotieven](#) (Accessed on 27 November 2024).

rates for Flanders were calculated before the introduction of the orientation year for international graduates, so more recent cohorts may exhibit higher retention rates.

Consequently, international students are not yet a significant feeder for labour migration in Flanders. However, those international students who stay in Flanders after completing their studies do demonstrate long-term employment rates and wages nearly equivalent to those of labour migrants and notably higher than other migrant groups (see Figure 2.4).

Annex A.

Annex Table 1A. Socio-demographic characteristics of permanent migrants by category of entry, Flanders, 2019-2023 settlement cohort

| | EEA | | | non-EEA | | | | |
|----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------|----------|-------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| | Work | Studies | Family | Work | Studies | Family | Family of labour migrant | Humanitarian |
| Sex | | | | | | | | |
| Male | 68% | 43% | 42% | 76% | 50% | 33% | 16% | 74% |
| Female | 32% | 57% | 58% | 24% | 50% | 67% | 84% | 26% |
| Age | | | | | | | | |
| 18-29 | 40% | 94% | 40% | 33% | 79% | 39% | 24% | 51% |
| 30-39 | 30% | 5% | 28% | 44% | 19% | 39% | 54% | 31% |
| 40-49 | 20% | 0% | 20% | 18% | 2% | 16% | 17% | 13% |
| 50+ | 10% | 0% | 12% | 6% | 0% | 6% | 5% | 5% |
| Province/city | | | | | | | | |
| Antwerp (city) | 14% | 15% | 17% | 21% | 15% | 22% | 18% | 15% |
| Antwerp (province) | 16% | 4% | 16% | 14% | 5% | 15% | 12% | 17% |
| Eastern Flanders | 14% | 1% | 13% | 11% | 3% | 14% | 8% | 14% |
| Flemish Brabant | 21% | 50% | 20% | 26% | 44% | 18% | 42% | 12% |
| Ghent (city) | 9% | 17% | 7% | 12% | 22% | 7% | 10% | 4% |
| Limburg | 9% | 1% | 11% | 7% | 5% | 11% | 4% | 17% |
| Western Flanders | 18% | 11% | 14% | 9% | 6% | 13% | 7% | 20% |
| Nationality (top 5) | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | Romania | Italy | Romania | India | China | Morocco | India | Afghanistan |
| 2 | Poland | Spain | Netherlands | Turkey | India | Turkey | Turkey | Syria |
| 3 | Bulgaria | Netherlands | Bulgaria | Morocco | Turkey | Afghanistan | Japan | Palestine |
| 4 | Netherlands | France | Poland | China | Cameroon | India | United States | Eritrea |
| 5 | Portugal | Germany | Spain | UK | Iran | Brazil | Brazil | Turkey |

Note: Individuals aged between 18 and 64 at the time of settlement. All characteristics are measured at the time of settlement. All characteristics are measured at the time of settlement.

Source: Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration.

Annex Table 1-B. Skill characteristics of civic integration participants by category of entry, Flanders, 2019-2023 settlement cohort

| | EEA | | | non-EEA | | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------|---------|--------|---------|---------|--------|--------------------------|--------------|
| | Work | Studies | Family | Work | Studies | Family | Family of labour migrant | Humanitarian |
| Foreign education | | | | | | | | |
| Lower secondary or less | 13% | 1% | 14% | 8% | 1% | 24% | 8% | 41% |
| Higher secondary | 48% | 15% | 43% | 17% | 8% | 35% | 15% | 32% |
| Short-tertiary or Bachelor | 23% | 32% | 26% | 35% | 42% | 28% | 42% | 21% |
| Master | 13% | 44% | 13% | 29% | 44% | 10% | 29% | 5% |
| PhD | 2% | 3% | 1% | 8% | 3% | 1% | 3% | 0% |
| Missing | 3% | 3% | 3% | 3% | 2% | 2% | 3% | 1% |
| Dutch language learning track (A2) | | | | | | | | |
| 600-1140h | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 4% | 0% | 11% |
| 440h | 6% | 0% | 6% | 3% | 0% | 14% | 3% | 23% |
| 360h | 7% | 0% | 10% | 4% | 0% | 10% | 4% | 18% |
| 240h | 56% | 19% | 56% | 40% | 25% | 45% | 46% | 35% |
| 160h | 25% | 75% | 22% | 47% | 70% | 20% | 41% | 12% |
| Missing | 5% | 6% | 6% | 5% | 5% | 6% | 6% | 2% |
| Language proficiency (mother tongue/fluent/good) | | | | | | | | |
| Dutch | 3% | 6% | 4% | 4% | 3% | 5% | 1% | 3% |
| French | 11% | 18% | 9% | 13% | 22% | 18% | 8% | 7% |
| German | 4% | 12% | 4% | 2% | 2% | 1% | 1% | 1% |
| English | 53% | 94% | 38% | 76% | 91% | 39% | 70% | 27% |
| Labour market status | | | | | | | | |
| Employed | 77% | 24% | 25% | 90% | 12% | 22% | 15% | 14% |
| Study | 0% | 60% | 2% | 4% | 76% | 1% | 1% | 1% |
| No employment/study | 20% | 13% | 70% | 4% | 9% | 74% | 81% | 84% |
| Missing | 3% | 3% | 3% | 2% | 2% | 2% | 3% | 1% |

Note: Individuals aged between 18 and 64 at the time of settlement who have participated in an intake assessment with a Flemish Integration Agency. All characteristics are measured at the time of the intake.
Source: Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration.

Annex Table 2-C. Employment characteristics of stayers by years since settlement, by nationality and category of entry, Flanders, 2015-2016 settlement cohort

| | Native-born | EEA | | | | | | Non-EEA | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------|--------|--------|---------|--------|--------|--------|---------|--------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------------|--------|
| | | Work | | Studies | | Family | | Work | | Studies | | Family | | Humanitarian | |
| | | t=0 | t=5 | t=0 | t=5 | t=0 | t=5 | t=0 | t=5 | t=0 | t=5 | t=0 | t=5 | t=0 | t=5 |
| Type of employment | 2021q4 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| White collar | 57% | 28% | 29% | 89% | 93% | 26% | 29% | 86% | 84% | 86% | 86% | 23% | 27% | 15% | 19% |
| Blue collar | 28% | 72% | 71% | 11% | 7% | 74% | 71% | 13% | 14% | 14% | 14% | 77% | 73% | 85% | 81% |
| Civil Servant | 15% | 1% | 1% | 0% | 1% | 0% | 0% | 1% | 2% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Type of contract | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Full-time | 64% | 51% | 70% | 78% | 76% | 30% | 37% | 95% | 92% | 83% | 82% | 30% | 50% | 27% | 65% |
| Part-time | 34% | 28% | 25% | 14% | 21% | 52% | 56% | 3% | 7% | 11% | 13% | 34% | 39% | 38% | 16% |
| Special | 2% | 21% | 5% | 8% | 3% | 18% | 7% | 2% | 1% | 6% | 5% | 36% | 11% | 35% | 19% |
| Sector of employment | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Agriculture | 0% | 3% | 2% | 0% | 0% | 2% | 1% | 1% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 3% | 1% | 2% | 0% |
| Industry | 15% | 10% | 18% | 1% | 6% | 3% | 8% | 17% | 20% | 2% | 9% | 4% | 11% | 5% | 15% |
| Construction | 5% | 7% | 11% | 1% | 1% | 3% | 4% | 3% | 3% | 0% | 1% | 4% | 4% | 2% | 5% |
| Wholesale and retail trade | 13% | 9% | 10% | 5% | 7% | 8% | 10% | 15% | 12% | 7% | 8% | 10% | 12% | 22% | 11% |
| Transportation | 6% | 6% | 11% | 0% | 4% | 3% | 5% | 3% | 4% | 1% | 4% | 4% | 8% | 2% | 8% |
| Accommodation and food service activities | 2% | 8% | 5% | 7% | 3% | 6% | 5% | 2% | 2% | 7% | 4% | 15% | 8% | 29% | 8% |
| Information and communication | 3% | 2% | 2% | 1% | 7% | 1% | 1% | 10% | 15% | 0% | 7% | 1% | 1% | 0% | 1% |
| Financial, insurance and real estate activities | 4% | 2% | 2% | 1% | 1% | 2% | 2% | 3% | 3% | 1% | 1% | 1% | 1% | 0% | 0% |
| Sciences and services | 13% | 43% | 28% | 17% | 26% | 57% | 47% | 27% | 26% | 7% | 32% | 49% | 35% | 31% | 24% |
| Non-profit | 38% | 8% | 10% | 66% | 41% | 10% | 15% | 18% | 14% | 75% | 33% | 7% | 16% | 4% | 27% |
| Other services | 1% | 2% | 2% | 1% | 3% | 4% | 2% | 2% | 1% | 0% | 1% | 2% | 2% | 2% | 1% |
| Daily wage | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Mean | | 108,55 | 135,08 | 105,35 | 147,02 | 96,71 | 110,67 | 164,27 | 209,79 | 98,6 | 144,16 | 93,15 | 109,96 | 87,59 | 104,77 |

Note: Individuals aged between 18 and 64 at the time of settlement. Settlement is year of first occurrence in the National Register. Employment characteristics are only observed for those staying in Flanders during the 5-year follow-up. T=0 denotes the time of settlement; T=5 indicates five years post-settlement. 'Special' contracts primarily encompass temporary agency work. 'Non-profit' includes Public administration and defence; Education; Human health and social work activities; Arts, entertainment and recreation. The average daily wage is a gross wage, including employee contributions but excluding employer contributions. For full-time employees, the average daily wage is calculated by dividing the sum of the regular salary and the flat-rate salary (both ONSS gross wages) by the number of normal full-time days worked. For part-time employees, the average daily wage is calculated by multiplying the sum of the regular salary and the flat-rate salary by 7.6 and dividing by the number of hours worked as a part-time employee. For part-time employees, the daily wage is determined based on 38 hours per week, even if they work fewer hours. If there were no paid performances, the daily wage is set to 0.

Source: Crossroads Bank for Social Security.

3 Labour migration regulations and practice for non-EEA migrants

Since the recruitment halt of guest workers in the late 1960s, Belgium and its regions have operated a demand-driven, employer-driven labour migration system. Up until the sixth state reform in 2014, the regions had limited executive powers, while the federal level retained full regulatory authority, enacting labour migration legislation. During this time, regions were only responsible for issuing work permits. The main policy objective during this period was to provide a flexible labour migration channel for highly skilled non-EEA workers. The implementation of this system was characterized by the free and relatively fast issuance of work permits. In fact, it was one of the fastest systems in the OECD.⁶⁷

Following the 2014 state reform, the regions gained full and exclusive authority over the normative and enforcement policies for work permits for foreigners, while the federal level retained competence for access to the territory and residence regulations.⁶⁸ Until 2019, the system remained largely unchanged, and did not result in high numbers of non-EEA workers. The number of first issued and renewed work permits to non-EEA nationals hovered around 7,000 annually between 2014 and 2017, with the vast majority of permits issued to highly skilled employees.⁶⁹

The reformed Flemish labour migration policy came into effect in January 2019.⁷⁰ These reforms included, among others, the belated transposition of the single permit directive⁷¹, the introduction of a dynamic list of shortage occupations for medium-skilled workers, extending the permit duration for high-skilled workers to three years, granting unlimited access to the labour market after four years, and

⁶⁷ Mussche, N., Corluy, V. & Marx, I. (2014). Arbeidsmarktonderzoek als instrument en basis bij toekomstig arbeidsmigratiebeleid en EU vrijhandelsakkoorden. VIONA report.

⁶⁸ The federal government retains its essential role not only through its control over labour immigration (residence) but also through various competencies, including social security, taxation, and employment regulations.

⁶⁹ Myria (2014-2017). Migration in numbers and rights. Economic Migration, Free Movement and students. Brussels.

⁷⁰ The main principles of the Flemish economic migration policy were outlined in the vision document 'Unlocking Foreign Employment Potential in Flanders', adopted by the Flemish Government on June 8, 2018. This led to the decision of December 7, 2018, implementing the law of April 30, 1999, regarding the employment of foreign workers. The decision was amended three times: first by the decision of March 27, 2020 (COVID-related provisions), second by the decision of January 8, 2021 (technical adjustments), and third by the decision of July 14, 2023 (the latest adjustments discussed in this chapter).

⁷¹ While the original deadline for the adoption of the single permit was December 2013, Belgium only implemented it in 2019 due to internal bureaucratic hurdles and national governance mechanisms that divide competences related to immigration and employment. See: Van der Elst, E., & Bronckaers, N. (2019). De langverwachte implementatie van Richtlijn 2011 / 98 / EU inzake één enkele aanvraagprocedure voor een gecombineerde vergunning en haar gevolgen voor het Belgisch wetgevend kader inzake de tewerkstelling van buitenlandse onderdanen. Tijdschrift Voor Vreemdelingenrecht, 2, 106–119.

abandoning the nationality requirement⁷². Additionally, in 2021, a digital platform ‘Working in Belgium’ (WiB) was launched for single permit applications. These reforms coincided with a significant increase in the issuance of work permits and single permits, reaching approximately 11,000 in 2019. This surge was primarily fuelled by a marked rise in labour shortages, alongside the relaxation of labour migration entry channels for previously excluded occupations and nationalities. Following a temporary decline attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of applications increased even more strongly, resulting in more than 17,000 issued permits in 2023. The influx of labour migrants is exerting considerable strain on the system’s capacity to assess permit applications and comply with statutory processing times.

Against this backdrop, this chapter assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Flanders’ current labour migration system. It draws upon extensive interviews with stakeholders in the economic migration sector, supplemented by analyses using data from WEWIS regarding applications for work permits. The chapter is structured as follows: section 3.1 discusses the selection of skills and the channels through which non-EEA workers can come to Flanders. Section 3.2 covers key issues in the procedure for work and residence permits. Section 3.3 is on issues related to safeguarding wages and working conditions of migrant workers. Section 3.4 focuses on the recognition of foreign qualifications and its implications for recruitment. Section 3.5 addresses talent attraction and support for migrants for settlement and integration. Section 3.6 discusses talent mobility partnerships. Finally, section 3.7 discusses international students as a source for labour migration. Strengths and weaknesses of the system are addressed in dedicated boxes within each section.

3.1. Selection of skills: main labour migration categories and their relative importance

Non-EEA nationals intending to work in Flanders must obtain prior work authorization, unless exempted.⁷³ The nature of the work that the non-EEA worker will perform determines their eligibility to enter the Flemish labour market, as only specific categories of workers qualify.

The Flemish labour migration policy operates on a concentric vision: employers should first consider the Flemish labour market, other regions (intra-regional mobility), and the EEA (free movement of workers). Only if no suitable candidates are found within this sphere can an employer recruit from outside the EEA. However, there are exceptions to this concentric model. The Flemish labour migration policy explicitly allows for a flexible influx of highly skilled workers and medium-skilled workers in a specific set of shortage occupations. For both groups, permits are issued based on a legal presumption of shortage in the local labour market, relieving the employer from the individual obligation to demonstrate a lack of suitable candidates for the vacancy. For low-skilled occupations and medium-skilled occupations not on the list for migration purposes, there is no presumption of shortage. The employer must demonstrate that they have first surveyed the ‘local labour market’ before obtaining permission to recruit a non-EEA worker.

Beside the two main exemptions to the labour market test – highly skilled and medium-skilled shortage occupations – which will be discussed in detail below, there are also other exempted (smaller in size) categories under which non-EEA workers can come to Flanders. These include short-term permits for workers employed by a foreign company and posted to Flanders (specialized technicians, vocational

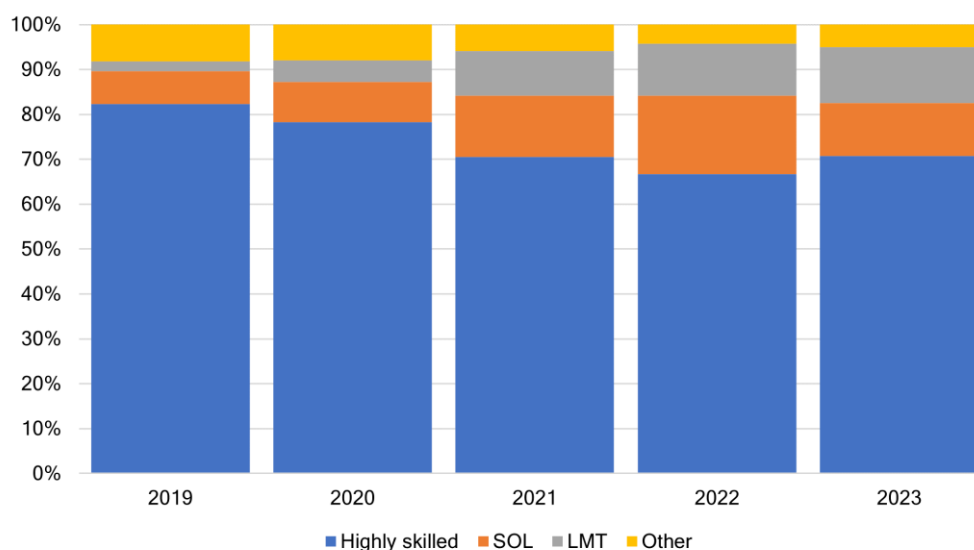
⁷² Previously, access to the Flemish labour market was restricted to nationals of countries with which Belgium had concluded employment agreements.

⁷³ Exemptions are applicable to non-EEA nationals who are posted to Flanders and possess work and residence authorization in other EEA countries (for further details, refer to Chapter 2).

training participants, and participants in a multinational group); one-year permits for young adults (au pairs and volunteers); professional sports; entertainment artists; ministers of recognized religions; and journalists.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the growing significance of entries through the migration shortage occupation list (SOL) and labour market test (LMT) in Flanders. The figures are adjusted for permit duration because highly skilled workers typically hold permits for longer durations (three years) compared to SOL (one year) and especially LMT workers (one year or less), as discussed further below. In 2019, highly skilled workers accounted for more than eight out of ten first issued work permits. By 2023, this proportion decreased to seven out of ten. Conversely, the share of SOL issuances increased from 7% to 12%, while LMT issuances rose from 2% to 12%. Other exempted categories, mainly specialized technicians, au pairs, and professional sports players, decreased in importance from 8% in 2019 to 5% in 2023.

Figure 3.1. Composition (weighted) of first issued work/single permits by category, Flanders, 2019-2023 (year of issuance)



Source: WEWIS, work permit database

3.1.1. Highly skilled workers based on diploma and salary thresholds

Highly skilled workers are a sought-after category of labour migrants for whom a general presumption of shortage exists. Since 2019, permits for highly skilled profiles are issued for a maximum duration of three years. The following categories of workers are considered: highly skilled employees (locally hired or posted⁷⁴), managers (locally hired or posted), researcher-professors or international lecturers, European Blue Card holders, intra-corporate transferees, interns pursuing further education, and postdoctoral researchers.

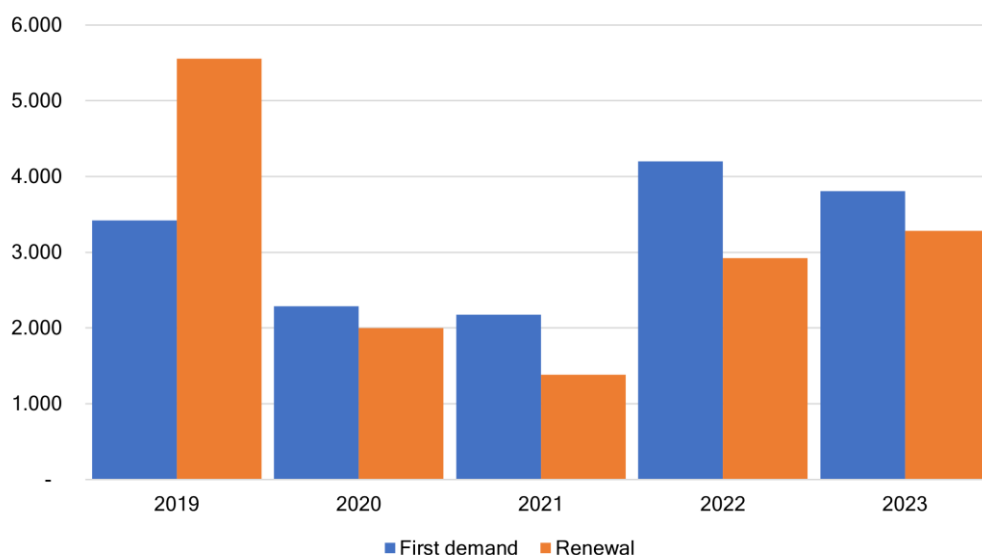
⁷⁴ In contrast to other categories (SOL and LMT), permits in the highly skilled category can also be issued for workers who are posted by their employers, mostly within the same company. In this case, the user of posting services is established in the Flemish region.

Highly skilled employees are required to hold a tertiary degree⁷⁵ and receive a market-compatible wage, currently set at EUR 46,632 gross per year⁷⁶. Following the Dutch system, to attract recent graduates or young employees, the salary threshold for workers aged below 30 is set at 80% of the applicable salary scale (EUR 37,305). The 80% salary threshold also applies to nurses and high-educated school teachers, both of which are severe shortage occupations in Flanders (see section 1.3).

'Managerial roles' are determined not solely by formal diplomas but by a combination of the internal hierarchical position within the company and external representation capacity.⁷⁷ Additionally, these positions have a salary threshold set at EUR 74,611, higher than that of highly skilled employees. The salary threshold for EU Blue Cards stands at EUR 60,621.

Figure 3.2 illustrates the fluctuation in the number of first issued permits and renewals within this category over recent years. While there was a decrease in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID, there was a notable rebound in 2022, surpassing pre-COVID levels. In 2023, the number of first issued permits did not increase further.

Figure 3.2. Number of work/single permits issued to highly skilled workers, by procedure type, Flanders, 2019-2023 (year of issuance)



Source: WEWIS, work permit database

⁷⁵ Educational qualifications at levels 5 to 8 of the Flemish Qualifications Framework, see [Onderwijskwalificaties | De Vlaamse Kwalificatiestructuur](#) (Accessed on 20 February 2024).

⁷⁶ For highly skilled positions, the salary threshold is determined based on the average gross annual salary in Belgium, which is annually determined by the General Directorate of Statistics of the Federal Public Service Economy. A percentile of the average gross annual salary is established for each highly skilled category. This average salary serves as an objective benchmark, subject to yearly adjustments to account for inflation.

⁷⁷ Managerial staff member meet one of the following criteria: lead or manage; are responsible for day-to-day direction; supervise the work of subordinate employees; are authorised to represent the employer and make binding decisions or actions (see article 17,2° of the Government of Flanders Order).

The majority of entries in this channel consist of highly skilled employees, either locally hired or posted to Flanders (often within the same company), comprising 52% and 25% of all permits (first demands and renewals) issued in 2023, respectively. Since March 2023, researchers with hosting agreements at recognized research institutions are also included in the single permit system. In 2023, they and other researchers accounted for 18% of permits issued to the highly skilled.

In Annex Table 3-B, the characteristics of highly skilled entries between 2019 and 2023 are further detailed relative to other categories (SOL, LMT, other). It reveals that almost three in ten non-EEA highly skilled workers are female, with a relatively low mean age of 34. Highly skilled workers are overrepresented in Flemish Brabant. They predominantly occupy high positions in the occupation skill distribution, with 16% in managerial roles, 49% in professional roles, and 5% in technician and associate professional roles. The most common occupations are engineer, consultant, manager, researcher/professor, ICT specialist, and nurse. More than one third of all permits issued (first demands and renewals) were granted to Indian nationals. Together with Japanese, Turkish, and Chinese nationals, they collectively represent more than half of all permits issued to highly skilled non-EEA workers in 2023.

The highly skilled benefit from long permit durations.

Single permits for highly skilled profiles are issued for a maximum duration of three years, significantly reducing the administrative burden for workers, employers and the administration.

Salary thresholds for young employees are relatively high.

Even if salary thresholds in Flanders are notably lower compared to those in Wallonia and Brussels, stakeholders (employers and sector organisations) regularly express concerns regarding the threshold for highly skilled workers, noting that it appears disproportionately high compared to the salaries received by similarly aged Flemish co-workers for identical work. Yet, an analysis using Belgian Labour Force Survey data, augmented with wage data from administrative sources (DMFA and Beltax), leads to more nuanced conclusions. Of tertiary-educated individuals aged between 30 and 55 employed full-time with permanent contracts in high-skilled occupations, approximately 69% earn a gross yearly wage surpassing the standard single permit salary threshold (EUR 46,632), while only 31% earn a wage below the threshold (see Annex Figure 3-A). It thus seems that the standard salary threshold is not set overly high.

However, when we consider the salary threshold for workers aged below 30 set at 80% of the standard salary scale (EUR 37,305), the percentage of individuals aged below 30 earning less increases to 52%. This incongruity may foster unease in the workplace, particularly evident when the 20% reduction in salary for young workers abruptly ends upon reaching the age of 30. At this point, the worker's salary undergoes a sudden increase to align with the standard single permit wage thresholds, often resulting in wage disparities among colleagues, and posing challenges for employers in justifying such discrepancies.

Despite being underused, EU Blue Cards face further tightening.

Although the Blue Card has been available since 2012, the majority of highly skilled employees still use the single permit procedure which has a lower salary threshold. With the implementation of the EU directive in May 2024, EU Blue Card holders gain full access to the Flemish labour market after one year (instead of the previous two years), based on a minimum 6-month employment contract (instead of the previous one-year contract). In response, the Flemish government has raised the diploma requirement from an associate degree to a bachelor's degree and increased the salary threshold from 120% to 130% of the standard threshold (EUR 60,621). The BLFS analysis shows that this threshold can act as a barrier, as 63% of the tertiary-educated individuals aged between 30 and 55 employed full-time with permanent contracts in high-skilled occupations earn a wage below the Blue Card threshold

(see Annex Figure 3-A). Consequently, the popularity of the EU Blue Card is not expected to increase in the near future, despite the benefits in terms of access to employment and mobility rights that come with it for non-EEA workers.

3.1.2. Medium-skilled workers based on a shortage occupation list

Since 2019, the Flemish labour migration framework enables a flexible influx of medium-skilled non-EEA workers, based on a specific migration shortage occupation list (SOL), formalized by ministerial decree. At least every two years with the option of early revision⁷⁸, the Minister of Work compiles a catalogue of medium-skilled occupations facing persistent shortages in the Flemish labour market. This catalogue is based on the VDAB (Flemish Public Employment Service) shortage occupation list and is further developed with input from the Advisory Committee for Economic Migration of the Social and Economic Council of Flanders (SERV) (see Box 3-1).

The current list, effective from September 2023, includes 29 job descriptions (capturing 46 occupations). This list covers operating and maintaining vehicles and machinery; installing, assembling, maintaining electrical, electronic, and plumbing installations; butchers and bakers/pastry chefs; nursing assistants; and various technical and construction-related professions. To qualify for the SOL, both the job title and its accompanying description in the single permit application must adhere to the precise terminology and job delineation as outlined in the SOL (see Box 3-1). The employer has recently been required to also submit additional elements, including a detailed description of the position and the range of duties, the CV with full details of the foreign worker's education and work experience, and additional documents (diploma, certificate or proof of professional experience) demonstrating the employee's qualifications for the specific job.

Every non-EEA worker employed in a shortage occupation must receive remuneration at a minimum level corresponding to the medium-skilled category as determined by the relevant joint committee – a collective bargaining body tasked with setting working conditions, wages, and benefits for specific sectors of the Belgian economy. Prior to 2022, there were instances where workers in occupations listed in the migration SOL were compensated at a lower category or classification within the joint committee. To prevent such occurrences, the Economic Migration Service (EMS) now rigorously assesses the actual wages stipulated by the joint committees during the single permit application process (see section 3.2.1).

⁷⁸ Since May 2024, the list is to be compiled at least every two years, with the option of early revision on the advice of WEWIS or social partners.

Box 3-1. The development of the migration SOL: an overview

The methodology for constructing the migration SOL, developed by the Minister of Work in 2018 and reaffirmed in 2023, consists of the following steps:

The most recent VDAB shortage occupations list (SOL) serves as the initial basis for creating the draft migration SOL. Each January, VDAB releases a list of shortage occupations, based on a quantitative analysis of VDAB data concerning job vacancies and job seekers, and a qualitative survey involving VDAB experts and relevant sector organizations (see Box 1-2). This comprehensive list includes occupations at high, medium, and low skill levels, with shortages arising from various causes.

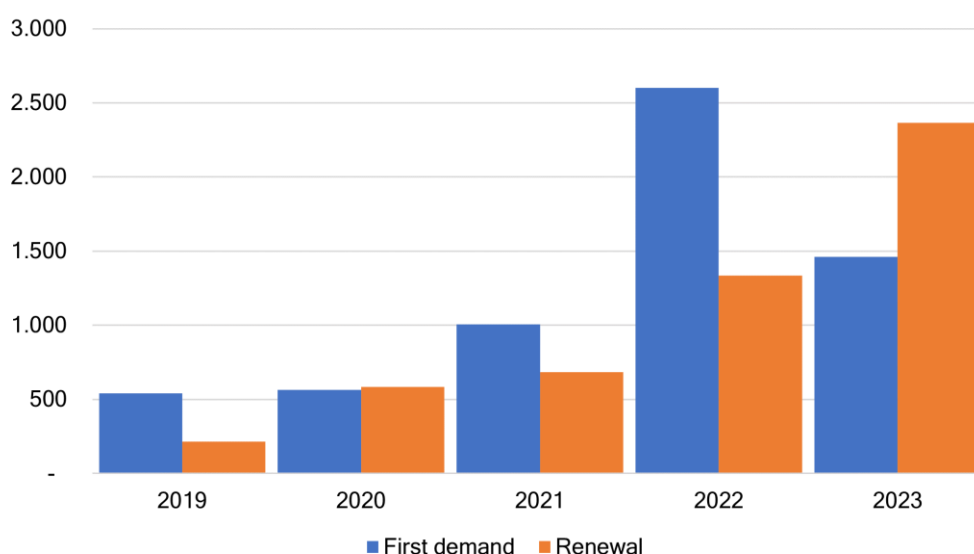
The process of compiling the list of occupations eligible for migration involves reducing the total number of VDAB shortage occupations through the following steps: 1) focusing solely on medium-skilled occupations (based on the required skill level reported by employers in the vacancy); 2) incorporating only quantitative shortage occupations; and 3) including only occupations that are listed as EU-widespread labour shortages by the European Labour Authority. Following this process for the 2023 migration SOL, VDAB began with 234 occupations, retaining 153 after step 1, 68 after step 2, and finally 31 occupations after step 3. At this stage, the process does not include an inter-regional comparison because Actiris and Forem use different occupational classifications, making direct comparison of shortage occupations unfeasible.

Subsequently, the compiled list of medium-skilled positions for economic migration is reviewed by the Advisory Committee for Economic Migration (ACEM) of the SERV, consisting of representatives from employers, unions, and the government. Following consultations, ACEM can propose the addition or removal of occupations to the list. In the 2023 migration SOL, ACEM suggested adding 51 occupations, most of which were statistically severe shortage occupations according to VDAB but were excluded from the migration SOL in the EU comparison (step 3). A smaller number of proposed occupations were not on the initial VDAB SOL and were added by sector representatives, often based on recruitment challenges reported by employers rather than quantitative data.

Finally, the updated list is submitted to the Minister of Work for a political decision regarding approval. While for the 2021 list, the cabinet included all but one occupation proposed by the ACEM, for the 2023 list, only 15 of the 51 suggested occupations were retained.

Figure 3.3 illustrates a notable increase in the first issuance of permits for shortage occupations, with a peak in 2022, followed by a decline in 2023. The recent decline can be attributed to several factors, including a modest easing of labour market tightness in Flanders (see section 1.3). Yet, another significant factor is the stricter approval procedure at the EMS, leading to a higher share of refusals in this category, as discussed further below.

Figure 3.3. Number of work/single permits issued to SOL workers, by procedure type, Flanders, 2019-2023 (year of issuance)



Source: WEWIS, work permit database

SOL permits (first demands and renewals) are predominantly issued to non-EEA men, with an average age of 38 years. Over four in ten SOL permits are granted to Turkish nationals, followed by Moroccans (12%), and Indians, Filipinos, Kosovans, and Albanians (all at 5%). The most common occupational categories include plant and machine operators (e.g., truck driver, tractor-trailer driver, construction machine operator), craft and trade workers (e.g., chef, butcher, pipefitter, baker, plumber), and technicians and associate professionals (e.g., maintenance mechanic, technician, nursing assistant). (see Annex Table 3-B).

The migration SOL facilitates addressing the demand for skilled labour through migration.

Compared to many other OECD countries, including neighbouring countries like the Netherlands, where highly remunerated labour migrants are easily approved while applications for lower-wage migrants are usually rejected, the migration SOL enables a broader range of labour needs to be addressed through migration. This channel is highly appreciated by social partners as it reflects the real needs of the Flemish labour market.

Social partners view the migration SOL as too rigid.

While the migration SOL is considered crucial, social partners (employers and unions) view it as still too rigid.⁷⁹ There is concern about the VDAB SOL being the sole basis for constructing the migration SOL, as the VDAB database only represents a portion of the job market. Stakeholders report that employers increasingly use platforms like Indeed or Advertsdata instead of the VDAB website to post job vacancies. Moreover, some employers report vacancies to VDAB only once, despite ongoing searches, which can distort vacancy counts. Niche-specific professions with few vacancies are also overlooked on the VDAB list. Still, currently, no other statistical data by occupation are available to indicate whether vacancies are difficult to fill.

⁷⁹ [Advies dynamische knelpuntberoepenlijst | Commissie Economische Migratie](#) (Accessed on 21 February 2024).

Further, social partners view the exclusion of occupations not listed as widespread shortages in the EU as an overly strict application of the concentric model. They argue that an occupation not being in shortage in other countries does not ensure a surplus of labour and actual migration needed to address shortages effectively in Flanders.

Also, employers face difficulties in accurately identifying the occupations eligible for migration based on the job descriptions present on the 'Work permits for foreign workers' website. The relatively high proportion of rejected single permit applications within the migration SOL (see section 3.2.1) suggests the pertinence of this issue. A significant recent addition is that VDAB indicates whether an occupation is open to labour migration on the broader SOL and in the online tool 'Occupations in Numbers'⁸⁰, but employers may be unaware of this.

Finally, despite consultations with the ACEM of the SERV being integrated into the process, social partners perceive a lack of impact or acknowledgment of their input by the Minister of Work and the cabinet. They believe their contributions are a valuable addition to the quantitative analysis but feel that their feedback is not always adequately considered.

3.1.3. Low- and medium-skilled workers based on a labour market test

If none of the previously mentioned categories apply, the employer can still apply for a work permit under the 'other' category, where the labour market test (LMT) becomes relevant. In this case, before submitting the application, the employer must first demonstrate that finding a suitable employee on the local labour market within a reasonable time is not feasible. Specifically, employers must post the vacancy for at least nine weeks within the four months prior to the application on both VDAB and EURES platforms (with automatic publication on EURES) and request 'active assistance' from VDAB to help fill the vacancy.

The EMS then handles the application in two phases: first, the EMS reviews the admissibility of the application (after the nine-week vacancy period). Once the application is deemed admissible, for occupations where the local tension ratio is between 7 and 12 (indicating that local candidates should be available), the EMS asks VDAB to conduct a labour market test. VDAB will then assess whether it is possible to find a suitable candidate within a reasonable timeframe. This search considers not only available profiles but also the possibility of training candidates through additional vocational or individual training. VDAB may require the employer to be open to on-the-job training through workplace learning, be accessible for discussions regarding VDAB actions, adhere to anti-discrimination laws when advertising vacancies and assessing candidates, and provide VDAB with feedback on all applications to help accurately recommend alternative candidates. VDAB takes about two weeks to gather the results and convey its decision to the EMS, who ultimately decides on the granting of the work authorisation.

As of May 2024, only low- to medium-skilled occupations listed on the VDAB SOL are allowed entry through the 'other' category; all others are automatically rejected, along with any occupation of very low skill level⁸¹. For non-EEA workers in the other category, the wage cannot be lower than the guaranteed average minimum monthly income⁸² (EUR 1,995 as of July 2023), but higher wages apply under collective labour agreements and these are applied in the process.

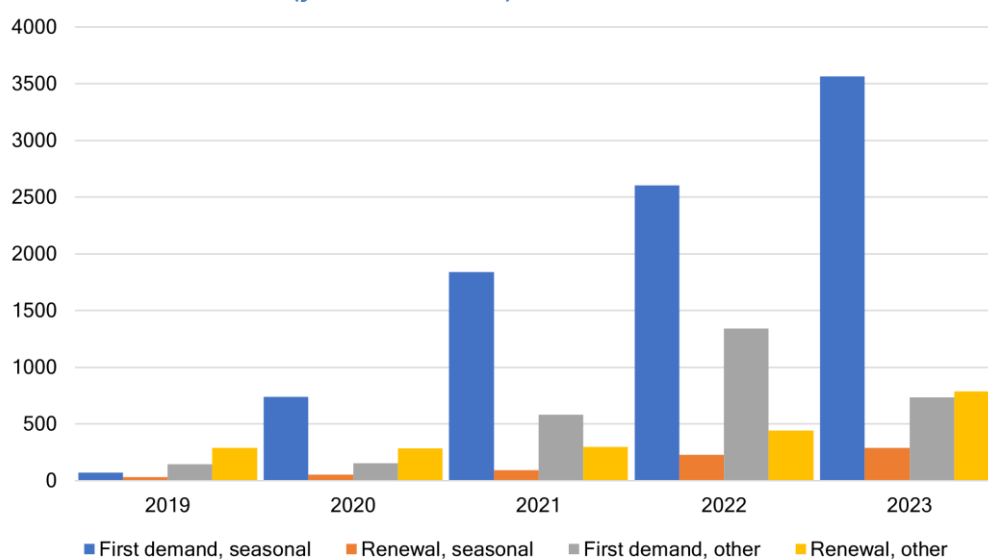
⁸⁰ See [Beroepen in cijfers \(vdab.be\)](https://www.vdab.be/beroeopen-in-cijfers) (Accessed on 21 August 2024).

⁸¹ Educational qualifications at levels 2 to 4 of the Flemish Qualifications Framework, so excluding the 'unskilled'.

⁸² Employees who are at least 21 years old and work full-time under an employment contract are entitled to a guaranteed average minimum monthly income, regardless of their industry and the joint committee they fall under. The GMMMI is particularly important for employees who do not fall under any joint committee or under a joint

The other category (from here on out: LMT) has seen a notable increase in the number of first issued permits since the current procedure was introduced (see Figure 3.4). This rise, to 4,000 in 2023, is largely due to the influx of seasonal workers. Seasonal workers constitute a unique category among the LMT entries (for example, the legislation requires only 3 weeks for posting vacancy instead of 9), and their characteristics are separately discussed in section 3.2.2. Noteworthy aspects of seasonal workers include their predominantly Ukrainian nationality and employment in the Limburg province, with the majority being female.⁸³ Non-seasonal LMT workers are mostly engaged in skilled trades (e.g., form worker, iron worker, plasterer, roofer, welder, mason) and elementary occupations (e.g., groundworker, packaging, manual labourer, (assistant) chef, bus driver, horticultural worker), and they are primarily men, from Turkey, Morocco, and India (see Annex Table 3-B).

Figure 3.4. Number of work/single permits issued to LMT workers, by procedure type and seasonal, Flanders, 2019-2023 (year of issuance)



Source: WEWIS, work permit database

The LMT forms a solid foundation for the concentric model.

The implementation of the LMT offers robust assurances for upholding the concentric model and helps to maximize the potential of the EURES platform. Increased support from and dialogue with VDAB seems particularly pertinent in Flanders, given that employers often impose stringent language requirements for their vacancies (see section 1.3), even in a tight labour market. While such requirements are reasonable in many cases, language prerequisites sometimes exceed those necessary for the job at hand. More proactive engagement with employers during the LMT phase could serve to adjust language criteria to more realistic levels, thereby enhancing opportunities for migrants who already possess the right to work in Flanders to fill vacancies.

The long LMT process may hinder swift recruitment for certain occupations.

committee that has not yet been established or has not concluded a collective bargaining agreement on this matter. Joint committees can indeed establish more favourable minimum wages for their industry through collective labour agreements.

⁸³ Since the outbreak of Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine, there has been a complete shift in the gender balance of Ukrainian seasonal workers coming to Flanders, now notably favouring women.

The LMT process, comprising 9 weeks of vacancy posting plus some time for VDAB's investigation, may be excessive for certain occupations, especially notoriously hard-to-fill professions, where the vacancies indicate realistic or no requirements.

Excessive restrictions on the SOL and LMT pathways may incentivize reliance on posting of non-EEA workers.

The main argument for excluding unskilled and occupations not listed on the general VDAB SOL from labour migration is the relatively poor employment outcomes among the low-skilled population in Flanders. This approach aims to improve the activation of the local Flemish labour reserve and encourage the recruitment of a larger labour pool available in the Brussels and Wallonia regions.

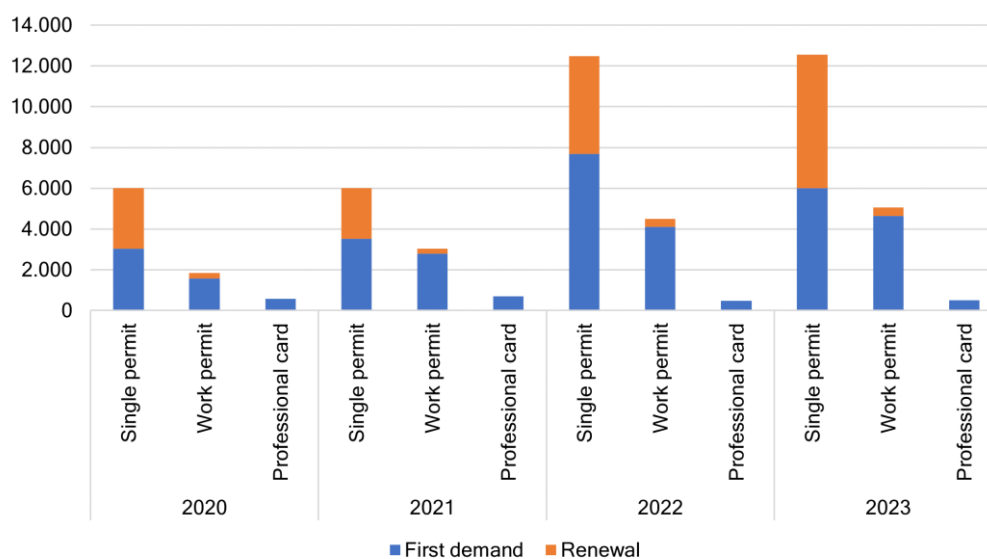
However, considering the comprehensive nature of the LMT process, there appears to be low risk in allowing employers to extend it to all occupations. The new restrictions could pose challenges for filling certain difficult-to-fill roles where genuine demand exists. Additionally, tightening and prolonging the SOL and LMT channels may increase the attractiveness of posting non-EEA nationals in labour-intensive sectors such as construction, transport, electrical installations, and meat processing (see section 2.3.2). Despite some inherent vulnerabilities, as outlined below, single permits offer numerous advantages over posting. These include a stronger rights position for non-EEA migrants, the ability to set clearer demands on employers, and enhanced opportunities for social inspection services to monitor aspects like wages and housing.

3.2. Permit procedures in practice: key issues in the legal and administrative framework

Since January 2019, there have been three main types of permits for non-EEA workers in Flanders. The first type is a single permit, which is an electronic residence card containing both a work permit and a residence permit. This is intended for non-EEA nationals intending to work as employees for more than 90 days. The second type is a short-duration work permit, intended for non-EEA nationals who want to work as employees for 90 days or less. Au pairs and frontier workers also fall under the short-term work permit, even though they often work for more than 90 days. The third type is a professional card for non-EEA nationals wishing to work as self-employed individuals.

Most permits issued are single permits (see Figure 3.5), with 12,000 permits issued in 2023 (48% first-time applications and 52% renewals). Work permits constitute a smaller proportion, with 5,000 permits issued (92% first-time applications). Professional cards represent a very small entry channel, with only 519 permits issued (almost all first-time applications). The following section delves into the key issues within the legal and administrative framework for each type of permit.

Figure 3.5. Number of issued permits by type of application and type of procedure, Flanders 2020-2023 (year of issuance)



Note: The data include both definite and indefinite permit durations.

Source: WEWIS, work permit database

3.2.1. The single permit (>90days)

The administration of the single permit in Belgium is governed by the executing cooperation agreement among the Federal State, the Walloon Region, the Flemish Region, the Brussels-Capital Region, and the German-speaking Community, dated 2 February 2018, and by the Ministerial Decree of December 2018.⁸⁴

Employers bear the responsibility of initiating the necessary procedures to obtain work and residence authorization for prospective non-EEA workers. Following the submission of the application, the single permit procedure involves multiple stages and stakeholders across all policy levels (see Table 3-1). Each step is further discussed in detail below.

At the regional level, the Economic Migration Service (EMS) of WEWIS plays a central role in managing labour migration in Flanders, determining the authorization to work (the 'labour aspect' of the single permit). At the federal level, the Immigration Office (IO), under the Ministry of Home Affairs, decides on the authorization to reside in Belgium (the 'residence aspect' of the single permit) and issues an Annex 46 or 47. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through its consulates and diplomatic posts abroad, is responsible for issuing visas to single permit holders, enabling their access to Belgian territory. Finally, at the local level, Flemish cities and municipalities are responsible for issuing the electronic residence card A when non-EEA migrants apply for registration. While waiting for issuance, the migrant receives an Annex 49.

⁸⁴ The regions mutually recognize each other's issued work permits. The authorization for temporary employment applies to employment for the same employer throughout the entire Belgian territory.

Table 3-1. The single permit procedure from application to start of employment.

| APPLICATION | ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF RECEIPT | EMPLOYMENT DECISION | POSITIVE DECISION | ANNEX 46/47 | VISA APPLICATION | ARRIVAL | RESIDENCE CHECK |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>The employer applies for a single permit via the digital platform 'Working In Belgium'.</p> | <p>The application is automatically forwarded to the EMS. This service has 10 days to decide whether the application is complete and admissible.</p> <p>In practice, hardly any admissibility decisions are made within this period (see below for further discussion).</p> | <p>The EMS assesses whether the necessary conditions are met and decides on the work permit within 120 days of the acknowledgement of receipt.</p> | <p>If a positive decision is made, the file is automatically forwarded to the IO, who will decide on the residence permit within the same 120 days of the acknowledgement of receipt.</p> | <p>The IO makes a positive decision and issues Annex 46, or exceeds the allowed decision period, resulting in Annex 47 being issued.</p> | <p>With Annex 46 or 47, the worker can apply for a type D visa - long stay at the competent embassy or consulate.</p> | <p>After arriving in Belgium, the worker must report to the municipality within eight days to receive Annex 49.</p> | <p>After a residence check by the police, the municipality issues the electronic residence card A.</p> |
| | | | <p>NEGATIVE DECISION The IO issues Annex 48. An appeal for annulment can be lodged with the Council for Alien Law Litigation within 30 days of the decision being notified.</p> | | | | |
| | | | <p>NEGATIVE DECISION An appeal may be lodged with the Minister of Work within 30 days of the decision.</p> | | | | |
| | | | <p>INCOMPLETE APPLICATION A new application may be submitted with supplementary documents within 15 days of the decision.</p> | | | | |
| <p>INADMISSABLE APPLICATION An appeal may be lodged with the Council of State within 60 days of the decision.</p> | | | | | | | |

Note: EMS = Economic Migration Service; IO = Immigration Office.

Source: Compiled by authors, based on legislation and regulations, see [Hoe vraag je een gecombineerde vergunning aan? | Vreemdelingenrecht.be](#); [De gecombineerde vergunning: procedure | Myria](#) (Accessed on 28 February 2024).

The employer submits the single permit application

Belgium's labour migration system operates on a demand-driven basis. The employer (or their authorised representative) initiates the single permit procedure by submitting the application and required documents on-line through the digital Working in Belgium (WiB) platform. The competent region is determined based on the employee's primary place of work. If this cannot be identified, the employer's registered office is used. The WiB platform automatically assigns the file to the appropriate region based on the entered employment details, requiring no additional action from the employer.

The application requires various work-related documents (employer details, worker details⁸⁵, employment contract⁸⁶, and depending on the category: proof of social security abroad for postings, proof of qualifications⁸⁷, a detailed job description, proof of sufficient means of subsistence), as well as residence-related documents (passport, criminal record extract⁸⁸, health insurance declaration of commitment⁸⁹, medical certificate⁹⁰). The start date can be freely determined, but employment cannot start before the single permit is granted.

Single permit applications can also be made for workers already residing legally in Belgium with a short or long status.⁹¹ The only exception to this rule is the LMT category, where employers can only apply for a single permit for workers who are still residing abroad. This is because under the LMT category, employers are required to post the vacancy and search for local candidates first. The argument is that if the foreign worker is already in Belgium, the effectiveness of a genuine search for local availability becomes questionable. For workers already residing in Belgium, a copy of their valid Belgian residence permit is required for the application.

⁸⁵ Employers must provide a temporary National Register number (BIS number) for the candidate. This number is a mandatory field on the application form.

⁸⁶ When applying for a work permit, the employer must provide a copy of the employment contract signed by both parties. The contract must comply with all Belgian employment law requirements and be drafted in Dutch for employment in the Flemish Region. While a translation can be added for the employee's convenience, only the Dutch-language version will be considered for the single permit application.

⁸⁷ For a single permit application for a highly skilled individual, a copy of their diploma must be submitted. For a single permit to work in a shortage occupation, the Flemish government requires proof that the foreign worker possesses the necessary skills to perform the job. This may include evidence of completed training or relevant work experience. Acceptable documents include: a cv; proof of previous employment; social security certificate listing prior employment; or certificates of completed training.

⁸⁸ The criminal record extract must confirm that the employee has no criminal convictions and must be no more than six months old at the time of application. If the extract is not in Dutch, French, or English, it must be legalised and accompanied by a sworn translation.

⁸⁹ Through the declaration of commitment, the employer confirms their intention to register the employee with a Belgian mutual health organisation upon their arrival in Belgium. While this declaration is not mandatory, it is recommended. Proof of health insurance or the declaration of commitment must be issued no more than six months prior to the single permit application.

⁹⁰ The employee must provide a medical certificate confirming they do not have an illness that could endanger public health in Belgium. The certificate must be issued no more than six months prior to the single permit application.

⁹¹ Previously, applicants were required to reside abroad, with only the minister having the authority to grant exceptions through appeals.

After compiling the application file, a fee must be paid to the IO. As of 1 January 2024, the fee for a single permit application is EUR 144. Currently, there are no regulations specifying who should bear this cost. While the employer typically covers the fee, the employee or a third party may also pay it. Proof of payment must be included in the application file.

The Working in Belgium platform functions well but can still be improved.

The WiB platform was launched in May 2021 to streamline the filing and processing of labour migration applications. This platform allows employers to submit a unified file which will then be processed by both regional and federal authorities for issuance of the final single permit. Compared to the fragmented submission process before 2021, the WiB platform is seen as an improvement, marking a significant advancement in the admission process for employers.

Nevertheless, there are opportunities to improve transparency and user-friendliness through some straightforward additions. One specific issue is that key stakeholders such as Belgian embassies, diplomatic posts and municipalities have no access to WiB and hence cannot check the status of permit applications. As a result, they still have to wait to be informed by the IO, which slows down the overall process. The fact that non-EEA workers have limited access to the WiB platform is also problematic, and is further discussed in section 3.3.1. A continuous working group is in place with all stakeholders involved (IO, EMS, foreign affairs, ONSS) to improve the platform's functionality.

Access to information regarding the single permit regulations and procedure remains fragmented.

Public-facing information on single permit regulations and procedures is fragmented, spread across multiple websites, which causes confusion for employers. There are a number of public-facing websites providing information about labour migration to employers, migrants and other stakeholders, but these operate independently, sometimes linking to other websites. These include the Federal Immigration Office website, the WiB platform, WEWIS' page 'Work Permits for Foreign Workers', Flemish Integration Agency's 'work' page, and Flanders' 'Your Future in Flanders' which also includes a page on 'Working in Flanders as a foreigner'. Taken together, these provide useful information, but content is hard to find, drafted independently and links do not always provide a comprehensive picture for the user. While effort has been made to provide content in English, some important material is still in Dutch.

Applying for a single permit from a short-stay permit is practically unfeasible due to lengthy procedures.

While the system allows individuals (excluding LMT) to apply for a single permit from within Belgium, in practice, this option is hard to use. The initial 90-day short-stay period usually expires because processing times take much longer (see further discussion below). The legislation does not specify the course of action if legal residence expires during the processing period of the single permit. There is no procedure or temporary document to ensure legal residence of the immigrant in this interim period. The immigration authorities implement a policy of tolerance in this situation, but the applicant remains in illegal residence in the meantime.⁹²

The regional level determines the work authorization

Once the application is submitted, the competent authorities begin processing it. Due to the division of powers between the federal and regional governments in Belgium, the single permit application procedure consists of two stages. First, the competent region processes the case—for Flanders, this is

⁹² Van Huylbroeck F. (2023), *Waarom de behandelingstermijn voor een gecombineerde vergunning (g)een probleem is*, T. Vreemd. Nr. 4.

the EMS, which handles the work permit. If the region issues a positive decision, the file is automatically forwarded to the federal IO, which makes the final decision.

The maximum processing period for a single permit is four months.⁹³ However, in Flanders, following Belgian legislation, the four-month period does not begin from the submission of the application, as prescribed by the single permit directive. Instead, it starts only after notification from the EMS confirming that the application is complete and thus admissible.⁹⁴

The EMS first assesses whether the application is complete and notifies the applicant of its decision. If any documents are missing or incomplete, the EMS will inform the applicant in writing of the required additional information or documents. Employers have 15 days from the date of the letter to submit the requested documents. If the additional documents or information are not provided within this period, the EMS will declare the application inadmissible and notify the employer of this decision by registered letter.

According to the cooperation agreement, if the file is complete, the employer should receive an admissibility decision within 10 days. In practice, however, this period is rarely respected, and there are no sanctions specified for failing to meet the deadline nor is the decision considered automatically favourable. When the EMS processes the application – after a considerable backlog – it usually immediately evaluates concerning labour market admission. If the file is complete, the admissibility decision is communicated on the same day as, or just a few days before, the decision on the work authorization via the WiB platform.

For single permit applications received in 2023, EMS decided on the admissibility within an average of 61 days. Consequently, the statutory processing period of four months is only counted after two months on average from initial submission. Admissibility times varied among categories, with average durations of 49 days for the highly skilled, 81 days for SOL, 70 days for LMT, and 19 days for other categories.

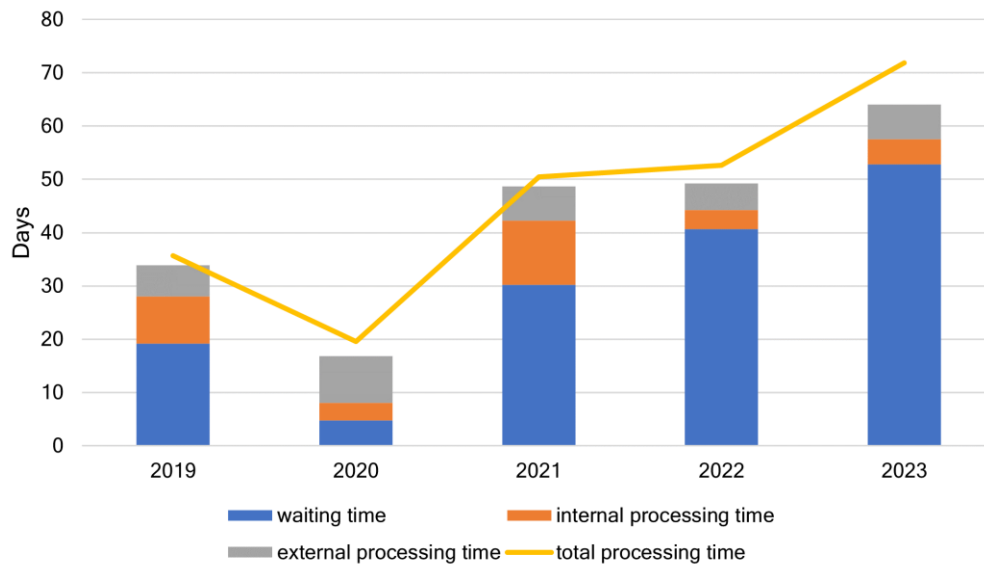
To determine approval of admissible files, the EMS verifies various aspects including the labour agreement, workers' CV, and employers' economic activity. Dependent on the category of entry, they also verify the workers' qualifications and work experience, the salary, job description, and task package, as well as the outcome of the labour market test if applicable. In some cases, the EMS requests additional information from the applicant (employer) or from social inspection services (see 3.3.2).

Total processing times of first single permit applications have been rising, from 36 days in 2019 to 72 days in 2023 (see Figure 3.6), primarily due to backlog accumulation. Waiting times, indicating the duration before case handlers start assessing an application, surged from an average of 19 days in 2019 to 53 days in 2023. Meanwhile, internal processing times at the EMS have decreased to 5 days on average in 2023, while external processing times (involving employers or other authorities) have remained relatively stable at 7 days in 2023. These figures indicate that the surge in processing times is largely attributed to capacity constraints within the EMS.

⁹³ Different deadlines apply to specific categories, such as researchers under guest agreements (60 days), and blue card holders, intra-company transfers, seasonal workers, and interns (90 days).

⁹⁴ Approximately 5% of the applications received in 2023 were deemed inadmissible, with certain categories experienced higher rates: 6% for SOL, 11% for LMT, and 8% for others, contrasting with only 2% for highly skilled applications.

Figure 3.6. Breakdown of processing times for first demands of single permits, Flanders, 2019-2023 (year of application)

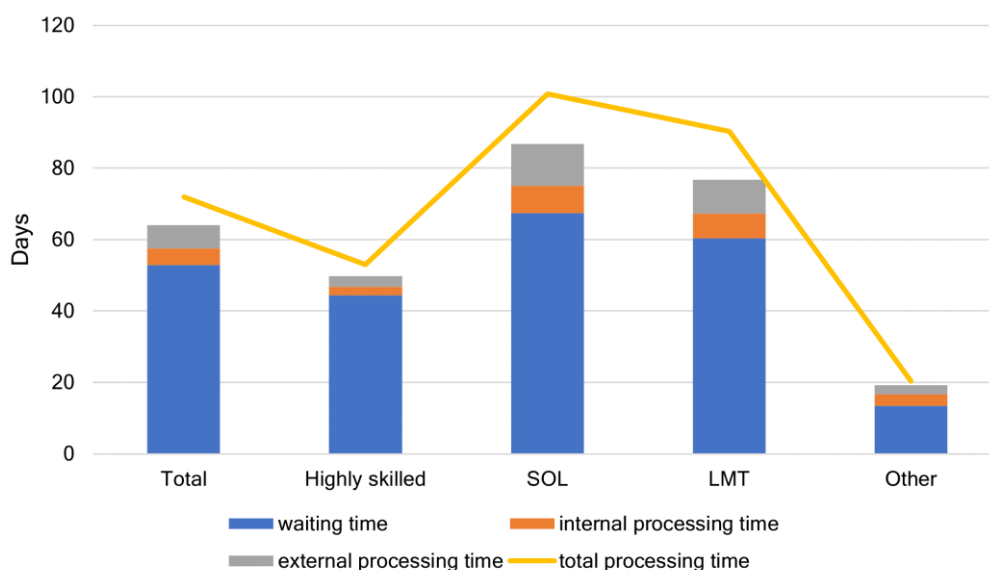


Note: Only applications for which the EMS has made a decision are included.

Source: WEWIS, work permit database

There are no formal systems for expedited handling in Flanders. However, the EMS does differentiate between categories in terms of processing times. For 2023 applications, total processing times were nearly twice as long for SOL and LMT applications (100 and 90 days, respectively) compared to highly skilled applicants (53 days) and four times as long as for other (smaller) categories (see Figure 3.7). While longer internal and external processing times undoubtedly contribute to this discrepancy for SOL and LMT, longer waiting times also prevail within these categories. This suggests that case handlers tend to start assessing applications for highly skilled individuals more quickly, even though there is no official policy to prioritize them. This may be because applications for highly skilled workers are generally easier to review, with a lower refusal rate compared to SOL and LMT applications, and possibly due to informal requests for faster processing.

Figure 3.7. Breakdown of processing times for first demands of single permits, by main category, Flanders, 2023 (year of application)



Note: Only applications for which the EMS has made a decision are included.

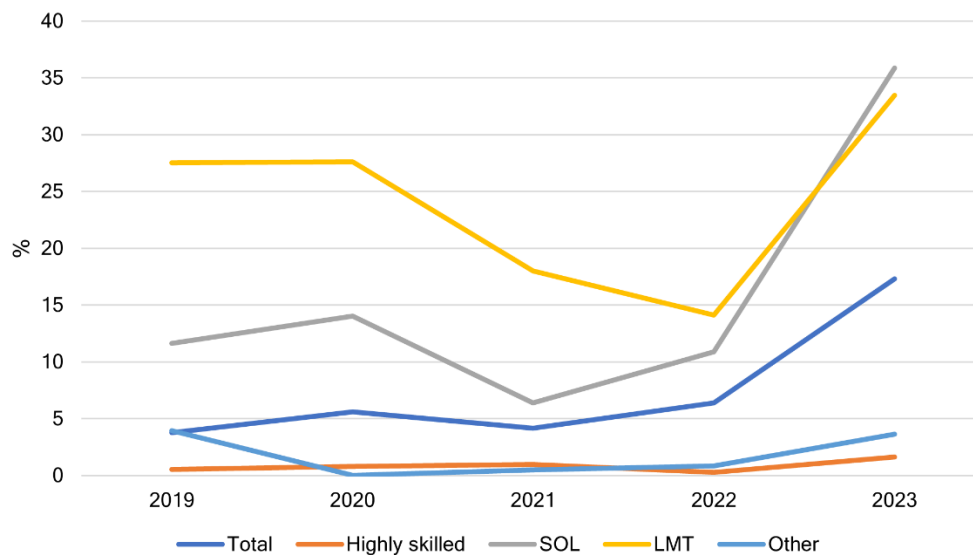
Source: WEWIS, work permit database.

As soon as a positive decision regarding the work authorisation is made, the applicant is informed by the EMS through the WiB platform. This is purely to inform the employer and does not authorize start of work (see below). If the region refuses permission for employment, this decision will be notified to the applicant and the worker via the platform.

Refusal rates have significantly increased recently. In response to large-scale and widely publicised cases of social fraud (e.g., Borealis), the EMS has established a 'control room' to enhance screening in cases where doubt or suspicion arises. This entails additional verification of foreign workers' qualifications using data from foreign public employment services (where possible) and embassies, alongside an evaluation of the employer's financial-economic status (liquidity, solvency, and profitability) using company-level databases. Moreover, the EMS scrutinizes past single permit application histories, prior violations, and sanctions associated with illegal employment, as well as previous outcomes of social inspections, among other factors.

As a consequence of this closer review, refusal rates have risen from 3.8% in 2019 to 17.3% in 2023. This increase was primarily driven by the SOL (36%) and LMT (34%) categories, while the refusal rate for the highly skilled category has remained low (1.6%) (see Figure 3.8). The SOL category in particular saw much higher refusal rates than in 2019, the only pre-pandemic year for which data are available.

Figure 3.8. Refusal rates for first demands of single permits, by main category, Flanders, 2019-2023 (year of application)



Note: Only applications for which the EMS has made a decision are included
Source: WEWIS, work permit database.

The admissibility phase is used to allow Flanders to go beyond the clearly defined maximum period from the single permit directive.

While including an admissibility phase in national regulations is not inherently problematic, the letter and spirit of the single permit directive would see it incorporated within the maximum four-month period following the submission of the application. The four-month deadline in the directive is meant as a limit rather than a target. The timeframe outlined in the directive ensures legal certainty: applicants are aware that they will receive a response within a maximum of four months after submitting their application, with the provision for extensions in complex cases or suspension if information is incomplete.

Currently, in Flanders, the four-month period only begins when the EMS has confirmed the completeness of the application. Consequently, the starting point of the period depends on an external circumstance – the speed at which a government agency reviews and deems the file admissible – and is no longer predictable.⁹⁵ The deadline from the single permit directive is in practice not correctly transposed. The EMS has more than four months to provide a response, circumventing the requirement that applications be automatically approved in the absence of a response within this time limit.

Long processing times are mostly due to understaffing.

Following the submission of an application, employers usually receive no feedback for several months. According to stakeholders, the WiB platform provides scant information, merely stating “in process”, without specifying the stage of the file.

The large backlog accumulated within the EMS means that files remain dormant for extended periods. Interestingly, once a case handler opens the file, processing times are not excessively long, showcasing administrative efficiency despite significant understaffing. In 2024, the EMS added eight new case

⁹⁵ Van Huylbroeck F. (2023), *Waarom de behandelingstermijn voor een gecombineerde vergunning (g)een probleem is*, T. Vreemd. Nr. 4.

handlers, bringing the total to nearly 40 full-time equivalents (FTEs), including administrative support. As a result of these new hires, overall processing times, especially waiting times, have decreased significantly in 2024. An initial backlog of 3,000 applications (as of January 2024) was reduced to 1,100 applications by June 2024. The EMS publishes real-time processing times on its website.

There is a dearth of communication during the application process.

Although EMS reports handling daily requests via phone or email, employers express frustration over the sometimes-challenging communication with EMS and the uncertainty about how to address questions regarding single permit applications. There is no chatbot service available, nor an automated system to receive updates on applications.

There is a lack of clarity regarding which salary threshold should be applied in SOL applications.

Discussions between employers and the EMS often revolve around worker salaries, with workers in similar occupations sometimes earning significantly less depending on their joint committee classification. Determining the relevant joint committee classification for a worker's occupation can be complex and may lead to differing perceptions between employers and the EMS, resulting in frequent exchanges, with employers occasionally perceiving decisions on approvals and denials as arbitrary.

The introduction of new grounds for refusal with a wide scope for interpretation has increased uncertainty among employers.

Starting from May 2024, additional grounds for refusal of a single permit for employment have been implemented in Flanders, primarily pertaining to employer compliance with social and tax law obligations. Firms with limited activity, newly established entities, those lacking personnel, or with outstanding social or fiscal debts may be refused approval of a single permit application. EMS case handlers have substantial discretionary power in determining whether to reject the application, which may foster insecurity among employers.

The pre-approval check procedure at the EMS could be made more efficient.

The EMS application for reviewing single permit applications is inefficient, requiring case handlers to manually retrieve information from separate, non-integrated data sources during pre-approval checks.

There is no statutory time limit for appeal.

If, during the initial stage of the procedure, the EMS denies admission to work, it notifies the applicant (employer) and the federal authority. An appeal can be lodged with the competent minister within 30 days.⁹⁶ In 2023, there were 372 appeals submitted to the minister, a significant increase from 106 in 2022. The minister made 58 positive decisions and 73 negative decisions. Additionally, 24 cases were either classified as having no consequence or were declared inadmissible. As of February 2024, the remaining cases were still being processed. The average processing time for the 155 decisions made was 230 days. Unlike the application and renewal processes, the appeal process does not have a statutory time limit. Therefore, appellants wait seven months on average, often without any information or indication as to when a decision will be made.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ In 2023, there were 232 appeal cases, marking a significant increase compared to previous years. This surge correlates with the rise in refusals during the same period.

⁹⁷ Weatherburn, A., Kruithof, E. H., & Vanroelen, C. (2022). Labour migration in Flanders and the use of the single permit to address labour market shortages: The lived experiences of single permit holders working in medium skilled bottleneck professions. Interface Demography Working Paper No. 2022-01.

The federal level handles the residence authorization

Once the region makes a positive decision, the file is automatically transferred to the IO for the decision on residence in Belgium. This sequential procedure, where the IO begins processing the residence aspect only after the EMS has made a positive decision on the labour aspect of the single permit, contrasts with the provision in the cooperation agreement, which allows the IO to start processing applications after the region's admissibility decision.

The IO assesses the conditions for obtaining a residence permit by examining criminal records, medical health insurance, and the history of residence permit and visa applications in Belgium (and sometimes other EEA countries). Similar to the EMS, the IO has access to administrative data sources at both the worker and employer levels to perform manual look-ups on a case-by-case basis. If there are any doubts, the IO may also request foreign embassies to arrange an interview with the non-EEA worker ("alarming procedure").

According to the Foreigners Act, the IO has four months to reach a decision, starting from the admissibility decision made by the EMS. However, as discussed, admissibility decisions are often made late in the process. Statistics from the WiB platform compiled by the IO indicate that the average duration between the admissibility decision of the EMS and the IO decision for first-time single permit applications in 2021-2022 was 46 days. At the time of writing the report, it was not possible to distinguish these processing times by labour migrants' category of entry or nationality. However, IO mentioned that their processing times are primarily determined by the nationality of the non-EEA worker for whom the single permit was requested. Some nationalities are deemed to pose higher security risks and therefore require more time for checks. The IO does not have a triage or fast-track system in place, except for highly skilled workers such as researchers, whose cases need to be decided within shorter timeframes, and for very specific files prioritized by the EMS, such as those involving specialized technicians or professional athletes.

If the IO makes a positive decision, it issues a decision granting both the right to work and the right to stay, with the delivery of Annex 46 as the final confirmation of the single permit. If the federal authority issues a negative decision, an Annex 48 is provided. In cases where no decision is made within the four-month period, the application is deemed approved by default, and the worker receives an Annex 47. Statistics from the WiB platform reveal that 98% of first-time single permit applications processed by the IO in 2021-2022 received a positive decision within the statutory processing time. There were very few negative decisions. However, it is important to note that following cases in 2023 of visa fraud involving Turkish and Moroccan labour migrants, the IO has intensified its security checks, resulting in increased processing times and possibly higher refusal rates.

Sequential processing at the regional and federal level prolongs total processing times.

For all single permit applications, the federal authorities await a positive decision from the regional authorities before initiating their residence assessment. A straightforward calculation shows that with an average processing time of 72 days at the regional level and an additional 46 days at the federal level for the residence decision, the four-month deadline stipulated in the single permit directive is often exceeded.

This frequently results in scenarios where requests for additional information from the IO arrive more than four months after the initial submission of the single permit application to the WiB platform. Similar to the EMS, capacity constraints are evidently present at the IO. In March 2024, the IO had 12.5 Dutch-speaking FTE case handlers processing single permit applications for the Flemish region (compared to 6.5 FTEs for the Walloon region). Clearly, under the current system, it will be very challenging for

Flanders to meet the new three-month deadline for single permit applications (not including visa issuance) as stipulated in the recast single permit directive.

The IO still has no automatic transfer of single permit applications from WiB to its back-offices.

At the time of writing the report, the IO still manually downloaded individual applications from the WiB platform onto their own system for review, requiring at least one full-time employee to handle these logistics. The process to establish an automatic connection or linkage between WiB and the IO back-office is underway and will facilitate the transfer of data and streamline administrative processes.

Enhancing communication and coordination between authorities.

The EMS and the IO have distinct roles in the single permit application process. The regions oversee employment matters, verifying labour agreements, employer legitimacy, and worker qualifications, while the federal level conducts security assessments and background checks on individual workers. However, this division has led to limited information exchange.

Following visa fraud and abuse cases, authorities recognised the need for improved communication and coordination. This has led to increased consultations while ensuring that the separate jurisdictions over work and residence are maintained. The Management Committee of the WiB, where both regional and federal authorities participate, discusses the functioning of Working in Belgium. This structure is established under the cooperation agreement. In addition, the Economic Migration Working Group provides a forum for discussing the transposition of the Single Permit Directive and other legal and operational matters between the regions and the IO. Bilateral consultations between the IO and WEWIS have also been introduced, particularly in response to visa fraud cases and following a Flemish Parliament request to strengthen cooperation. These meetings focus on specific cases but lack a formal legal basis.

Despite these structures, stakeholders report ongoing issues in communication and coordination. After the visa fraud cases, the IO lost trust in the regions' competence and has started conducting its own employment checks alongside security assessments, despite this falling outside its mandate. While formal consultation mechanisms exist, dissatisfaction remains regarding cooperation and the division of responsibilities in practice.

The worker applies for a D visa

The decision to grant a permit is made using Annex 46 or 47, and it is communicated to both the applicant and the worker via the WiB platform. If the application was submitted from outside Belgian territory, the employee must apply for a D visa for long-term residence at a Belgian diplomatic post (e.g., embassy or consulate) with their Annex 46 or 47 document, even if their nationality is normally granted a visa waiver for short visits. Typically, the non-EEA worker will need to travel to the nearest embassy or consulate from their place of residence, where the visa is then issued. In some countries, the Belgian administration outsources the issuing of visas to a subcontractor.

Lengthy waiting times for appointments at diplomatic or consular posts in certain countries can pose challenges.

Although the IO decision is forwarded to diplomatic posts, securing an appointment can prove to be a difficult and demanding process in some locations. In several countries, migrants may spend months just trying to obtain an appointment to apply for, and then to collect, their visa. Sub-contracting organizations that handle visa applications, such as VFS in the UK or TLS in Senegal, for instance, are particularly difficult to reach.

The worker registers with the municipality before the start of employment

Upon arrival in Belgium with a visa type D and Annex 46 or 47, the single permit holder must apply for registration in the national register (foreigners register) at the local authority of their place of residence – not their place of employment – within eight working days. Applicants will receive an Annex 49⁹⁸, valid for 45 days (renewable twice), while awaiting their residence check – a physical verification by the local police to confirm residence. The Annex 49 enables the worker to start employment.

Upon a positive residence check, they will be issued an electronic residence card A, which specifies the individual's level of access to the labour market (for single permit holders, it indicates “limited access”). The electronic card's chip includes the employer's enterprise number and the region's file number. This card remains valid for the duration of the work permit.

Long waiting periods to obtain the residence card upon arrival.

At some Belgian municipalities, it can take weeks to make an appointment to register and apply for the residence permit (A-card). Some municipalities provide Annex 49 digitally, without requiring physical presence, but others do not.

Registering also requires proof of housing, which can be challenging due to tight housing markets in many Flemish cities (see section 3.5.3). It may take time to find suitable housing, especially if the employer does not take care of housing. Consequently, many labour migrants reside in hotels for an extended period, sometimes delaying the registration process. While some municipalities temporarily register migrants based on temporary housing following the IO's GEMCOM instructions, others require permanent housing.

Once a suitable residence is found and the address is submitted to the municipality, the migrant must await police verification of their residence in this new home. In many cities and municipalities, this verification process also takes several weeks. Only after police verification is completed does the migrant receive the electronic A card, granting full work rights.

With the Annex 49 (provisional residence document), one can work but cannot, for example, travel or join a Belgian health insurance, for which an electronic residence permit is required. Although banks are legally allowed to open accounts using identity documents such as an international passport and Annex 49, many prefer to wait for the A card, creating practical challenges for workers and employers, who must pay wages electronically by law.

Legal ambiguity regarding the right to work with Annex 46.

The current legal framework does not guarantee that all labour migrants can start working with Annex 46 and a D visa while awaiting municipal registration. The new cooperation agreement addresses this issue for specific categories, including EU Blue Card holders, seasonal workers, ICTs, researchers, interns, and volunteers, but not for others. In practice, the Flemish administration tolerates (“gedoogbeleid”) work under Annex 46 or 47 for other categories, but this unofficial policy does not provide legal certainty for workers or employers. The European Single Permit Directive states that the document granting access to the territory should also grant access to the labour market.

The stringent language policy at the municipal level sometimes impedes interactions with non-EEA workers.

Belgian municipalities are not free to choose their language of communication. The Administrative Language Law regulates language use within municipalities. In predominantly Dutch-speaking areas, municipalities are required to use Dutch as their administrative language. Consequently, municipalities

⁹⁸ The cost of the Annex 49 is EUR 150.

in these areas must communicate with labour migrants in Dutch. However, there is an exception to this rule known as the ‘principle of courtesy’. Although most municipal officials make ample use of this principle in their interactions with labour migrants, in some municipalities they refuse to communicate with migrants in any language other than Dutch.

Renewal or modification of the single permit and changing employers

In Flanders, the procedure for renewing or modifying a single permit is largely similar to the initial application process.⁹⁹ The application must be submitted to the WiB platform no later than two months before the previous permit’s expiration date, but in light of long processing times (see below), employers are permitted to initiate the renewal process six months in advance.

As with the initial application, the renewal or modification process is initiated by the employer. The required documents for renewing a single permit are very similar to those for the initial application. Some documents, such as a medical certificate and a criminal record extract do not need to be resubmitted. However, proof that the candidate is registered with a health insurance fund is required. Notably, the employer must provide pay slips for the period during which the permit ran, so that the EMS can verify compliance with labour and wage conditions stipulated in the contract and permit requirements.

When the non-EEA worker changes employers, the new employer must also submit a new application,¹⁰⁰ with the same documents required as for a renewal, except for pay slips from the previous employer. If the first permit had been LMT-subject, the new employer must go through the LMT procedure before the work can be authorised.

The statutory processing time for renewal or modification is similar to an initial application: 120 days from the admissibility decision. As with first demands, the EMS communicates the admissibility decision for renewals on the same day as the decision on the work authorization (or within a few days). The increasing trend in processing times for renewal applications closely mirrors the pattern observed for initial applications (see Annex Figure 3-B), as do the disparities in processing times between highly skilled workers and those in SOL and LMT categories (see Annex Figure 3-C). However, the average processing times for renewals (56 days in total for applications received in 2023) are lower than those for initial applications (72 days). The refusal rate is also significantly lower among renewals (4.5%) compared to initial applications (17.3%) (see Annex Figure 3-D).

After the EMS issues a positive decision on the work authorization, the IO takes over. The average processing time at the IO for a renewal (applied for in 2021-2022) was 39 days, also below the average for initial applications (47 days).

If the single permit expires during a renewal or modification procedure and the IO has not yet made a decision, the applicant may receive an Annex 49 from their municipality to temporarily cover their residence while awaiting a decision. If the region approves the work authorization, the migrant can start

⁹⁹ However, no administrative fee is required for renewal.

¹⁰⁰ If the previous employment has ended, the single permit is revoked, and the worker must wait for the new single permit before commencing work with the new employer. If the previous employment is ongoing, the previous single permit remains valid until the employment contract ends. In such cases, the worker may continue working for the former employer during the application process for the new single permit, as long as the employment is covered by the existing single permit.

working with this Annex 49, even if the IO has not yet decided on the single permit renewal. However, until the region makes a decision on the work permit, the migrant cannot work.¹⁰¹

For occupations in the SOL and LMT categories, employers and workers need to go through the renewal process every year.

Permit renewal takes almost as long as initial applications both at the EMS and the IO. SOL and LMT workers are only entitled to permits valid for one year. Given the significant processing delays, employers must remember to file all documents for renewal at least several months prior to permit expiration to prevent any interruption in the labour migrant's right to work and reside. Permits for highly skilled workers are valid up to three years, and renewal is not required annually, so the long renewal processing time is less of an issue for them.

Job changes are almost as complex as initial recruitment.

Currently, non-EEA workers cannot change employers without the new employer having to submit a new single permit application. One of the important changes in the recast single permit directive is that workers must be given the opportunity to change employers under the same permit.

Even with the Annex 49, interruptions in the labour migrant's right to work and reside still occur.

To avoid work interruptions when the initial single permit expires, non-EEA workers are permitted to work with an Annex 49 after the EMS has approved the work permit renewal (even before the IO has made a decision on the residence aspect of the renewed single permit). Employers are not always aware of this possibility. The Annex 49 is also not a full substitute – it does not grant the same rights as an A residence card (the right to travel for example).

Even though the EMS treats renewal applications with priority, processing times typically take about 56 days on average, and even longer for SOL (74 days) and LMT (65 days) categories. As a result, work interruptions still occur. If the candidate's residence is at risk of expiring, the employer can contact the EMS to expedite the process.

The process of renewal poses challenges for researchers as well.

The lengthy renewal procedure is also a problem for researchers, whose stay is regulated by the European Directive 2016/801. Research funding is frequently uncertain, and contract extensions are contingent upon successful funding acquisition. Research contracts are often not renewed until late in the researcher's contract period. As the renewal process takes time, researchers risk residing and working illegally as their single permit expires before the renewal is granted, even if they applied within the specified timeframe. In academia, where contracts are often fixed-term, this situation can result in highly skilled personnel waiting for permit renewals, residing in the country illegally.¹⁰²

To address this issue, the EMS allows researchers to be granted a permit for up to three years, even if the funding is only secured for one year. At the time of permit issuance, a condition is set requiring proof of extended funding. If no proof is provided, the permit will be revoked. Thus, the research institution can issue a guest agreement for three years, subject to the condition of securing additional funding.

If a renewal is refused, workers are not permitted to remain in Belgium to reapply.

¹⁰¹ Van Huylenbroeck F. (2023), Waarom de behandelingstermijn voor een gecombineerde vergunning (g)een probleem is, *T. Vreemd*. Nr. 4.

¹⁰² Cools M., ['Bureaucratie hindert verblijf toponderzoekers: nefast voor het imago van België als gastland voor internationaal talent' \(knack.be\)](https://knack.be) (Accessed on 20 March 2024).

When a single permit is withdrawn, workers are issued an Annex 51, allowing them to stay in Belgium for 90 days to seek work (see below for further discussion). However, if a single permit renewal application is refused, workers are not issued an Annex 51 and must leave Belgium as soon as their residence permit expires. This leaves employers with little option to retry the renewal process for the same worker while they are still in Belgium. This will change with the transposition of the recast Single Permit Directive in 2026.

Too many appointments with the municipality that could be digitalized.

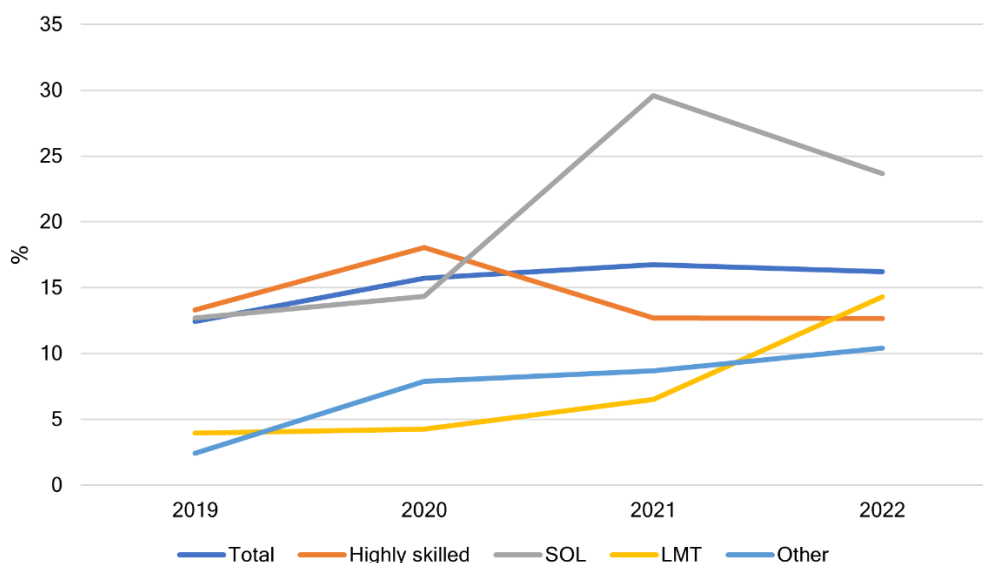
When the labour migrant has their single permit renewed, multiple physical interactions with the municipality are sometimes necessary, imposing a heavy burden on both municipal officials and workers. If the A-card expires before renewal is granted and to avoid becoming undocumented, the labour migrant must physically or digitally (depending on the municipality) apply at the municipality for an Annex 49, which is valid for only 30 days. Even though some municipalities do grant the Annex 49 for 90 days to avoid multiple contact moments, other municipalities only grant it for 30 days. Hence, if the renewal decision has not yet been made when it expires, the labour migrant has to return to the municipality for a renewal of another Annex 49 valid for the next 30 days. In the worst-case scenario, this process may occur two or three times. When the renewal is granted, the migrant must again visit the municipality to apply for the new A-card. Finally, when the A-card is ready, the worker once again has to visit the municipality to pick it up. Some larger Flemish cities have simplified this process by (partially) digitalizing interactions. However, this does not reduce the number of steps to be taken nor does it eliminate the need for renewal of the temporary documents.

Withdrawal of the single permit

If single permit holders lose their employment because their contract ends prematurely or due to employer misconduct, their work permit is revoked. In such cases, the residence permit remains active for 90 days, or the worker is issued an Annex 51, allowing them to stay in Belgium for the same duration to seek – but not perform – work. If they receive a job offer within this time frame, the new employer can apply for a new single permit on their behalf, with the usual processing times. However, if new employment is not secured or the application is not filed by the new employer within 90 days, the worker must leave Belgium.

Withdrawals of single permits are not uncommon (see Figure 3.9). Around 16% of the single permits issued in 2022 were withdrawn, with minor variations across categories, except for the SOL category where the withdrawal rate was highest. Generally, nine out of ten withdrawals were due to early termination of employment, with only one in ten attributed to either unmet conditions or violations detected by an authorized social inspection service. However, in the SOL and LMT categories, the proportion of withdrawals due to infringements is much higher at 36% and 17%, respectively, compared to a negligible 3% among the highly skilled.

Figure 3.9. Withdrawal rates of single permits (first demands and renewals), by main category, Flanders, 2019-2022 (year of issuance)



Source: WEWIS, work permit database.

A 90-day window for unemployed labour migrants to secure new employment is too restrictive (reform underway).

There are many obstacles to the ability of workers to benefit from the Belgian regulation allowing single permit holders who are unemployed to seek alternative employment for a period of 3 months. First, they may not know about this possibility: if the employer does not follow the right procedure, workers who lose their job are not systematically informed of the possibility to receive an Annex 51 which gives them three months to look for a new job; and the right to unemployment benefits (for a maximum of 2 months). Second, since the single permit does not allow employer change, they must find a new employer to apply for a new single permit. While VDAB can assist these workers in finding a new employer, the lengthy application process often discourages employers from hiring non-EEA workers. Even if an employer is willing, few workers will choose to wait, as the process currently often takes more than three months. Workers may therefore be reluctant to leave, even in the case of unfavourable working conditions or abuse.

For workers who do not fall into the high-skilled category, there is an additional issue: their single permit is only valid for one year, requiring the employer to submit a renewal each year. If the employer fails to obtain a renewal and informs the employee only at the end of the permit's validity, the employee cannot use Annex 51 to search for a new job for three months. The reasoning is that the single permit was issued for one year specifically for that employer and position. Consequently, if no renewal is requested, or if there is a negative decision on the renewal when the permit expires, the worker is not entitled to Annex 51, which is only available if employment ends during the validity of the initial single permit.

The new migration code¹⁰³, advanced by the State Secretary of Asylum and Migration and under discussion at the federal level, proposes the extension of the ‘job search period’ from 90 to 180 days in cases where workers leave their employer because they experienced violations of their social rights perpetrated by their employer. The recast of the single permit directive also includes such a provision. Another point currently under discussion is to provide labour migrants access to unemployment benefits for the full duration of the job seeking period, instead of two months.

Single permit of unlimited duration

After four years of employment within the five years preceding the application¹⁰⁴, the non-EEA worker who is legally resident in Belgium can apply for an authorization of an indefinite single permit, which allows work for any employer and in any occupation. The electronic residence card A then indicates “labour market: unlimited”, eliminating the need to apply for a new work authorisation when changing employers.

The workers must apply for this single permit themselves via the WiB platform. The application must include salary slips for the entire period of the most recent single permit (one year if SOL/LMT, up to three years if high-skilled), the current employment contract (or alternative proof of sufficient means of subsistence if unavailable), and proof of health insurance for the applicant and their family members.

In 2023, 606 single permits of indefinite duration were issued, up from 400 in 2019. The average total processing time at the EMS for these applications was 72 days, up from 37 days in 2019 – longer than for other types of applications. Refusal rates are also relatively high; around one in four of applications received in 2023 was refused.

Due to administrative delays, a worker may not fully benefit from their new indefinite duration single permit.

After the EMS and the IO have made a decision, the worker must be notified by the municipality and collect the necessary documents. However, the high workload at the municipalities sometimes results in the decision being communicated to the non-EEA worker only months later. This delays the worker from taking advantage of the new right to change employers and work in any occupation.

3.2.2. The work permit (<90 days)

The (short-duration) work permit procedure is also initiated by the employer. Currently, applications are made directly to the EMS via email, but integration into the WiB platform is planned for the near future.

Similar to the single permit process, once the file is deemed admissible, the EMS has 120 days to make a decision after which authorization for employment is automatically granted, and the work permit is issued. If the decision is positive, the work permit, specifying the start and end dates of employment, is sent to the employer. If the non-EEA worker is abroad, the work permit is delivered to the employer, who then provides it to the migrant. With the work permit, the migrant can apply for a type C visa. Non-EEA workers already within Belgium receive the work permit from their municipal authority (without the requirement of police inspection of lodging). Upon arrival in Belgium with a type C visa, the migrant must

¹⁰³ See [Nieuw wetboek gecontroleerde migratie - Nicole de Moor](#) (Accessed on 14 March 2025).

¹⁰⁴ Shorter periods apply for nationals of countries with which Belgium has international agreements, such as Turkey.

register with the municipality within three days, unless exempted due to temporary accommodation in places such as hotels, guesthouses, campgrounds, or youth hostels. In case of a negative decision, it is communicated via email to both the employer and the worker. Both parties, if legally residing in Belgium, have the right to appeal to the competent regional minister within one month of receiving the negative decision.

A renewal of the work permit can be requested for employment in the same occupation, whether or not with the same employer. The procedure is the same as for the initial application. However, this is uncommon because if the total period of employment through the renewal exceeds 90 days, the employer must apply for a single permit.

Most short-term work permits are issued to seasonal workers. Of the 5,050 work permits issued in 2023, 3,896 (77%) went to seasonal workers. Given that the application process for seasonal workers differs significantly from that of other categories of workers, both groups of workers are discussed separately below.

Non-seasonal work

For non-seasonal work permits, the most important categories are au pairs, and highly skilled employees and specialised technicians who are posted. The SOL channel is of much smaller importance among short-term work permits. For applications received in 2023 (first demands and renewals), total processing times averaged 57 days, compared to 29 days in 2021. Au pairs had the longest processing time at 71 days, followed by SOL applicants at 65 days, highly skilled employees at 63 days, and specialized technicians at 22 days. The long processing time for au pair applications is also linked to the higher risk of fraud. According to the EMS, the Flemish Social Inspectorate finds violations in one-third of the au pair files they check.

Seasonal work

Non-EEA workers may, under certain conditions, acquire authorization as seasonal workers. This requires an employment contract¹⁰⁵ for season-dependent activities in the agriculture and horticulture sectors (PC 144 and 145) or the hospitality sector. The duration for seasonal employment, which entails reduced social contributions for picking¹⁰⁶, is 100 half-days in agriculture and 100 days in horticulture. Additionally, seasonal workers are permitted to work up to 11 hours per day and 50 hours per week, including Saturdays.

As per legislation, the prospective employer is required to prove the unavailability of suitable candidates in the local labour market before hiring non-EEA seasonal workers. However, due to challenges faced by employers in finding local seasonal workers, even with minimal qualifications or Dutch language proficiency requirements, the LMT is largely a formality and is expedited, taking only 3 weeks instead of the standard 9 weeks. At the EMS, seasonal work permit applications are processed very fast: 9.5 days on average for applications received in 2023. Moreover, applications for seasonal workers are almost never refused, provided that the applications are complete.

While seasonal workers can legally be employed for up to 5 months per year, many employers prefer short-term contracts lasting a maximum of 90 days, accompanied by a (short-term) work permit. The short-term work permit cannot be extended. Applications for single permits for seasonal work are rare.

¹⁰⁵ Seasonal workers operate without a conventional employment contract; instead, they utilize an occasional work form, commonly referred to as a 'plukkaart,' to track their days of employment. No formal notice or contract termination is necessary.

¹⁰⁶ The main advantage of seasonal work is the reduced employer's social security contribution, which is calculated based on a fixed daily wage instead of the real wage.

However, this may change because of the legislative amendments that have taken effect in May 2024. Seasonal workers are now able to change employers through a simple notification at the EMS.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, it may become more attractive for them to opt for a single permit, especially since there are crop activities almost all year long, albeit with different employers.

As demonstrated in Chapter 2, seasonal labour frequently involves circular migration patterns, with workers returning to Flanders year after year. The recruitment of new workers mainly takes place through informal networks and connections between Flemish farmers and non-EEA workers. Interest groups such as the Farmers' Union (De Boerenbond) also provide recruitment tools to assist employers in their permit applications, although the request for a seasonal workers authorisation must be filed by an individual employer rather than a cooperative or by an agricultural association.

The swift labour migration process for seasonal workers promotes regular employment while discouraging posted work arrangements.

The process for obtaining work permits for seasonal labour is much faster than the long single permit application process. This rapid and adaptable procedure makes posting mobility less attractive. The seasonal work permit exemplifies how a streamlined procedure – together with financial incentives through reduced social security contributions – provides a viable alternative to posting mobility. Furthermore, the expedited and flexible process allows the horticultural sector in Flanders to readily employ regular documented labour, rather than resorting to irregular employment.

However, the 90-day work permit duration does not equate to 90 actual working days.

A drawback is that although the work and residence permit is granted for 90 days, and employers hope to use the full duration, the actual duration of seasonal work performed typically amounts to around 70 days, according to the Farmers' Union. This discrepancy arises from the time required to obtain the work permit and visa, travel, register one's presence in the municipality, and comply with labour laws that impose maximum working times. As a result, the full duration of the 90-day work and residence permits cannot be fully utilized. There is a tolerance policy in some municipalities allowing seasonal workers to start work before they are officially registered, but this policy may not be in place in others.

3.2.3. The professional card for migrant entrepreneurs

Non-EEA nationals wishing to engage in self-employment in Flanders must apply for a professional card.

In January 2022, the policy regarding professional cards underwent significant reform. On the one hand, a simplified and digital application process, as well as an appeals process, were introduced. On the other hand, new admission requirements tailored to the nature of professional activities were implemented, and maximum permit durations were reduced to three years instead of five (however, as long as the business is operating at the minimum income level, business owners can apply for a renewal of their professional card). Notably, the new policy distinguishes between traditional enterprises and self-employment activities with innovative, cultural/artistic, and sporting added value. Within the largest category of traditional enterprises, the requirements have been significantly tightened. Among other things, candidates for self-employment are now required to possess a starting capital of EUR 21,557 and need to show a net monthly income of EUR 2,048. Flanders previously had no capital requirement. These thresholds are not particularly demanding relative to other OECD countries, which often judge applications based on the added value brought by the business (OECD, 2011^[1]).

¹⁰⁷ Subsequently, the EMS has 30 days to object.

Figure 3.5 (see above) illustrates that the 2022 reform led to a significant reduction in the total number of issued professional cards, declining from 711 in 2021 to 491 in 2022, before slightly increasing to 519 in 2023. However, the reform did manage to decrease processing times, attributed to reductions in both internal and external processing times, from 64 days in 2021 to 53 days in 2023. Unfortunately, statistics on the processing times at the IO for residence permits for the self-employed were not available.

In Annex Table 3-A, the characteristics of non-EEA self-employed individuals (based on professional cards issued between 2019 and 2023) are further detailed in comparison to non-EEA employees. Seven in ten entrepreneurs are men, with a mean age of 36. The self-employed are somewhat overrepresented in Antwerp, largely due to the diamond industry. The most prevalent nationalities among applicants are India, Turkey, Armenia, Iran, and China.

The reform led to a significant reduction in the number of non-EEA entrepreneurs.

The reform significantly tightened the criteria for ‘traditional’ enterprises (e.g., a start-up capital). As a consequence, 31% fewer professional cards were issued in 2022 compared to the year before, and numbers barely recovered in 2023.

Only a few ‘non-traditional’ businesses were attracted.

At the same time, Flanders has not (yet) succeeded in attracting many entrepreneurs in innovative, economic, cultural, artistic, or sporting categories after the introduction of the new policy. In 2022, traditional enterprises still accounted for the majority (76%) of the total number of professional cards issued. Much smaller shares of self-employment activities exhibited an innovative (13%), cultural/artistic (11%), or sporting (1%) character.

The professional card procedure is too long to allow applying from a short-stay permit.

In-country transition from a short-stay permit to a professional card is even more difficult than to a single permit (the unified process described above). Non-EEA entrepreneurs must apply separately for both a professional card and a residence permit and the processing times for obtaining work and residence rights are even longer. Furthermore, there is no standard procedure (Annex) for these applicants to extend their short stay beyond 90 days (excluding exceptional cases, e.g., force majeure) while awaiting their card and permit.

3.3. Safeguarding wages and working conditions

One concern regarding labour migration in Flanders and in other EEA countries arises when non-EEA workers are exposed to violations of health, employment and safety regulations, including those pertaining to working time and housing standards, and when they are offered wages and other benefits that fall below the prevailing rates for local workers or fail to adhere to collective agreements and labour migration regulations.

Recent cases (e.g., Borealis), studies¹⁰⁸, and the parliamentary evaluation of the procedure for human trafficking and smuggling¹⁰⁹ have highlighted abuse of the labour migration channel. Labour migrants are heavily reliant on their employer, particularly concerning information about their labour and social

¹⁰⁸ Weatherburn, A., Kruithof, E. H., & Vanroelen, C. (2022). Labour migration in Flanders and the use of the single permit to address labour market shortages: The lived experiences of single permit holders working in medium skilled bottleneck professions. Interface Demography Working Paper No. 2022-01.

¹⁰⁹ [De Belgische Kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers \(dekamer.be\)](https://dekamer.be) (Accessed on 20 March 2024).

rights, which increases the risk of abuse. Protecting their rights and well-being in the workplace also requires social inspection services. Both aspects are further elaborated upon in this section.

3.3.1. Dependency of non-EEA workers on their employer

The complex application procedure and the central role of the employer contributes to the limited awareness among permit holders of their social and labour rights entitlements. The employer applies for the work permit and requests the renewal, so many migrant workers depend on their (future) employers to provide information on their case and, in case of refusal and the need to appeal, access to support such as legal services.

The temporary nature of the single permit also leaves migrant workers dependent on their employers not only for employment but also for accommodation. This can create conditions conducive to ongoing exploitation. Under the current system, employer misconduct leading to permit revocation primarily affects the non-EEA workers themselves. Consequently, workers may hesitate to report unfair employment practices or voice grievances, knowing that their employment and residency in Belgium are contingent upon their employer's decisions. If accommodation is provided by the employer, departing from a job could also mean losing housing, further pressuring workers to swiftly secure new employment and potentially increasing the likelihood of enduring mistreatment.

Lack of awareness among non-EEA workers regarding WiB platform access.

Non-EEA workers can access the WiB platform if they have a Belgian electronic ID or a temporary token while awaiting one. However, due to a lack of information, many are unaware of this possibility and struggle to navigate the platform. As a result, migrants may not realise if their employers have misrepresented or omitted key details in their application. If the worker somehow discovers misrepresentation or omissions in the contract provided by the employer to the WiB platform, they can report this to the federal labour inspectorate, whose website is only in French and Dutch.

Research by Weatherburn et al. (2022) highlights cases where migrant workers unknowingly sign employment contracts that differ from those submitted to the authorities. This discrepancy can lead to workers being employed in positions not authorised by the government, often under conditions that violate Belgian labour laws.

When such discrepancies are detected during inspections or renewal applications, the single permit is revoked or refused for failing to meet the original conditions. However, if the WiB platform only notifies the employer—due to missing or incorrect worker contact details—the worker remains uninformed. Similarly, if an employer delays notifying the worker of the permit's approval, the worker may arrive in Belgium only to find that their permit is valid for a shorter period than expected.

There are no communication channels between the authorities and non-EEA workers.

The point of contact and source of information for the worker is the employer. Both regional and federal authorities have limited direct channels of communication with workers. According to Weatherburn et al. (2022), the EMS only has correct contact details for about half of the current single permit holders.¹¹⁰ It is the responsibility of the employer to provide contact details, in the absence of which the authorities cannot inform workers on the status of permit applications (e.g., approval, modification). In any case, communication is unidirectional with the worker: the EMS only informs the worker of a positive decision, and the IO only sends the relevant Annex to the worker, and only if contact details are included.

¹¹⁰ Weatherburn, A., Kruihof, E. H., & Vanroelen, C. (2022). Labour migration in Flanders and the use of the single permit to address labour market shortages: The lived experiences of single permit holders working in medium skilled bottleneck professions. Interface Demography Working Paper No. 2022-01.

Otherwise, it is only the employer who receives information, and only the employer who can communicate with the EMS and the IO (through the WiB platform). The authorities have no record of information provided to the worker by the employer or of information provided to the employer by the worker.

There are no guarantees that all costs related to recruitment are paid by the employer and not the worker (reform underway).

The existing labour migration policy lacks clear guidelines for allocating costs associated with the permit procedure and labour migration overall, due to the fact that most of the costs are federal competence. Expenses may encompass fees to the federal government, travel costs, visa fees, insurance expenses, document translation and legalisation fees and others. Employers are allowed to recover these costs from the worker through advance payments or deductions from wages, a practice which exists.¹¹¹

This is expected to change. The legal implementation of the principle that the expenses related to the labour migration process are the responsibility of the employer, and the prohibition of the employer recovering these costs from the employee, is included in the migration code proposed by the State Secretary of Asylum and Migration.

Labour migrants have limited access to information on their social and labour rights (reform underway).

Labour migrants rely entirely on their employer to access information regarding their labour and residency rights. Information provided by regional authorities on their websites is primarily aimed at employers rather than single permit holders and is limited to the official languages of the host country (Dutch, French, German) and English. There is no specific material prepared for general information nor for provision at the in-person points of contact (visa issuance at the embassies and municipal registration). No brochure, pamphlet or link to a dedicated information site is available to provide information on social and labour rights and the existing complaints mechanism. Neither Belgium nor the Flanders region have created any app for non-EEA workers.

The migration code incorporates proposals to provide accessible information in multiple languages on the website of the FPS Employment and the Regional Labour Administrations. The objective in the long term is to establish a single website containing consolidated information from all agencies. Furthermore, the migration code proposes to require embassies and diplomatic posts abroad and municipalities to include, along with visa issuance and renewal, the worker with a (digital) brochure or information sheet describing and linking to pertinent websites regarding labour rights – currently not available, but to be created by the competent administrations.

In line with these steps taken at the federal level, Flanders plans to launch an international communication campaign to inform labour migrants in their home countries about their rights and obligations, including through the ‘Your Future in Flanders’ portal (see section 3.5.2 for further discussion).

Advantageous residency documents are not always being issued to those entitled to them.

There is no mechanism to inform applicants of their eligibility to obtain an indefinite-duration single permit or when the declared salary in their single permit application could qualify them for a European Blue Card instead of a standard single permit. Employers may have no incentive to request permits

¹¹¹ Weatherburn, A., Kruihof, E. H., & Vanroelen, C. (2022). Labour migration in Flanders and the use of the single permit to address labour market shortages: The lived experiences of single permit holders working in medium skilled bottleneck professions. Interface Demography Working Paper No. 2022-01.

which grant workers full labour market mobility. Migrants are sometimes unaware of the option to apply for these.

Social security portability may be difficult for some nationalities.

Social security rights are transferable for migrant workers who originate from countries that have concluded bilateral social security agreements with Belgium. While most single permit holders hold nationality of countries with which bilateral social security agreements are in place, in 2023, about one in four single permits were issued to workers with nationalities from countries with no bilateral social security agreements.¹¹² The five main nationalities were China, Iran, Russia, Ukraine and South Africa. Social security portability may be difficult for these workers, and it should be explored whether they export social security benefits via other ways, i.e. through unilateral actions or multinational private sector schemes.

3.3.2. Social inspection and infringements

Social inspection services play a critical role in monitoring and enforcing compliance with labour laws and regulations, ensuring that employers adhere to fair employment practices and provide adequate working conditions and benefits to all workers, including labour migrants.

At the time of writing this report, the Flemish social inspection had about 70 employees, including administrative staff (a large expansion is underway). Since 2014, there has been a heightened emphasis on economic migration and the employment of foreign workers. Following the Ukraine crisis, an additional 10 inspectors were appointed, and after the Borealis incident, 5 more inspectors were added to bolster capacity to supervise the working conditions of economic migrants. Thus, within two years, there was an increase of 15 inspectors. The Flemish social inspection collaborates closely with the EMS, the federal inspection service, and the labour auditorate.

Economic migration is now one of the main areas of interest. In 2022, 50% of all inspections, (1,265) were related to the employment of foreign workers (work permits and professional cards). In 2023, a dedicated team of 17.9 FTEs was assigned to carry out these inspections, which according to the Flemish social inspection is equivalent to a total cost of EUR 1,506,890. In 2023 (pending final figures), there were 2,100 inspections conducted on labour migration. The projected target for 2024 is to increase the number of inspections on foreign workers to 2,300. The Flemish social inspection conducts its supervisory duties across all sectors but focuses on sectors that are more susceptible to non-compliance (e.g., hospitality, retail, construction, transport, temporary employment agencies).

Many inspections by the Flemish Social Inspection concerning the employment of foreign workers are carried out at the request of the EMS (see Table 3.2). These may include follow-up inspections, conducted after the employee has started work, to verify compliance with all conditions of the work permit. If these conditions are not met, the Flemish Social Inspection may recommend revoking the work permit. Alternatively, inspections for first-time applications or renewal of work permits involve a pre-decision check. The Flemish Social Inspection then provides non-binding advice to the EMS regarding the granting or refusal of the work permit. This advice can have important consequences, and since May 2024, the grounds for withdrawal and refusal have been significantly expanded (see above).

¹¹² As it stands Belgium has concluded 25 bilateral social security agreements with third countries (Albania, Algeria, Argentina, Australia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Brazil, Canada (Quebec), Chili, DR Congo, the Philippines, India, Israel, Japan, Kosovo, VJR Macedonia, Morocco, Moldova, Montenegro, San Marino, Serbia, Tunisia, Turkey, Uruguay, the US, and South-Korea): see [Federal Public Service - Social Security | \(belgium.be\)](https://www.belgium.be/en/social-security) (Accessed on 14 May 2024).

Table 3.2. Number of inspections by initiative, work permits and professional cards, Flemish social inspection, 2019-2022

| | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|------------------------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| <i>Work permits</i> | | | | |
| Own initiative | 346 | 297 | 276 | 258 |
| Action at the district level | 189 | 100 | 105 | 103 |
| Request EMS | 161 | 267 | 215 | 194 |
| Request from another service | 52 | 30 | 63 | 61 |
| Complaint/report | 49 | 23 | 44 | 45 |
| Administrative checks | / | 363 | 18 | 524 |
| Total | 797 | 1.080 | 721 | 1.185 |
| <i>Professional cards</i> | | | | |
| Own initiative | 80 | 63 | 72 | 52 |
| Request EMS | 1 | 24 | 19 | 20 |
| Request from another service | 2 | 5 | 3 | 1 |
| Action at the district level | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7 |
| Complaint/report | 2 | 4 | 8 | 0 |
| Total | 85 | 96 | 102 | 80 |

Note: EMS = Economic Migration Service.

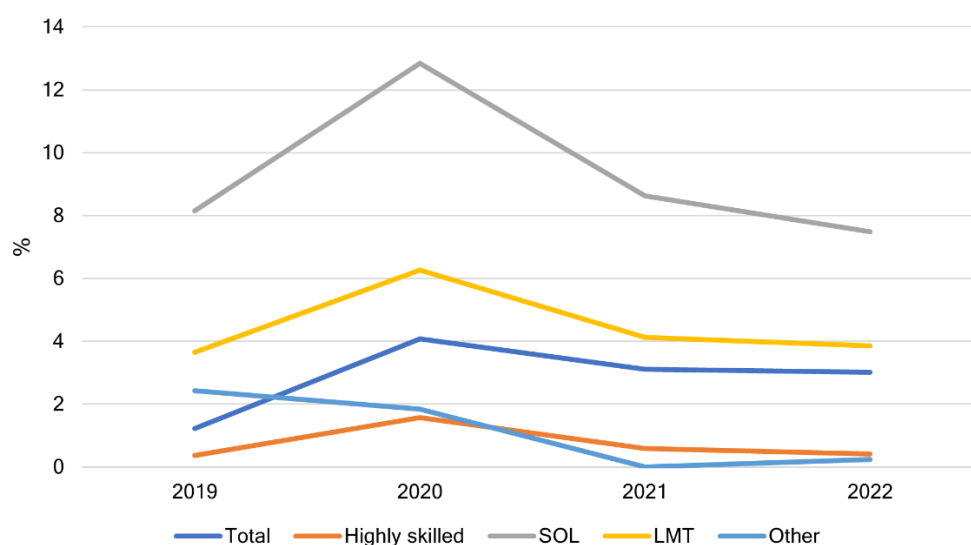
Source: Flemish social inspection services. Actions at the district level primarily consist of 'hit-and-run' operations conducted in collaboration with other inspection services (such as food and tax inspection), coordinated by the labour auditorate.

Administrative checks are the predominant type of inspection, where the social inspection services use databases such as DIMONA and DMFA to verify whether non-EEA workers have begun employment and if salaries have been accurately disbursed; no site visit is necessary, and the firm may be unaware of this inspection unless violations are found. These inspections typically require less time compared to standard inspections.

Social inspection efforts, initiated by the EMS, are primarily concentrated on SOL and LMT single permits (see Figure 3.10). The coverage is not complete but approximately 8% and 4% of the single permits issued in those categories in 2023 were associated with a social inspection.¹¹³ Considering the ILO benchmark for developed economies of one inspector for 10,000 workers, the 2023 coverage of almost 20 FTE inspectors covering about 20,000 migrant workers indicates a good level of coverage, even if this is one of the highest risk parts of the labour market.

¹¹³ Note however, that some of these inspections are only indirectly linked to issued single permits (e.g., illegal employment), thus this may be an overestimation.

Figure 3.10. Share of issued single permits linked to a social inspection, Flanders, 2019-2022 (year of issuance)



Source: WEWIS, work permit database

Out of the 734 cases inspected (excluding administrative checks) in 2022, violations of regulations regarding illegal stay and/or absence of a work permit/professional card were identified in 163 cases. This equates to a 22% infringement rate. In 2022, 42% of the violations resulted in notification to the public prosecutor's office through a pro Justitia; 27% were addressed preventatively by urging employers to comply with regulations through warnings; and 30% were referred to other inspection services.

Reporting point of the Flemish Social Inspection for violations related to work and social economy is only available in Dutch.

To submit a report or complaint concerning the employment of foreign workers and self-employed individuals, individuals need to contact the Flemish social inspection via a dedicated on-line reporting point.¹¹⁴ The website of the reporting point is currently only available in Dutch.

¹¹⁴ [Meldpunt van de Vlaamse Sociale Inspectie voor inbreuken in het kader van werk en sociale economie | Vlaanderen.be](https://www.vlaanderen.be/meldpunt-van-de-vlaamse-sociale-inspectie-voor-inbreuken-in-het-kader-van-werk-en-sociale-economie) (Accessed on 20 March 2023).

3.4. Recognition of foreign qualifications and skills

Recognition of formal qualifications can present challenges for employers seeking to acquire the necessary skills and for workers in their quest to secure jobs commensurate with their qualifications. This section delves into the strengths and weaknesses of the existing framework for recognising foreign qualifications.

The process of recognizing formal qualifications is discussed, focusing on a particular group of workers, namely nurses (“verpleegkundigen”) and nursing assistants (“zorgkundigen”). The Flemish healthcare sector is currently grappling with ongoing shortages, which are projected to worsen in the future due to population aging (see section 1.2). Yet, existing regulations governing the recognition of foreign degrees and access to the profession in Flanders complicate hiring non-EEA nurses.

3.4.1. Recognition of foreign qualifications and access to regulated occupations

Non-EEA migrants who are recruited to work in a regulated profession in Flanders, such as nurses and nursing assistants, must apply not only for an academic recognition of their degree, but also for access to the profession through a specific licence and/or visa.

Non-EEA migrants first need to apply for *academic recognition* of their foreign qualifications at National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) Flanders, a division of the Flemish Department of Education and Training.¹¹⁵ NARIC belongs to the ENIC-NARIC network.

NARIC offers two recognition procedures: level recognition and specific recognition.¹¹⁶ Level recognition confirms the level of the certificate in Flanders, while specific recognition, in addition to the level, specifies the field of study of the certificate. Immigrants with a non-EEA diploma aiming to enter a regulated profession must apply for specific recognition of equivalence of the degree.¹¹⁷

An assessment at NARIC typically encompasses the level and nature of learning indicated by the qualification, the duration of the training or study programme, the status of the issuing institution (or system), and the authenticity of supporting documents, as well as equivalence with comparable domestic courses of training or study. For specific recognition, NARIC also seeks advice from higher education institutions (HEI). Since the recognition process in Flanders is governed by law, applicants who have their qualifications recognized for labour market purposes receive a legally binding certificate of equivalence.¹¹⁸

To be employed in regulated professions non-EEA applicants must first obtain academic recognition and then undergo *professional recognition*.¹¹⁹ The latter gives them a specific license and/or visa issued by the appropriate professional licensing bodies to be granted access to the profession. Assessment for

¹¹⁵ In Belgium, the recognition of foreign academic qualifications falls under the purview of the (Language) Communities, each with its own distinct system.

¹¹⁶ See [NARIC-Vlaanderen | Vlaanderen.be](https://www.naric-vlaanderen.be) (Accessed on 26 February 2024).

¹¹⁷ With EUR 90 for a level recognition, EUR 180 for a specific recognition of a bachelor or master’s degree, and EUR 300 for a specific recognition of a PhD, recognition fees are relatively low in Flanders compared to other OECD countries. However, there are other expenses, such as translation fees, which can make applying costly. NARIC Flanders requires certified translations of the diploma, ID-card, and diploma supplements if these documents are not drafted in either Dutch, English, French or German.

¹¹⁸ This is one of the main reasons why processing times are longer in Flanders compared to countries like Norway or the Netherlands, where NARIC offices serve solely in an advisory capacity.

¹¹⁹ Recognition processes for *employment* vary between regulated and non-regulated professions. Non-regulated professions usually require academic recognition alone

professional recognition is provided by the regulatory authority overseeing the specific profession. More than 20 bodies are responsible for recognizing qualifications for regulated professions, with many of them operating at the federal level.¹²⁰

Table 3-3 outlines the division of authority among relevant bodies for two common regulated healthcare professions among non-EEA labour migrants who come to Flanders: nurses and nursing assistants. Following a specific recognition procedure at NARIC, both nurses and nursing assistants must apply for a visa at the FPS Public Health (FPS PH). Nursing assistants must additionally apply for access to the profession at the Flemish Department of Care (FDC), before they can apply for a visa.

¹²⁰ See: [Een gereguleerd beroep uitoefenen met een buitenlands diploma | Vlaanderen.be](#) (Accessed on 27 February 2024).

Table 3-3. The responsible authorities for recognition of foreign qualifications in Flanders, for nurses and nursing assistants

| Purpose | | | | | Allowed to work |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Labour market entry | For nurses and nursing assistants Apply for academic recognition with NARIC, who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • checks if the dossier is complete • verifies if the programme and institution are recognised • verifies the authenticity of the dossier • examines the dossier and seeks advice from HEI • informs the applicant of the decision (digital) | Specific equivalence | For nursing assistants only Apply for access to the profession with the FDC, who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • verifies the authenticity of the dossier • examines the certificate of good professional conduct (max 3 months old) • may seek advice from a committee, which provides a positive/negative advice • if the decision is positive, FDC issues a specific licence | For nurses and nursing assistants Apply for 'visa' with the FPS PH, who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • verifies the authenticity of the dossier • examines the certificate of good professional conduct (max 3 months old) • examines the language proficiency (Dutch, French, German) • in case of doubt, organizes a hearing committee with the Federal Nursing Council, which provides a positive/negative advice • if the advice is positive, the FPS PH drafts a Royal Decree • transfers the advice and the Royal Decree to the Minister of Public Health, who decides on the visa issuance • if the visa is issued, the Minister forwards the Royal Decree to the King for his signature • FPS PH issues the Royal Decree and visa to the applicant | Yes |
| | | | Level equivalence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply for access to higher education with HEI • Apply for revision of NARIC decision based on additional documentation | No |
| | | | No equivalence | | |
| Further education | Apply for access to higher education and exemptions with HEI through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • procedure for prior acquired qualifications (EVK) or prior acquired competencies (EVC) | | | | |

Note: Nurses and nursing assistants who are still in education can work as interns as part of their educational programme.

Source: Compiled by authors, based on Flemish legislation and regulations, [NARIC-Vlaanderen | NARIC-Vlaanderen \(naricvlaanderen.be\)](https://www.naricvlaanderen.be) (Accessed on 27 February 2024)

The recognition procedure for regulated occupations is opaque and difficult to navigate.

In February 2023, NARIC has implemented a digital application system, enabling applicants to submit and track their entire application digitally. However, the digital application procedure is currently only available for applicants with a Belgian social security number (which labour migrants usually lack when they start their application); others must apply via email.

NARIC Flanders is also responsible for disseminating information on recognition procedures. To assist applicants in navigating the recognition system more effectively, the NARIC website features an on-line wizard (available in Dutch, English, and French) that provides step-by-step guidance on the application submission process based on their personal situation. Despite these efforts, recognition processes for regulated professions involve a range of actors (at the regional and federal level) and remain difficult to navigate.

Applications from abroad are restricted by the necessity for employer commitment.

NARIC offers the option to have foreign qualifications assessed prior to arrival, contingent upon having a document demonstrating an employer's commitment to hire the individual once their diploma is recognised. However, this places the burden on the candidate to convince a potential employer that their skills will receive recognition in Flanders. For regulated professions, employers must be willing not only to make a commitment in the absence of recognition but also be prepared to wait until the equivalence recognition of the diploma is finalised. Since migrants need employer commitment in order to apply for equivalence recognition of the diploma, they may be trapped in a vicious circle.

Academic recognition processes remain lengthy.

During the period from 2021 to 2023, NARIC received 54 applications for the specific recognition of Indian nursing diplomas. About half of these cases took more than six months to process. Several factors contribute to this delay. Firstly, NARIC-Flanders is dealing with a growing volume of requests for diploma recognition: 6,500 applications from 5,800 applicants in 2022, almost double the number it received in 2015.¹²¹ Capacity constraints mean NARIC takes approximately two months before it starts to process an application file.

After an application is assigned to a manager, it may take time to obtain additional information or to verify certain documents. For most of the specific recognition applications, NARIC needs to gain additional advice from HEI, particularly for assessing relevant experience such as internships or additional education. HEI are compensated per advisory request, and are expected to respond within a few working days. However, these institutions are also facing pressures and experiencing delays. Often, NARIC must consult multiple HEI before receiving advice. To address these delays, NARIC is now initiating additional HEI advisors.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, NARIC has prioritised medical degrees, and as of 2024, shortage occupations are also given priority, which may reduce the waiting times for these professions at the expense of others.

NARIC assesses each application individually, which limits the potential for bulk recruitment.

NARIC conducts individual assessments for each case; group applications are not accepted. This approach allows NARIC to thoroughly evaluate cases where applicants may possess relevant work experience or additional education that compensates for deficiencies in their official diploma, potentially leading to full equivalence recognition. Moreover, NARIC refrains from processing group applications due to concerns regarding fraud, such as involvement by intermediaries, and the necessity of

¹²¹ NARIC Flanders received a record-breaking 6,457 applications from 5,845 individuals in 2022, marking a 92% increase since 2015. See: [Jaarverslag NARIC - Vlaanderen | Vlaanderen.be](https://jaarverslag.naric-flanders.be/) (Accessed on 27 February 2024).

exchanging significant amounts of personal data. Direct communication with the parties involved is always preferred over intermediaries.

Frequently, equivalency to a lower degree is granted, highlighting the necessity for customized bridging courses.

Currently, there is limited flexibility in the recognition process at NARIC due to the absence of recognition for partial competencies. Non-EEA nurses often receive a general-level recognition instead of a specific one, or they may be granted a lower-level recognition than the one they applied for (for example, recognition as a nursing assistant). Out of the 54 Indian nursing diplomas evaluated by NARIC between 2021 and 2023, 46 received recognition, but only 21 were granted specific recognition (necessary to work as a nurse in Flanders). The remaining 24 received a level recognition due to deficiencies in certain educational competencies, such as insufficient internships or a lack of education in psychiatry or geriatrics. NARIC Flanders advises these applicants to apply at HEI for further studies.

Applicants are required to contact HEI on their own; there is little coordination between NARIC and HEIs or a central coordinating body to guide applicants. Applicants face barriers: language, cost, distance, and unfamiliarity with the system. Stakeholders have expressed concerns that many applicants become lost in the process, and according to a one-off data analysis conducted by NARIC, few applicants successfully registered at an HEI after receiving a level recognition decision. If a migrant, such as a nurse, manages to find their way to an HEI, course requirements then differ by institution leading to 'educational shopping'. There are no targeted shorter training courses or modules available in Flanders.

The care sector, through talent partnerships such as Aurora and DT4E (further discussed in section 3.6), has devised a strategy to circumvent the challenges associated with the recognition of nursing diplomas and further schooling. In these initiatives, nursing homes in Flanders first employ Indian and Filipino nurses as nursing assistants. During their initial year in this position, they engage in both employment as nursing assistants and training at a Flemish HEI to learn Dutch, enhance their qualifications and attain a Flemish nursing diploma (in Dutch). Upon completion of this training, they become qualified to work as highly skilled nurses.

Individual educational institutions decide which subjects still need to be taken by foreign student to gain equivalence.

If NARIC decides that a foreign degree is not equivalent to the Flemish one, the applicant needs to undertake further studies to attain equivalence. Each educational institution enjoys significant autonomy in determining the necessary foreign qualification certificates or language proficiency required for eligibility to enrol in a specific educational programme.¹²² There are no standards, nor coordination amongst the institutions.

There is a lack of comprehensive information to aid in decision-making for recognition processes.

NARIC Flanders is also responsible for providing information to applicants on educational systems in Flanders and abroad. Various stakeholders emphasized the need for more specific information regarding educational disparities between Flemish and foreign diplomas. NARIC has an on-line interactive checklist to see whether the candidate can apply for equivalency, but does not yet offer an on-line equivalency information tool – such as that offered by Ireland's database. However, NARIC has a project running in 2024 to make informational sheets available for about a dozen of countries. Additionally, NARIC aims to offer more information upon request and to streamline data provision in the

¹²² In Dutch study programs, language requirements are often quite significant, minimum at level B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

future, facilitated by the introduction of the WiB platform in February 2023. This new platform enables smoother access to data, among other benefits.

Professional recognition (access to the profession) for regulated occupations is long and involves numerous stakeholders and administrative steps.

The process of professional recognition, which often involves obtaining a license and/or a visa, adds to the already lengthy process of academic recognition for regulated occupations. For example, for nurses, administrative steps include submission to the FPS PH, then to an advisory body (Federal Nursing Council), whose decisions are sent to the Minister's cabinet, from which they are sent to the King of Belgium to sign the decision of professional recognition. The average processing time from submission to the FPS PH to the Royal Signature typically ranges from 3 to 4 months, but, like academic recognition, there are no statutory processing times. Nursing assistants must also undergo the procedure at the FDC, which typically takes 1 month on average if the dossier is complete.

High Dutch language requirements create major bottlenecks for international healthcare workers in Flanders.

While Dutch proficiency is essential in healthcare, the newly established language requirements (May 2024) are exceptionally high and risk obstructing international recruitment. The required levels are C1 for master's degrees, B2 for bachelor nurses, B1 for lower-level nurses, and A2 for nursing assistants. Non-EEA workers must prove their language level through a certified test (Certificaat Nederlands als Vreemde Taal, CNaVT) before they can apply for a single permit. However, the combination of high language requirements, limited training options, and bureaucratic obstacles significantly restricts access to the Flemish healthcare sector for international workers.

Limited access to online language training further complicates the situation. Subsidised Dutch courses require a Flemish address, while university courses are too academic and impractical for professional use. Self-study materials focus on standard Dutch rather than the practical language needed for daily healthcare work in Flanders.

Language testing is another major barrier. The CNaVT test is only offered once a year in the migrant's home country, and test centres in Flanders require a Belgian national register number, which non-EEA workers will not have. Additionally, the ITNA test assesses academic Dutch, which does not align with legal language requirements for healthcare professions.

Learning Dutch in Flanders is equally challenging. Registration requires signing up with the integration agency and completing a language level test, but these services are overburdened, causing delays. Intensive courses are difficult to combine with work, while standard pathways take too long (B2-level training requires up to four years). Higher-level courses (B2/C1) are also geographically limited, and online classes are often oversubscribed. Moreover, existing courses focus primarily on passing language tests rather than on developing the practical Dutch skills needed in the workplace.

3.4.2. Driver's license obstacles

In most cases, there is also a need for recognition of a driving licence from a third country. Many models of driving licences from third countries are recognised in Belgium. A recognised driving licence means that its holder can drive in Belgium on that licence for the first 185 days after registering with a municipality, without any additional formalities. However, after this 185-day period, the original driving licence must be exchanged for a Belgian licence.

If the candidate does not have a recognised driving licence, he or she must apply for an international driving licence in his or her home country. This international driving licence, together with the original driving licence, gives permission to drive in Belgium for the first 185 days after registering with a municipality. To continue driving a car thereafter, candidates must pass full driving licence tests in Belgium.

Exchanging a foreign driver's licence into a Belgian license imposes a period during which migrants cannot drive.

The application for exchange is submitted to the municipality and the applicant has to submit the original driving licence for this purpose. During the exchange process, the foreign license is sometimes sent to Brussels for authenticity checks. Unfortunately, no replacement document is issued, leaving the applicant temporarily without a valid driving licence.

The duration of the procedure can vary from one municipality to another and can sometimes take as long as two to three months. These long and unpredictable processing times create many headaches for both employers and employees, who need to creatively tide over this period. Obviously this situation is particularly problematic for professional drivers with a C or D licence from a third country, who can be recruited via the SOL for migration purposes. But it can also cause problems for workers who use a car as part of their job or who travel to and from work by car. Migrants residing in more remote areas with limited public transportation often face isolation during this period. Additionally, families may encounter difficulties if both members of the household begin the exchange process simultaneously. Since the exchange deadline cannot be postponed or extended, some migrants may be tempted to drive for work or urgent matters without authorization and therefore without insurance coverage while awaiting exchange.

Migrants whose foreign licenses are not recognized in Belgium must obtain a Belgian licence, but exam sessions are only in one of the official languages or in English.

If the worker does not have a recognised driving licence or an international driving licence, there is no validity period or exchange and they must take the Belgian written exam. The process of obtaining a Belgian license can only start once the individual has obtained their Belgian residency card. It is not possible to schedule theoretical and practical exams beforehand. Furthermore, exam sessions can only be taken in one of the official languages (Dutch, French or German) or in English. However, English-language slots are often unavailable. Taking the exam in another language with the help of a translator is not allowed.

Workers from non AETR-member states cannot drive a tachograph equipped truck until they possess a Belgian driving licence and Code 95

To operate a truck equipped with a digital tachograph, drivers must hold a 'driver card' that records their working and resting times. In Belgium, one can only apply for a driver card after residing in the country for 185 days. Drivers who are citizens of countries in the AETR treaty, such as Turkey, already possess a driver card from their home country and may operate a tachograph-equipped truck during the initial 185 days before the driver's license exchange. Drivers from countries not part of the AETR, such as Morocco, are not permitted to operate a tachograph-equipped truck until receiving a Belgian license and driver card, and a Code 95 (i.e., (a mandatory certificate of professional competence for professional drivers). This restriction means that employers looking to hire internationally must calculate an extended initial period of inactivity for the driver if they recruit from non-AETR countries.

3.5. Support for attraction, settlement and integration

Flanders is an appealing destination for potential workers: it has a robust and diverse economy, strategic location, high quality of life and public (health care) facilities, high quality and low price of the schooling system, and strong social security system. English can easily be used in daily life. Factors that make Flanders less attractive for international talent include, amongst others, the complex tax system with relatively high personal income tax rates.¹²³ Indeed, to offset the overall high income tax regime in Belgium and to attract potential labour migrants, who often have the option to choose countries with lower tax burdens, Belgium offers tax relief for newly arriving ‘expats’ who earn more than EUR 75,000 per year.¹²⁴

In the context of the global competition for talent, attracting and retaining non-EEA workers also depends on the quality of the reception and support offered to workers and their families to ensure successful social and cultural integration. Labour migration is not just a matter of matching an employers’ needs with the right professional profile; it is also a life project for migrant workers and their families. This section discusses the strengths and weaknesses of existing support measures for settlement and integration throughout the migration process in Flanders, focussing on soft landing, housing, family reunification, and civic integration beyond the workplace.

3.5.1. Flanders as an attractive destination

There are no surveys internationally of how Flanders ranks relative to other destinations in terms of attractiveness. There is limited information on Belgium as a whole. The OECD Indicators of Talent Attractiveness rank Belgium in the mid-level, 19 of 38 countries, in the third tier of OECD countries.

There are no comprehensive and coordinated efforts to promote Flanders as an attractive destination for labour migrants.

To support the visibility and attractiveness of Flanders as a destination, the region offers a number of initiatives, although not coordinated. These include four websites and webpages. ‘Your Future in Flanders’ is a subpage of the Flemish website – see below for more detail. The site section is informative rather than promotional. ‘Work in Flanders’, run by VDAB and available in English and Dutch, is produced in conjunction with EURES, and focuses on providing users with information or useful links. It is not promotional and is clearly not targeted at third-country nationals. ‘Study in Flanders’ presents and promotes English-language degree programmes at Flemish universities; it is more promotional (‘Why Flanders?’) and advertises the advantages of studying in Flanders, providing testimonials from students. It provides information on the orientation year post-graduate extension, although it does not promote it as a selling point for Flanders.

Existing initiatives are fragmented, informational rather than promotional, and not consistently targeted at non-EEA workers.

¹²³ OECD (2024). Tax on personal income (indicator). doi: 10.1787/94af18d7-en (Accessed on 12 March 2024).

¹²⁴ A new regime has taken effect in January 2022. To qualify for the tax relief, individuals must meet certain conditions, including not being Belgian residents for the previous 60 months, having a gross wage above EUR 75,000 per year, and being recruited abroad or posted by a foreign company. The new regime offers tax-free reimbursement of certain expenses related to employment and is applicable for a period of five years, extendable by three years.

3.5.2. Soft landing

Providing soft landing services can significantly enhance the initial experience of migrant workers. In Flanders, onboarding activities are mostly decentralized and conducted by individual employers, municipalities, or other private entities, including non-profit organizations and volunteers.¹²⁵ Larger companies, with specialized departments for international relocation, such as international relations officers or mobility teams, typically develop onboarding strategies and welcome packages that cover various aspects such as accommodation, transportation, healthcare, and local amenities, thereby fostering a sense of knowledge and comfort among migrant workers in their new environment. Onboarding sessions often include cultural orientation, language support, mentorship programmes, and networking opportunities. Safety training is also offered, particularly in sectors with physical risks. Small and medium-sized companies and their foreign employees have limited resources and generally do not offer such services.

Recently, however, Flanders has taken some welcome steps towards organizing a more structured soft landing for non-EEA labour migrants. Most provinces now have an International House or expat centre in place, that aims to be an information, knowledge and service base where labour migrants and their families as well as organisations and companies can go to ensure a smooth arrival and integration.

‘Your Future in Flanders’ is an important addition to the soft landing framework.

In 2023, a new, multilingual soft-landing page named ‘Your Future in Flanders’¹²⁶ was officially launched. This website offers comprehensive information on living and working in Flanders for non-EEA nationals and their family members. Sections covering safety at work and labour rights provide references to the relevant federal services. Additionally, the website features a section enabling individuals to file complaints concerning illegal employment or their employment conditions. However, some of the content is still only available in Dutch.

Soft landing initiatives are being expanded, but they may remain decentralised and they may not be accessible to lower-skilled workers.

In addition to the existing HR initiatives in many companies to onboard and orient labour migrants, the expansion of provincial international houses has made significant progress in supporting non-EEA labour migrants and their families by providing essential information and services to help them navigate life and work in Flanders. In response to a longstanding request from social partners, the Flemish government allocated EUR 500,000 to establish soft landing projects in the Flemish provinces over 2024-2025, and a more structural funding is currently under discussion.

These projects are part of a ‘warm welcome’ policy aimed at assisting economic migrants in navigating their new work and living environment. These initiatives will (further) develop provincial International Houses which serve as information, knowledge, and service centres for labour migrants and employers. They provide support for relocation, social integration, and adjustment to life and work in the area of residence to varying extents. Most of the existing initiatives focus on highly-qualified expatriates. However, these soft-landing initiatives remain decentralized and may primarily cater to highly qualified expatriates, leaving lower-skilled labour migrants with limited access to similar resources.

¹²⁵ [Advies een warm welkom | Commissie Economische Migratie](#) (Accessed on 20 March 2024).

¹²⁶ See [Working in Flanders as a foreigner | Flanders.be \(vlaanderen.be\)](#) (Accessed on 6 February 2024).

3.5.3. Housing

Access to housing is an issue in Flanders, where the rental market is relatively small due to high homeownership rates and both real estate and rental prices have risen sharply in recent years. Residents struggle to find affordable rental dwellings on the regular market. Labour migrants have even more difficulty, due to their temporary residence perspective, smaller networks, discrimination by landlords and real estate brokers, and lack of knowledge about the functioning of the housing market.

An increasing number of groups of workers in Flanders require housing near their (temporary) workplace. This puts additional pressure on the already tight rental market. As a result, a significant number of non-EEA labour migrants are accommodated in employer provided housing, either on a temporary or long-term basis. Whilst the provision of accommodation by employers upon arrival can smoothen migrants' settlement, it can also become problematic where the accommodation provided is sub-standard or the employer overcharges (excessive deduction from wages) to cover the cost of rent and utilities.¹²⁷ In addition, the legislation on housing in Flanders is not adjusted to many labour migrants' specific situations.

Lack of temporary housing solutions for non-EEA workers.

A significant challenge faced by labour migrants is the lack of temporary housing options, such as short-term rentals (several months), often necessary during the initial stages of relocation. Additionally, landlords may require prior payslips or other financial documents, making it difficult for labour migrants to secure accommodation promptly. Moreover, there is often limited guidance available to labour migrants regarding finding housing.

In 2023, the Department of Housing established a working group on foreign workers' accommodation to examine their housing needs more closely.

The Flemish Housing Legislation hampers co-housing of labour migrants.

Employers who provide accommodation, either on a provisional basis upon arrival or permanently, must comply with the accommodation standards outlined in the Flemish Housing Code ("Vlaamse Wooncode"). Housing legislation in Flanders primarily caters to nuclear families. Cohabiting in single family houses, by multiple individuals who share amenities but have separate rental contracts, is prohibited. All parties involved, including owners and mediators, face risks if they allow co-housing and may be subject to legal action.

Alternatively, renting out separate rooms is subjected to regulations, such as the availability of separate sinks per room, separate doorbells per room, separate mailboxes, etc. Such 'room housing' is very rare and requires a lot of investment from a landlord.

Additionally, the decentralized nature of urban and regional planning leads to varied interpretations of the legislation. Consequently, labour migrants are often unable to legally use co-housing, despite its economic and social benefits.

The new Flemish decree on standards for temporary housing for workers may help to provide housing for labour migrants, but seems only implemented by the city of Antwerp.

A new decree of October 2023 allows cities and municipalities to implement policies addressing decent and adjusted housing for workers ('arbeidskrachten') and establishes legal provisions for tailored housing requirements for workers. The new decree is more flexible than the Flemish Housing Code and allows for smaller rooms, common bells and mailboxes, but still requires individual sinks per room. If

¹²⁷ Weatherburn, A., Kruithof, E. H., & Vanroelen, C. (2022). Labour migration in Flanders and the use of the single permit to address labour market shortages: The lived experiences of single permit holders working in medium skilled bottleneck professions. Interface Demography Working Paper No. 2022-01.

the municipality implements the decree, employers can apply for a permit to accommodate workers in room accommodations rather than independent units, provided they meet specific conditions and obtain conformity certificates for all rooms. The permit is valid for up to five years, and renewable under certain conditions. Failure to obtain a permit results in the application of general housing quality standards for rooms.

While social partners appreciate the establishment of a specific framework of norms for the target group of workers, they have expressed concern that its implementation relies on a municipal ordinance and decision – and municipalities are not required to offer this permit. Some local authorities may decline to authorize this type of housing in their jurisdictions. In practice, only the city of Antwerp has implemented this new decree for the large infrastructure project ‘Oosterweel’. Social partners worry that the measure will not help address the widespread need for more suitable housing across all of Flanders.

Labour migrants’ accommodation and housing conditions are not monitored on a regular basis.

Accommodation and housing conditions of labour migrants are not regularly monitored, as no social inspection service is authorized for this purpose. The initial check conducted by local police after registration at the municipality is insufficient to ensure respect of housing conditions in the long-term. The Flemish housing inspectorate does not generally conduct inspections on housing. However, if accommodation is provided on-site by the employer, both Flemish and federal social inspection services may uncover irregularities regarding housing and living conditions. In such cases, they either relay information to the Flemish housing inspection or conduct a joint inspection.

3.5.4. Family reunification: conditions for spouses and children

Family reunification policies and conditions for spouses and children play a crucial role in facilitating the integration, well-being, and retention of labour migrants.

Non-EEA workers have the right to family reunification. The procedure for family reunification can begin after Annex 46 or 47 is issued. If the procedure for family reunification is initiated within 6 months of the issuance of visa D to the worker, the embassy may decide ex officio on the family reunification application. If the family reunification procedure begins later, an additional procedure at the IO is often required. This generally takes much longer, up to 12 months. To apply for family reunification, the sponsor must prove that they earn a minimum income (monthly net income of EUR 2,048.53), prove adequate housing, and that their dependents will not be dependent on the state.

Upon receiving an A card (or Annex 15 while awaiting the A card), family members of labour migrants have immediate access to employment. As such, family members have broader access to the labour market than the migrant worker themselves, who is bound to a specific employer and occupation. Foreign students (discussed below) also sometimes have accompanying partners. These partners are permitted to reside in the territory with the student but do not have access to the Flemish labour market. If they wish to work, they must apply for a single permit.

It is difficult for children of labour migrants to enrol in regular Flemish schools.

Before arriving in Flanders, families often seek schools but face obstacles. Without a Belgian national number or knowledge of their future municipality, they cannot request enrolment in most municipal schools, which prioritize local children. Additionally, due to the fluidity of relocations, families may miss enrolment deadlines, resulting in waiting lists and late confirmations, typically received in August or just before the school year starts. This situation breeds insecurity and uncertainty. There are no on-line databases detailing available school places so families must individually contact numerous schools.

Without the assistance of employers, expat centres, or relocation agencies, newly arriving labour migrants often find it nearly impossible to secure public school placements for their children.

International schools are expensive and the availability is limited.

Offering curricula in multiple languages and accommodating diverse cultural backgrounds, international schools play a crucial role for expatriates. Flanders has several international schools in cities like Ghent, Antwerp, Leuven, and Brussels, but options are limited, especially at the secondary education level, and the cost is high – between EUR 15,000 and 50,000 annually, depending on school and level.

Unrestricted access to the labour market for partners of non-EEA labour migrants.

A positive aspect of the current legal framework in Flanders is that accompanying spouses or legally registered partners of labour migrants have access to the labour market. If individuals hold a permit as family members of a single permit holder, they are permitted to work immediately – although their permit duration remains tied to that of the sponsoring family member. Partners are allowed to pursue employment with any employer. However, some groups of family migrants continue to be left out – for instance, accompanying partners of PhD researchers. Chapter 2 illustrated that partners of labour migrants are often highly skilled and have great potential to contribute to the Flemish labour market.

Although finding work in practice can be challenging, the various expat centres and international houses often help family members of labour migrants find a suitable job or connect them with organisations that can assist in this process.

There is little awareness among policymakers and labour market stakeholders regarding family migrants' right to work.

A study¹²⁸ on highly skilled migrant women in Belgium revealed limited awareness among stakeholders regarding the legal right to work for family migrants. The study cites examples where employers fail to grasp the implications of the single permit directive and mistakenly request single permits for family migrants when they are not necessary, or where municipal officials and public employment service counsellors lack training regarding the implications of the single permit for family members. There has been no information campaign targeting family migrants living in Belgium since before 2019, leaving many family migrants unaware as well. Consequently, accessing the labour market may still be a significant challenge for partners of labour migrants, despite their legal right to work.

To become self-employed, partners of labour migrants need to apply for a professional card.

To pursue self-employment, partners of labour migrants need to apply for a professional card, which can act as a disincentive to undertake independent economic activity. If the activity is considered innovative or of sporting or cultural added value, the application procedure is more flexible.

3.5.5. Civic integration and language training

Labour migrants can integrate more effectively into the workplace, and cultural misunderstandings can be minimised when they possess some knowledge of the host country's language and have access to civic integration courses. Integration training is even more relevant for those planning to establish themselves on a long-term basis in Belgium, including with a view to family reunification (as family migrants are required to provide a proof of integration when their permit is up for renewal).

To welcome newly arrived migrants, assist them in learning Dutch, and help them secure employment, Flanders has a civic integration programme (“inburgeringstraject”) in place. The programme targets all

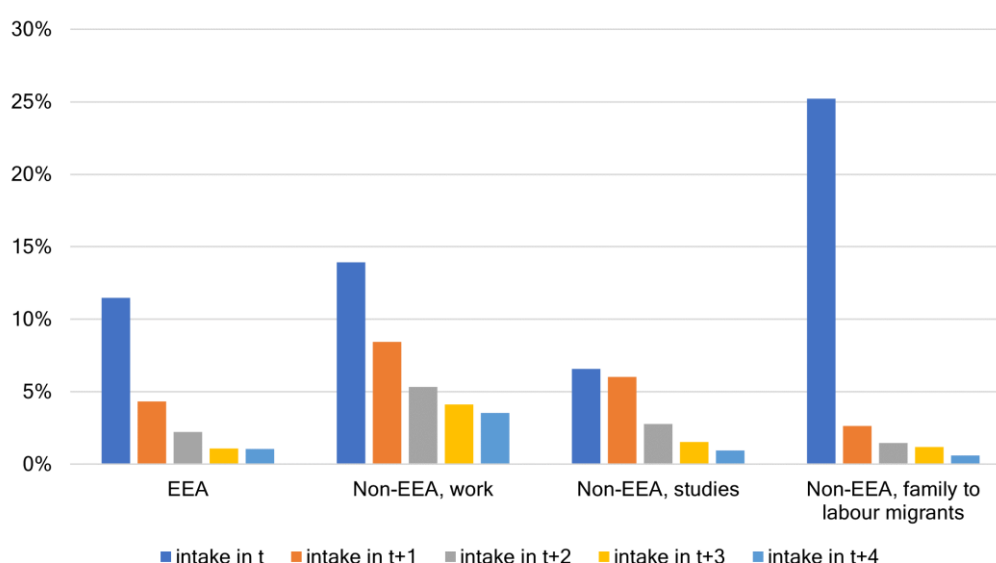
¹²⁸ Purkayastha, D., & Bircan, T. (2023). Present but not counted: highly skilled migrant women in Belgium. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(1), 294-312.

adult newcomers to Flanders who are registering for the first time in the National Register with a residence permit exceeding three months. Generally, non-EEA family and humanitarian migrants are obligated to participate in the programme, whereas participation is voluntary for EEA immigrants and their family members, non-EEA migrants arriving for work or study purposes and their families, as well as long-term residents of EEA countries.

The civic integration process begins with an intake assessment conducted at integration agencies, ideally during the migrant's initial appointment. This assessment involves a consultation between the newcomer and integration counsellors to determine individual needs and abilities, and to establish a roadmap for integration activities. Only after migrants obtain a residence permit and register in a municipality can they arrange an appointment with one of the Flemish integration agencies. To enhance awareness, integration agencies send invitation letters to new arrivals who have not scheduled an appointment independently. Immigrants with a civic integration obligation must enrol within three months of receiving the invitation, while there is no time limit for others.

Within four years after settlement, 35% of non-EEA labour migrants and 31% of their family members engage in an intake assessment with integration agencies (see Figure 3.11). This participation rate is higher compared to other migrant groups for whom participation in the programme is optional, such as free movement migrants (20%) and non-EEA study migrants (18%). The figure also highlights that late registrations are more prevalent among non-EEA labour migrants but not among their family members. This trend is likely attributed to non-EEA labour migrants often having a job upon arrival (as discussed in chapter 2), which may delay or prevent their participation in integration activities.

Figure 3.11. Share of migrants that participate in an intake assessment, by years since settlement, by category of entry, Flanders, 2019 settlement cohort



Note: Individuals aged between 18 and 64 at the time of settlement. t = year of settlement.

Source: Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration

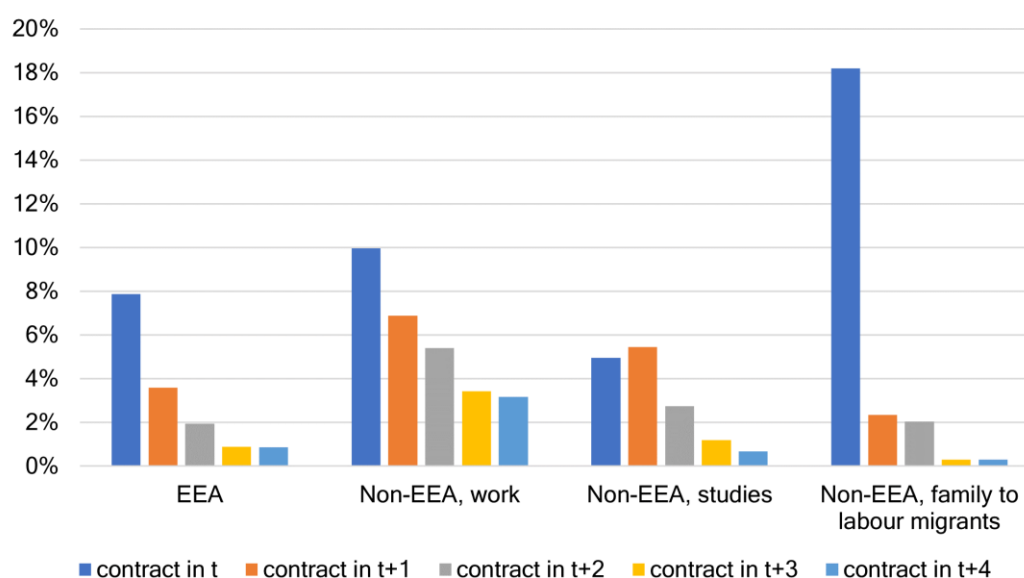
Following the intake assessment, the counsellor and the participant establish a personalised integration contract outlining integration goals and obligations. Generally, integration activities comprise four pillars: a 60-hour civic orientation course, Dutch as a second language training up to level A2, registration with VDAB for work trajectory development (as of March 2022), and a 40-hour network and participation trajectory (as of January 2023). However, non-EEA labour migrants, being already employed upon

programme start, are exempt from registering with VDAB and participating in the network trajectory. Consequently, most will solely engage in Dutch language training and civic orientation classes.

Moreover, nearly half of the non-EEA labour migrants enrolled in the civic integration track are exempted from the civic orientation requirement after taking a test.¹²⁹ Many of these migrants have been in Flanders for some time before starting the integration track, often having received welcome packages or other soft landing tools through their employers (see above). Consequently, in practice, many will only pursue Dutch language training, with the majority being assigned to accelerated learning tracks (120 or 240 teaching hour courses at the Centres for Adult Education) to reach level A2, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Figure 3.12 illustrates the percentage of individuals who sign an integration contract within the first four years after settlement. The proportions are slightly lower than those engaging in an intake, indicating that some migrants withdraw from the programme during this period. Among non-EEA labour migrants, the dropout rate is approximately 5%, comparable to the dropout rate among free movement migrants but higher than among non-EEA student migrants.

Figure 3.12. Share of migrants that sign a civic integration contract by years since settlement, by category of entry, Flanders, 2019 settlement cohort



Note: Individuals aged between 18 and 64 at the time of settlement. t = year of settlement.

Source: Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration.

Upon passing standardized tests for civic orientation (or the exemption test) and Dutch at level A2, participants receive a civic integration certificate.¹³⁰ This certificate can serve as proof of meeting

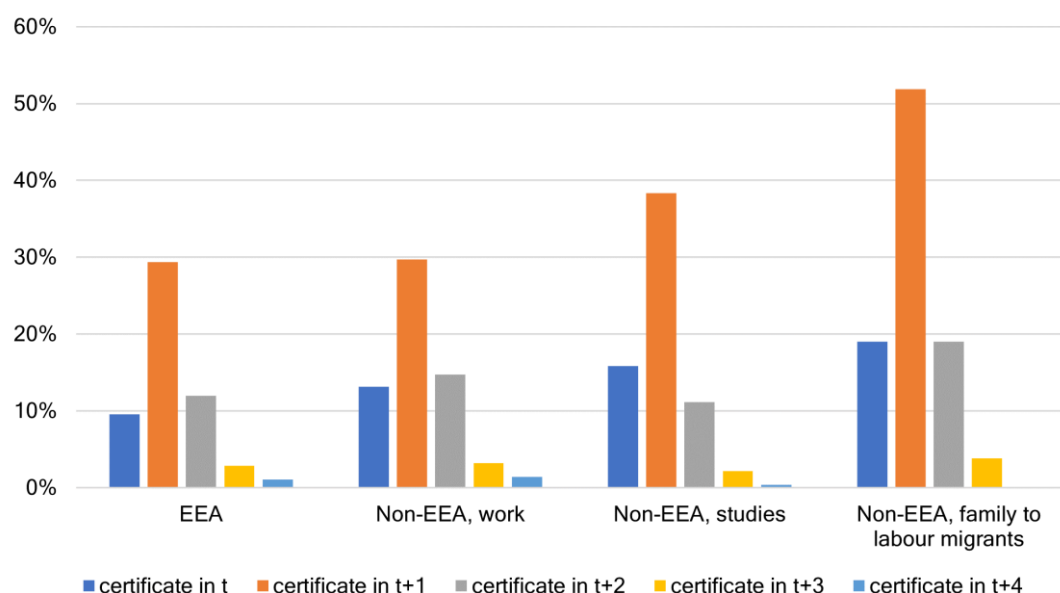
¹²⁹ There are two reasons to anticipate an increase in the proportion of labour migrants opting for an exemption test. Firstly, the exemption test implemented since 2022 boasts higher success rates compared to its predecessor. Secondly, as of September 2023, language and civic orientation training in Flanders are no longer provided free of charge. Participants now incur a fee of EUR 90 each for the civic orientation course and test, as well as for the Dutch L2 course and test (totalling EUR 360). Therefore, opting for the exemption test over the course also saves the migrant some money.

¹³⁰ For immigrants who due to 'limited learning capacities' are unable to fulfil all of the programme's pillars, a 'declaration of efforts' is provided instead.

integration requirements, which may be beneficial or required in various situations, such as when applying for jobs, renewing a residence permit, or seeking Belgian nationality. However, it is not the only way to fulfil these requirements, as alternative proofs may also be accepted.

Six out of ten non-EEA labour migrants obtained an integration certificate within four years of contract signing (see Figure 3.13). This percentage is higher than for free movement migrants (55%) but lower than for student migrants (68%) and notably lower than for family members of labour migrants, where almost all (94%) successfully complete the integration programme. Non-EEA labour migrants, not bound by a civic integration obligation, may have various reasons for not completing the integration track, including challenges in balancing integration activities with work or family responsibilities, or perceiving little benefit in obtaining an integration certificate. Additionally, some may have left Flanders altogether (see section 2.2.2).

Figure 3.13. Share of migrants that obtain a civic integration certificate by years since signing an integration contract, by category of entry, Flanders, 2019 civic integration cohort



Note: Individuals aged between 18 and 64 at the time of settlement. t = year of signing the civic integration contract.

Source: Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration.

Flanders also provides opportunities for language learning and practice in the workplace. Specifically, 'Workplace Architects' (Werkplekarchitecten) offer 10 to 12 free individual coaching sessions at the workplace during working hours for employees with less than one year of experience with a company. For employees with more than one year of experience, the employer covers the cost of these sessions.

One third of the labour migrants participate in integration training.

The civic integration programme serves as a valuable platform for non-EEA labour migrants to acquire information on their rights and to build Dutch language skills. While the programme is not mandatory for labour migrants and their families, one-third of labour migrants participate in the programme, and a slightly higher rate of their family members. This implies that two-thirds of labour migrants do not participate in the civic integration programme. This could be due to the challenge of balancing

employment with integration training. Additionally, employers may not consistently support such participation, particularly during working hours.

Barriers to accessing Dutch language learning in Flanders.

Starting Dutch language learning in Flanders requires registration with a local integration agency and a language level test, but long waiting times sometimes delay access to courses. Many Dutch courses are full-time and intensive, making it difficult for migrants who need to combine work with language learning. Flexible options, such as online, evening, or weekend classes, are frequently fully booked. Higher-level courses (B2/C1) are not available in all regions, limiting access for learners in certain areas. Moreover, existing courses focus primarily on passing language exams rather than developing the practical Dutch skills needed in the workplace.

Flanders is taking active steps to offer integration training to labour migrants who are still residing abroad.

In 2023 and 2024, Flemish Integration Agencies launched pilot projects allowing prospective labour migrants still residing abroad to begin their civic orientation classes digitally. The organization of remote classes for labour migrants is closely linked to existing talent partnerships (e.g., Aurora or DT4E; see section 3.6). Additionally, new regulations are being prepared which will allow people who want to come to Flanders, including labour migrants, to take online Dutch courses from their home country.

3.6. Talent partnerships

Talent Partnerships with non-EEA countries, also known as Skills Mobility Partnerships or Global Skills Partnerships, are a relatively new but increasingly popular concept in both migrant-origin and destination countries. These are bilateral or multilateral agreements designed to facilitate crossborder training and the matching of talent from countries of origin with employers in host countries. They often focus on specific sectors or skills, including technical occupations. These schemes typically include both a skills development component and a mobility component: programme participants receive training in their country of origin, in the host country or in both, while some (or even all) programme participants receive migration and employment opportunities in the participating host countries.

Alongside Germany, Belgium is pioneering in this field. In Flanders, several such projects have already been implemented, including PALIM (2019-2021), THAMM (2020-2023), MATCH (2020-2023), MBI (2018-2021), and PEM (2021-2024), under the leadership of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Enabel (the Belgian development agency). These partnerships with African partner countries such as Morocco, Nigeria, Tunisia, and Senegal targeted young graduates from specific sectors like biotechnology and ICT. Some projects involved circular migration, where non-EEA nationals gained experience through internships, while others aimed to offer them permanent employment contracts or establish them permanently as entrepreneurs.¹³¹

The Aurora project, launched in 2023, builds further on these initiatives. The key partners in this project include Flemish higher education institutions for nursing (IVV Sint-Vincentius), nursing homes (Curando, Exalta, and Mintus), and the Government of Kerala-India (ODEPC). Several other organizations are also involved, including VDAB (advisory role), Centers for Adult Education (providing Dutch language training),

¹³¹ Morsink, N. (2022). Actieve rekrutering buiten de Europese Unie. *Over.Werk. Tijdschrift van het Steunpunt Werk*, 32(1), 93-101; and [Joint EMN-OECD Skills Mobility Partnerships inform.pdf \(emnbelgium.be\)](#) (Accessed on 14 May 2024).

Mentor-Compaan (offering Dutch language training in the workplace), Integration Agencies (providing civic integration training), and the Flemish Association of Cities and Municipalities (for outreach). The programme consists of three phases. In Phase 1, the aim is to recruit qualified nurses in India through a reliable partner (ODEPC) and provide them with a six-month preparatory training in their home country, focusing on elderly care, mental health care, and the functioning of the healthcare system in Flanders. The civic integration process also starts in the home country, including (remote) Dutch language lessons. During this phase, the employer also initiates the single permit application, based on employment as nursing assistants (which is on the list of shortage professions for migration purposes). In Phase 2, upon arrival in Belgium, the migrant combines full-time work as a nursing assistant (minimum 80%) with studying to become a nurse in an HBO5/Bachelor programme with Dutch language classes, internships, and on-the-job language coaching. The migrant is permitted to work as a nursing assistant through a recognition of acquired qualifications (EVK) procedure completed at a Flemish HEI. After about a year or two, the migrant worker should have a Flemish nursing diploma, and Phase 3 begins: the employer requests a renewal of the single permit so that the migrant can start to work as a nurse. Starting the procedure for family reunification is also an important part of Phase 3.

In May 2024, 40 candidates were in Phase 1 (selection and pre-training), 37 in Phase 2 (working as nursing assistants and studying to become nurses), and 20 candidates were in Phase 3 (working as nurses). Employer costs per candidate are approximately EUR 15,000, covering recruitment, preliminary processes, administration, and support. This also includes furnished accommodation for the first year. Indian nurses pay EUR 400 per month for rent (including costs and a EUR 30 deposit). Additional costs for candidates include flights and the Visa D procedure in India.

Another notable project in development is DT4E (Displaced Talents for Europe), spearheaded by IOM. It targets skilled Syrian refugees currently residing in Lebanon and Jordan, aiming to connect them with employers in Belgium and facilitate their sustainable integration into the Belgian labour market. IOM's overarching strategy heavily draws from the Aurora project, seeking to formulate comparable recruitment and immigration strategies tailored to the Flemish healthcare sector.

There is limited direct engagement with countries of origin.

While there have been some talent missions, they lack clear vision and organisation, and it is unclear who is in charge, what the role of the government should be, or which countries should be targeted. Such talent missions have also been disconnected from existing talent partnerships in Flanders.

Despite growing interest in their use, talent partnerships face obstacles to success.

It is important to note that many recent Talent Partnership programmes are pilot projects designed to test labour migration pathways and integrate company and talent support into relevant institutions in both the country of origin and Belgium. As a result, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Aurora), these programmes are currently small-scale and short-lived, facilitating only limited worker movements.

Challenges for these partnerships include the mismatch between project duration and goals, reliance on administrative lead times, difficulty securing private-sector engagement and housing, and the need for more labour market analysis and training capacity.

Nevertheless, the potential of Talent Partnerships is promising. These projects can test new migration corridors and recruitment models, provide support in training and selecting candidates, guide through necessary immigration procedures, and assist with integration upon arrival in Flanders. Learning from these projects is crucial, as they offer valuable insights and foundational elements for developing a structured policy on active recruitment.

3.7. International students as a source for labour migration

Belgium has one of the highest R&D intensity in the EEA.¹³² The country also has one of the best salaries for PhD students, especially when compared to countries where PhD programmes charge fees. These elements, combined with low tuition fees for international students, have made Flanders very attractive to brains worldwide. Indeed, international students are eager to come study in cities like Leuven, Ghent, Antwerp, and Hasselt. The Flemish government website ‘Study in Flanders’¹³³ offers comprehensive information on information about studying and living in Flanders and helps non-EEA students find the English taught degree programmes of the 18 Flemish higher education institutions.

As discussed in section 2.4, the retention rates among international students from outside the EEA have not been high in the past. This indicates that foreign graduates face challenges in transitioning their status to become labour migrants. Following countries like Denmark and the Netherlands, Belgium introduced a one-year search period in 2021, aimed at enhancing the retention rate of international graduates. This ‘orientation year’ allows non-EEA students to stay in Belgium after graduation and use their skills in the Flemish labour market by seeking high-skilled employment. During the orientation year, graduates have the freedom to work in any skill level job while actively seeking employment. They can register with VDAB to receive personalised advice and support, including guidance towards vocational training, Dutch language training, or job fair events.

To transition into labour migrant status, graduates must secure employment with an employer who requests a single permit on their behalf. Applications for the orientation year are submitted to the municipality of residence at least 15 days before the expiration of the student residence permit (A card). The application typically requires a proof of diploma and proof of financial means. The IO has 90 days to decide on the orientation year application and refusal rates are reported to be relatively low. If approved, graduates can apply for a new A card through their municipality of residence. If the orientation year is not granted before the student residence permit expires, the municipality issues an Annex 15, which also allows full access to the labour market. The period under Annex 15 is deducted from the 12-month duration of the orientation year.

¹³² See [OECD Main Science and Technology Indicators - OECD](#) (Accessed on 11 March 2024).

¹³³ See [Belgium? Flanders? Brussels? - Study in Flanders](#) (Accessed on 20 August 2024).

Foreign graduates face the risk of illegal residency if the single permit is not granted in time, with significant implications for their long-term stay.

The orientation year is crucial in facilitating the transition of international students into labour migrant status. The A card allows unlimited employment, so the graduate who has obtained one can start working for the employer even as the single permit application is being processed. However, since the single permit procedure can take six or even nine months, students must find an employer willing to do a single permit application quickly after obtaining the orientation year permit. Otherwise, they risk losing their legal residency when the A card runs out. The orientation year in practice only grants a few months to find a job if the graduate wishes to remain in Flanders.

If a student's orientation year expires but the single permit has not yet been granted, they risk falling into illegal residency status. While authorities may adopt a policy of non-enforcement ("gedoogbeleid"), allowing students to remain in the country without actively enforcing their departure, any interruption in their legal residency can have significant implications for their long-term stay. Specifically, any years of legal residency accrued prior to the interruption will no longer be considered when calculating the duration required to qualify for a permanent residence permit later on. Years of study count 50% towards permanent residence, but only if there was no interruption between study and the post-study status.

Professional card applicants face an even higher risk of having to return to their home country if residency is not secured in a time.

Should a graduate wish to apply for a professional card to initiate self-employment during the orientation year, they must also do so rather quickly. Because if residency rights based on the professional card are not granted before the end of the orientation year, the graduate is required to leave the country and apply for a Visa D from their country of origin. Unlike with single permit applicants, there is no leniency for professional card applicants who are unable to secure residency within the designated timeframe.

Students who graduate early do not receive an Annex 15 and thus face work restrictions.

Non-EEA migrants holding a student residence permit are permitted to work for up to 20 hours per week (except during holidays). Typically, student residence permits are valid until the end of October, aligning with the Flemish academic year. The IO has instructed municipalities not to revoke students' A cards before their expiry date. Consequently, students graduating before October who apply for an orientation year do not immediately receive an Annex 15; they must wait for their A card to expire first. While this practice ensures residency rights during the validity period, it does not grant full work rights. Therefore, these graduates are limited to working 20 hours per week, potentially causing disruptions for those already employed.

Graduates can no longer apply for a single permit with an Annex 15.

Since student residence permits are valid until the end of October, the typical period in which individuals who have applied for an orientation year hold an Annex 15 is from November to approximately February. However, to apply for a single permit from within Belgium, a legal short- or long-term residence status is required. An Annex 15 does not qualify as either, as no decision on residence has yet been made at that point.

Recently, the region has started declaring single permit applications inadmissible on the grounds that an Annex 15 does not allow for submission from within Belgium. At the same time, the processing time for an orientation year application (to obtain an A card) can be lengthy. This means that graduates must wait before they can apply for a single permit. Combined with the lack of a temporary residence document if the orientation year expires, this further undermines the effectiveness of the orientation year.

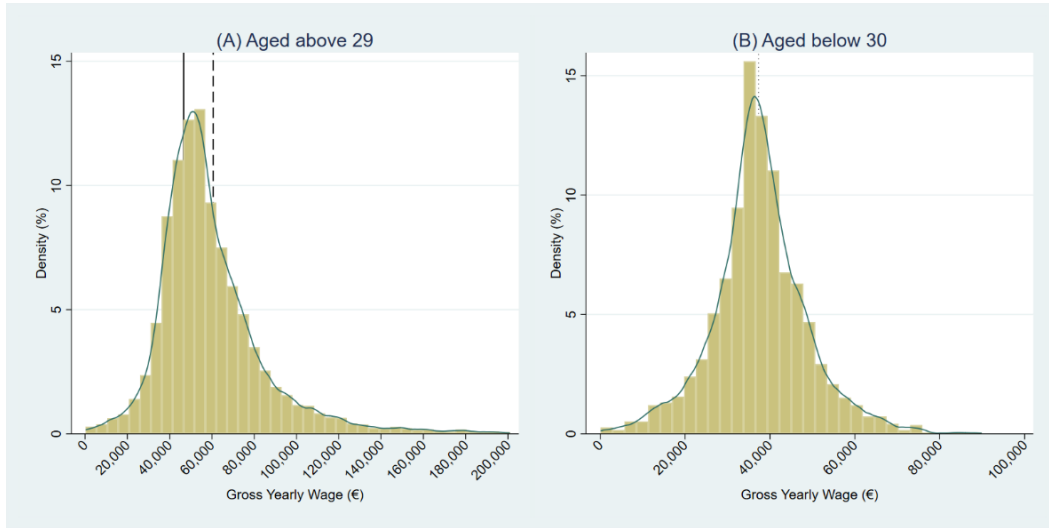
Annex 3.A.

Annex Table 3-B. Characteristics of issued work/single permits and professional cards (first demands and renewals), by main category, Flanders, 2019-2023 (year of issuance)

| | Highly skilled | SOL | LMT | Other | Professional card |
|----------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------|---------|--------------|-------------------|
| <i>Sex</i> | | | | | |
| Male | 72% | 95% | 55% | 59% | 73% |
| Female | 28% | 5% | 45% | 41% | 27% |
| <i>Mean age</i> | | | | | |
| | 34 | 38 | 37 | 28 | 36 |
| <i>Top 5 nationality</i> | | | | | |
| 1 | India | Turkey | Ukraine | China | India |
| 2 | Japan | Morocco | Turkey | US | Turkey |
| 3 | Turkey | India | Morocco | South Africa | Armenia |
| 4 | China | Philippines | Moldova | Philippines | Iran |
| 5 | US | Kosovo | India | Brazil | China |
| <i>Province of employment</i> | | | | | |
| Antwerp | 36% | 36% | 13% | 34% | 40% |
| Eastern Flanders | 12% | 32% | 16% | 21% | 22% |
| Flemish Brabant | 43% | 12% | 8% | 16% | 20% |
| Limburg | 3% | 11% | 52% | 15% | 10% |
| Western Flanders | 5% | 9% | 12% | 15% | 8% |
| <i>Occupation (ISCO)</i> | | | | | |
| Managers | 16% | 1% | 2% | 1% | |
| Professionals | 49% | 1% | 1% | 10% | |
| Technicians and associate professionals | 5% | 14% | 2% | 31% | |
| Clerical support workers | 2% | 2% | 0% | 0% | |
| Service and sales workers | 0% | 4% | 2% | 0% | |
| Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers | 0% | 0% | 21% | 0% | |
| Craft and related trades workers | 0% | 25% | 8% | 1% | |
| Plant and machine operators, and assemblers | 0% | 38% | 2% | 4% | |
| Elementary occupations | 0% | 1% | 47% | 0% | |
| Unspecified | 28% | 15% | 14% | 52% | |
| <i>Mean permit duration (in days)</i> | | | | | |
| | 757 | 356 | 161 | 260 | 676 |

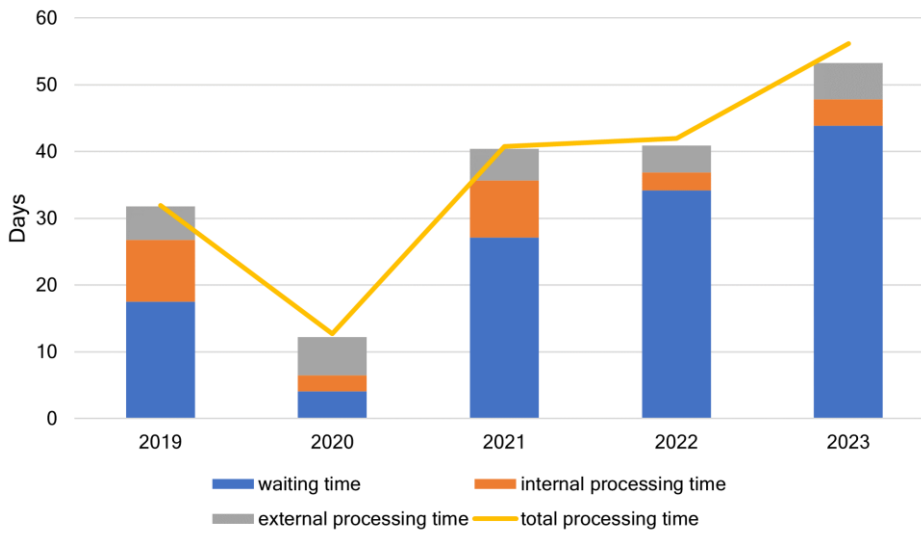
Source: WEWIS, work permit database.

Annex Figure 3-A. Gross yearly wage distribution for tertiary educated individuals employed full-time with permanent contracts in high-skilled occupations (ISCO 1-3) relative to salary thresholds for highly skilled labour migrants, Flanders, 2022



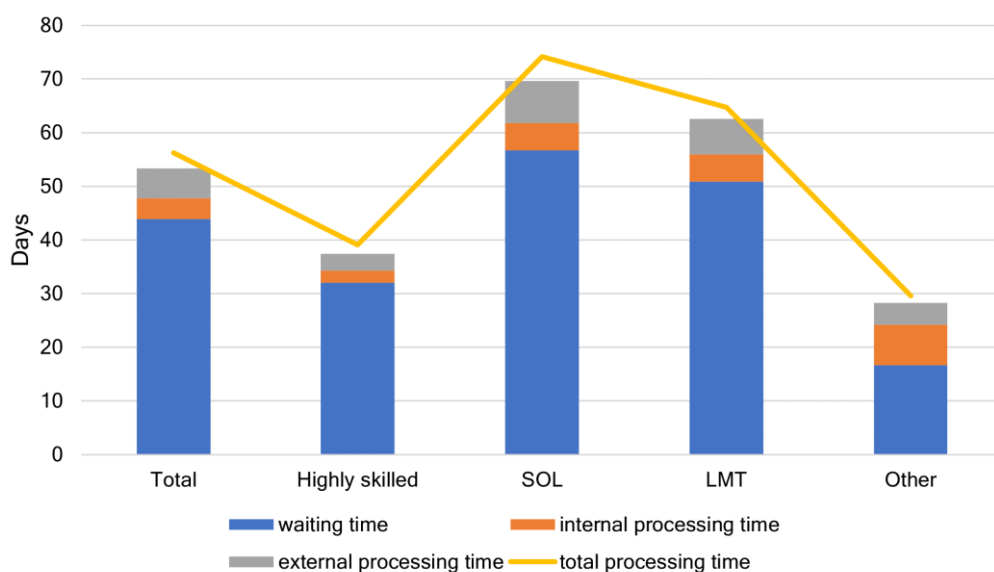
Note: The sample includes individuals aged 18-55. Gross yearly wage is derived by multiplying the gross monthly wage by 12. The full vertical line represents the 100% salary threshold at EUR 46,632; the dashed line represents the 130% salary threshold at EUR 60,621; and the dotted line represents the 80% salary threshold at EUR 37,305.
 Source: Belgian Labour Force Survey linked with social security data.

Annex Figure 3-B. Breakdown of processing times for renewal of single permits, Flanders, 2019-2023



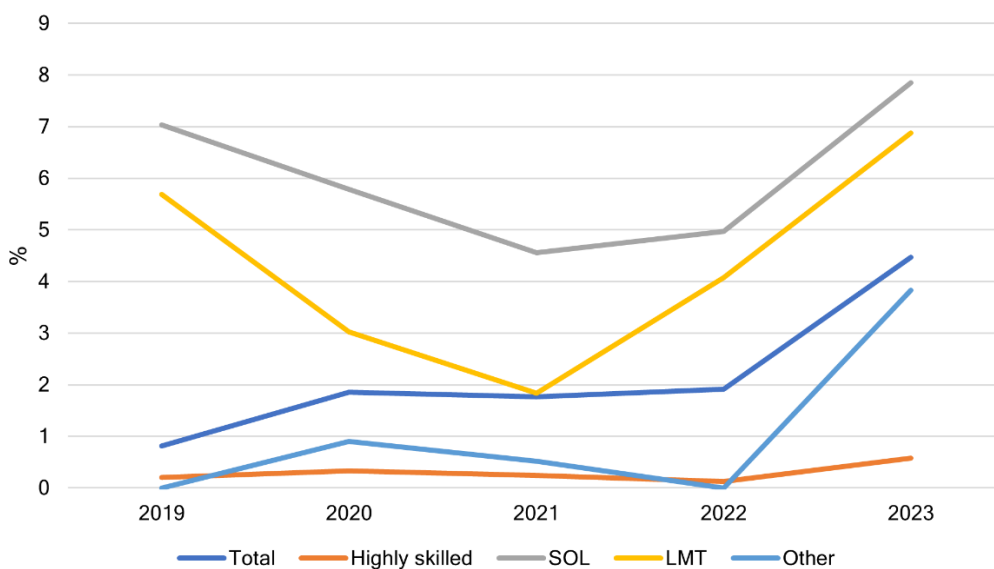
Note: Only applications for which the EMS has made a decision are included.
 Source: WEWIS, work permit database.

Annex Figure 3-C. Breakdown of processing times for renewals of single permits, by main category, Flanders, 2023



Note: Only applications for which the EMS has made a decision are included
 Source: WEWIS, work permit database.

Annex Figure 3-D. Refusal rates for renewals of single permits, by main category, Flanders, 2019-2023



Note: Only applications for which the EMS has made a decision are included.
 Source: WEWIS, work permit database.

4 Potential Initiatives to Support International Recruitment in Flanders

4.1. Introduction

Certain models for attracting, recruiting, and managing economic migration offer insights to guide potential reforms in Flanders. Drawing inspiration from international best practices, solutions can be adapted to the region's specificities and policy priorities. These solutions involve both optimizing economic migration management mechanisms, such as improving the Shortage Occupation Lists and implementing a faster-track system to accelerate the processing of work permit applications for certain categories of workers. They also include strengthening and developing talent attraction and recruitment tools and strategies, as well as improving reception and integration practices for talented individuals and their families. The objective is to further strengthen Flanders' attractiveness, better meet recruitment needs not met locally, and maximize the benefits of economic migration. The following sections present the international experiences that inspired the recommendations aimed at modernizing and further structuring the Flemish framework for attracting and managing skilled talent.

4.2. Attracting and Recruiting Talent

4.2.1. The Current Situation

As described in Context for labour migration to Flanders, Flanders is disadvantaged in the competition to attract and retain talent by a number of obstacles, ranging from procedural complexity and duration, to gaps in the institutional framework for supporting recruitment and retention, to the absence of clear mandates. Gaps could be addressed by drawing inspiration from tested and tried practices in attracting and recruiting foreign talent in benchmark and competing countries and regions.

4.2.2. The Shortage occupation list (SOL) and the Labour Market Test (LMT)

Labour Market Tests

The Labour Market Tests (LMT) In many EU countries, vacancies posted with public employment services may also be uploaded to the EURES job portal, although this is not a legal requirement under EU law. Labour market tests involving an employer obligation to advertise a vacancy usually refer to making the vacancy available for resident job-seekers who would not be subject to work permit authorisation – i.e., nationals and foreigners holding unrestricted work rights. In the EU, the pool of potential job seekers extends to all EU/EFTA nationals, regardless of which member state they reside in. While many LMTs

requiring publication with the public employment services also cross-post vacancies on the EURES platform, there is no EU legal requirement to do so. “Community Preference” in EU law has no legal force except where explicitly or implicitly included in directives. In labour migration, “community preference” appears as a binding rule only in Accession acts, and only during transitional periods. It cannot be considered a general principle of EU law, comparable to other general principles such as the principle of equal treatment or the principle of proportionality.

In conducting a labour market test, there is no specific requirement to post vacancies on EURES – or indeed in any way across the EU – to satisfy a “community preference” principle. It may be a choice by the legislation in the individual Member State to increase the likelihood of identifying interested candidates among EU/EFTA nationals prior to authorising recruitment of a third-country national, but it is not mandatory under any EU instrument (Robin-Olivier, 2016^[2]). For Flanders, this means that the “Concentric Approach” to the LMT does not require any reference to the EU level.

Some OECD countries use a relatively restrictive labour market test in which most applicants are rejected, although these examples are the exception. The Netherlands, for example, employs a strict LMT for low- and medium-skilled occupations. Most applications for labour migration are under the Knowledge Migrant scheme, which requires an approved employer and receiving a fixed salary threshold. For every application that does not include highly skilled migration (Knowledge migrants, Blue Card, researchers, etc.) nor trainees, the employer must request that a work permit be issued to the foreign national. To obtain a work permit, the employer must demonstrate that there is no labour supply within the Netherlands or the EU/EEA via an LMT. The employer must have tried to find employees from whom no work permit is required by as many sources as possible, such as vacancy websites, networks such as LinkedIn, temporary employment agencies (not limited to those focused on workers in the Netherlands), advertisements in trade journals. The application form requires the employer to send relevant documents to prove that these efforts have been made. The Dutch UWV examines whether or not there are candidates present in the EEA and the Netherlands who could fulfil the vacancy. If this is the case the application will be denied.

Another example of a strict application of the LMT comes from Canada’s Temporary Foreign Worker Programme (TFWP). Under the TFWP, employers who demonstrate that they have been unable to fill their vacancies with local workers, either Canadians or permanent residents, must complete an LMT process, the Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) test. Each request for an LMIA requires a fee of CAD 1 000. Since employers are not likely to file requests they do not seriously intend to pursue, the administration need only process well-documented and serious requests, and the government is able to devote sufficient resources to review of the application. To issue a positive LMIA, Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) reviews the application to determine that hiring the foreign worker will have a positive or neutral impact on the Canadian labour market. It considers whether, among other things, there are no qualified Canadians or permanent residents available to fill the position and that wages and benefits that meet federal and provincial standards.

Generally, Canadian employers must prove they have attempted to find a Canadian citizen or permanent resident to fill the position before offering it to a foreign worker. The employer must demonstrate having made the necessary local recruitment efforts¹³⁴. The employer must advertise job offer(s) for at least 4 consecutive weeks during the 3 months preceding the submission of the LMT application. Vacancies must

¹³⁴ Acceptable methods of recruitment for a job advertisement include: general employment websites, online classified websites, specialised websites that are dedicated to specific occupational profiles (for example, accounting, marketing, biotechnology, education, engineering), local, regional and national newspapers or newsletters, local stores, places of worship, and community resource centres, local, regional and provincial/territorial employment centres, magazines and journals (for example, national journals or magazines, professional associations magazines, specialised journals), participation at job fairs, partnering with training institutions or offering internships/bursaries, professional recruitment agencies, consultations with unions for available labour, advertising through professional associations, recruitment within the company (for example, considering internal candidates for the position).

be advertised in 3 different recruitment methods, one of which must be the official Job Bank website (Canada's national employment service). In addition, the other two methods must be targeted to an audience that has the potential to possess the appropriate qualifications in terms of level of education, work experience and level of skills required to fill the position. ESDC also examines whether recruitment methods also target underrepresented groups, such as indigenous peoples, vulnerable youth, persons with disabilities, newcomers to Canada, and asylum seekers with valid work permits.

The LMIA process differs depending on whether the employee is classified as receiving a "high wage" or "low wage" according to whether they are paid above or below the provincial median wage. Employers hiring high-wage workers in Canada must provide "transition plans" with their LMIA to show efforts to reduce dependence on temporary foreign workers. A transition plan describes the activities the employer agrees to undertake in order to recruit, retain and train Canadians and permanent residents and to reduce its reliance on the TFWP. The plan is meant to reduce use of the TFWP to a program of last resort and that Canadians are prioritised for available jobs. Employers hiring low-wage workers in Canada do not need to provide transition plans with their LMIA but must adhere to specific guidelines. The number of low-wage foreign workers is capped at a maximum of 10% of their workforce¹³⁵. Certain low-wage occupations may also be denied LMIA processing.

In the specific case of the province of Quebec, the TFWP is administered jointly with the provincial government due to the immigration agreement between the federal government and Quebec. Under the shared jurisdiction mechanism between the governments of Canada and Quebec, employers must simultaneously submit a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) application to the federal and Quebec authorities, which is jointly analysed by the two levels of government.¹³⁶

Overall, the LMT is generally of shorter duration in other OECD countries than in Flanders, and usually more cursory, although it may be more expensive in some cases.

Shortage Occupation Lists

A shortage occupation list (SOL) is used to identify, determine, and prioritise occupations experiencing chronic labour shortages in the domestic labour market. Occupations listed on the SOL are often granted exemptions from certain immigration restrictions accelerating and simplifying hiring of foreign workers for these roles.

United Kingdom (UK) Immigration Salary List

History of the UK SOL and its use

The UK Shortage Occupation List (SOL) was first introduced in 2008 to identify "skilled" occupations considered both in "shortage" and where migration is a "sensible" response to that shortage. A Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) was established to develop and review the SOL, as well as the methodology used to determine which occupation should be part of the list. The MAC is an independent, non-statutory and non-departmental body that advises the UK government on migration issues; its initial mandate was to determine the SOL, which at the time provided an exemption from the labour market test under the skilled labour migration channel ("Tier 2"). The SOL played a modest role in wider immigration policy, acting as a complement to the main work visa route; most Tier 2 entries were in labour-market tested occupations. When a cap was placed on work permits, the SOL provided an exemption from the cap. With

¹³⁵ This does not apply to the following sectors, which are considered strategic: construction, hospitals and nursing and residential care facilities.

¹³⁶ There are fees at both the federal and provincial level. The employer must pay CAD 1000 to the federal level (EDSC) for the LMIA and an additional CAD 228 to Quebec for each Quebec EIMT and for each CAQ.

the abolition of the RLMT in 2021 and the suspension of the visa cap, the main advantage of recruiting under the SOL rather than the regular SW route is that a lower salary threshold is allowed. The SOL is not meant to support government initiatives outside of providing facilitations within the skilled work stream¹³⁷.

The Skilled Worker (SW) visa is the primary immigration route currently for working in the UK. Employers may recruit – uncapped - foreign employees in Regulatory Qualification Framework (RQF) 3+¹³⁸ occupations, subject to salary requirements (the general threshold for the SW route or the going rate for their occupation).

To reflect this changed role, in 2024, the SOL was renamed the “Immigration Salary List” (ISL). Along with this, the ISL significantly reduced the number of occupations eligible for sponsorship at lower salary thresholds to 23 occupations¹³⁹. The minimum salary threshold for new Skilled Worker visa applicants was raised to GBP 38 700, which is higher than the previous general threshold, and salary threshold for occupations listed in the ISL increased to GBP 30 960 compared to the GBP 20,960 in 2023 in the SOL, meaning that fewer jobs can benefit from the lower salary requirement. In addition, each job on the ISL is assigned a specific 'going rate', which represents the standard market rate for that occupation, and these rates have generally increased. The 'going rate' was previously the 25th percentile of annual full-time earnings for that occupation. Employers must now ensure that they meet both the minimum salary requirement **and** the specific going rate for the occupation, making the process more rigorous than under the SOL. In addition, the 20% discount to the "going rate" for specific occupations on the SOL was abolished. Employers must pay the full going rate for ISL occupations. These changes reflect the UK government's wider aim to tighten immigration controls and prioritise higher-paid positions in the labour market.

How the MAC determines the SOL

The MAC approach combines statistical analysis with evidence-based stakeholder input, through a structured consultation process, in which stakeholders must provide substantial and credible evidence to support their claims and justify the inclusion of specific occupations. The quantitative approach to determining shortage uses 9 top-down indicators.

To supplement the evidence base, MAC carries out consultation to compile views and evidence from stakeholders about jobs which they think should be considered for the SOL. The MAC consultation process uses an online questionnaire, the Call for Evidence (CfE), as well as an extensive engagement with stakeholders involving sectoral or regional roundtable events, site visits and follow-up meetings. Questions in the CfE are designed to provide the MAC with a relevant evidence base. The CfE includes enhanced guidance on how to answer the questions, which largely focus on the 'meaningfulness' criterion – specifically, why migration is an appropriate solution to recruitment challenges. This focus addresses an

¹³⁷ Review of the Shortage Occupation List, October 2023, MAC, p. 29:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/651557b86dfa600148e37ba/Review_of_the_Shortage_Occupation_List_2023.pdf

¹³⁸ Regulatory Qualifications Framework (RQF) – RQF levels refer to the level of a qualification. The immigration system includes routes (such as Skilled Worker, which includes the Health and Care visa) where eligible jobs are based on the estimated levels of training and experience required to do a job based on the RQF level of relevant qualifications. Skilled Worker and Health and Care visa jobs generally are open to RQF 3+ level jobs. This level of qualification includes vocational and academic certifications that provide individuals with the foundational skills necessary for further study, training, or entry into certain job roles, equivalent to jobs estimated to require training and experience pitched at least A level or equivalent qualifications. [Legal migration statement: estimated immigration impacts \(accessible\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\): https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels](https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels)

¹³⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skilled-worker-visa-immigration-salary-list/skilled-worker-visa-immigration-salary-list>

area where the MAC has often found insufficient detail from respondents¹⁴⁰. Basically, all occupations are eligible, subject to one major review and two minor reviews. Stakeholders must give evidence that an occupation should remain on the list, since the MAC views the SOL as a temporary rather than structural measure.

Despite this structured methodology for identifying shortage occupations, which incorporates both statistical analysis and stakeholder input, the government retains the power to place occupations on the SOL outside of the MAC process. This capacity allows for policy-driven exceptions where certain occupations may be included on the list for reasons beyond documented shortages, even if they do not meet the criteria established through the MAC methodology and may run counter to the logic of the list.¹⁴¹

Australia's CSOL

In 2024 the Australian government introduced a new system based on a Core Single Occupation List (CSOL), which serves as the single occupation list for employer-sponsored visas and offers a pathway to permanent residency for all listed occupations. The development and maintenance of the CSOL are managed by Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA), a public agency tasked with this responsibility, through a comprehensive, evidence-based process. JSA's methodology for developing the CSOL involves analysing a wide array of labour market indicators and datasets that are pertinent to Australia's skill visa programs. The data sources include surveys of migrants conducted every 18 months to gather information on their employment status, location and compensation; visa grant records from the Department of Home Affairs to track occupation-specific visas and the level of demand for each; and job vacancy data, particularly from Workforce Australia, the government website that provides insight into the volume and salary levels of advertised jobs. The process also takes into account skills and education information, such as enrolment and historical graduation rates at universities and other tertiary institutions. Trade obligations also play a role, ensuring access to specific cultural role occupations under agreements with countries such as China.

The methodology also involves a consultation process that gathers input from a diverse range of stakeholders, particularly focusing on occupations where there is uncertainty about their inclusion. Based on this data collection and analysis help determine labour market needs and trends, JSA drafts the CSOL, which is then submitted for public consultation. In 2024, consultation was open for approximately one month, during which the public and stakeholders were invited to review and provide feedback on the draft list. Following the public consultation, JSA meets with key stakeholders, including government agencies, State and Territory governments, industry representatives, and other relevant bodies. These meetings discuss occupations where there may be conflicting evidence or insufficient data. JSA then reviews the submissions received during the public consultation phase and engages in targeted consultations with the States and Territory governments, the Ministerial Advisory Council on Skilled Migration, large business and union representatives. Each group provides insights and feedback on the occupations in question, bringing additional diverse perspectives.

After reviewing all the feedback and conducting thorough discussions with stakeholders, JSA finalises the CSOL, then provides advice to the Minister for Skills, who provides the list to the Minister for Immigration. The Minister for Immigration has the final say in putting occupations into legislation and may change the

¹⁴⁰ Shortage Methodology review, MAC, February 2023, p.9:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/643687b989f19f00133cfb7f/SOL_methodology_review.pdf

¹⁴¹ For example, one notable exception to the SOL methodology is the inclusion of care workers, who are not necessarily included because of a defined shortage, but because of their 'strategic importance' to the UK's health and social care sector, benefitting from a reduced salary threshold below that of other occupations on the SOL. Unlike other occupations on the SOL, care workers have been added using a different set of criteria. Between 2021 and 2023 the number in low skilled care workers increased sharply to comprise in mid-2023 between 60% and 70% of all incoming care workers and the main category within the SW channel.

list as they see fit – i.e. if there are occupations in the national interest, such as to support a transition to a net-zero economy. The CSOL is set to be updated annually, considering stakeholder input and labour market analysis.

The SOLs in the UK and Australia are drawn up through extensive and resource-intensive processes, involving far more time and staff than currently used for the Flemish SOL. They play a more important role in determining the contribution of labour migration to employment, however, which justifies the investment. Flanders can draw on these examples to improve the transparency and methodology for consultation, without having to reproduce these approaches in all their detail.

4.2.3. Recognised employer mechanisms in immigration systems: fast-tracking workforce matching and recruitment of third country nationals

The recognised employer mechanism, employed in countries like the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland, is a tool within immigration systems designed to streamline the recruitment process for third-country nationals through a simplified process for hiring foreign workers, reducing the administrative burden on both employers and immigration authorities. The principle is to review and approve employers and grant them privileges in recruitment (lower document requirements, priority or faster processing, ability to recruit more workers or to use reserved permit categories). By streamlining the processing of applications from recognised employers, these mechanisms ensure that critical labour needs are met promptly. Employers must undergo a thorough vetting process to achieve recognised status, with the aim of ensuring they adhere to legal standards and ethical practices. This vetting process helps prevent exploitation of foreign workers and maintain fair labour market conditions.

Table 4.1. Overview of Recognised Employer Policies in Selected Countries

| Country | Year launched | Criteria/conditions | Fees | Documentation | Pre- and Post-Enforcement Measures | Processing Time (certification/permit) |
|-------------|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Netherlands | 2013 ^[i] | Trustworthiness of the enterprise, labour conditions, criminal record, and financial health assessed by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency Minimum salary criteria for Highly Skilled Migrants (HSM) | EUR 4,560 | A completed application form, proof of payment, company registration, financial documents, and a tax compliance declaration. Additional requirements depend on the situation, such as business plans for start-ups, notarial deeds for mergers, or accreditation for educational institutions. Recognized sponsors provide yes/no statements instead of detailed documentation for each application | Pre-Enforcement: Information via email, meetings, brochures, website, newsletters, and dedicated support Notifications during the process reduce follow-up document requests. Post-Enforcement: Compliance checks with possible warnings, fines, suspension, or withdrawal of sponsorship. | IND target is to process work permit applications within 14 days (extendable in some cases). ^[ii] IND must take a decision on certification within 90 days (extendable). ^[iii] |
| Denmark | 2015 | Solvency, clean record (no convictions, illegal acts, or labour disputes), compliance with Danish working environment standards | DKK 6,290 (approx. EUR 840) | Documentation of paid fee; documentation, if applicable, of membership in an employer's organisation or being party to a collective bargaining agreement; documentation of any convictions or fines under the Danish Alien's Act; and, if applicable, power of attorney for Fast-track certification of your company. ^[iv] | Pre-Enforcement: SIRI holds a mandatory individual meeting (in person or online) with approved companies to explain programme requirements. | Work permits processed in 20–25 days. |

| | | | | | | |
|---------|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Finland | 2023 ^[i] | 3-year history of positive equity and financial health; annual turnover > EUR 1M; issuance of 10+ work permits in the past 3 years; compliance with employment obligations and collective agreements. | EUR 140 | <p>Company details, representative's personal information, most recent financial statements. Include board meeting records detailing ownership changes and documentation of shareholder changes (for those with at least 25% ownership or control) within the current calendar year.</p> <p>Certification removes the need for separate employer and employment details in individual employee applications.</p> | <p>Automated post-decision monitoring of residence permits. Register controls use national databases to verify ongoing compliance with residence permit requirements. (residency in Finland, means of financial support, criminal activity).^[vi]</p> <p>Employers must report payments, including wages, fees, and allowances, within five calendar days of payment.^[vii]</p> | <p>Fast track applications processed in 14 days (average 9 days).</p> <p>Expected application processing time for certification: 1-2 months.^[viii]</p> |
| Canada | 2023 | Positive LMIA decisions for at least 3 applications in the last 5 years (exceptions for COVID-19-affected periods). Employers must meet TFWP standards for worker protection, wages, housing, and recruitment. | CAD 1,000 per position | Employers must submit detailed documentation with LMIA applications to prove business legitimacy, employment agreements, and compliance measures. | <p>Employers commit to wage reviews, housing inspections, and recruitment efforts.</p> <p>Random REP check-ins to confirm compliance with REP conditions (e.g. prevailing wage review, yearly recruitment, working conditions, completed housing inspection reports, etc.) and records maintenance. Fines or disqualification for non-compliance.</p> | <p>As of October 2024, LMIA processing times vary by stream:</p> <p>Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program approximately 7 business days</p> <p>Permanent residence applications up to 105 business days.^[ix]</p> |

Source: ^[i] Inspectie Veiligheid en Justitie, 2017, '[Onderzoek naar het IND toezicht op de erkend referent](#)', p. 4; ^[ii] IND, [Apply for recognition as sponsor | IND](#); ^[iii] IND, [Apply for recognition as sponsor | IND](#); ^[iv] The Danish Immigration Service, [New to Denmark](#); ^[v] Finnish Immigration Service, [Amendments to the Aliens Act enable more efficient services for employees and employers | Maahanmuuttovirasto](#); ^[vi] Finnish Immigration Service, [Post-decision monitoring of residence permits | Maahanmuuttovirasto](#); ^[vii] Finnish Immigration Service, [Incomes register | Maahanmuuttovirasto](#); ^[viii] Finnish Immigration Service, [Työntantajien sertifiointihakemus | Maahanmuuttovirasto](#); ^[ix] Government of Canada, [Labour Market Impact Assessment application processing times - Canada.ca](#).

Recognised Employers under the Dutch Knowledge Migrant System

In the Netherlands, the main channel for admission of qualified migrants (the kennismigrant or “knowledge migrant” scheme) requires employers to go through a recognition process. Recognised sponsors are companies or organisations that have been approved by the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) to recruit highly skilled migrants from outside the EU/EFTA. In 2024, there were over 10 000 recognised sponsors listed and 90 000 labour migrants in the Netherlands holding permits under the Knowledge Migrant scheme. The recognition process streamlines several parts of the employer sponsorship process relative to other channels for admission (it remains optional for other work permits, and inapplicable for the EU Blue Card). Recognised sponsors are largely exempt from providing detailed proof or documentation for each individual application. Instead, they can submit simple yes/no statements (although employers are expected to retain necessary documents for possible inspections conducted by the Dutch labour authorities afterwards). This system facilitates faster decision-making, typically allowing for decisions within 14 days.

Conditions for employers to be recognised as sponsors are outlined in the Aliens Act 2000, with specific criteria serving as grounds for refusal. To become a recognised sponsor, the IND conducts a preliminary assessment to verify the enterprises’ reliability, compliance with labour conditions, and criminal record status. Continuity and solvency of the organisation must also be guaranteed. The Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) provides advice to IND on an employer’s continuity and solvency to ensure they meet the necessary standards. The organisation, its directors and managers and other natural persons and legal entities involved must be “reliable”. The IND takes a decision within 90 days. The fee for being a recognised sponsor is EUR 4 560, although it may be lower for companies that are less than 18 months old and companies that employ fewer than 50 people worldwide. Once a company becomes a recognised sponsor and makes an application for a migrant, the company will be bound administratively to that migrant. The employer is obligated to fulfil duties related to information about Dutch legislation, administration, and care, for each migrant sponsored. The main criterion for eligibility of the migrant is a salary above a certain threshold (1.5 times the modal income), and it is the responsibility of the employer to ensure that salary level. The IND can revoke the recognised sponsorship if the company has not applied for a highly skilled migrant for three years and no longer employs highly skilled migrants.

When recognised sponsors start the Entry and Residence Procedure (TEV) with the IND, they apply online via the Business Portal. The IND investigates whether there are any objections to the entry on public policy or security grounds, a review which takes approximately two weeks. If the review is positive and the highly skilled migrant meets the other requirements for foreign nationals, the migrant can obtain the Provisional residence permit (MVV) from the Dutch embassy in the origin country. The MVV is valid for 90 days to come to the Netherlands and collect a residence permit from the IND. If the highly skilled migrant does not need an MVV, the application procedure for the residence permit can be started as soon as the migrant arrives in the Netherlands. The residence permit for highly skilled migrants is granted for the same duration as the employment contract, with a maximum duration of 5 years. Under the terms of the residence permit for highly skilled migrants, the holder may only work as a highly skilled migrant for the same employer or as a self-employed person. The fees for first application are EUR 380.

As an approved sponsor, the employer is required to keep comprehensive records of each foreign national employed under its sponsorship for at least five years after the sponsorship has ended. This record-keeping requirement will enable the employer to provide all necessary information to the IND upon request. Specifically for highly skilled migrants and European Blue Card holders, the records must include a copy of the employee’s valid passport and a signed Certificate of Antecedents. Pay slips, employment contracts or letters of appointment must also be retained, showing the employee’s name, job title, place of work, hours of work, length of contract and salary structure. The employer must also provide evidence of salary payments, such as bank statements. For healthcare professionals, proof of registration in the Individual Register of Healthcare Professionals (BIG register) is required. Additional registrations, such as with the

Medical Specialists Registration Committee, may be required for roles such as house officers. If the worker's qualifications are demonstrated by relevant work experience rather than formal diplomas, the employer should keep a personal statement, CV, vacancy details and possibly references or previous contracts. If the profession is regulated, documentation confirming the employee's suitability for the regulated role is essential. The employer must keep records of how they have fulfilled their duty of care as an approved sponsor, demonstrating compliance with all employment, qualification and sponsorship requirements¹⁴².

How does the IND make sure that the conditions are being met?

To improve understanding and compliance with the conditions, a combination of preventive and post-enforcement measures is in place. Preventive enforcement focuses on educating recognised sponsors to help them understand and fulfil their duties. The government provides clear explanations of the conditions, rights, and obligations associated with sponsorship. It does this by sending information via email to new recognised sponsors, organising optional information meetings, and providing brochures and detailed information on the website. Additionally, IND sends newsletters regularly with information on, for example, legal changes, to all recognized employers. IND assigns an account manager to large companies, while a dedicated helpline (e-mail address and phone number) is available for smaller businesses. During the application process, companies get digital notifications about the requirements and the necessary documents. This reduces the number of requests for additional information.

Post-enforcement measures involve conducting compliance checks based on samples, signals, or notifications. This has recently been criticised by the Labour Inspectorate as being inadequate. The employer can be asked to provide proof any time. If non-compliance is detected, measures such as warnings, fines, suspension, or withdrawal of sponsorship can be implemented.

The Danish Recognised Employer System (Fast-Track)

In 2015, Denmark introduced a “Fast-Track” Recognised Employer system, moving from a labour shortage-driven approach to one tailored to the specific needs of individual Danish companies. The main objective was to facilitate quick and efficient access to qualified migrant workers by simplifying the process of obtaining work and residence permits. This fully online system reduces processing times to an average of 20 to 25 days. In 2023, 7 000 qualified migrant workers came to Denmark through this scheme. It is the main scheme for labour migrants to come to Denmark.

To benefit from this scheme, a company must be certified by the Danish Agency for International Recruitment and Integration (SIRI). A residence and work permit under the Fast-Track Scheme, which is divided into five tracks, can be granted for a period of up to four years and allows foreign employees to work in Denmark (and also abroad for certain periods without losing their permit). 98-99% of work permit applications under the Fast-Track Scheme are approved. The processing fee is DKK 6 290 (about EUR 840).

To make use of the fast-track scheme, companies must fulfil certain requirements such as a certain level of solvability, no previous convictions, illegal acts nor labour disputes. They also must comply with the Danish working environment and standards (wages, holiday entitlement, notice periods and all other terms and conditions of employment). Companies that are not part to a collective agreement must explicitly declare that they comply with these standards. In addition, eligible companies must employ at least 10 full-time, permanent employees in Denmark at the time of application. Temporary or part-time workers are excluded from this count and calculations cannot be based on 'man-years', which would include non-permanent staff. As part of the certification process, companies are required to attend a 30-minute

¹⁴² [Apply for recognition as sponsor | IND / As a Dutch employer, how can I hire a highly skilled migrant? | Government.nl](#)

consultation session, either online or in person, organised by SIRI. This session provides detailed information on the conditions and procedures of the Fast Track Scheme. A company representative must attend the session and the company must formally confirm in writing that it has received and understood the information provided. This ensures that all certified companies are well informed and fully compliant with the requirements of the scheme.

The Finnish Recognised Employer System

Since 2022, companies hiring many employees from outside Finland can benefit from applying for employer certification under the Finnish Recognised Employer System. Employers that frequently hire qualified workers are given fast-track service that enables qualified workers, growth entrepreneurs, and their family members to obtain a residence permit within 14 days.

To qualify for the Recognised Employer certification, companies must meet a number of eligibility criteria relating to financial stability and compliance with labour laws. For the three years prior to application, the company must have had a positive equity balance in each year and a positive financial result in at least one of those years. In addition, the company must have achieved an average annual turnover of at least EUR 1 million per accounting period. Certification also requires evidence of active recruitment, with at least ten work residence permits granted to the company's employees in the last three years, three of which must be renewable. The company must also meet all employer obligations, including compliance with relevant collective agreements and labour laws.

This certification simplifies the application process in several ways. Companies do not need to enter their information separately for each employee's application, and employees are not required to fill in the terms of employment in their applications. Furthermore, employees can apply for a D visa for faster entry into the country. While employees must still submit their own residence permit applications, employer certification shortens the time needed to process these applications. This certification is intended for employers whose employees are applying for a residence permit based on work.

Several features support the 14-day service pledge. A clearly defined process ensures that all parties fulfil their duties and responsibilities within predetermined time frames. Additionally, technical solutions facilitate a smooth process for both applicants and the authorities responsible for processing the applications. As part of the fast-track initiative, Finland introduced a long-term national D visa, which allows quicker entry into the country without the need to wait for the residence permit card abroad. This visa expedites the overall immigration process.

The electronic application fee to become a Recognised Employer is 140 EUR.

5 Innovative approaches for talent attraction and recruitment

Aligning recruitment needs of employers in receiving countries with available skilled workers from countries of origin is complex due to several factors, including differing labour market demands, the difficulty of accessing the right talent pools abroad, and the logistical hurdles associated with international recruitment. High-demand sectors such as healthcare, engineering, IT, and construction are particularly competitive, as multiple countries target the same pool of talent. Additionally, the available talent in countries of origin may not always align perfectly with these needs, as skills gaps and the necessity for additional training can complicate the matching process.

To address these challenges, OECD countries have implemented various initiatives to facilitate international recruitment and attract foreign talent, improving the matching between job vacancies and qualified workers from third countries. Taking into account approaches ranging from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Finland, New Zealand and Sweden, among others, two complementary approaches to talent attraction adopted: passive and active.

The passive approach consists of making legislative, regulatory or administrative changes to the framework for economic migration, relaxing rules and selection criteria to facilitate the arrival of workers in sectors of activity in demand, creating immigration programs or establishing policies favouring specific professional profiles. These reforms mostly aim at simplifying legislative frameworks to reduce formal constraints limiting entry for work.

The active approach is to *promote* labour opportunities abroad. Legislative adaptation alone will not improve a country's visibility in targeted countries. For specific skill profiles a proactive approach to international recruitment –in addition to regulatory adaptation – may be necessary to competitively position a destination country. Active attraction policies pursue skilled migrants internationally through outreach and recruitment initiatives, which can take different forms: job fairs at higher educational institutions abroad, brand image campaigns to change the perception of a country, city, or region to increase its attractiveness. Varied options for non-legislative talent attraction strategies already exist.

One approach involves developing a comprehensive strategy led by public organisations mandated to manage economic migration, with the active involvement of key stakeholders such as economic development and investment agencies, other government organisations, educational institutions, and professional associations. As in any area of policymaking, the creation of talent attraction strategies ideally relies on a planned, methodological approach. Authorities start by gathering thorough knowledge about firms' needs and labour market trends to identify priority sectors of activity where there is an immediate need for recruitment, in addition to policies to activate local human resources, and the specific target groups and subgroups. They must also identify a country's most appealing features to advertise and create tailored communication and outreach initiatives. These strategies are operationalised through a range of tools and support services, including promotional events, targeted recruitment campaigns, and digital platforms designed to connect employers with potential international candidates. For example, Canada's Destination Canada Mobility Forum, Germany's Make it in Germany initiative, and Québec's Journées Québec serve as platforms where employers can conduct interviews, offer job placements, and provide

information about living and working in these countries. These initiatives not only facilitate the recruitment process but also help to bridge skills gaps by connecting employers directly with the talent they need. Additionally, these programs often include pre-arrival services, language training, and orientation programs to smooth the transition for workers and enhance their integration into the local labour market.

Moreover, collaboration between government agencies and key stakeholders such as economic development and investment agencies, educational institutions, and professional or employer associations plays a crucial role in enhancing attractiveness. Organisations with expertise in the field have largely operational functions and are linked to the business and enterprise community and skills pools both locally and abroad. Additionally, they also have the tools, platforms, distribution networks and the organisational agility to ensure greater visibility and a targeted approach to promotion. These partnerships can also help bridge the gap between international qualifications and local standards, ensuring that the skills of foreign workers are appropriately recognised and utilised. Collaboration is essential to organise support services such as pre-arrival orientation, settlement assistance, and language training.

The strategies employed by several OECD countries actively engaged in attracting and recruiting skilled talent can be classified based on the extent of the support in the recruitment process offered by public services to both employers and prospective or current immigrants. This document outlines three approaches, corresponding to increasing levels of ambition and investment: an online promotional and information interface; a web-based support platform for prospective migrants and employers; and an international recruitment support service.

5.1. Online promotional and information interface

While most OECD countries – and many subnational bodies in these countries – provide information on their institutional websites, promotional portals are different in tone. Promotional portals *encourage* candidates to consider migrating – and highlight advantages and elements of attraction of the destination country. They resemble promotional websites run by trade and investment agencies, and indeed are sometimes run by these actors.

Online portals are the basic and usual starting instrument in the toolkit of active attraction and invariably part of a comprehensive strategy. Online portals serve several functions: they help migrants and employers navigate complex migration systems and present important aspects about living and working in the country. Often, these websites function as aggregators of information for prospective migrants, easing access to a wide spectrum of information, from existing immigration pathways to the recognition of skills and language learning opportunities.

Most of the portals have the same basic features: information about the labour market, including how to find work; information about the migration regime; and links or contacts with relevant support services. Smart Move Australia is one example. The degree of detail and promotion varies (Table 5.1). Other examples include Sweden (where the public Sweden Institute runs the top domain Sweden.se, a promotional site for Sweden which includes general information for potential migrants).

Table 5.1. Promotional Websites in selected OECD countries

Overview of public portals and selected characteristics, 2024

| Portal | Promotion of life in the country | Information on how to seek a job | Information on the migration procedures | Self-check eligibility tool | Direct user assistance | Languages | Run by |
|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Sweden.se (“Welcome to Sweden”) | Strong promotion of work-life balance, innovation, equality, environment, etc. | Basic, with link to Employment Agency | Basic, with link to Migration Service | No | No | EN, AR, RU | Swedish Institute |
| Smart Move Australia | Adventurous lifestyle, safety, multiculturalism, environment, innovation, family life, etc. | Limited | Basic, with link to start the migration procedure | Yes | No | EN | The Australian Government’s Department of Home Affairs |
| Make it in Germany | Economic strength, high-quality education, comprehensive social security system, inclusion and equality, cultural life, safety, etc. | Comprehensive, with integrated job search portal which lists vacancies from the Federal Employment Agency | Comprehensive, with link to the Federal Foreign Office | Yes | live chat, hotline, e-mail box | DE, EN, FR, ES | The German Federal Government |
| Work in Austria | Quality of life, safety, price levels, leisure activities, environment, etc. | Comprehensive, with integrated job search portal | Comprehensive | Yes | No | DE, EN | The Austrian Business Agency |
| Work in Czechia | Leisure activities, location in Europe, transportation efficiency, work-life balance, safety, etc. | Basic, with links to private job search portals | Basic, with link to the Ministry of Industry and Trade | No | No | EN | CzechInvest (Investment and Business Development Agency) |
| Greater Copenhagen Region (e.g., ‘A State of Denmark’) | Sustainability, equality, constitutional values, work-life balance, digitalization rate, innovation, etc. | Comprehensive, with integrated job search portal | Limited, with a link to ‘life in Denmark.dk’ which provides further information | No | No | EN (DE, JP) | Copenhagen Capacity |
| Work in Finland | Work-life balance, safety and stability, social welfare system, labour rights | Comprehensive, with integrated job search portal | Limited, with link to the Immigration Service | Yes | Chatbot | EN | Business Finland and the KEHA Center |
| Invest in Italy | Rich history, environment, cultural wealth, sustainability, health care, favorable tax schemes, etc. | Limited | Limited | No | No | EN, IT | National Unit for Investment Attraction |
| JETRO | Environment, richness of historic and cultural traditions, work ethic, safety, cuisine, economic strength, innovation, etc. | Basic, with integrated interactive list of companies interested in hiring foreign workers | Basic, with link to the Immigration Service | Yes | No | EN, JP | JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization) |
| Live and Work New Zealand | Work-life balance, safety, health care, environment, climate, multiculturalism, etc. | Basic, with links to private job search portals | Basic, with link to the Immigration Service | No | No | EN | Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment |

| | | | | | | | |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|--------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Welcome to NL | Quality of life, business climate, innovation, inclusivity, infrastructure, etc. | Comprehensive, with integrated job search portal | Basic, with link to the Migration Service | No | No | EN | NL Netherlands (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy, in collaboration with Talent Coalition partners) |
| Great Talent (UK) | Innovation, education, work-life balance, cuisine, healthcare, multiculturalism, etc. | Limited | Limited, with link to different government website | No | No | EN | The UK Government's Cabinet Office |
| Immigration Québec | Quality of life, integration services, education, finance, health, language training, infrastructure, etc. | Comprehensive, with integrated job search portal (Journées Québec) | Comprehensive, with link to all programmes, tools and services | Yes | No | EN, FR | Ministry of Immigration, Francisation and Integration (MIFI) |

Note: Only public portals are listed. In countries with multiple portals, the main portal or most comprehensive portal is listed.

Source: OECD Secretariat review

5.1.1. A web-based support platform for prospective migrants and employers

"Make it in Germany"

Germany has one of the most advanced promotional portals in the OECD. The portal is part of a broader "Make it in Germany" (MiG) initiative. The official website is designed to attract skilled professionals from around the world. This platform is a key element in Germany's strategy to enhance talent attractiveness and address both current and future labour market shortages. MiG offers extensive information and easy navigation, particularly in sections dedicated to working and living in Germany. Additionally, it provides comprehensive guidance for employers about how to find potential recruits and how to go through migration procedures.

MiG was launched in 2012 as an informational portal under the German Federal Government's umbrella. Since August 2023, it is part of the new Skilled Immigration Act, which designates it as the central communication platform for this legislation. Available in German, English, French, and Spanish, MiG offers the necessary information for international skilled workers and German-based companies. Various ministries, agencies, and structures oversee its main functions, coordinated by a lead Ministry.

The website covers a wide range of topics, including working in Germany, studying and vocational training, visa and residence information, living in Germany, recruiting, visa and entry requirements, and integration. MiG targets three primary groups: graduates, skilled workers, start-up companies, researchers, prospective students and trainees, and foreign graduates of German institutions; employers in Germany; and various stakeholders, including advisors, disseminators, and the general public.

MiG includes a self-check tool, which helps candidates assess whether they meet the minimum requirements for migration. The website also offers practical tools such as webinars, visa guides, interactive maps, and testimonials. Job postings linked to the Federal Employment Agency's job board can be advertised on MiG, although MiG itself does not conduct active recruitment. MiG's user-friendly design includes an intuitive homepage with a menu bar that organizes content into relevant sections and categories, facilitating easy navigation. The *Quick-Check* function provides users with personalized information after they complete short forms. The website offers 18 language options and country-specific pages for Mexico and Brazil, as well as an 'easy read' option.

Moreover, the *Working in Germany* section provides comprehensive job-related information and resources, including a job listings tool and advice on job seeking and application processes. However, job offers are available only in German, which may limit accessibility for non-German speakers. MiG also addresses the recognition and assessment of foreign credentials, complete with an explanatory video.

In the *Living in Germany* section, MiG offers extensive information on language training and integration courses, along with an interactive world map to help users find German institutions in their home countries. It provides detailed information about each German state and covers aspects of German politics, society, culture, and the economy. However, the website's information on housing is less comprehensive compared to similar portals in other countries.

Additionally, MiG features an *Events* section that includes recruitment, information, and marketing efforts, primarily through webinars. It also targets employers, providing operational advice, recruitment information, and encouraging participation in various events and programs.

5.1.2. *International recruitment support service*

Beyond promoting the benefits of working and living in a particular country, active international recruitment can extend to offering concrete job opportunities. Direct recruitment addresses the challenges of filling hard-to-fill vacancies, especially difficult for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). SMEs often face greater difficulties in recruiting foreign workers due to their lower level of international exposure, lower capacity for human resource management, and other resource constraints.

Two tools to support international recruitment strategies are **tailored recruitment missions** and **job fairs in target countries**. These events provide SMEs with a platform to directly engage with potential foreign workers, helping them compete with larger firms that typically have more established international recruitment processes.

Public sector involvement in recruitment initiatives depend on a number of factors. First, public administrations must invest human resources. Second, they must involve private sector actors; businesses understand industry-specific needs and can guide public authorities to better identify and articulate the demand for foreign talent. Public sector recruitment must be aligned with the actual needs of the market, while protecting the local job market. Further, along with defining profiles of the talent to recruit, destination countries need to develop a nuanced understanding of the origin countries in which they are recruiting. This includes building relationships with the local public authorities and other local stakeholders, who can provide insight into the available talent pool and facilitate more effective recruitment efforts.

Some OECD countries public administrations have gone far in institutionalising recruitment, creating specialised units with staff solely dedicated to support employers in their effort to recruit foreign workers abroad. The unit not only coordinates recruitment activities but also develops long-term strategies to enhance the country's attractiveness to foreign talent.

5.1.3. *Canada*

The Canadian government is not actively engaged in direct recruitment but provides attraction support services to help and facilitate the matching between employers and qualified talent abroad. Canada's multi-faceted approach to reach their target audience combines **online promotion** through the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) website and social media with the organisation of **large-scale events in target countries** to bring together representatives of employers, regional economic development organisations, higher and technical education institutions, chambers of commerce and professional associations with potential skilled workers.

Destination Canada Mobility Forum (DCMF) is the flagship event organised by IRCC to promote Francophone immigration to Canada and facilitate the meeting and connection between skilled foreign

workers and Canadian employers and organisations. This annual event is particularly focused on French-speaking and bilingual candidates wishing to settle in Canada, outside of Quebec. The forum takes place over several days and in various countries, mainly in France and, more recently, in Morocco and Cameroon, where there is a large population of Francophones and Francophiles interested in immigrating to Canada.

5.1.4. Quebec/Canada

Since 2008, the Canadian province of Quebec has had an international recruitment service specifically designed to assist employers, particularly SMEs and very small enterprises (VSEs), in sectors experiencing labour shortages. This service launched in Paris in 2008 targeting residents of France and Europe, and was expanded in 2018 to other regions, including Africa, Latin America, and Asia. This initiative targets industries identified as priorities by the government, helping businesses struggling to fill positions with local talent. This service has been developed and implemented by the Ministry of Immigration, Francisation, and Integration (MIFI), which holds the government mandate to coordinate Quebec's international recruitment and immigration promotion efforts. MIFI also relies on non-governmental partners (economic development organisations in the Montreal, Drummondville and Quebec City regions), with which it has signed funding agreements to operate this international recruitment service.

MIFI oversees the entire comprehensive recruitment process. It begins with the evaluation and approval of job offers, followed by their publication on the government platform and promotion in targeted countries abroad. MIFI and its institutional partners in the countries of origin handle the pre-selection of candidates, ensuring that those chosen meet the specific needs of employers and Quebec's labour market.

Moreover, MIFI is responsible for the logistical aspects of the recruitment process, including organising face-to-face interviews in the country of origin, often in collaboration with local authorities or agencies. The ministry also supports with the immigration formalities, ensuring that all legal requirements are met to facilitate the seamless entry of workers into Quebec. Once the recruitment is finalised, the public services continue to play a crucial role by supporting the newly arrived workers in their settlement and integration, helping them navigate the social, cultural, and administrative landscapes of their new environment.

The legal foundations of Quebec's outreach programme

To enabling the MIFI to undertake this mission effectively, continuous amendments have had to be made to the legislation governing the Ministry – most recently, with an expansion of MIFI's role in 2019. The law includes specific provisions that authorise the MIFI to¹⁴³:

- ensure and coordinate, with the support of the departments and agencies concerned, the promotion of immigration to Québec and the search for and recruitment of foreigners abroad;
- provide a personalised support programme for immigrants, in particular by assisting them in their immigration, francization and integration efforts and by informing them about democratic values and the values of Quebec¹⁴⁴, the importance of the French language, Quebec culture and the vitality of the regions.

¹⁴³ Projet de loi 9 Loi visant à accroître la prospérité socio-économique du Québec et à répondre adéquatement aux besoins du marché du travail par une intégration réussie des personnes immigrantes : https://www.publicationsduquebec.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/Fichiers_client/lois_et_reglements/LoisAnnuelles/fr/2019/2019C11F.PDF

¹⁴⁴ As expressed in the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms (Chapter C-12)

These legislative changes grant the MIFI comprehensive authority to oversee and coordinate public policies and activities related to the promotion, prospecting, and recruitment of foreign workers, including the management of initiatives funded by public resources.

The organisation of recruitment missions

This wide range of services requires a significant commitment on the part of the public authorities, both in terms of human and financial resources. Two divisions within MIFI work together under a single directorate to develop and operate the Journées Québec international recruitment support services. The first division oversees MIFI's international activities, which include identifying target countries with pools of skilled workers, promoting and attracting skilled workers and establishing partnerships with relevant countries and organisations. This division consists of 50 people, 30 of whom work abroad in various Quebec delegations and offices. The second section is responsible for liaising with Quebec employers and managing the operational aspects of recruitment missions. This team of 20 people focuses on providing customised support services to employers involved in international recruitment, offering guidance and assistance throughout the recruitment process. In total, 70 MIFI staff are dedicated to delivering the full range of international recruitment services. Both departments operate under directorate which is responsible for coordinating all public and semi-public initiatives aimed at attracting and recruiting talent. This coordination is carried out through a consultative committee chaired by MIFI, which brings together its three non-governmental partners and other government partners, the Ministries of Employment, Health and Education, as well as representatives of the professional associations involved in these services. The committee meets annually to validate the annual programming of the Journées Québec recruitment missions, which are organised on the basis of the priority sectors identified by the government (through the Ministry of Labour and the PES) and the target countries. Once approved by the Table, the annual programme is submitted to the Ministry for final validation.

These recruitment missions are organised multiple times each year. Missions are scheduled following a thorough assessment of Quebec companies' labour needs, identifying priority sectors and target countries for recruitment efforts. The calendar is published on the official websites of the government and its partners, indicating dates, target countries, and sectors involved in each mission.

The annual recruitment programme is actively promoted to employers across the province, with efforts to "sell" the service by explaining the extensive support provided and encouraging participation. Employers are required to pay a fee, set annually along with the program's schedule. The missions are designated by country, such as Journées Québec - Brésil, Journées Québec - France, or Journées Québec - Maroc, allowing employers to select the country and mission that best suits their recruitment needs and preferences.

Once registered for a mission, employers' job offers are evaluated by MIFI teams to ensure they meet labour and immigration regulations. Job descriptions must align with the standards for the profession and wages offered must be consistent with those paid to Canadian workers or permanent residents.

Each recruitment mission is accompanied by a targeted promotional plan led by MIFI and its local partners abroad, often beginning months in advance. This proactive promotion ensures that potential candidates are well-informed about the upcoming events and can prepare accordingly. This targeted promotion is coordinated and done by the MIFI teams abroad, who develop a tailored promotional plan for each recruitment mission, taking into account the sectors targeted in the mission and the specific needs of participating employers regarding professional profiles. Promotional activities include in-person presentations organised in collaboration with local partners¹⁴⁵, as well as webinars, online promotional campaigns, advertisements in specialised magazines, and participation in job fairs and professional

¹⁴⁵ For example, alumni associations, sectoral professional organisations, technical and higher education institutions, local public authorities (employment agencies), Alliances françaises, etc.

networking events. Typically, in-person presentations will attract in average between 50 to 150 attendees, while webinars, due to their logistical advantages, can engage between 200 and 400 participants, and sometimes even more, depending on the specific country or region related to the mission. The promotional phase of a Journées Québec mission typically lasts between 4 and 6 weeks leading up to the job interviews, which usually take place over a weekend (2 to 3 days). The objective is to reach a targeted audience that matches the job offers, ensuring that the needs of employers are met efficiently while minimising irrelevant applications. To maintain and increase the province's visibility abroad, MIFI teams actively promote Québec as a prime destination for work and immigration. This effort continues outside of recruitment missions through online and in-person information sessions that provide insights into immigration programs, in-demand occupations, required skills and the Journées Québec concept. In addition, teams participate in relevant events such as job fairs and networking opportunities to ensure that Québec remains visible and attractive to potential candidates¹⁴⁶.

Various channels are used for promotion, including social media, recruitment websites, Public Employment Services (PES), professional associations, and educational institutions.

Interested candidates are invited to submit their applications through a dedicated online platform, which is typically opened several weeks before the event. The platform's automated functions, along with the efforts of national employment agencies in the partner countries, facilitate the pre-selection of candidates (see Bilateral agreements limited to the logistical organisation of operations). The pre-screened applications are then presented to the participating employers, who make the final selection for interviews. These interviews can be conducted online or in person, depending on the logistics of the mission.

Beyond the interview process, MIFI organises information sessions on life in Quebec and the immigration process, helping candidates understand what to expect in terms of professional and social integration, as well as the procedural steps required to obtain all the necessary authorisations to immigrate to Quebec for work. These sessions will take place in person during the Journées Québec mission, but also before and after the mission (online and in person). This support is crucial for preparing candidates for their transition to Quebec. Employers can finalise employment contracts with successful candidates immediately after the interviews, initiating the necessary immigration procedures.

As with immigration processing in other countries, successful candidates may have to wait several months or more before receiving work and residence permits allowing them to travel to Quebec and start work. This waiting period is used to prepare for post-arrival integration. Once the employment contract is signed and the initial approval for a temporary work permit is received from the Quebec government, the worker is granted access to a personalised online support service offered by MIFI. This service, which includes resources for settlement, integration, and French language learning, is provided free of charge and allows workers to prepare for their arrival in Quebec, making important connections and setting the stage for a smoother transition. Upon arrival in Quebec, candidates continue to receive support to help them integrate into their new work and living environments. Support services and integration programs are available to assist newcomers in settling into Quebec, ensuring they are well-equipped to thrive both professionally and socially in their new home.

Financial structure of the service and human resources

The Journées Québec recruitment service is supported by both public and private funding. This is necessary for its long-term viability and sustainability. Public funds primarily cover the Ministry's operational costs, which include the human resources required both in Quebec and abroad to organise and manage the service. These funds also support promotional activities in target countries and subsidies provided to

¹⁴⁶ In some instances, particularly in Latin American countries where Quebec has been present and active since 2018, it has been observed that prospective candidates are investing by themselves in French language courses and skills training sought by Quebec employers with the aim of participating in the Journées Québec and being recruited there.

the three non-governmental partners involved in the initiative. The fees paid by participating companies cover logistical expenses associated with recruitment missions, including venue rentals for interviews, transportation (such as airfare), accommodation, and living expenses. Costs related to MIFI staff are excluded from these fees and are covered directly by MIFI. The rates charged to companies are intentionally kept competitive with those of private recruitment agencies. For instance, the cost for a company to participate in an in-person Journées Québec mission ranges from CAD 4 500 to 7 500 (EUR 2 900 to 4 800), depending on the destination country, with no cap on the number of workers that can be recruited. In contrast, recruiting a single worker through a private firm in Quebec can cost between CAD 7 000 and 15 000, with fees sometimes reaching up to 20 000 per worker.

MIFI's international network plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of these recruitment efforts. It currently includes immigration services divisions in France, Mexico, and Morocco, as well as offices in Brazil, Colombia, and Senegal, and an immigration services team in the United States. This network, supported by a team based in Montreal, covers over 40 priority countries, allowing Quebec to tap into a diverse and extensive talent pool.

The integration of public and private funding not only makes this service accessible to a broader range of companies, particularly SMEs, but also ensures that the recruitment missions are both cost-effective and efficient, and assisting Quebec to remain competitive in the global labour market.

Unified brand identity

The introduction of the international recruitment support initiative was strategically accompanied by the creation and deployment of a unified brand identity under the government banner, named Journées Québec. This brand is designed to be flexible and adaptable, allowing it to be customised for different countries and professional sectors.

Alongside this branding effort, additional resources enhance outreach and engagement. A comprehensive promotional and informational website has been established to provide detailed information about immigration and life in Quebec. This website serves as a central hub for potential candidates, offering insights into living and working in the province. Additionally, a [specialised online platform](#) has been created to manage and promote recruitment missions and job offers. Candidates and employers participating in Journées Québec must create their profiles on the platform. Once the profile has been created, candidates can apply for jobs in the country where the recruitment mission is taking place, provided they are legally resident in the country or countries targeted by the mission. All communication between candidates, employers and the MIFI during recruitment missions takes place exclusively through this platform. This platform facilitates the management of applications, as it has automatic functions that allow an initial filtering, which are then pre-selected by the MIFI and the PES in the countries of origin..

To further boost Quebec's visibility, the initiative also leverages social media to reach a broader audience, maintaining an active presence on various networks to engage with potential recruits and disseminate information. In addition, teams stationed abroad participate in significant international events and organise regular promotional and informational activities. These efforts are designed to raise awareness of Quebec's opportunities and attract skilled workers from around the globe.

How Quebec identifies skilled talent in targeted countries

A three-stage identification process is used to identify potential skill pools. The first is a theoretical analysis model that generates an initial list of countries with potential pools of skilled workers that meet employers' needs but also meet the province's immigration requirements. The model covers all countries in the world and uses macroeconomic parameters such as the Human Development Index (HDI), the GINI index, GDP per capita, sectoral GDP, educational attainment and the unemployment rate, which it relates to the economic sectors and occupations in short supply in Quebec and to aspects that favour the integration of

immigrants, such as French language skills and the presence of a diaspora in Quebec. The model also takes into account data on work permits, in particular the number of permits issued by nationality or country of origin over a given period, which identifies recruitment trends among employers. The operationalisation of this model generates an initial list of countries on which to base the Ministry's actions abroad.

The list is then validated by the Ministry's teams abroad, who play a key role in identifying suitable talent pools, professional networks in targeted sectors and potential strategic partners in the countries selected in the first phase. They also confirm the willingness and availability of local authorities - such as ministries and public employment services - to collaborate with Quebec in providing these international recruitment or mobility services.

The third and final stage consists of establishing partnerships with origin-country authorities to oversee and monitor this mobility of workers to Quebec. In some cases, the scope of the partnership may extend to areas of cooperation of interest to the authorities of the countries of origin, which would enable them to limit the impact of labour shortages in key sectors of their economies that could be caused by the departure of their talent.

Bilateral partnerships and the role of PES

The PES operates at two levels. At the operational level, it identifies potential candidates and assists in the promotion and coordination of recruitment missions. At the strategic level, the PES serves as the first and main point of contact in the development of bilateral labour mobility agreements. These agreements, particularly between Quebec and other countries or regions of interest, are often prioritised. Although not always mandatory, some authorities in countries of origin require a formal cooperation agreement in order to proceed. If not mandatory, it is nevertheless preferable to have such agreements, at least to formalise cooperation and provide a framework for sharing responsibilities in the organisation of missions. This is particularly true for several French-speaking African¹⁴⁷ and Latin American countries where Quebec actively seeks to attract and recruit skilled workers. Generally, these agreements are signed between MIFI, with Quebec's Ministry of International Relations and La Francophonie, and the PES and the Ministry of Labour in the country of origin. The process of negotiating such agreements can take several months or even years, depending on its complexity and content. However, in practice, while awaiting the finalisation of an agreement, the authorities in the countries of origin often express their preliminary consent and actively participate in organising recruitment missions.

Bilateral agreements limited to the logistical organisation of operations

In certain cases, such as with "France Travail" (formerly Pôle emploi) in France or Actiris in the Brussels-Capital Region of Belgium, these agreements are mainly practical. They focus on dividing responsibilities for organising recruitment missions to facilitate the alignment of skilled candidates residing in these countries with Quebec employers. Under these agreements¹⁴⁸, MIFI receives and validates job offers¹⁴⁹, manages the digital platform supporting the recruitment process, and assists both employers and recruited candidates with their immigration procedures, providing relevant information and directing them to appropriate resources. MIFI also plays a key role in supporting recruited workers by helping them settle and integrate into Quebec.

Meanwhile, the PES in the country of origin supports the promotion and dissemination of Quebec employers' job offers to target audiences and facilitates networking with relevant outreach partners, such

¹⁴⁷ Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Morocco, Senegal and Tunisia, among others.

¹⁴⁸ Example of an agreement between the MIFI (formerly the Ministry of Immigration and Cultural Communities) and France Travail (formerly Pôle Emploi): file:///C:/Users/tessa_h/OneDrive%20-%20OECD/Bureau/2010-01.pdf

¹⁴⁹ MIFI agents check that job offers comply with Quebec labour law in terms of the qualifications required, the job description, the salary offered and the general working conditions (number of hours per week, holidays, etc.).

as professional associations in specific sectors like IT, engineering, nursing, etc. These partners may also include universities, prestigious schools, or higher education institutions in specific fields (engineering, hospitality, catering, etc.) as well as vocational and technical education establishments. This diversification of partners in the countries or regions of origin is important because, in general, the type of workers to whom the PES has access and whom it serves is primarily composed of low- to mid-skilled workers, typically with secondary, vocational, technical, or advanced technical education. Most of highly qualified workers, such as engineers and IT professionals with university-level education, typically do not use PES channels for their job searches. Instead, they rely on other avenues like LinkedIn or specialised job search platforms. As a result, PES generally has limited access to these highly skilled profiles.

The PES also plays a key role in facilitating coordination with other public bodies that are essential in the recruitment process, such as the administrations responsible for accrediting educational programs. This step is crucial for recognising qualifications in Quebec, particularly in regulated professions like engineering. In this context, the recognition of qualifications by Quebec's professional orders relies on a thorough assessment of the educational programs completed in the countries of origin, which are compared to the standards and requirements of equivalent programs offered in Quebec. To conduct this evaluation, Quebec's professional orders must access precise information, such as detailed descriptions of the courses and training modules completed abroad, as well as the accreditation methodology used by the accrediting bodies in the countries of origin. Access to this information allows the evaluation of whether the training completed abroad meets the standards required to practice in Quebec. This is where collaboration between Quebec's institutions and foreign entities becomes crucial. It facilitates the flow of information, increases transparency regarding curricula, and accelerates the qualification recognition process. This partnership goes beyond simply validating diplomas. In some cases, it fosters dialogue between the parties to potentially harmonise educational systems, understand differences in training, and better align the skills of foreign workers with the expectations of Quebec's labour market. Thus, collaboration between qualification recognition bodies and the administrations of the countries of origin is crucial to support this evaluation and ultimately facilitate the qualification recognition process. Additionally, the PES supports candidate pre-selection, which simplifies the initial screening of applications for employers to review for the final selection. It also assists in organising the logistics of recruitment missions, providing its infrastructure as needed for interviews and technical tests, or helping find suitable facilities for mission activities.

Specifically, regarding the PES's contribution to promotion, it operates on two levels: promotional and informational, and targeting potential candidates. On the promotional level, the PES relays MIFI's web promotional campaigns using the brand image and promotional messages of Journées Québec, through its social media and web platforms, and participates in MIFI's information and promotion activities abroad, either in person or online, aimed at prospective workers. The PES also informs MIFI teams abroad of any events or platforms that may be of interest for promoting Quebec and its recruitment missions. On the targeting level, the PES uses its job seeker database to disseminate job offers in a targeted manner, based on the professions sought by employers. This dissemination is typically done via email.

In terms of pre-selecting candidates, the PES's support and expertise is particularly useful. For instance, a recruitment mission in Morocco or Tunisia involving around 60 companies with a total of 600 to 700 positions to fill could generate between 200 000 and 250 000 applications, or roughly 55 000 to 60 000 unique candidates. Processing such a large number of applications requires substantial human resources. An initial screening is automatically performed by MIFI's Journées Québec platform¹⁵⁰, which filters out incomplete applications and those that do not meet specific job requirements, such as the minimum years

¹⁵⁰ To apply for a job, potential employees must create a candidate account on the Journées Québec platform, in which they enter their occupation (the nomenclature used is that of the federal government, which is the basis for all labour migration programmes: <https://www.canada.ca/fr/immigration-refugies-citoyennete/services/immigrer-canada/entree-express/admissibilite/trouver-classification-nationale-professions.html>), their level of education and diploma, their level of language and any other relevant information that can shed light on their professional profile.

of experience or relevant professional qualifications. The second phase of pre-selection is conducted by PES and MIFI agents, and in some cases, when there's a high volume of application to assess, part of the process is outsourced to a private firm. At this stage, the PES's expertise is important, as its agents have knowledge of local diplomas and professional profiles and can better match candidates to job offers.

Cooperation agreement that goes beyond logistical aspects

In some cases, the authorities of the countries of origin seek agreements that go beyond the technical and logistical aspects of foreign worker mobility. Rather than limiting cooperation to recruitment processes, these authorities aim for broader partnerships that include cooperation in areas other than migration. This is especially evident in French-speaking African and Latin American countries, where governments, concerned about the emigration of skilled workers, strive for a more balanced approach. These workers, often trained through public investments in education, are also needed by their local labour markets. The authorities in these countries therefore emphasise a 'win-win' approach to such partnerships, ensuring that both sides benefit. Therefore, the ministries responsible for public employment services and foreign affairs require that these partnerships include components related to the transfer of training expertise, covering different levels of education - vocational, technical and higher education¹⁵¹. In practice, this involves the exchange of training programmes in specific fields, particularly those in which Quebec is looking for skilled workers. This transfer of knowledge goes beyond the simple export of theoretical content; it can also aim to integrate these programmes into the academic systems of the partner countries, thus contributing to the updating of their educational offer. It also involves the sharing of curricula, training methods and assessment techniques that have proved effective, as well as the training of trainers.

The interest of the countries of origin in such partnerships is multifaceted. On the one hand, it involves training a local workforce that meets international standards, facilitating better integration of their graduates into the global labour market, including Quebec. On the other hand, updating educational programs to meet Quebec's standards or those of other economically advanced regions would enhance the attractiveness of the local education system and better respond to the evolving industrial and economic needs of the country of origin. By aligning curricula with Quebec's standards, partner countries hope to better retain their talent, mitigating the potential exodus of skilled workers while strengthening their local capacities. These collaborations can also support training teachers and educators in key sectors. This partnership model not only helps Quebec meet its demand for skilled labour but also contributes to the sustainable development of the countries of origin, creating a shared development framework that enhances workers' skills.

Agreements that follow this deep partnership logic typically take longer to finalise than purely technical and logistical agreements focused on recruitment organisation and worker support. In the case of Quebec, these agreements often involve the intervention of other ministries in addition to Immigration, such as the Ministry of Higher Education, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of International Relations, and may even include direct participation from educational institutions or professional orders that govern regulated professions like engineering and nursing. This type of partnership requires more complex inter-institutional coordination, as it aims not only to address the immediate needs of the labour market but also to establish sustainable cooperation. The time required to conclude a formal partnership agreement can indeed pose challenges for the operationalisation of recruitment. Negotiation processes for agreements, especially when involving multiple ministries or government agencies, tend to be lengthy and complex. Meanwhile, the needs of businesses, particularly in sectors experiencing labour shortages, are often urgent and require short-term solutions. This discrepancy in timing between the immediate demands of the labour market and the timelines dictated by the bilateral agreement process can undermine the effectiveness of recruitment missions.

¹⁵¹ In some cases, they also request financial support for acquiring equipment or infrastructure.

To overcome this obstacle, Quebec and the authorities of the countries of origin have adopted a pragmatic approach. During the prospecting phase, authorities from countries such as those in Francophone Africa or Latin America are approached to obtain a preliminary agreement for collaboration. This initial consent allows for the organisation of recruitment missions under an informal agreement. In other words, even without a formal agreement, local authorities provisionally cooperate with Quebec, thereby facilitating recruitment operations. This type of collaboration is built on trust and mutual commitment while waiting for the more complex and technical aspects of the agreement to be finalised. However, this informal approach may have limitations. The absence of a formal framework can restrict the scope of missions and the depth of collaborations. For instance, certain local resources or infrastructures may not be fully mobilised without a formal agreement in place.

5.1.5. Denmark

In Denmark, Copenhagen Capacity, the regional economic development agency, plays a central role in attracting and recruiting skilled international talent. Beyond its mission to draw international companies and investors to Denmark and the Greater Copenhagen Region—which also encompasses parts of neighbouring Sweden—the agency is actively involved in attracting highly qualified professionals. Its operations are supported by a mix of public and private funding, with regional and municipal governments contributing to its public financing. Private funding comes from local businesses and industry associations that benefit from and support the agency's initiatives. Legally, Copenhagen Capacity operates as a non-profit organisation governed by a board that includes representatives from both the public and private sectors. The agency plays a crucial role in addressing Denmark's labour shortages, particularly in sectors with high demand for specialised skills, such as IT, engineering, life sciences, and other innovative industries.

In 2017, the Danish government in collaboration with Copenhagen Capacity developed the “Talent to Denmark” programme as part of the national strategy to attract and retain skilled international professionals, and to support Danish employer in their effort to address their challenges in filling their job vacancies. Copenhagen Capacity was mandated to implement and to manage this program, since it had the expertise needed in attraction, recruitment and integration of qualified individuals into the Danish labour market. “Talent to Denmark” is designed to attract skilled professionals from third countries who possess the expertise that Danish companies need. The agency works closely with Danish businesses, educational institutions, and local municipalities to create a “Talent to Denmark” ecosystem that is not only attractive to foreign talent but also conducive to their long-term integration and retention.

The initiative includes a variety of targeted activities aimed at promoting Denmark as a top career destination. This involves international marketing campaigns, participation in global job fairs, and partnerships with foreign universities and professional networks. One of the key features of “Talent to Denmark” is its focus on matching the needs of Danish employers with the right international talent. The active role in facilitating connections between Danish companies and potential employees abroad includes providing support for recruitment processes, helping companies navigate the complexities of hiring from overseas, and ensuring that candidates have the necessary information about moving to and living in Denmark.

On the demand side, Copenhagen Capacity employs a data-driven approach to identify and understand the precise needs of Danish employers. It collaborates with companies across the country to gather detailed information about their workforce requirements. This includes the types of skills that are in high demand, the qualifications and experience levels needed, and the specific roles that are difficult to fill with domestic talent alone.

Once these needs are clearly identified, one of the primary methods to connect Danish employers with suitable international candidates is through targeted recruitment campaigns. Copenhagen Capacity organises and participates in international job fairs and recruitment events, often in collaboration with local

embassies, consulates, and international partners abroad. These events are designed to showcase Denmark as an attractive career destination and to directly engage with potential candidates who have the skills that Danish employers are seeking.

The initiative also makes extensive use of digital platforms to broaden its reach. For example, Copenhagen Capacity operates specialised online portals where Danish companies can post job openings that are specifically targeted at international candidates. These portals offer detailed information about the roles, the companies, and the benefits of working in Denmark. Additionally, these platforms often feature content tailored to different professional sectors, for example [engineering or IT](#), making it easier for candidates to find opportunities that match their expertise.

In addition to job postings, "Talent to Denmark" offers personalised matchmaking services. Copenhagen Capacity collaborates with employers and prospective qualified workers to streamline the recruitment process. For businesses, this includes help with crafting job descriptions that attract an international talent pool, advice on offering competitive salary packages, and support with navigating the migration-related aspects of recruitment. For candidates, it offers support in understanding the Danish labour market, the types of opportunities available, and how their skills can be applied within the Danish context. Moreover, the service actively supports the recruitment process by pre-screening candidates. Copenhagen Capacity collaborates with recruitment agencies, educational institutions, and other partners to assess the qualifications and suitability of international candidates before they are introduced to potential employers. This pre-screening process ensures that only qualified candidates who meet the specific requirements of Danish employers are put forward, thereby increasing the efficiency of the recruitment process and reducing the time and resources needed for companies to find the right talent.

5.1.6. Finland

Finland's Talent Boost, first developed in 2017, is one of the most well-developed systems of active talent attraction initiatives in Europe. Efforts are organised at national, regional and municipal levels. At the national level, the Finnish government's comprehensive strategy to address the country's skilled labour shortage and enhance its international competitiveness through work-based and education-based immigration. Talent Boost (TB) is designed to increase Finland's attractiveness to international talent, facilitate the recruitment of international talent by Finnish companies, and improve retention strategies.

An intersectoral approach

TB is cross-sector, in line with the Finnish model of wide participation and a high degree of cooperation from all stakeholders. The Talent Boost programme¹⁵² is coordinated, and monitored by a dedicated steering group, chaired alternately by the Permanent Secretaries of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment and the Ministry of Education and Culture. The steering group comprises representatives from key ministries and government agencies involved in work-based and education-based immigration, as well as representatives from cities, municipalities, and higher education institutions. The steering group's meetings are thematically prepared by a preparatory network, which operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment and the Ministry of Education and Culture. The work of the Preparatory Network underlines the cross-sectoral nature of the Talent Boost programme, which requires collaboration across different sectors and levels of government.

Business Finland, the Finnish government organisation for innovation funding and trade, travel and investment promotion, has the mandate in the legislation to promote immigration of skilled workers to

¹⁵² [Talent Boost 2023–2027: Programme for international recruitment and work-based and education-based immigration](#)

Finland¹⁵³. Most of the staff working on Talent Boost are with Business Finland, along with a number of dedicated staff from the public employment service.

Communication occurs through various events attended by representatives of government agencies and stakeholders. A monthly Talent Boost Newsroom, a biannual Talent Boost Network Day, and an annual Talent Boost Summit provide opportunities for stakeholders to share updates, discuss challenges, and explore new opportunities for collaboration. Immigrants are included in these discussions, to integrate their perspectives and experiences in programme implementation. The communications plan aims to keep all stakeholders well-informed about the programme's objectives, progress, and outcomes and to build trust and foster collaboration among the stakeholders involved in the Talent Boost programme.

The programme also includes specific components and separate sub-steering groups appointed – which report to the main group. One group oversees the implementation of residence permit procedures and the development of follow-up monitoring. Another addresses labour exploitation. Additionally, a working group has been appointed to develop the target-country model of international partnerships. Finland's international recruitment efforts will focus on specific countries and sectors, particularly in sectors where Finland faces significant shortages, and which are developed sources of labour. As of 2024, four priority countries have been identified (India, the Philippines, Brazil, and Vietnam). Finland approaches the relevant authorities in these countries to assess their willingness to cooperate in a labour recruitment programme for Finland and, if necessary, to negotiate the terms of the partnership. Partnerships are meant to ensure smooth and ethical recruitment processes, minimising risks related to abuse, illegal immigration, and exploitation. TB has country agents in each of the focus countries, whose task is to represent Finland at job fairs. Country agents do not conduct recruitment on behalf of employers, but rather identify reliable recruitment intermediaries who are willing to sign a commitment not to take fees from workers.

To ensure that government support measures are effective and of high quality, providing a solid operating basis for other authorities and private actors, the Talent Boost network includes public and private stakeholders such as large cities, higher education institutions, and private recruitment actors.

An online platform to centralise the programme's services

To support these efforts in attracting and recruiting talent, the programme offers a range of advisory and support services through the "Work in Finland" online platform. These services are tailored to meet the needs of Finnish employers and include assistance with the recruitment process, legal advice, and guidance on best practices for integrating foreign workers into the workplace.

The "Work in Finland" platform is specifically designed to assist Finnish companies, particularly SMEs, in overcoming the challenges of international recruitment. Several features and services address the specific barriers faced by SMEs when trying to attract talent from abroad: limited resources, lack of specialised human resources expertise, and the absence of established global recruitment networks that larger corporations typically possess. SMEs often lack the budget and reach to engage in extensive international advertising or participate in global job fairs, so they can **advertise job openings** to a global audience on the centralised, easily accessible online hub. By listing their vacancies on a platform that is specifically designed to attract international talent to Finland, SMEs gain visibility without the need for costly marketing campaigns. Moreover, the platform simplifies the recruitment process by offering **templates and guidelines for crafting job postings** that are tailored to international candidates. This includes advice on how to present roles in a way that appeals to foreign workers, who may have different expectations or qualifications compared to domestic applicants. For SMEs, which may not have dedicated HR departments or the expertise to navigate these nuances, this support makes their job offers more attractive and

¹⁵³ Act on Business Finland, the Finnish Funding Agency for Innovation, and Business Finland, a limited liability company, 11§: 7) : [Act on Business Finland, the Finnish Funding Agency for Innovation... 1146/2017 - Up-to-date legislation - FINLEX ®](#)

accessible to international candidates. The platform offers **detailed guidance on the legal requirements** for hiring foreign workers, including information on visas, work permits, and other necessary documentation.

In addition to these resources, the platform often collaborates with other initiatives under the Talent Boost Programme, such as organising **virtual and physical recruitment events** where Finnish employers can directly engage with potential candidates abroad. These events are designed to match employers with pre-screened, highly qualified candidates, streamlining the initial stages of recruitment. For SMEs, which may not have the capacity to travel abroad or participate in multiple international job fairs, these events offer a cost-effective way to access a global talent pool. Furthermore, the platform supports SMEs by offering networking opportunities and fostering **connections with other Finnish businesses that have successfully recruited internationally**.

6 Reception and Integration of talent and their families

Flemish employers play an important role in the settlement and integration of foreign workers and their families and find themselves responsible for assisting with a variety of procedures such as finding accommodation, residence formalities or opening bank accounts. Institutional support provided by organisations mandated to facilitate the settlement and integration of foreign workers provide a structured and independent framework, guiding workers in their access to housing, their administrative procedures and their social and professional integration, without making them dependent on their employer. This approach not only strengthens workers' rights and security, but also helps to retain them, as they work in an environment where they can develop their autonomy and build their network. For employers, this institutional support reduces their burden and optimises the integration process, while for the region, it increases the attractiveness of the area by ensuring a solid and inclusive reception infrastructure for international talent.

6.1.1. Quebec/Canada

The Ministry of Immigration, Francisation, and Integration (MIFI) in Quebec has developed a comprehensive regional network providing a free of charge integration and “francisation” support services for immigrants of all categories, including temporary foreign workers and international students. This network includes 89 Immigration Assistance Officers (AAI), 72 regional antennas, and 10 regional directions, ensuring that services are accessible across all regions of Quebec. One of the key programs offered by MIFI is *Accompagnement Québec (AQ)*, which provides personalised support service to immigrants. This program includes a continuum of services such as pre-departure assistance, installation support, free language training in French, guidance on recognition of qualifications, employment information, and immigration procedures. The aim is to facilitate the first steps in the settling in and the integration process of immigrants during their stay in Quebec, from the moment immigrants decide to move to Quebec until they are fully settled and participating in the community. Participation to this service is optional and not mandatory.

Accompagnement Québec is divided into six main domains: Settlement (pre-departure services), Community life, language training, recognition of qualifications, employment, and immigration procedures. Pre-departure services are a key component of the program, providing essential information and guidance to immigrants before they arrive in Quebec. These services prepare immigrants for their new life by informing them about necessary steps they can take while still in their country of origin. For instance, immigrants receive guidance on finding housing, which can be a complex and stressful process, enrolling their children in school, and opening a bank account to manage finances and access various services in Quebec. This pre-departure support service is closely linked to the recruitment mission known as *Journées Québec*. During these missions, potential immigrants are not only interviewed by Quebec employers but, if hired, are also introduced to the comprehensive support system offered by AQ. Workers hired through *Journées Québec* immediately start benefiting from the AQ program. They are linked to a dedicated officer (AAI) who helps them develop a personalised integration plan. This plan outlines all the steps they need to take from their country of origin and upon their arrival in Quebec, ensuring a smooth transition and

successful integration into their new environment. For example, eligible immigrants can use pre-departure services to find housing near their new workplace, enrol their children in nearby schools, and set up necessary financial arrangements like opening a bank account even before they arrive. The personalised integration plan also includes tailored guidance on navigating Quebec's healthcare system, understanding cultural norms, and learning French through government-sponsored courses. Furthermore, the recognition of qualifications domain addresses the challenges immigrants might face in having their professional credentials recognised, helping them validate their qualifications through platforms like Qualifications Québec and the *Programme d'aide à la reconnaissance des compétences* (PARC)¹⁵⁴.

In addition, as part of the AQ services, the MIFIs provide financial support under the *Programme d'accompagnement et de soutien à l'intégration* (PASI) to dedicated non-profit organisation partners mandated to support the integration of newcomers and migrants, including temporary foreign workers with work permits of 12 months or more. PASI supports integration in areas such as settlement, community life and immigration procedures. The programme includes the *Objectif Intégration*, a 24-hour training session in French that covers democratic values, Quebec values, cultural codes in the workplace and the legal framework in the workplace. Participants who complete the training receive a financial allowance.

6.1.2. Italy: the example of Emilia-Romagna Region

In Italy, as in most OECD countries, admission and residence of foreigners are competence of the national authorities. Sub-national bodies have a limited role. Nonetheless, they can play an active role in supporting attraction and retention. Since 2019, the Emilia-Romagna region in Italy has run "it-ER", a programme aimed at attracting and retaining highly qualified talents, particularly international professionals, students, and researchers. This initiative, run by ART-ER, a regional organisation dedicated to fostering innovation and economic growth, is part of a broader strategy to enhance the region's competitiveness and innovation capacity by leveraging a multi-stakeholder approach that involves various local actors, industry partners, educational institutions, and local and regional government agencies. Prior to it-ER, there was no concerted promotion of the region as a destination for international talent. While the programme was originally a pilot, in 2023¹⁵⁵, the region passed legislation on attracting talent and designated it-ER as the operative program for talent attraction.

ART-ER coordinates and supports initiatives under the it-ER program. It organises stakeholder consultations and engagement activities, and facilitates collaboration between local actors, industry partners, and educational institutions, to respond to needs of both talents and employers. Regular consultations and feedback sessions are held to understand the evolving needs of the workforce and employers and develop relevant and effective programs and initiatives. ART-ER also works closely with municipalities and other governing bodies to align regional policies and regulations with the goals of attracting and retaining international talents. This includes advocating for policy changes in local regulations that make the region more welcoming to foreign workers. ART-ER also organises events and workshops that provide networking opportunities for talents and employers. These events are designed to showcase the region's strengths. ART-ER also supports educational institutions in developing programs and curricula that are aligned with the needs of the local industry, ensuring that graduates have the skills required by employers in the region.

Under Italy's first regional talent attraction law, Emilia-Romagna Regional Law 2/2023, entitled "Attraction, valorisation and promotion of highly specialised talent in Emilia-Romagna", the regional body was given

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.quebec.ca/en/immigration/work-quebec/recognition-skills-acquired-abroad/financial-assistance>

¹⁵⁵ In accordance with the Regional Law of 14 February 2023, n.2, it-ER programme became part of a framework of initiatives carried out directly by local actors, in which ART-ER plays a supporting and coordinating role. ART-ER Attractiveness Research Territory is the Emilia-Romagna Joint Stock Consortium founded with the mission to promote the sustainable growth of the region through the development of innovation and knowledge, attractiveness and internationalisation of the territory.

the mandate to attract, retain and support the return of highly specialised talent with expertise in key areas targeted by the region's smart specialisation strategy. "Highly specialised talent" is defined in the law as "those with significant experience or specialised training in education, research and innovation". The law provides a basis for ART-ER to support the development of skills in areas essential to the region's economic and innovation goals. Key articles of the law define various areas of action, including cooperation agreements (Art. 4), support for regional internationalisation (Art. 5), joint initiatives with universities and research centres (Art. 6), and the development of a talent retention manifesto for the cultural and economic sectors (Art. 7). In addition, the law mandates ART-ER to facilitate talent attraction and business creation (Art. 8), to provide welfare and incentives to attract specialised talent (Art. 9), and to carry out promotional and information activities (Art. 10). The it-ER programme operationalises the legislative objectives.

The it-ER program adopts a Talent Attraction Management (TAM) approach, which focuses on providing a welcoming and supportive environment for international talents. "International talents" includes many categories: foreign tertiary education students, scientists and researchers, and knowledge workers who are living outside of Italy or in the Emilia-Romagna region, or who were born or studied in Emilia-Romagna and now are living abroad, or returnees. TAM highlights the region's strengths, such as its innovation ecosystem, high quality of life, and strong connections with industry and research centres, to attract highly skilled individuals who can contribute to the region's economic and social development.

To achieve these goals, ART-ER has deployed a strategy structured around four key dimensions of mobility: moving, settling, living and engaging (get involved). Each dimension targets the three main categories of international talent. A [one-stop-shop](#) was created where those talents can access a wide range of services and information related to housing, taxation, language training, and other essential aspects of relocation and integration.

- "Moving to" provides guidance and information on key issues such as the recognition of foreign qualifications, visa procedures, tax incentives and other opportunities related to the it-ER programme. It also addresses practical issues such as moving with family or pets, finding housing, securing jobs or internships, and finding international schools for children.
- "Getting Started" provides information on formal procedures required to live in Italy, such as setting up internet and mobile phone services, opening bank accounts and learning Italian.
- "Living in" provides guidance on life in Emilia-Romagna, covering social and health services for foreigners, urban mobility, social life and networking opportunities, as well as cultural events and support for the LGBTQIA+ community, for instance.
- "Get involved" encourages participation in community initiatives. It includes the promotion of the it-ER Ambassador Programme, a network of international students, graduates, researchers and knowledge workers representing Emilia-Romagna and who want to connect with other talents and key players in the region. In addition, the it-ER Stories section features inspiring stories of young people who have embarked on international journeys, highlighting their high skills and ties to Emilia-Romagna through podcasts and videos.

Moreover, it-ER conducts talent oriented place-branding, promoting Emilia-Romagna based on a sectorial or profession-based approach aimed at attracting and relocating qualified workers from abroad. This includes specific promotional campaigns. For instance, the first edition in 2021 targeted international software developers, while the second edition in 2023 focused on international data scientists. These targeted efforts are designed to help address specific skills gaps in the regional labour market and support the business system in attracting the necessary foreign workers. This place-branding approach is also based on skills demand, drawn from the Skills-Intelligence Emilia-Romagna online platform developed by ART-ER.

6.1.3. Estonia

Work in Estonia is an initiative of the Estonian Business and Innovation Agency, a public body promoting investment and development in Estonia designed to attract and retain talented individuals in Estonia. The program is structured around four key pillars: Reception, Attraction, Adaption/Retention, and Reputation. These pillars collectively ensure that international talent is not only drawn to Estonia but also integrated smoothly into the local environment through individual consultations, events, and a one-stop service centre known as the International House of Estonia.

The approach of Work in Estonia is to focus on the “customer journey”. The program treats foreign talent as customers and Estonia as the service provider. This approach is evident in the user-friendly interfaces and the various services offered, such as consultations for employers, qualified talents, and their families. These consultations are free of charge and can last between 30 to 60 minutes, available both online and offline. The consultations cover a wide range of topics, including migration advice, which has proven to be the most popular. In addition to consultations, the program organises various events aimed at helping newcomers integrate into Estonian society. These events include "Meet & Greet" sessions for first impressions, "Go PROfessional" events focused on professional development, and "Estonian Essentials" sessions that cover must-know topics for living in Estonia. The program also offers a "Re-invent yourself" Spouse Programme, designed to help the spouses of international specialists find their footing in Estonia. Ensuring that spouses are integrated is a significant factor in improving retention.

The International House of Estonia (House) is an all-in-one service centre for foreign workers, providing a range of services from individual consultations to networking events. It is multilingual and offers free services to foreign workers, their families, Estonian returnees, and local employers. As of March 2024, there are nine staff members to manage the whole customer journey, providing extensive support throughout each stage of the journey, from the initial attraction of foreign talent to their reception and full integration into the community. The aim is to create a supportive environment where newcomers can easily access the information and resources they need to settle in Estonia. By March 2024, the centre had conducted 4 138 consultations, achieved a Net Promoter Score (NPS) of 78%, and a Customer Satisfaction (CSAT) score of 4.6. A NPS of 78%¹⁵⁶ indicates that the majority of people who have used the services of International House of Estonia would be very likely to recommend the Centre to others. The CSAT of 4.6 out of 5 measures overall satisfaction with the services received, generally based on direct feedback following each interaction. A score of 4.6 indicates that users are generally very satisfied with the Centre's services and that it has been successful in meeting their expectations and needs. Additionally, the centre has organised 81 events. Once newcomers have settled in Estonia, the centre continues to provide valuable information to make their new life easier. This includes counselling for learning the Estonian language, a downloadable handbook, and various events that cover essential topics such as tax filing and finding a family doctor.

The International House of Estonia is funded by the national government, with government funding used only to cover operating costs and infrastructure. Staff salaries, however, are funded by contributions from various stakeholders invested in the House's mission. The programme has estimated that each euro invested in the program generates 15 euros in direct tax revenue.

¹⁵⁶ The NPS, which ranges from -100 to +100, is a measure of customer loyalty and satisfaction based on responses to the question "How likely are you to recommend our service to others? An NPS of 78% is considered very high and reflects the positive experiences of users.

6.2. Protection of vulnerable workers

6.2.1. One concern in Flanders is that of the risk of exploitation of labour migrants. A solid legal and regulatory framework that guarantees the protection of migrant workers, minimises the risks of exploitation and vulnerability, and provides flexible and rapid mechanisms for escaping precarious situations can ensure respect for the fundamental rights of these workers, but also enhance the attractiveness of Flanders as a labour destination by offering guarantees of protection to foreign workers. The credibility and coherence of an immigration system also depend on its ability to respond proactively and appropriately to the challenges posed by exploitation. This section provides several examples of procedural and regulatory approaches to limiting the exploitation of workers.

6.2.2. Canada

The procedural and regulatory component

From a procedural and regulatory perspective, migrant workers in Canada who hold a work permit tied to a specific employer, i.e. a closed work permit, and who are victims of violence or at risk of violence in the context of their employment, can benefit from a special protection mechanism, the Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers (OWP-V). As provided for in Canadian legislation, these workers are not required to obtain a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA)¹⁵⁷ or a job offer in order to apply for an OWP-V. This permit is intended to provide an exit route for these workers, allowing them to leave their abusive employment and seek new employment with another employer without being penalised by the restrictions of their original permit. The OWP-V is intended to be a transitional measure. Once a worker with a OWP-V finds a new job, both the worker and the new employer must submit a LMIA application and apply for a conventional work permit under the Temporary Foreign Worker Programme (TFWP).

To qualify, workers (and their families, if applicable) must be in Canada and hold a valid work permit. They are also eligible if they have already applied to renew their permit and are in transitional status, which allows them to continue to work legally in Canada. Similarly, migrant workers who have already left abusive employment remain eligible for this open work permit if their employer-specific work permit is still valid or their status is maintained. In addition, a unique feature of this system is that it protects workers even if they have a history of working without authorisation or violating certain conditions of their work permit, as long as there are reasonable grounds to believe that a situation of violence has occurred.

The OWP-V application process is **online**, on the Immigration, Refugee, Citizenship Canada (IRCC)¹⁵⁸ website, and there is no application fee. The onus is on the applicant to provide evidence of the violence they are experiencing or the general situation in which they find themselves, and to demonstrate that they are a victim of violence or at real risk of becoming a victim. Violence in this context is not limited to that perpetrated by the direct employer but may also include other actors in the course of their employment. This protection also extends to workers living in accommodation provided by their employer.

To support their claim and demonstrate their vulnerability, workers must provide a letter of explanation describing the violence they have suffered or the risk they face. A model letter in the form of an [online form](#) is available on the IRCC website for the worker to use. Although it is not mandatory to provide certain documents, a variety of evidence can strengthen their claim. This may include letters or reports from support organisations, affidavits, formal complaints to the authorities, and additional documents such as witness statements or photographs illustrating injuries or abusive working conditions. The standard of proof used in this context, called 'reasonable grounds to believe', requires the officer to have convincing

¹⁵⁷ Similar to a labour market test.

¹⁵⁸ The federal ministry of immigration in Canada.

evidence, although it is less demanding than the stricter balance of probabilities standard. In other words, the officer must assess whether the evidence presented is strong enough to give rise to an objective and reasonable belief about the applicant's circumstances. The officer must therefore examine all the evidence in each case to ensure that it is conclusive and trustworthy. For example, a document from a competent authority stating that an event has occurred may carry considerable weight, whereas an anonymous letter may not.

Processing times vary depending on the volume of applications received. OWP-V applications are processed on a priority basis. Agents are responsible for contacting the applicant **within 5 working days** of receiving the application. Regarding the duration of the OWP-V permit, IRCC estimates that it takes an average of 12 months for migrant workers to find a new job and, if necessary, obtain a new work permit and LMIA. In the case of a positive decision, the duration is at the discretion of the officer, who may consider a period of **up to 12 months**. The period of validity of the open work permit (or the time remaining) must not be adversely affected by the validity of the previous permit. In addition, the processing times for a new LMIA and a new work permit must be taken into account when determining the duration of the permit, as extensions are only possible in very specific circumstances.

Family members of migrant workers present in Canada may also benefit from an open work permit, provided that the principal applicant holds a permit under this programme. These family members will receive their work permit for the same duration as the principal applicant or until their passport expires, whichever comes first. They benefit from the same fee waivers as the principal applicant. Dependent children of working age may also obtain an open work permit under the same conditions. After a worker is approved for an OWP-V, an inspection by EDSC is conducted to verify the employer's compliance with the program conditions.

In addition, the decision-making process for granting an OWP-V consists of two distinct stages. First, the IRCC officer must validate the facts and evidence presented by the migrant worker by examining them on the balance of probabilities. The second step is to assess all the circumstances and evidence to determine whether there are reasonable grounds to believe that the migrant worker is, or is likely to be, a victim of violence. The table below (see Table 6.1) outlines the level of persuasion required by the officer to make a decision based on the standard of proof required to establish an element of proof.

Table 6.1. Level of persuasion required by standards of proof for an element to be established

| Standards of proof (higher to lower) | Description | Officer's assessment |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Beyond reasonable doubt | No doubt; convinced | - |
| Balance of probabilities | Likelihood of something being true | <p>Step 1. Officers must be satisfied on a balance of probabilities (50 + 1%) that the facts and evidence provided by the migrant worker occurred and are credible.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the events described take place? • Did the situation occur? <p>Is it credible?</p> |
| Reasonable grounds to believe | More than a mere possibility; would satisfy an ordinarily cautious and prudent person | <p>Step 2. Officers must determine if they have reasonable grounds to believe that abuse occurred or that there is a risk of abuse.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do the events reported amount to "abuse"? <p>Was the applicant abused, or at risk of abuse?</p> |
| Mere suspicion | Simply an emotional reaction that it might be possible | - |

Source: IRCC, <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/operational-bulletins-manuals/temporary-residents/foreign-workers/vulnerable-workers.html>

IRCC officers may also use their discretion to decide whether an interview is necessary. An interview will only be required if there are doubts about the eligibility or admissibility of an application. In other words, if the officer considering the application has questions or concerns about whether the applicant meets the criteria necessary for the application to be accepted or considered, an interview may be arranged to clarify these points. This may be in person or by telephone.

The organisation of an interview is codified and must follow a protocol detailed in a procedure. Officers must be objective and open-minded and create an environment that minimises stress and respects the sensitivity of those being interviewed. This includes allowing for frequent breaks and taking into account cultural and gender differences. The interview should be conducted in private and in a confidential setting.

On the prevention front

In addition to the protection for vulnerable workers provided by the OWP-V, prevention and awareness measures have been put in place to inform, guide and sensitise both workers and employers to the risks of abuse and trafficking. These initiatives are partly delivered through government channels, such as websites, telephone hotlines and information leaflets, but also rely on a large network of community organisations that provide various support services to new arrivals.

In 2022, the government launched the Migrant Worker Support Programme (MWS), with a budget of CAD 49.5 million until 2024. This programme aims to increase migrant workers' knowledge of their rights and provide them with the tools they need to ensure their protection and inclusion. The MWS has two main components: the first involves orientation services at major Canadian airports, providing migrant workers with information on their rights and referrals to relevant services as soon as they arrive. The second component, which receives the bulk of the funding, is community services. This component supports over 120 local organisations that provide orientation services, information workshops, legal aid and emergency assistance to help migrant workers understand and assert their rights. Some of these organisations assist victims of trafficking by providing safe exit, legal assistance, emergency shelter, counselling and assistance in applying for the OWP-V. In addition, the Ministry of Employment and Social Development Canada (EDSC), which oversees employment, labour market and social services issues in Canada, has created a multilingual [website](#) dedicated to temporary foreign workers (TFWs) to inform them of their rights and how to report abuses or bad practices under the TFWP. The platform also provides self-assessment tools and advice on reporting abusive situations. A confidential reporting line, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with a helpline in 200 languages, also allows any abuse to be reported anonymously. Complementing these initiatives is the [Migrant Worker Hub](#), an online platform launched in 2020 by the Migrant Workers Centre (MWC), a non-profit organisation that advocates for the rights of migrant workers in British Columbia. The platform provides accessible, multilingual information and practical resources for migrant workers, the organisations that support them, and for employers.

In parallel, in September 2022, EDSC introduced regulatory changes to strengthen employer compliance under the TFWP, imposing stricter measures including the ability to suspend the processing of LMIAs where serious risks to workers' health or safety are identified, and when the employer is suspected of non-compliance. Employers must also provide temporary foreign workers with clear information about their rights and sign employment contracts that reflect the commitments made in their LMIA application. In addition, employers are now prohibited from retaliating against workers or charging them recruitment fees. Employers will also be held responsible for the practices of the recruitment agencies they use. Finally, they must guarantee workers adequate access to health care and provide private health insurance until workers are covered by the provincial or territorial plan.

6.2.3. Finland

The procedural and regulatory component

Similar to Canada's OWP-V channel, since 2021, Finland has two distinct legal mechanisms designed to protect vulnerable workers who have been victims of employer negligence or exploitation without risking their residence rights while seeking new job opportunities: the Extended Residence Permit for Victims of Employer Negligence or Exploitation (RP), and the Certificate of Expanded Right to Work for Victims of Employer Negligence or Exploitation (Certificate).

The RP is intended for foreign workers whose legal status in Finland is closely linked to their employment. In cases of severe exploitation, such workers may risk losing their legal status in Finland if they are forced to leave their jobs. The permit allows these workers to stay in the country while they look for a new job or even start a business. This option gives workers a longer period to stabilise their situation and allows them to remain in Finland without the immediate pressure of deportation or loss of residence status. On the other hand, the Certificate is for workers who want to leave an abusive employer but do not necessarily need to change their overall residence status. It allows them to change employers quickly, giving them full access to the labour market without having to go through the process of changing their residence permit. It does not extend their stay in Finland, but removes the restrictions tied to their original employer, meaning that they can move to a new job in a different field or sector without bureaucratic hurdles. Both mechanisms are subject to tariffication and are not renewable.

The RP is a one-year permit designed to help vulnerable workers by allowing them to stay in Finland while they seek new employment or take steps to start a business. To be eligible, workers must have a valid residence permit and have experienced labour abuse. The application process involves submitting a paper application, as it is not possible to apply online, and making a personal appointment at a Finnish Immigration Service office to submit the application and pay the EUR 180 fee. To support its claim and demonstrate its vulnerability, the worker must provide a free-form statement detailing how the employer has failed to meet its obligations or exploited the worker. This statement should be as detailed as possible, and workers must mention whether they have reported the employer's behaviour to other authorities, such as the police or the Occupational Safety and Health Authority (the Regional State Administrative Agency). However, filing a formal complaint or initiating legal action is not a requirement. In practice, the statement provided by the worker is generally accepted as sufficient evidence to qualify for the permit, without the need for additional assessments or investigations. The one-year validity period begins upon issuance of the permit and cannot be extended. During this time, individuals have unrestricted access to the labour market and may be unemployed or take steps to establish a business. Once employment is secured, they can initiate the application process for another residence permit.

The Certificate for its part is designed for workers who have experienced exploitation or significant negligence in the workplace **and** have secured a new job offer from another employer. This certificate allows them to change employers without needing a new residence permit, maintaining the validity of their existing permit and their immigration status. Unlike the RP, eligible workers must have a job offer or work contract with a new employer. When a Certificate is issued, it gives the worker the flexibility to change employers without having to obtain a new residence permit. This certificate is valid for as long as the worker's current residence permit is valid. Essentially, when the worker's residence permit expires, the extended right to work also expires. Therefore, if the worker wishes to stay in Finland after the current residence permit expires, he or she must apply for a new residence permit before the Certificate expires. It also gives the worker complete freedom to seek employment in any field, not limited to the job specified in the original residence permit. This means that the worker can pursue opportunities outside his or her previous occupation. It also allows the worker to change employers if necessary during the validity period of the permit, giving them greater control over their employment situation. The application process is the same as for a RP, but with an extra step: the new employer must attach an extra document, an annex, to

the application which details about the new employment, including information on the job offer, terms of employment, and the employer's obligations. The fee for the Certificate is EUR 65. The application process for this certificate is paper-based and not available online. After completing the required form, the worker must submit the application along with the required attachments to the Finnish Immigration Service either by fax, post, or e-mail. The attachments are not exhaustive and include a copy of the worker's identity card or passport, the receipt or a reliable proof of payment of the processing fee, and the annex provided by the employer. Once the documents have been submitted, the certificate or decision will be sent to the worker by post.

On the prevention front

In March 2023, the Finnish government adopted a national strategy to combat the exploitation of workers. A year later, in February 2024, an action plan¹⁵⁹ was adopted to implement the strategy. This plan, which consists of 33 measures, is based on four main areas: coordination between public authorities, prevention and detection of exploitation and human trafficking, strengthening the rights and social inclusion of foreign workers, and promoting employer accountability and social responsibilities. This work was led by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment through a steering group composed by ministries of Justice, Interior, Social Affairs and Health, Foreign Affairs, and Agriculture and Forestry. Social partners were also engaged.

The measures to improve cooperation between Finnish authorities follows an inter-administrative approach and aims to address the low reporting rates of crimes such as labour exploitation by empowering authorities to initiate investigations themselves and by improving inter-departmental coordination. It focuses on the creation of a legal framework that ensures the rapid and unhindered exchange of information between authorities. It also aims to improve analytical capacity by centralising data collection and analysis at the National Bureau of Investigation. The initiative is led by the Ministries of Justice, Economy, Interior and Social Affairs.

Measures to improve the detection and prevention of labour exploitation include amending the Aliens Act to allow authorities to refuse residence permits where there is a risk of exploitation. This will include closer monitoring of vulnerable workers, such as those with limited language skills or education. A national steering and identification mechanism for victims of trafficking will be established. In addition, the government will create a centralised system for the collection of intelligence and risk data, using automation to screen work permits and identify vulnerable workers.

Strengthening the rights and social integration of foreign workers requires that they be informed about Finnish labour practices and employment conditions before they receive a residence permit. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment is responsible for coordinating and updating these basic information materials, which are available in several languages. These materials will be distributed to all persons moving to Finland for work and will not only cover legal aspects but also direct them to employment opportunities, language learning and resources for social orientation. It also includes the expansion of the Work Help Finland application, which provides information in 26 languages, accompanied by a campaign to promote the application. In addition, the prevention of labour abuse and exploitation will be disseminated through Finnish diplomatic missions via social media, mission websites and other channels, specifically targeting individuals considering migration.

Actions to strengthen the social responsibility of employers in preventing and combating the exploitation of foreign workers include the provision of tools and guidance to help employers address shortcomings in their recruitment practices that may create potential risks of labour abuse or exploitation. It also includes measures to improve employers' understanding of labour regulations and ethical recruitment by assisting them in sourcing skilled labour abroad, analysing labour needs and building partnerships in key countries

¹⁵⁹ https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/165395/TEM_2024_5.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

to promote ethical practices. This includes linking Finnish employers with trustworthy international recruitment partners, particularly in India, Vietnam, Brazil, and the Philippines, to reduce risks such as kickback fees. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment will also continue to develop international agreements with key countries to facilitate the promotion of ethical international recruitment.

7 Assessment and recommendations

Flanders should be well-positioned as an attractive destination for international talent, due to enterprises of excellence, innovative and strong businesses, high quality of life and high purchase power for skilled workers. However, it has not attracted international talent to the extent of neighbouring and competing countries. The long, complex and uncertain procedures for single permits discourages firms from recruiting highly qualified talent from abroad. Barriers to recognition of qualification make it difficult for Flemish firms to recruit highly qualified third-country nationals to work in regulated professions, especially health care. Flanders struggles to retain international students graduating from its universities and to retain the international talent which arrives to work in its firms.

Flanders is a latecomer in international competition for talent. No overall policy is in place to attract and retain talent, to communicate opportunities to talent abroad and to make recruitment more accessible and sustainable for enterprises. While numerous local and regional actors have taken steps to improve the context for talent, there is limited coordination. Unlike competing countries, there is no branding as a destination for talent. This document presents an assessment of the gaps in Flemish policy and provides recommendations on how to address them, under a series of headings.

The goal of these recommendations is to position Flanders as a leading destination for international talent, strengthening its role in the competitive landscape of the European Union. Beyond adopting a labour market-driven approach to migration policy, it is equally important to embrace a logic of excellence to keep Flanders at the forefront of innovation. To achieve this, Flanders must enhance its attractiveness to top global talent.

This requires a paradigm shift in how talent attraction is approached, transitioning from a passive demand-driven strategy to a proactive data-driven strategy. To achieve this, the identification and empowerment of a dedicated government agency is essential – one with a clear, strategic mandate to identify and address the needs of both employers and prospective international talent. This agency would act as the central authority, coordinating with the various government agencies involved (regional and federal) as well as with social partners.

As part of the attraction policy, the vision is to make the administrative procedures as lean and efficient as possible so as to be competitive with neighbouring countries. Additionally, by leveraging advanced data analytics, the agency can better anticipate future workforce demands, and tailor policies to align with the evolving priorities of highly and medium skilled professionals.

The Flemish region has recently improved its oversight of labour migration. This includes a special cell dedicated to focus on high-risk cases, increased funding and resources for labour inspection services to monitor compliance with employment regulations, and new grounds for permit refusal. The recommendations below include a number of additional measures to improve compliance and to protect vulnerable workers. While enforcement and protection are not directly linked to talent attraction, the sustainability of a talent attraction policy depends on limiting any possible cases of abuse of the labour migration system.

The objective of a coordinated talent attraction policy is not to increase the numbers of labour migrants to Flanders. In a responsive labour migration system, the numbers of migrants will depend on the evolution

of the Flemish labour market. It is about making Flanders competitive, ensuring that the labour migration that is needed comes through the right channels. It is about better quality and management of labour migration. It is about positioning Flanders for the future.

7.1. A clear mandate for talent attraction and retention within Flanders

Assessment

Talent attraction and retention includes both hard (regulatory and administrative) policy and soft (service and context) policy. While there are many agencies and local actors conducting activities which contribute to improving the attractiveness of Flanders for talent, these efforts are fragmented. Specific mandates allow different actors to conduct piecemeal efforts in their domain; some actors conduct activities even without an explicit mandate. The absence of an overall policy for attraction or retention of international talents puts Flanders at a disadvantage relative to neighbouring and other competitors, most of which have a well-developed and articulated strategy for talent attraction and retention.

Recommendations

Flanders should mandate one or more of the existing competent actors to promote Flanders as a destination for international talent and to coordinate actors in Flanders. International good practice in this area offers a range of examples of appropriate actors, ranging from the public employment service, to the investment attraction agency, to the economic development ministry, to subcontracted agencies, including combinations of these actors. In the Flemish context, WEWIS, VDAB and FIT are candidates for this role. An alternative would be to assign a Secretariat with a Board comprising representatives of the public bodies (WEWIS, VDAB, FIT, VLAIO, etc.) as well as a representative of SERV or more broadly, different representatives of social partners and civil society.

The first task of this body would be drafting a strategy. The strategy could take the form of a **Horizontal Policy Plan** (*Horizontaal beleidsplan*) or another explicit high-level policy mandate. Regardless of the form, the strategy should aim to avoid overlap, identify responsibilities within the attraction and retention strategy, and **prioritise actions** for the different bodies to pursue. The actor would receive **additional structural resources** (designated staff) to lead the drafting of the strategy and be empowered to convene meetings of other parts of the administration, within a specified timeline, in order to produce the strategy. The actor would be responsible for mapping the networks and ecosystems conducting talent-attraction related activities and involve them in the development of the strategy. Action plans in the different policy domains may be drafted to guide reform, each with a timeline, responsibilities and associated resources.

The body mandated would also be responsible for promoting policy and legislative changes in the admission and stay conditions of international talent, and coordinating with the other Belgian regions and the federal level on issues related to talent mobility and labour migration. It would be responsible for **identifying priority origin countries** and developing country-specific outreach and proximity efforts, including targeted recruiting, the negotiation of cooperation agreements, alignment of training standards, provision of resources for pre-departure training, etc. Activities abroad could be conducted by or in conjunction with Flanders' foreign representation. Within Flanders, it would be responsible for **coordinating attraction and retention policies** across the regional administration and with municipalities, as well as interacting with existing consultation bodies. As part of this mandate, it would be responsible for **coordinating with bodies holding mandates for aspects of talent attraction and retention**, including those responsible for recognition of qualifications, civic integration of immigrants, housing and school enrolment. It would also be responsible for advancing Flanders' talent attraction and retention priorities in consultation with local, regional and federal authorities.

Regardless of the agency designated with the mandate and coordinating role, it is essential that all existing agencies involved in the labour migration system continue to execute their operational functions under the coordination of the mandate holder.

The recommendations which follow are meant to provide indications for the strategy and action plans associated with the strategy.

Improve the evidence base for Talent Attraction policy

Assessment

To effectively shape a talent attraction and retention strategy, it is crucial to base policy decisions on comprehensive and reliable data.

The Policy Research Centre Work is taking steps towards identifying future short- and long-term labour market needs through integrated labour market projections at the sector, occupation, and skill levels. Sector federations and organizations also do labour market projections (e.g., Be The Change – Agoria). Nonetheless, basic information on labour migration stocks and flows by category, on stay rates, and on occupational pathways and outcomes remains difficult to obtain, irregularly published and not widely disseminated, leaving public and private stakeholders without a sufficient evidence base to develop their talent attraction and retention actions.

Demographic projections from Statbel and the Federal Planning Bureau help to anticipate future labour market needs, but they rely on cohort-component methods, which are limited by simplified assumptions about migrants' labour market outcomes. These methods do not account for variations in outcomes according to migrant characteristics such as education or category of entry.

A talent and retention strategy for Flanders requires expanding the evidence base. To develop a more data-driven migration system, Flanders needs to take additional steps to create a robust evidence base for guiding policy decisions. The rich administrative data sources are not currently structurally integrated. Further, they are not systematically used to assess and project labour market needs and shape migration policy. At present there is no systematic evaluation of the impact of Flemish economic migration policies. As a talent and retention strategy develops, decision making will benefit from empirical evidence.

Recommendations

Under the responsibility of the lead organisation with the mandate for talent attraction, **constitute a working group or other method to identify demographic, migration, and labour market data needs from different domains** (e.g., employment, education, migration history, and social security). Prioritise the **collection and structural integration of these data**, with the goal of making them available for longitudinal analysis. High priority data should be collected as soon as possible, for **use in the annual report** (below), while the integration of other data would be scheduled according to its ranking and taking into account the cost necessary for acquiring the data relative to its use in developing and evaluating the strategy.

Publish an annual report on talent attraction (labour migration) in Flanders to keep stakeholders informed of trends and outcomes. While this report may be initially limited to coverage of labour migration stocks and flows by category, it should expand over time to cover indicators which allow benchmarking Flanders' talent attraction such as retention rates of labour migrants and graduating students, employment outcomes, internal mobility, professional mobility, etc. Additionally, the report should include analysis on the effects of policy changes on these outcomes. (regional – WEWIS)

Use the data infrastructure to simulate labour market dynamics and migration flows under different policy scenarios, and to **estimate future labour shortages** and the **potential role of migration** in addressing these. Identify specific sectors and occupations experiencing persistent shortages, using evidence to classify targets for labour migration. (federal – Statbel, the Federal Planning Bureau; regional – WEWIS)

Improve the selection of skills for the main labour migration categories

Assessment

The single permit system in Belgium and Flanders provides notable advantages for highly skilled non-EEA workers, including long permit durations of up to three years, which approaches the duration of similar permits issued in neighbouring countries. The standard (100%) salary threshold for highly skilled workers does not seem excessively restrictive, as most highly qualified workers in Belgium earn above this threshold. It is however much more difficult for young employees to meet the 80% salary threshold, and the EU Blue Card salary threshold is harder to reach than in neighbouring countries. Currently, there is a sharp rise in the salary threshold as workers turn 30, requiring a sudden salary hike for single permit holders, while prevailing salaries for native-born workers in Flanders rise gradually. This is creating workplace inequities. The transposition of the recast Blue Card Directive introduced the baseline level of flexibility on diploma requirements, applied to the IT sector, without extending it to other occupations. Uptake of the Blue Card is limited, even among those potentially eligible. As the Blue Card is the main permit category used at the EU level to promote the EU as a destination for talent, the difficult-to-reach threshold makes it harder for Flanders to leverage EU branding around the Blue Card. Further, the EU Blue Card facilitates intra-EU mobility for firms present in multiple EU countries, so an accessible Blue Card can improve Flanders' attractiveness for these firms.

Flanders' shortage occupation list (SOL) for migration purposes enables a broader range of labour needs to be addressed through migration by providing an exemption from the labour market test (LMT). The Migration SOL is derived from VDAB's shortage occupation list, currently the most comprehensive source available on labour supply and demand at the level of occupations. However, VDAB statistics do not fully represent the Flemish labour market, as many vacancies are not reported to VDAB. The Migration SOL also excludes occupations not identified as shortages in other EU countries, overlooking Flemish labour market needs and employing a needlessly strict application of the concentric model. Reference to shortages in other EU countries is neither required under EU law nor effective in determining shortage in Flanders. Employers continue to face challenges in identifying eligible occupations for migration, contributing to a relatively high refusal rate of single permit applications under the Migration SOL. Finally, although a consultation is held of the SERV's Advisory Committee for Economic Migration regarding the list, social partners feel their input is undervalued in the decision-making process, despite its importance as a complement to VDAB's quantitative analyses.

The LMT forms a solid foundation for the concentric model. However, the LMT process requires at least nine weeks of vacancy posting and additional time for VDAB's investigation for some occupations, longer than in neighbouring countries. Excluding unskilled occupations and those not listed on the VDAB shortage occupation list is intended to protect the local labour reserve but prevents recruitment for genuine specific niche vacancies.

Unlike the highly skilled, workers recruited via the SOL and LMT pathways are entitled to one-year permits. This increases administrative burdens for both employers and workers due to the need for annual renewals, reduces job security and stability for workers, and creates challenges for employers in long-term workforce planning. Overall, the long, complex and uncertain process of recruitment through SOL and LMT pathways may disincentivise the use of single permits and unintentionally push employers toward relying on posted workers. Flanders loses out when employers use posting instead of the single permit system,

since posting allows lower gross labour costs for employers, reduces social contributions, and uses temporary workers to fill structural needs. The expedited seasonal labour migration process, combined with reduced social security contributions, effectively promotes regular employment in seasonal work and discourages irregular or posted work arrangements.

Recommendations on the highly skilled

Greater attention should be given to the impact of wage thresholds on talent attraction and retention, with a regular review process. The salary thresholds for highly skilled workers should be reassessed, as the last review dates back to 2018, although they are adjusted annually for inflation. Key factors to consider include prevailing wages by age, sector, education level, and occupation. The review process could explore options such as stepped thresholds or, as in the case of nursing and teaching, exceptions for specific priority occupations, based on evidence. Currently, Flanders grants flexibility in how the real annual compensation is calculated, allowing bonuses and allocations to be considered part of gross remuneration. Additionally, the review process should explore whether Flanders should keep this method – with its uncertainties – or move to a stricter but simpler definition of remuneration for the purposes of the threshold, as is the case in Brussels. (regional – WEWIS, Flemish Minister of Education and Labour).

Align the salary threshold for Blue Cards more closely with the labour market conditions for highly qualified workers. (regional – WEWIS, Flemish Minister of Education and Labour)

Highlight the benefits of the Blue Card, such as faster access to full labour market rights and enhanced mobility within the EU, on the *Your future in Flanders* website and through targeted campaigns to employers and workers in high-skilled occupations. (regional – WEWIS, Flemish Minister of Education and Labour)

Communicate eligibility for the Blue Card to migrants whose salary and education level meets requirements. (regional – WEWIS, Flemish Minister of Education and Labour)

Recommendations on the Migration Shortage Occupation List

The Shortage Occupation List for migration purposes (SOL) remains one of the most visible elements of Flanders' labour migration policy and influences the characteristics of labour migrants admitted. To reinforce the role of the migration SOL and better align the occupations with demand, the process for establishing the list should be reviewed.

In terms of consultations, the role of the SERV's Advisory Committee for Economic Migration (ACEM) can be reinforced. In terms of visibility and transparency, awareness of the list and how to use it can be increased. In terms of ensuring that available labour is used effectively, the Cabinet should approve a modification of the process for the migration SOL according to the following elements:

Continue to encourage employers to report their vacancies to VDAB. (regional – VDAB, ACEM, employer organisations)

Increase employer awareness of tools such as the VDAB Shortage Occupation List and 'Occupations in Numbers' **to improve clarity on eligible occupations** for the Migration SOL. (regional – VDAB, ACEM, WEWIS)

Remove the step in the Migration SOL process that excludes occupations not classified as EU-wide shortages from the list, which is not required under EU law. Further, the ELA shortage list used for this step does not effectively capture the real availability of potential workers in other EU countries, and indeed no other country uses this list for regulating labour migration. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour)

Reinforce the advisory role of the ACEM in reviewing the migration SOL. The ACEM should hold dedicated **meetings** to review the migration SOL. This meeting should be on a regular basis following the publication calendar of the broader VDAB SOL. Labour market stakeholders (e.g., employer organisations, businesses, universities) should be solicited to **submit evidence to the ACEM** (during the month preceding the meeting) regarding occupations to include or exclude from the SOL. Evidence could include **hard-to-fill occupations not captured in the VDAB** database due to being niche or underreported, supported for instance by data from private job platforms or industry sources; occupations classified as high-skilled by VDAB but **routinely filled by medium-skilled workers** with relevant experience, warranting reclassification and inclusion on the migration SOL; or occupations that **frequently receive approval through the LMT channel**, demonstrating consistent demand and suitability for inclusion in the migration SOL. The ACEM should **review and discuss the evidence submitted**, and produce a short document responding to the evidence and suggesting inclusions and exclusions from the migration SOL. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour, ACEM)

Outside of this regular review, stakeholders should be allowed to submit evidence for inclusion or exclusion from the Migration SOL to the ACEM **during the year** – for review as an agenda item of regular ACEM meetings – to ensure it reflects near real-time labour market needs. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour, ACEM)

For occupations that are structurally listed on the migration SOL, extend the validity of the single permit to two or three years. This extension could be linked to an administrative check on employment and wages after one year to ensure compliance. (regional – WEWIS, Flemish Minister of Education and Labour)

Recommendations on the Labour Market Test

Consider reinstating labour migration through an LMT for occupations not included on the VDAB SOL. (regional - Flemish Minister of Education and Labour).

Reduce the duration of the LMT to align it with other countries. Nine weeks of vacancy posting appears excessive to demonstrate that certain occupations cannot be filled by candidates available in the pool of jobseekers not subject to work permit requirements (Belgian and EEA nationals and non-EEA nationals resident in Belgium with full work rights). The LMT appears especially long when applied to hard-to-fill professions where the vacancies indicate realistic or no requirements. To compensate for the shorter LMT, VDAB should continue to ensure shared mediation in matching between registered jobseekers and employers. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour, VDAB)

Inform employers that high Dutch language requirements in the vacancy may prevent them from later recruiting non-Dutch speakers through labour migration channels to fill the vacancy. (regional – VDAB, SERV)

Create faster, more transparent and more accessible permit procedures

Assessment

Public-facing information on single permit regulations and procedures is fragmented, spread across multiple websites, which causes confusion for employers. While the digital platform Working in Belgium (WiB) has significantly improved the ease of submitting single permit applications, it still faces issues with transparency, timely updates for employers, accessibility for workers, and access for embassies and municipalities. A continuous working group is already in place with all stakeholders involved in the digital platform (IO, EMS, foreign affairs, ONSS), to improve WiB functionality.

There are a number of public-facing websites in Flanders providing information about labour migration to employers, migrants and other stakeholders, but these operate independently, sometimes linking to other websites. These include the Federal Immigration Office website, the WiB platform, WEWIS' page "Work Permits for Foreign Workers", Flemish Integration Agency's "work" page, and Flanders' "Your Future in Flanders" which also includes a page on "Working in Flanders as a foreigner". Taken together, these provide useful information, but content is hard to find, drafted independently and links do not always provide a comprehensive picture for the user. While effort has been made to provide content in English, some important material is still in Dutch.

The labour migration system in Flanders relies on employers for providing non-EEA labour migrants with information on their permit applications, which can sometimes leave workers uninformed about permit statuses, changes and eligibility. Many migrants are unaware of their eligibility for advantageous residency permits, such as indefinite-duration work permits or European Blue Cards, and employers may lack incentives to assist with these applications.

Overall processing times for single permit applications often exceed the 120-days deadline mandated by the EU Single Permit Directive, making Flanders less attractive to highly skilled talents who may have faster migration options in other countries. Applying for a single permit for non-EEA migrants who are on a short-stay permit is practically unfeasible due to processing times which exceed the duration of their permit, with no clear procedure or temporary document to extend the worker's legal residence during the application process.

Capacity issues at both the regional and federal levels have exacerbated delays, with regional admissibility decisions often coming late in the process, creating unpredictability for employers. The EMS application for reviewing single permit applications is inefficient, requiring case handlers to manually retrieve information from separate, non-integrated data sources during pre-approval checks. Rejections by EMS can be appealed, but there is no time limit for review of appeals requests, for which the average processing time is 230 days – at which point the recruitment may no longer be relevant or the worker no longer available.

Sequential processing of applications at the regional and federal levels further increases delays, as the IO typically waits for a positive decision on the work aspect before assessing the residence aspect. The division of competences within the review of applications is not always respected, leading to duplication of review. This is also linked to limited communication and coordination between the regional and federal level. Even when both levels approve the application, long waiting times for appointments at diplomatic or consular posts in certain countries can delay visa issuance.

Upon arrival in Belgium, labour migrants face additional delays in registering at their municipality and obtaining an Annex 49 and ultimately an electronic A card. Some municipalities require permanent housing for registration, further extending the process. Even though the Flemish administration "tolerates" migrants commencing work with the Annex 46 or 47, it does not afford legal security to the worker or employer. As a result, many migrants delay starting work until they received the Annex 49 or even the electronic residence card A. The A card, which grants full work rights, the right to travel, and greater administrative convenience, is critical for workers. Although banks are legally allowed to open accounts using identity documents such as an international passport and Annex 46/47 or 49, many prefer to wait for the A card, creating practical challenges for workers and employers, who must pay wages electronically by law. Administrative delays at the municipality level also hinder timely communication of single permit decisions to workers.

Finally, the administrative language law, which mandates communication in Dutch in Flemish municipalities, poses an additional barrier for non-EEA labour migrants who do not speak the language. While the "principle of courtesy" permits communication in other languages, some municipalities enforce Dutch-only policies, hindering effective communication and complicating administrative procedures for migrants.

The renewal process for single permits is also lengthy, which burdens the administration and can potentially disrupt work rights. While there is a tolerance policy in place that allows workers to continue working with the Annex 49 after a positive renewal decision by the region, this offers no legal certainty to workers and employers. Further, the Annex 49 does not grant the same rights as the A card, such as the ability to travel. Employers are sometimes unaware that workers can continue working with the Annex 49. Additionally, workers often need multiple physical interactions with municipalities during the single permit renewal, as the Annex 49 is a temporary document that quickly runs out. If a single permit renewal is refused, workers must leave Belgium immediately, with no option to reapply while remaining in the country, although this will change with the transposition of the recast Single Permit Directive in 2026.

Recommendations on applications through the Working in Belgium platform

The WiB working group is already meeting regularly to discuss and implement changes to the WiB, as foreseen under Art. 29 of the 2021 Cooperation Agreement. The working group should receive instructions to make additional adjustments to the platform as follow.

Explore how to grant Belgian embassies and municipalities access to the information collected in the WiB platform, either directly to the platform or through the IO's E-migration system, to monitor the status of permit applications and submitted information. This eliminates the need for the IO staff to communicate to embassies and municipalities of each approval, thereby speeding up the overall process. (federal – ONSS)

Enhance communication through the WiB platform to improve transparency for both employers and workers during the application process. Implement push notifications at each step, including status updates on eligibility, document issues, progress in the application, and reminders for renewal or permit expiration (e.g., 6, 3, or 1 month in advance). Automatically notify non-EEA workers and employers about eligibility for advantageous residency permits, such as indefinite duration work permits, and Blue Cards. (federal – ONSS, IO; regional – WEWIS)

At application and renewal, require the provision of the worker's contact details (telephone and e-mail, and postal address in Belgium in case of renewal) **in the WiB platform** to keep workers informed of the outcome of the procedure and to provide them with information and updates. (regional – WEWIS)

Inform labour migrants about their right to access the WiB platform at the moment of visa application or – for those in Belgium – when the employment contract is uploaded to the platform. Explain which documents (e.g., contract) can be viewed, and provide clear instructions on how to do so ensuring full transparency regarding the documents submitted and the validity of workers' permit. For technical and privacy reasons, workers can only receive access when they have a Belgian social security number (BIS or National Register number). Therefore, the embassies are best placed to inform the worker that (s)he can access the application made by the employer. Additionally, periodic checks on working conditions (e.g., the wages mentioned in the application) through messages to the worker can allow the worker to verify that the declared wages correspond with the wages actually paid by the employer. (federal – Minister of foreign affairs, ONSS)

Recommendations on information provision on the process

Separate from the application management WiB platform, bring information regarding the labour migration process and residence in Flanders under a single brand and site. **Ensure that a single, user-friendly Flemish website centralizes all relevant information for employers, covering federal, regional, and municipal levels, with clear information on single permit regulations, procedures, and regional differences.** This could be part of the single Flemish talent attraction website (see below). The site should include the functions and content already offered in scattered websites (e.g., the wizard allowing employers to input details such as place of business, occupation, and duration of employment, and receive instructions on whether they should apply to the Flemish region, the required permit type, and related

requirements, as well as residence and visa information). The site should be coordinated by a single institution and content assigned to the competent bodies with a requirement to maintain updates (regional – WEWIS)

Recommendations on procedures at the regional level

Further increase EMS staffing levels to maintain improvements in processing times, aiming for competitive decision times compared to other European countries. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour, WEWIS)

As planned, develop the VLAMA application at the regional level to streamline data management, improve the efficiency of the work permit review process, and reduce the manual workload for case handlers by integrating relevant information sources. (regional – WEWIS)

Accelerate processing times for low-risk categories, such as highly skilled migrants, researchers with host agreement and post doc researchers, through a **Fast-Track system**. The Fast-Track would grant reduced evidentiary requirements rather than priority treatment. While the overall objective for all applications is to reduce waiting time, lowering the administrative burden in examining low-risk applications would free up resources to conduct analysis of higher risk applications. Criteria for fast-tracking can be based on data, such as refusal rates of categories and/or characteristics of businesses (including mandatories) using the system, such as size (number of employees or turnover) and frequency of use (number of work permits granted in the previous three years). Any document required at the federal level would still be required, but particularly onerous review of the characteristics of the applicant – such as education and qualifications – could be lightened or exempted for Fast-Track cases. Consequences for non-compliance of Fast-Track firms would be correspondingly more severe. (regional – WEWIS)

Ensure an admissibility decision within 10 days of submission to provide greater certainty for employers and workers, in line with the EU Single Permit Directive. For complete applications, statutory processing times should begin at the moment of submission rather than after the regional admissibility decision. (regional – WEWIS)

Introduce a 90-day statutory time limit for EMS appeal decisions, to ensure that appeals requests do not languish as lowest priority for review. (regional – WEWIS)

Recommendations on procedures at the federal level

Increase staffing levels at IO to handle the growing volume of single permit applications, especially for the Flemish region. (federal – IO)

Accelerate the development and use of an automatic transfer system between the WiB platform and the WEWIS and IO back-offices, to eliminate manual handling and speed up application processing. (regional – WEWIS; federal – IO, ONSS)

Establish a clear framework for parallel processing of applications by the region (EMS) and the federal administration (IO) for low-risk categories, where the regional refusal rate is below a threshold (e.g., 5%), such as highly skilled workers (potentially others depending on risk assessment). Both levels of government should agree on specific categories of labour migrants eligible for parallel processing, with respect for the division of powers. A parallel approach is already permitted under the Cooperation Agreement and can help streamline procedures, reduce delays, and enhance efficiency in handling applications. (regional – WEWIS; federal – IO)

Enhance communication and collaboration between the EMS and IO, through regular working groups, ensuring that both regional employment checks and federal security assessments are well-coordinated. (regional – WEWIS; federal – IO)

Non-EEA migrants on short-stay (as well as long-stay) permits should be issued a temporary residence document upon expiration, allowing them to remain legally in Belgium while their single permit or professional card application is being processed. (federal – IO)

For non-EEA migrants exempt from the short-stay C visa (e.g., citizens of US, UK), **streamline and simplify the application process**. While workers from these countries can apply for a D-visa (long stay) at the embassy in their home countries, they are allowed to travel to Belgium during the procedure to, for example, look for housing. However, once the single permit is authorised, they must return to their home country to collect it. To improve this process, allow them to complete the formalities in Flanders at their municipality and collect their residence permit locally without a visa, eliminating the need to return to their home country for the long-stay visa. (federal – IO)

In preparation for transposition of the recast Single Permit Directive, **extend the in-country application for single permit to those legally present in Flanders who apply for work permit for occupations subject to LMT**. (regional – WEWIS).

The body with the mandate for coordinating talent attraction should **adapt procedures and prioritize efficiency improvements at the regional and federal level to ensure Flanders can meet the new 90-days deadline** for processing single permit applications, excluding visa issuance, as stipulated in the recast Single Permit Directive.

Recommendation on procedures abroad

Streamline procedures and improve appointment accessibility at foreign diplomatic and consular posts. Consider offering priority scheduling for low-risk migrant categories. (federal – Minister of foreign affairs)

Ensure greater transparency regarding the practices of external visa partners working with consulates and clarify the specific role of consulates in relation to these partners, as the division of responsibilities may affect the efficiency and coherence of the visa issuance process. (federal – Minister of foreign affairs).

Recommendations on procedures at the municipal level

Support municipalities in digitising, streamlining, and accelerating their operations, including communication, appointments, and processing. Expanding online scheduling and increasing appointment availability would help reduce waiting times for labour migrants and other newcomers. The project to launch an entirely digital registration system (e-registration), which seems to have been shelved, could be revisited. (regional – Flemish Minister of Home Affairs)

Ensure that the legal framework is updated to allow all labour migrants to start working with Annex 46 while awaiting registration. This would align Belgium's practice with the Single Permit Directive and provide clarity for both employers and workers. The new cooperation agreement solves this longstanding issue, but only for specific categories of labour migrants (EU Blue Cards, seasonal workers, ICTs, researchers, inters and volunteers). (regional, WEWIS; federal – IO).

All municipalities should accept temporary housing as proof of residence for registration purposes, as long as a permanent address is provided within a reasonable time frame (e.g., 6 months). (regional – municipalities)

The body with the mandate for coordinating talent attraction should **support and facilitate municipalities to apply the "principle of courtesy" and provide non-EEA labour migrants with communication in languages other than Dutch** (French, German, English) when needed. This could involve training municipal staff or using language support services to ensure smoother interactions with migrants. At a minimum, municipal staff working with foreign workers should also be informed of and trained on the

contents of the *Your future in Flanders* website and on the existence of the International Houses (where migrants can be assisted in other languages more easily). (regional – municipalities)

Recommendations on single permit renewals and withdrawals

As planned, **integrate administrative data sources on employment (DIMONA) and wages (DMFA) into the WiB platform to enable automatic pre-approval checks for renewals**, improving efficiency and reducing manual effort. In the longer term, consider linking additional data sources on incoming postings (LIMOSA) and certificates of coverage of social security abroad (A1). (regional – WEWIS; federal – ONSS)

Ensure that the legal framework allows labour migrants to continue working with Annex 49 while awaiting a positive renewal decision from the federal level and the issuance of an A-card. (regional – WEWIS, federal – IO)

Extend Annex 49 validity (e.g., 120 days) to reduce the need for frequent renewals during the single permit renewal process. As planned, limit physical appointments with municipalities through digitalisation and automated issuance and mailing of annexes wherever possible. (federal – IO; regional – municipalities)

Allow non-EEA workers whose single permit renewal is refused to reside in Belgium and retain access to the labour market through an Annex 51. This will enable employers to address issues with the application without requiring the worker to leave the country, aligning with the recast Single Permit Directive. (federal – IO)

Ensure that workers whose single permit is withdrawn are systematically informed about their eligibility for an Annex 51 (allowing them to seek new employment during this period) **and their right to unemployment benefits.** The National Employment Office (RVA) should clearly provide this information on their website. Consider activating the validity of the Annex 51 only once there is confirmation that the worker has been informed on their permit withdrawal. (federal – IO, ONSS, NEO; regional – WEWIS, municipalities)

Extend the job search period for unemployed labour migrants from 90 days to 180 days for those who leave their employer due to abuse or violations of social rights. While this is particularly relevant for unemployed labour migrants whose new employer must go through the LMT process, it is also relevant for all labour migrants, whose employer may fail to communicate the withdrawal of their single permit in time for them to obtain an Annex 51. (regional – WEWIS; federal – IO)

Streamline the extension process for residence permits of labour migrants' family members. Currently, their application can only begin after the labour migrant's single permit renewal is granted. Instead, allow family members' extensions to be processed in parallel with the single permit renewal or automatically extend their residence permits upon the worker's permit renewal. (federal – IO)

Enhancing protections and access to information for non-EEA workers

Currently, non-EEA workers cannot change employers without the new employer having to submit a single permit application. While highly qualified workers are usually not in situations of extreme dependence on exploitative employers, this can be a risk for workers on one-year renewable permits in SOL and LMT occupations, who may be reluctant to leave the employer because of fear of losing their residence permit.

Workers are mostly dependent on employers for information about their labour and residency rights, with existing resources focused on employers and available in limited languages.

Migrants from countries without bilateral social security agreements with Belgium face challenges in transferring their social security rights (including pension rights).

Recommendations to better inform and protect workers

To reduce labour migrants' dependency on single employers and align with the recast Single Permit Directive, **allow single permit holders to change employers without requiring a new single permit application**. Introduce a **notification system** as a fast and flexible alternative, as is already in place for the EU Blue Cards. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour, WEWIS)

As planned, **develop multilingual resources** (e.g., digital brochures, information sheets, mobile apps) **detailing labour migrants' social and labour rights**, including contact details for trade unions. Require **embassies, diplomatic posts, and municipalities** to provide labour migrants with such resources alongside visa issuance and renewal, as outlined in the proposed migration code reforms. **Inform non-EEA workers in English about permit statuses, rights, and obligations directly**, in addition to through their employers. (regional – WEWIS, municipalities, international houses; federal – Foreign Affairs, trade unions)

Within the Talent Attraction website, provide information from all relevant agencies for reporting about issues like discriminatory treatment, workplace abuse, or grievances (e.g., racist behaviour or unjust wage deductions). These mechanisms should allow permit holders to report concerns confidentially. The information and contacts should be decided with input from social inspection services, labour unions, Fairwork, the Flemish Human Rights Institute, or Myria, etc. Ensure these reporting mechanisms for labour migrants to report abuses or violations are available in English. (regional – WEWIS; trade unions)

Expedite reforms mandating employers to cover all migration-related costs without recovery from workers. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour)

Pursue bilateral agreements with non-EU countries or explore unilateral measures to ensure portability of social security rights. Engage with private-sector schemes to **cover social security gaps** for workers from countries without agreements. (federal)

Explore the possibility of granting transitional permits to workers who are victims of exploitation but have no victim of human trafficking status, allowing them to maintain their right of residence and access to the labour market for the original duration of their residence permit. (federal – IO)

Improve the framework and practices for recognition of foreign qualifications and skills

Assessment

Recognition of foreign qualifications procedures remain complex and challenging to navigate, especially for migrants who want to work in a regulated occupation.

NARIC-Flanders is the body responsible for issuing academic recognition of equivalence of diplomas for labour market purposes. It issues level recognition (which level of education) and specific recognition (specific Flemish qualification to which the foreign diploma is equivalent). Specific recognition is needed to work in a regulated occupation. The fee for academic recognition is relatively low (EUR 119 for level recognition and 238 for specific recognition) and not a major barrier relative to the general costs of labour migration. However, NARIC has been struggling with an increasing volume of applications, resulting in long procedures. In 2024, the average processing time for specific recognition was 9 months. On average, it takes NARIC two months to begin processing a file, pointing to capacity issues. For most of the specific recognition applications, NARIC needs to gain additional advice from the HEIs which are also facing constraints and experiencing delays.

NARIC Flanders is also responsible for providing information on academic recognition. It offers an online tool that guides users through recognition procedures and application submission processes, tailored to

the type of foreign diploma and other relevant details. Although NARIC has developed informational sheets for several countries, it still lacks a comprehensive online equivalency information tool. A precedent database is also not yet in place.

Other challenges at the academic recognition level include the following. For applications submitted from abroad, employer commitment is required. However, employers are often unwilling to commit to employment without certainty regarding the diploma's recognition, creating a vicious cycle that obstructs labour migration. NARIC evaluates each diploma individually to assess cases where applicants may have relevant work experience or additional education that compensates for deficiencies in their official qualifications. However, this approach limits the possibility of processing group applications, which could save time and capacity. Additionally, NARIC has limited flexibility in recognising partial competencies, which frequently leads to lower-level recognitions (e.g., instead of specific recognition, diplomas may be assigned a broader level recognition).

When applicants receive a negative or lower-level decision, they often struggle to determine the next steps for further education. While NARIC directs them to the *Education in Flanders* website, weak coordination between NARIC and higher education institutions (HEIs) leaves applicants to navigate further education independently. Many find it difficult to enrol in HEIs after receiving a negative recognition decision, as HEIs have autonomy over recognition of prior learning (EVK/EVC), course eligibility, and bridging requirements. This leads to 'educational shopping'. Additionally, the lack of coordination between HEIs and associations and the diverse individual cases require significant investment from HEIs. There are few shorter modular training courses tailored to the competency 'gaps' of labour migrants in Flanders.

For non-EEA workers with a Belgian diploma seeking to work in a regulated occupation, obtaining access to the profession is straightforward, as the visa is automatically issued. However, for workers with a recognised foreign diploma, obtaining a visa or a license with a professional recognition body (most of which are situated at the federal level) can be a lengthy and complex process. For example, in the nursing occupation, if the foreign diploma is equivalent, the migrant worker must initiate an administrative procedure with FPS Public Health to apply for the visa. This process involves multiple administrative steps and stakeholders, takes 3-4 months, and has no statutory deadlines.

Finally, while Dutch proficiency is essential in healthcare, the newly established language requirements (May 2024) are exceptionally high and risk obstructing international recruitment. The required levels are C1 for master's degrees, B2 for bachelor nurses, B1 for lower-level nurses, and A2 for nursing assistants. Labour migrants must prove their language level through a certified test before they can apply for a single permit. However, the combination of high language requirements, limited training options, and bureaucratic obstacles significantly restricts access to the Flemish healthcare sector for non-EEA workers.

Recommendations

Improve coordination in the recognition of foreign qualifications by creating a central body to oversee processes between NARIC, HEIs, and professional recognition bodies.

This body should ensure that applicants do not get lost in the system and **design a clear, step-by-step recognition process from the applicant's perspective**, outlining the steps, requirements, and estimated processing times. In the longer term, the body should **develop a one-stop-shop** to input information on the type of foreign qualification and the purpose of recognition, with an automated response indicating the relevant procedure, competent institutions, processing times, documentary requirements, and any associated fees. The coordination body should aim to address the low enrolment rates in HEIs following negative or lower-level recognition decisions and **streamline recognition of prior learning procedures**.

The body should **consolidate all information** on academic, professional, and prior learning recognition and be responsible for **coordinating recognition-related content on the *Your future in Flanders* website**, providing clear guidance on the process and responsible actors.

Additionally, the body could **collaborate with foreign administrations and institutions** to match foreign talent with local demand in regulated occupations.

This central body should also play a key role in implementing the recommendations outlined below, many of which align with the advice on the recognition of foreign qualifications published by the SERV's ACEM.

Further increase NARIC's capacity to reduce processing times and provide extra support to enhance its digital infrastructure (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour)

In the longer term, NARIC should build internal expertise in high-demand fields like medicine and health care to reduce reliance on external experts (HEIs), improving efficiency and reducing delays in processing applications. (regional – NARIC)

Expand the development of an online equivalency information tool to provide detailed insights into origin country's education structure and disparities between Flemish and foreign diplomas, ensuring this tool is available in multiple languages. (regional – NARIC)

Establish an online, data-driven precedent database to summarise the outcomes of recognition applications, including decisions and processing times for various foreign diplomas based on past applications. This database would provide applicants and employers with credible insights into the likely value of a foreign study certificate without requiring a NARIC procedure. For instance, it could indicate that nursing diplomas from certain countries and institutions are consistently recognised at a lower level in Flanders, suggesting that employment as a nursing assistant may be a more realistic option or that further education in Flanders will be required. (regional – NARIC)

Allow applications for recognition of a foreign diploma without requiring the applicant to have a concrete employer, provided this is done **within the framework of structural partnerships** with specific partner countries, regions, and educational institutions. In such cases, the sector could commit to employing a certain volume of labour migrants, thereby guaranteeing employment. (regional – NARIC)

Based on priority occupations identified by the Talent Attraction body, **NARIC could revise its specific recognition assessment practices for certain occupations to allow for lower-level specific recognition**. For example, when a specific recognition for a qualification (e.g., nurse) is not possible, NARIC should assess whether the diploma can qualify for a related, lower-level specific academic recognition within the same field (e.g., nursing assistant). This would enable applicants to go through the professional recognition process and access employment in their sector. Now, in many cases applicants receive a level recognition (general bachelor) instead but that does not allow them to apply for professional recognition to take up employment. (regional – NARIC)

Pilot group recognition applications for trusted organisations that frequently recruit labour migrants with similar qualifications from the same institutions, such as Indian nurses from Kerala. Group applications could benefit from lower fees. (regional – NARIC)

HEIs should offer more standardized, shortened bridging programs or modular education tailored to the actual competency needs of labour migrants, with potential subsidies from employers and sectors. There are good practices to consider within the framework of existing talent partnerships, such as Aurora, where schools like Hivset and SVV Sint-Vincentius have designed tailored bridging programs for foreign students seeking to obtain a Flemish nursing degree. (regional – NARIC, HEIs)

Establish a technical working group to harmonize and streamline the recognition of prior learning process. Provide financial support to HEIs to cover the staff and procedural costs of recognition of prior learning. (regional – HEIs)

Automatically transfer decisions from NARIC to the relevant professional recognition bodies following academic recognition. (regional – NARIC; federal – professional recognition bodies)

Simplify the licensing process for regulated professions by reducing administrative steps, aligning it more closely with the process for Belgian diplomas, where the licence is often automatically granted. **Introduce statutory processing times** to improve speed and transparency. (federal – professional recognition bodies)

Adjust Dutch language requirements for healthcare professions to a more practical level that ensures effective workplace communication without imposing unnecessarily high academic standards. This would better align with the linguistic demands of healthcare roles while making recruitment more feasible. **Establish a fast-track pathway that allows healthcare workers to learn Dutch while working**, with phased language testing integrated into their employment rather than as a prerequisite to start working. Additionally, **enhance support for healthcare institutions** to facilitate workplace-based language learning.

In the long term, **conclude agreements with partner countries, regions, and educational institutions to recruit foreign talent**. The central coordinating body could identify the first countries and institutions with which to seek agreements, based on proximity of education systems and employer interest and trust. Agreements could cover automatic academic level recognition (as is currently in place in the Benelux). The objective of agreements would be to build strong preparatory trajectories in sending countries, and process degree recognition in bulk. Ensure transparent procedures and clear selection and screening processes. (regional – WEWIS, FIT, NARIC)

Facilitate issuance of drivers' licences

Assessment

Non-EEA labour migrants with foreign driver's licences face challenges when seeking to work in Belgium, depending on the type of licence and its recognition status.

Migrants holding recognised foreign licences can drive in Belgium for the first 185 days after registering with a municipality, without additional formalities. After this period, they must exchange their foreign licence for a Belgian one. Applications for exchange can only be submitted after municipal registration. The exchange procedure can be started during the first 185 days of registration, but the Belgian driving licence may only be issued after these 185 days have elapsed. The fee is EUR 20. Processing times vary between municipalities and can take several weeks. During this period, migrants cannot drive as their foreign licence is held by the municipality and sent to the federal police for an authenticity check, leading to potential isolation or unauthorised driving. For professional drivers with recognised foreign licences (Types C and D), these delays prevent them from performing their jobs, reducing the feasibility of labour migration in the transportation sector.

Migrants with unrecognised foreign licences face additional challenges, as these cannot be exchanged for Belgian licences. These migrants must obtain a new Belgian licence by passing theoretical and practical driving tests in a national language, with no guarantee of success. This poses significant risks for employers, as driving tests can only be taken after the workers' arrival in Belgium, whereas the actual hiring depends on the migrant's ability to acquire the Belgian driver's licence.

Furthermore, professional drivers must obtain Code 95 certification to demonstrate competence for commercial transport. This certification involves either a combined exam with the new licence (for those with a non-recognised foreign licence), a standalone test (for those with a recognised foreign licence or a Belgian licence) or completing 35 hours of refresher training (for those with a licence obtained after 9 September 2009). All of these are conducted or offered in national languages only, creating substantial obstacles for employing non-EU drivers in the transportation sector.

Recommendations

Streamline the driver's licence exchange procedure to prevent disruptions for labour migrants, particularly professional drivers. **Introduce an interim driver's licence** during the licence exchange period by leveraging the option under European Regulation 165/2014 to issue temporary driver cards (valid for up to 185 days). **Enable the application** for the exchange of foreign licences **before departure** or, at the latest, when the contract is signed, for migrants who already know their municipality of residence. (federal – FPS Mobility and Transport)

Allow the use of translators for theoretical and practical driving tests to increase accessibility for non-native speakers and **provide theoretical test sessions in English**. (regional – Flemish Agency for Mobility and Public Works)

Allow labour migrants to take the Code 95 theoretical and practical exam with the assistance of a translator, similar to the provisions in place for Ukrainian refugees. (regional – Flemish Agency for Mobility and Public Works)

Pilot driver licence assessments and remediation in origin countries, using a contact language and potentially in group settings, through a Flemish training centre with certified instructors. (regional – Flemish Agency for Mobility and Public Works; federal – FPS Mobility and Transport)

Take a whole-of-government-approach to attraction, settlement and integration

Assessment

There are no comprehensive and coordinated efforts to promote Flanders as an attractive destination for labour migrants. Existing initiatives are fragmented, informational rather than promotional, and not consistently targeted at non-EEA workers. There is also limited direct engagement with countries of origin. While there have been some talent missions, they lack clear vision and organisation, and it is unclear who is in charge, what the role of the government should be, or which countries should be targeted. Such talent missions have also been disconnected from existing talent partnerships in Flanders (e.g., Aurora). EU Talent partnerships (e.g., Match, Thamm, DT4E) have so far led to limited worker movements, in part because they are not fully operational yet, but also due to challenges such as administrative delays, and difficulty engaging the private sector.

In addition to the existing HR initiatives in many companies to onboard and orient labour migrants, the expansion of provincial international houses has made significant progress in supporting non-EEA labour migrants and their families by providing essential information and services to help them navigate life and work in Flanders. However, these soft-landing initiatives remain decentralized and may primarily cater to highly qualified expatriates, leaving lower-skilled labour migrants with limited access to similar resources.

Labour migrants face difficulties securing housing due to a shortage of rentals, with landlords often requiring financial documentation like payslips and a three-month deposit, which new arrivals cannot provide. The Flemish Housing Code restricts co-housing arrangements, and renting individual rooms involves stringent and costly regulations. While the Flemish decree on temporary housing standards for foreign workers introduces more flexibility, it has only been adopted by Antwerp, leaving the rest of Flanders without tailored housing solutions. Furthermore, labour migrants' housing conditions are not regularly inspected or monitored.

Labour migrants face significant barriers to enrolling their children in Flemish schools as well as day care for pre-schoolers which requires booking a seat months beforehand, such as the lack of a Belgian social security number, uncertainty about municipality residence, strict local priority rules, and early annual enrolment deadlines. The absence of online databases for available school places, combined with limited

employer or expat centre assistance, exacerbates the situation. International schools are costly and limited, especially for secondary education.

Although partners of non-EEA labour migrants have unrestricted access to the labour market, awareness of their rights is low among labour market stakeholders, limiting employment opportunities. Additionally, partners face barriers to self-employment, as they must apply for a professional card, for which they must either have a high starting salary or have the enterprise declared innovative or of sporting or cultural added value. This is a barrier for spouses who wish to engage in part-time work and freelancing.

Despite the benefits of Flanders' civic integration programme for rights awareness and Dutch language acquisition, participation rates among labour migrants remain modest, partly due to challenges such as balancing work and training, limited employer support, and insufficient adaptation to their specific needs.

Recommendations on attraction

To enhance visibility, the outreach and promotion of Flanders as a destination for foreign talent should be explicitly mandated to Flanders Investment & Trade (FIT) and carried out in collaboration with international houses and Belgian diplomatic representations abroad. (regional – FIT, International houses; federal – Foreign Affairs)

The *Your Future in Flanders* website should be expanded, so that all content is also available in English (including the content in the internal links) and marketed more effectively to reach a broader audience of foreign workers, serving as the primary platform for promoting Flanders. A promotional campaign is being developed by WEWIS in co-operation with VDAB and other stakeholders to enhance the website's visibility and impact. (regional – WEWIS, VDAB, international houses)

Aligned with the Flemish government agreement, establish stronger connections with specific countries of origin to enhance the recruitment of skilled workers and attract non-EEA workers in targeted occupations and at the same time conclude social security agreements. To streamline recruitment efforts, **identify strategic origin countries** based on matching skills composition in origin countries with the skills needs of the local labour market, considering also facility of recognition of qualifications. The indicator matrix for third country cooperation developed by VDAB would be a good starting point for this. (regional – WEWIS, VDAB, FIT)

Opt into collaboration with the new EU Talent Pool. VDAB should use the Talent Pool to post vacancies for jobs which are open to international recruitment and assist employers to review profiles which match job requirements. (regional – VDAB)

Continue to take advantage of the Talent partnerships and mobility measures supported by the European Commission with Belgian participation. (federal)

Recommendations on soft landing

Ensure sustainable and increased funding for provincial soft-landing programmes and infrastructures. Flanders should **coordinate International Houses and expat centres** to improve standards and share best practices, under the umbrella of talent attraction managed by the designated body. Special attention should be given to **supporting and reaching out to lower-skilled labour migrants**, ensuring that soft-landing programmes remain accessible and relevant to their needs. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour, WEWIS)

Recommendations on housing

Encourage the development of short-term rental options through public-private partnerships, employer initiatives, and support from international houses. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour, Flemish Minister of Housing)

Address financial barriers by promoting rental assistance programmes (e.g., Flemish Housing Fund) **and allowing employer-backed housing guarantees** to help migrants meet deposit and documentation requirements. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour, Flemish Minister of Housing)

Establish housing orientation services to guide labour migrants in finding accommodation before arrival. International Houses and the revised Talent Attraction website should provide information. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour, international houses)

Revise the Flemish Housing Code to allow overall for more flexible co-housing arrangements, particularly for short-term stays. This could involve **relaxing restrictions on shared amenities** (requirement to have individual sinks in every room), while maintaining reasonable standards of health and safety. (regional – Flemish Minister of Housing)

Require implementation of the Flemish Decree on housing for temporary labour migrants in all municipalities. (regional – Flemish Minister of Housing)

Establish a housing inspection mechanism. Integrate housing monitoring of labour migrants into the responsibilities of existing social inspection services to provide consistent oversight. Engage municipalities in monitoring housing conditions to strengthen accountability and ensure decent living standards. Migrants should also receive information – through orientation and on the Talent Attraction website – about how to report substandard housing to municipalities and social partners. (regional – Flemish Minister of Housing, municipalities, SERV Economic Migration Committee)

Recommendations on integration

Develop guidelines for schools to accommodate labour migrants' children, such as allowing pre-enrolment without a Belgian social security number or before municipal registration. This already exists at HEIs, which can serve as a model. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour)

Promote collaboration between employers, international houses, municipalities and relocation agencies to assist with school placements and finding housing. (regional)

Invest in expanding the capacity of international (English immersion) sections in public schools, particularly at the secondary level. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour)

Launch targeted information campaigns to raise awareness among employers, municipal officials and labour market stakeholders **regarding the right to work for partners of labour migrants.** (regional – VDAB, international houses)

VDAB should reintroduce introductory sessions and/or counselling for partners of labour migrants and conduct specific outreach to this group, in conjunction with International Houses. (regional – VDAB, international houses)

Review the requirements for professional card applications for partners of labour migrants and identify administrative hurdles which prevent them from engaging in economic activity. (regional – WEWIS, Flemish Minister of Education and Labour)

Develop support services within international houses to address employment challenges for partners of labour migrants. (regional – International houses)

Expand language training opportunities in Flanders to better accommodate migrants' work schedules, with a focus on highly flexible formats such as on-demand digital courses. Enhance support for employers by providing targeted resources, funding, and structured programmes to facilitate workplace-based language learning. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour, adult education institutions)

Reinforce online distance learning services to acquire Dutch language skills prior to departure. Consider subsidising language training for foreign workers with a launched single permit application or an employer contract/commitment. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour, adult education institutions)

Develop and pilot a mandatory civic orientation course for non-EEA labour migrants, distinct and shorter than the standard civic orientation course. Language training should not be mandatory for all labour migrants. The civic orientation course should be in line with the broader attraction and retention strategy, and cover principles of living in the Flanders community, practical aspects of daily life, labour rights, taxation (including the special regime) and social security, for a maximum of 24 hours. It should be offered in English or the migrant's contact language and scheduled during or compatible with typical working hours. The cost (currently EUR 90) should be borne by employers, with potential support from the Flemish Educational Leave system. Exemptions may apply for short or highly remunerated stays, or by taking a test (as for other migrants). Labour migrants could take the test, for example, after taking on-boarding training offered by their employer. The Agency for Home Affairs, potentially in collaboration with WEWIS, should design the curriculum. (regional – Flemish Minister of Education and Labour, WEWIS, International houses, Flemish Minister of Home Affairs, integration agencies)

Aim at offering (digital) pre-departure civic orientation courses to hired labour migrants that are waiting in their country of origin for the delivery of their administrative documents. Experiences can be drawn from the piloting of such courses by integration agencies and IOM. (regional – Flemish Minister of Home Affairs, integration agencies)

Focus on international students as a source for talent

Assessment

The orientation year helps international students transition into labour migrant status, offering graduates the opportunity to work without restrictions during this period. However, its limited duration (12 months) combined with lengthy processing times for single permit applications often results in gaps in legal residency. Such interruptions delay the accumulation of time needed for permanent residency.

Early graduates who apply for the orientation year must wait for their student residence permit to expire before receiving Annex 15, which restricts them to part-time work outside of school holidays (max 20 hours per week) and may hinder their ability to secure full-time employment. For graduates wishing to pursue self-employment, the professional card application process offers no flexibility for those who fail to secure residency on time.

The current system does not adequately address the challenges international students face in securing post-graduation employment, particularly for those lacking extensive networks or familiarity with the labour market. Finding an employer willing to sponsor a work permit within a short timeframe remains difficult. A lack of awareness and guidance for students and employers about the transition from student to labour migrant status and single permit requirements, combined with employers' unfamiliarity with the single permit process, exacerbates the problem.

The VLIR working group on economic migration and international students has identified many of these issues.

Recommendations

The duration of the orientation year could be extended, as is the case in countries like Germany and Finland, giving graduates more time to secure employment and a sponsor. Higher degree levels could grant longer orientation periods as in Australia and Canada. The orientation period could be based on empirical evidence of the time necessary to secure employment which qualifies for issuance of a single permit for the highly skilled. (federal – IO)

Ensure that early graduates who are not yet eligible for an Annex 15 have unrestricted access to the labour market between graduation and the expiration of their student residence permit (typically in October). (federal – IO)

Graduates applying for single permits or professional cards should receive a temporary extension of their legal residence if their orientation year is ending. This would prevent them from having to leave the country to apply from abroad and ensure continuity of legal residence, also allowing years of residence accrued during studies to count towards permanent residence eligibility. (federal – IO)

Ensure HEIs and associations inform foreign students on the existence and conditions of the orientation year. (regional – HEIs, VLIR).

Awareness efforts should be strengthened to ensure that international graduates understand their rights, application timelines, and the support available to them. Involving HEIs and international houses to lead awareness-raising campaigns is strongly recommended. Existing initiatives, such as the cooperation between the EMS and some HEIs during Postdoc Days or graduation events, could be expanded to include other institutions and relevant events. **Collaboration with international houses** could further enhance outreach and engagement. Particular emphasis should be placed on providing graduates with **detailed information about single permit requirements, notably salary thresholds.** Many international graduates may face challenges meeting these thresholds, particularly those transitioning at a later age (>30) or those seeking employment in sectors with lower average wages. **Employers should also receive tailored guidance** on effectively managing single permit applications. (regional – WEWIS, VDAB, HEIs, international houses)

To improve the transition from study to work, **VDAB and other stakeholders should build on existing initiatives to expand targeted support for international students.** **Job fairs** for international graduates, tailored career guidance, and workshops on labour market integration are already organised to some extent but could be scaled up and made more accessible. Strengthening **collaborations between VDAB and universities** to host job preparation events and expanding professional development resources – such as language training and sector-specific workshops – could better address the needs of international students. These efforts would enhance the alignment of graduates' skills with employer needs in Flanders and improve their chances of securing employment that meets single permit requirements. (regional – VDAB, HEIs, international houses, VLIR working group)

Annex

Table 1. Recommendations

| Theme | Actions | Time Frame | Type of change | Lead and participating actors |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Targeted attraction and recruitment - Attraction | | | | |
| Talent Attraction Mandate | <p>Officially mandate a public body as responsible for talent attraction policy.</p> <p><i>Example: "WEWIS will be responsible for promoting Flanders as a destination for talent, including coordination of public information instruments and campaigns, the identification of pools for recruitment abroad and attracting skilled workers, providing soft landing and integration support measures - coordinating these actions with support from the Ministries, agencies and actors involved and delegating responsibilities for specific actions as appropriate".</i></p> <p>The body would also be responsible for advancing Flanders' talent attraction and retention priorities in consultations with the Federal authorities.</p> | Short term: mandate | Legal, administrative | WEWIS |
| Horizontal Policy Plan | <p>Establish a committee or commission to draft a strategy as a "Horizontal Policy Plan". This strategy will address overlap, identify responsibilities within the attraction and retention strategy, and prioritise actions for the different bodies to pursue.</p> <p>The Committee should meet regularly to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coordinate the development and implementation of the Talent Attraction and Retention Strategy as well as the plans for promotion and recruitment abroad. - Coordinate Flanders' promotion as a destination abroad and recruitment initiatives. - Identify priority sectors/occupations and target sources. - Identify and propose solutions for obstacles and shortcomings in the talent attraction and the labour migration management framework for Flanders. - Coordinate measures for pre- and post-arrival integration of talent and their families. | <p>Short term: establish committee</p> <p>Medium term: produce and implement the Policy Plan</p> <p>Long term: monitor and revise plan</p> | Legal, administrative | Lead: WEWIS. Committee: VDAB, FIT, social partners, etc. |
| Improved evidence base | <p>Improve the evidence base for talent attraction policy and for management of labour migration more broadly</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify data needs. - Coordinate the collection, integration and dissemination of data. - Publish an annual report on talent mobility and labour migration in Flanders. | <p>Short term: establish working group on data mapping and needs, publish report</p> <p>Medium term: expand coverage and depth of annual report</p> | Administrative | Lead: WEWIS |
| Targeted Attraction and Retention Action plans | <p>Develop Action Plans and instruments to:</p> <p>Identify pools of talent abroad (Identification)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify countries with skills pools that match Flanders' needs and use the region's network abroad to confirm interest in the mobility of these skills and the willingness of local authorities to cooperate. - Identify skills pools of non-EEA graduates from Flemish higher education institutions. - Pursue agreements with governments and public employment services with strategic intermediaries providing access to high-potential talent pools abroad. | <p>Short term: drafting of the Action plans with the associated instruments</p> <p>Medium term: implementation of the Identification and Visibility pillars</p> <p>Long term:</p> | Administrative | Lead: WEWIS |

| Theme | Actions | Time Frame | Type of change | Lead and participating actors |
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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conduct market research and business intelligence on targeted talents and competition in target areas. <p>Increase Visibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brand Flanders and its associated outreach measures. - Promote Flanders' competitive advantages in social networks, through FIT and through intermediaries in targeted origin countries. - Organise regular information sessions through the Flanders network abroad and local partners in focus countries to promote Flanders as a working destination. <p>Attract and Recruit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify possible candidates to target with promotion through the public employment services and strategic intermediaries in focus countries - Engage candidates by encouraging them to participate in recruitment efforts. - Involve Flemish companies and key stakeholders in the international recruitment scheme. <p>Reception and Retention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Orient and accompany workers and their families in the initial phases of settlement in Flanders and in their long-term integration. | Implementation of the Attract and Recruit and Reception and Retention pillars | | |
| Support for international recruitment | Develop and improve support for international recruitment building on existing partnerships (e.g., Aurora, DT4E, MATCH, THAMM) and on recent VDAB activities, as well as new initiatives (e.g., EU Talent Pool). | <p><i>Short term:</i> identify priorities</p> <p><i>Medium:</i> develop and improve support for international recruitment</p> <p><i>Long term:</i> put in place targeted recruitment support activities</p> | Administrative | Lead: WEWIS VDAB, FIT, and key stakeholders |
| Promotional Portal for Flanders | <p>Bring existing internet information on talent attraction and labour migration (currently on different sites such as "Your Future in Flanders", "Work Permits for Foreign workers" etc.) into a single user-friendly Flemish website centralizing all relevant information, in Dutch and English, including sections for employers and foreign talent.</p> <p>Bring information and promotion under a single branded portal showcasing Flanders.</p> <p>Promote the portal through FIT abroad and in relation to targeted origin countries and profiles.</p> | <p><i>Short term:</i> designate single site for development and appoint lead</p> <p><i>Medium term:</i> converge content onto site and roll out promotion of the portal abroad</p> | Administrative | Lead: WEWIS. VDAB, etc. |
| Single Permits – Attraction | | | | |
| Coordinate with Federal Immigration Office | Amend the Cooperation Agreement to further clarify the terms of reference of the Management Committee provided for in the Agreement, as well as the operational arrangements for its meetings, to establish regular working groups to coordinate employment checks and security assessments, adapt the process to allow parallel processing and agree on cases where parallel processing should be conducted. | <p><i>Short term:</i> negotiate amendment to the Cooperation Agreement</p> <p><i>Medium term:</i> identify and implement adaptations of the processes</p> | Legal, administrative | Lead: WEWIS |
| Improve the process for establishing the migration SOL | Reinforce the role of the ACEM in reviewing the migration SOL by designating regular meetings of ACEM to receive evidence from stakeholders, review the evidence and produce an opinion document on occupations to include or exclude. | <i>Short term:</i> restructure the mandate and evidence | Legal, administrative | Lead: WEWIS |

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| | | collection practice | | |
| Fast track / facilitations | Allow longer work permit duration for certain categories of medium-skilled labour migrants. Allow in-Belgium applications for LMT category. Pilot Fast-Track for selected firms. | <i>Short term:</i> allow more in-Belgium applications <i>Medium term:</i> pilot adjustments to duration and Fast Track | Legal, administrative | Lead: WEWIS |
| Digitalisation | Accelerate introduction of automatic transfer system between Working in Belgium platform and WEWIS and Immigration Office back office. Automatically notify employers and workers of eligibility for Blue Cards and other advantageous permits. | <i>Medium term:</i> implement automatic file transfer; push notifications | | Lead: WEWIS |
| Reception, settlement and integration – Attraction and retention | | | | |
| Orientation and settlement and integration measures | Establish an orientation and integration plan for arriving talents, including the following elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coordination of International Houses. - Reinforced distance-learning services to acquire Dutch language skills, pre- and post-arrival. - Measures to facilitate access to housing. - Guidelines to schools to accommodate labour migrants' children. - Language-learning services appropriate to labour migrants. - Adapted civic orientation course. - Support for labour market integration of spouses of labour migrants and international students finishing their studies in Flanders. | <i>Short term:</i> coordination and support to Int. Houses <i>Medium term:</i> improved and standardized orientation material and courses | Administrative | Lead: WEWIS |
| Recognition of foreign qualifications | Appoint a central coordinating body to oversee processes between NARIC, professional recognition bodies and higher education institutions. This body will have the mandate to provide clear indications on recognition processes and the actors responsible. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Designate possibility of, and standards for, cases of partial recognition. - Coordinate with foreign administrations/institutions to facilitate recognition in selected priority regulated occupations. - Accelerate the development of equivalency recognition tools (in Dutch and English). - Establish a recognition database with precedents and processing times. - Coordinating the content on recognition in the talent attraction portal, including possible development of a query tool to provide automated responses and pathways for recognition according to type of qualification. | <i>Short term:</i> create coordination body <i>Medium term:</i> publish orientation information, identify cases for partial recognition <i>Long term:</i> establish fast track and MOU-based RFQ agreements | Legal, administrative | Lead: NARIC, AHOVOKS, Higher Education Institutions |
| Facilitate issuance of drivers' licenses | Accelerate access to drivers' licenses by introducing interim authorization and allowing applications prior to arrival. Allow the use of translators for theoretical and practical driving tests. theoretical exam prior to arrival. Pilot driver license assessments and remediation in origin countries. | <i>Short term:</i> introduce interim driver's licence <i>Long term:</i> pilot assessment and remediation in origin countries | | |

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