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EMN Finland National Conference and webinar *Is Finland ready for increased labour immigration?*

A conference organised by the Finnish Contact Point of the European Migration Network explored the question: "Is Finland ready for increased labour immigration?" A small group of guests participated in the event at the Taitotalo congress centre in Helsinki on 30 November, and a larger audience watched the event as a webinar.

Minister of Employment Tuula Haatainen: measures of the state authorities need support from the surrounding society

The opening words of the conference were given by the Minister of Employment Tuula Haatainen and State Secretary to the Ministry of the Interior Akseli Koskela. Minister Haatainen stated that discussing labour immigration is necessary as the lack of workforce is already slowing down the growth of various sectors and businesses in Finland. The Finnish Government has set ambitious targets for work-related immigration: labour immigration should be doubled by the year 2030. In order to meet this goal, the Ministry of Employment and the Economy has initiated several bills and other developments. The measures to be implemented during the sitting government's term are compiled in the *Talent Boost* programme. Launched in September, the *Roadmap for Education-based and Work-based Immigration 2035* defines the objectives for long-term development. According to Minister Haatainen, the state authorities' measures to attract skilled workforce to Finland will be in vain unless the attitudes of the surrounding society support that goal. She encouraged each member of the audience to think how they personally could make a difference and help those arriving in Finland feel welcome and accepted in Finnish society. Minister Haatainen emphasised that Finland must be determined and adopt a long-term perspective to hold its own in the global competition over talent and professionals. She added that Finland must eliminate discrimination in recruitment processes and ensure that employers are prepared to provide vocational support, education and training for employees and see potential in people whose competence or language skills still need support. Minister Haatainen emphasised that we should pay attention to the existing resources and strengths of people instead of what they may still be lacking.

State Secretary Akseli Koskela: investment comes first, results come later

Like Minister Haatainen, State Secretary Koskela also stated that the labour shortage is already hindering growth in Finland. According to the State Secretary, many entrepreneurs have named the shortage of skilled labour as the largest obstacle for economic growth. In addition to finding workers and encouraging them to come to Finland, another important question is how to entice them to stay. To retain the vitality of Finland, it is important to ensure that an increasing number of people feel at home here and believe in their future as part of Finnish society. In connection with this, the State Secretary highlighted three themes. First, the costs of immigration; according to the State Secretary, people sometimes express a notion that immigration should not produce any types of costs. The State Secretary went on to explain that this notion is flawed, as in terms of financial impact, immigration works similarly to investments: the investment comes first, the results come later. A common view among economic experts is that the total effect of immigration is positive as long as it is examined at a sufficiently extensive level. The second theme highlighted by the State Secretary was families. According to the State Secretary, having people with families immigrate without their spouse



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or children is rarely a permanent solution. Such a model is not worth pursuing, even if it might seem cost-effective at first glance. The third theme mentioned by the State Secretary was education. Early childhood education and education at different levels are key factors in this regard. The State Secretary stated that the basic structures are in good order in Finland and, as a country known for its education, we can offer real building blocks for a good life that stand comparison with any country in the world.

Like Minister Haatainen, State Secretary Koskela also mentioned discrimination in recruitment processes. The State Secretary called for a shift in attitudes and stated that we need to do everything in our power to make our society more receptive and equal to those who move here. The State Secretary went on to highlight a contradiction in the general discussion concerning immigration; while people see some groups as highly sought-after workforce, they do not see the same potential in those who enter Finland as asylum seekers, even though it would be important to put their skills and competence to use as well. The State Secretary added that success requires hard work and that immigration must be examined in a more comprehensive manner. In fact, the Ministry of the Interior has launched a project for building a comprehensive immigration policy. The State Secretary ended his address by stating that the results of today's conference will directly serve the preparations of Finnish immigration policy and asked all participants to offer their thoughts and ideas for the discussion.

First panel: *Increasing labour immigration – Easier said than done?*

The first panel introduced an international perspective to Finnish discussion on increasing labour immigration. The members of the panel were Associate Professor Mireille Paquet from Concordia University, Jean-Christophe Dumont, Head of the International Migration Division in the Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs at the OECD, and Silvio Grieco, Policy and Legal Officer in the Legal Migration and Integration Unit of the DG Migration and Home Affairs in the European Commission. The panel was moderated by Rafael Bärlund, Coordinator of the Finnish Contact Point of the EMN. The panel examined what Finland should do in order to increase labour immigration.

Viewpoints and good practices from the Canadian immigration policy

According to Mireille Paquet, the immigration policies of Canada and Finland face similar challenges, with the exception that Canada is 10–15 years ahead of Finland when it comes to immigration. Therefore, the topics currently under discussion in Finland have been an issue in Canada in the past, and the authorities have had time to experiment with various solutions. In other words, Finland has an excellent chance to learn from Canada in developing its immigration policy. The immigration volumes of Canada vastly exceed those of Finland: in 2019, for example, Canada welcomed nearly 200,000 permanent skilled migrants, and issued over 300,000 temporary work visas. According to Paquet, the Government of Canada has recognised skilled, medium-skilled and low-skilled migration as a major contributor to the national economy and to the labour market. There is also societal acceptance of this reality; Canadians do not question the importance of a high immigration levels for the country's capacity to move forward. In connection with this, Paquet highlighted three themes. First, the immigration policy must penetrate the entire society and be accepted as a shared approach. A high level of labour immigration cannot be achieved solely by economic development actors or the immigration department; it has to be supported by the community overall. This means very strong communications from the national government on how immigration is essential to the supply chains and the economic growth of the country.



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Second, labour immigration is a continuum that starts from pre-arrival services and finishes with an official, permanent residence permit. Canada offers services such as language training and credential recognition to labour immigrants even before their arrival in the country. What is essential is that, even with immigrants arriving with temporary visas and job offers tied to an employer, the goal is their permanent settlement in Canada. Moreover, the immigrants' spouses and partners are offered the chance for integration services, language training and access to the local labour market. According to Paquet, this approach is a game-changer as it helps immigrants to plan their move to Canada as a permanent change, start a family and ensure that the next generation is fully integrated.

Third, Paquet finds it important that labour migration remains managed by the Government. When facing labour shortages, we often feel tempted to have economic actors be the main intermediary between the migrant and the society, for example by limiting entry with job offers. According to Paquet, however, the key to success in Canada is its human capital approach: Canada recruits people not just on the basis of them having a job offer, but the majority of permanent migrants are selected on the basis of a point system. The point system looks at their education, language skills and experience. The approach is centered around recruiting broadly as the Government of Canada does not want people to leave the country at the end of their employment contract. This has proven effective as it ensures a labour pool capable of adapting to a changing labour market. According to Paquet, these things take time. Changing the processes is insufficient; what is important is to change the paradigm.

Situation of Finland from the perspective of the OECD

Jean-Christophe Dumont from OECD discussed what Finland could do in order to hold its own in attracting skilled international workers. The number of highly educated immigrants in Finland is still relatively small, but the development has been positive and, within the past 15 years, their numbers have tripled. The number of international students, in turn, has doubled. In 2018, the OECD published the indicators of talent attractiveness. In attracting highly educated labour, Finland ranked 18 out of the 35 OECD countries included in the ranking. Dumont joked that this is somewhat unusual for Finland which used to top all international rankings. In attracting international students, Finland ranked 4, and in attracting entrepreneurs, Finland placed eighth.

When discussing the reasons for Finland's average ranking in attracting highly educated workers, Dumont stated that Finland is doing great in terms of work conditions, inclusiveness and quality of life. The main issues in Finland seem to be the quality of opportunity, income level and taxation. The weaknesses of Finland also include immigrant's lower-than-average opportunities to permanently remain in the country as well as the opportunities offered to families, such as family reunification. In terms of the current challenges in Finland, Dumont had heard talk about long processing times for residence permits. However, he pointed out that Finland is already doing very well in this regard when compared to many other OECD countries. Second, people often talk about Finland's issues in the retention of skilled workers. However, according to Dumont, statistics show that Finland's retention is better than in many OECD countries; about 50% of international students were employed in Finland one year after graduation, whereas the corresponding figure for other OECD countries is 25–30% on average.

What, then, is the issue? Dumont stated that one of the largest issues in Finland is the integration of immigrants already in Finland. In addition to the fact that immigrants already in Finland have the potential to address the labour shortage, they are also a link to other potential immigrants. According to Dumont, well-



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integrated immigrants act as ambassadors of sorts, through whom other potential immigrants may be informed of the opportunities in Finland. For Finland, successful integration is also important because opportunities to find employment, enrol your children in school, engage in hobbies and studies and build a life in a safe society act as a goal and a reward after learning a difficult language. Dumont believes that Finland should support language training in the labour market while simultaneously improving the opportunities of using English. The employment rate of highly educated immigrants in Finland is lower than in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Estonia. Moreover, Dumont states that the difference between the employment rates of immigrants and native Finns is huge: 8%. The same goes for the mismatch between the skills and the occupation, which is regrettably common for immigrants. Dumont stated that Finland cannot increase its attractiveness for skilled foreign workers without addressing some of these labour market results.

Dumont also discussed Finland's options for increasing its visibility. He stated that putting a country on the map takes money, time and resources. Countries such as Canada and Australia invest a great deal of money in this in the form of information campaigns and other measures. Dumont adds that there are also other options, such as the use of EU-level mechanisms, such as the talent pool initiative which Dumont advises Finland to join. Dumont also sees much potential in opening complementary pathways and granting work permits to refugees. Third, Dumont examined the employer sector and encouraged engagement with employers to make English-language work environments more common and promote diversity in workplaces. It is also important to carry out internationalisation work with regions and cities. Finally, Dumont advised Finns to be patient and remember that changing attitudes and ideas takes time.

Grieco added the EU perspective to the discussion

Silvio Grieco from the European Commission talked about EU mechanisms that Finland could use in the immigration of international labour. Grieco noted that Finland is not alone with its concerns about enticing foreign labour to move permanently to Finland. According to the European Commission, the entire union attracts fewer skilled workers on average than the other OECD countries, such as the United States, Canada and Australia.

Grieco pointed out that the EU Blue Card granted for international skilled workers has not been very successful and has not resulted in a large number of workers migrating to Finland, among other things due to a high salary threshold. The Blue Card Directive has now been revised and significantly improved, according to Grieco. If the member states truly wish to use the EU Blue Card to attract highly qualified workers, the salary threshold can be set relatively low, which would help at least those arriving for entry-level positions.

Grieco also talked about the Commission's plans to publish the Skills and talent package in early 2022. As part of this package, two directives will be renewed: the directive concerning long-term residents and the directive concerning single permits. The Commission will also publish a communication that sets the path for the future. The EU Talent Pool, previously mentioned by Dumont, is also a main component of this communication. The purpose of the pool is to make EU as a whole more attractive to skilled workers outside the EU. The largest benefit of the Talent Pool is the matching of the skills of workforce outside the EU and the needs of EU employers. The goal is to develop a platform that can help the member states find the people they need. According to Grieco, this is a long-term project that will be developed in the next few years.



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A comprehensive approach towards immigration needed

As a conclusion from the first panel, we can say that in order to increase labour immigration in Finland, a comprehensive approach towards immigration is needed. The most important strategies for Finland are related to more than the streamlining of residence permit processes; the panelists agreed that, even though the efficiency of residence permit processes is important, it is not the most important factor in increasing labour immigration. Paquet and Dumont, who compared the situation in Finland with Canada and the rest of the OECD countries, agreed that the processing times of work-based residence permits are already quite short in Finland. Instead, the panel discussion emphasised the importance of a comprehensive approach: it is important to ensure the integration and retention of those already in the country and their families. Successful integration also makes Finland more attractive to other potential labour migrants. A comprehensive approach also includes other skills-based immigration, such as students, as well as complementary pathways and granting work permits to refugees, for example. The Canadian example, in particular, proved the functionality of a comprehensive approach, focusing on the potential of immigrants and understanding that the original reason why the person moved to the country will not define them forever but that they may find employment in different industries and contribute to society in different ways throughout their life. This calls for a shift in approach and attitudes, which takes time. However, the panelists gave the Finnish audience hope by pointing out that Finland is on the right path and encouraged Finns to be patient.

Second panel: *Immigration and labour market policy – structures, attitudes and readiness of the society*

Attitudes were also a significant theme in the second panel of the conference. The panelists were Minna Helle, Deputy CEO of Technology Industries of Finland, Taina Vallander, Director of Strategy and Development at the Finnish Confederation of Professionals STTK, Mika Raunio, Research Fellow at the Migration Institute of Finland, and Siamäk Naghian, Managing Director of Genelec. The panel was moderated by Minna Hulkkonen, Head of the Immigration Department in the Ministry of the Interior.

Immigration needed to alleviate the ageing problem

The discussion was based on a shared understanding that immigrants are a critically important resource for Finnish society, one of the most rapidly ageing populations in the world. Finland has the prerequisites for the development of the technological sector for example, but it is in dire need of international, skilled workers; according to Minna Helle, Deputy CEO of Technology Industries of Finland, technological industry companies will need 130,000 new workers over the next ten years. Helle referred to the Canadian example mentioned in the previous panel, stating that Finland does not have a similar uniform understanding of the importance of immigration for the economy. For this reason, the Confederation of Finnish Industries and the Technology Industries of Finland announced in the autumn a state of emergency in Finland in order to solve the shortage of workers; the goal was to express the issue as clearly as possible. Taina Vallander from the Finnish Confederation of Professionals STTK added that the shortage of workers does not apply only to the technology sector and export companies but also to municipalities and the health care sector, for example. According to Vallander, our options are either attracting new, skilled workers or cutting the services of the welfare state. Vallander also emphasised that we need to dismantle the culture of two labour markets and see those arriving in Finland as a resource and invest in their integration in the labour market.



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Siamäk Naghian, Managing Director of Genelec, mentioned his surprise at learning how people have suddenly understood the importance of immigration for the Finnish economy, even though the development has been visible for a long time. It should not come as a surprise to anyone that the Finnish population is ageing and there is need for more workforce. Research Fellow Mika Raunio provided background information for the discussion by pointing out that the issue of labour immigration was raised as early as in 2005 in the immigration policy programme, but the topic did not take root at the time. Launched by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment in 2017, the *Talent Boost* programme was the first real beginning which is now continued by the *Roadmap for Education-based and Work-based Immigration 2035*.

Are employers ready to hire foreign workers?

The panelists also discussed employers' prerequisites for employing foreign workers. Moderator Hulkkonen stated that, according to a recent study, 40% of businesses had not even considered the option of employing foreign workers. Helle pointed out that, in the technological sector, the figures most likely look better; according to her, 87% of the member companies of Technology Industries would be ready to employ foreign workers. Vallander mentioned that discrimination is still common in recruitment processes. Raunio emphasised that, as the perspective at national level becomes clear, the next step is to address regional structures and establish developer networks in different areas. The panelists listed attitudes of the society and the often unreasonably high language skill requirements as the largest obstacles for increasing labour immigration. On the other hand, Helle mentioned that employers may no longer be the party to blame for discrimination against foreign workers. According to her, there has been a shift in attitudes and the positive change will continue in the future.

Helle refers to the previous panel's conclusion on the importance of family reunification and integration by presenting an idea where businesses could start cooperating with schools and the public sector so that also the spouses and partners of foreign workers could find employment and enrol their children in school. Such measures could help businesses adopt the task of integrating immigrants, traditionally seen as the role of the public sector, and thus perhaps reach more permanent solutions. Raunio adds that there is no one correct way to integrate foreign workers and invest in the immigration of skilled workers. According to Raunio, large companies have the same abilities and resources to provide Finnish language training and provide assistance for their employees' integration process as the public sector. Raunio also mentions the capacity of SMEs to employ foreign workers as a challenge; many SMEs wish to recruit foreign workers but are unable to invest in supporting language studies, for example.

Feeling welcomed essential for a successful immigration policy

Siamäk Naghian identifies two priorities in increasing labour immigration; he highlights the same perspective as OECD's Jean-Christophe Dumont in the previous panel in stating that immigrants' experiences of feeling welcomed in Finnish society are essential for a successful immigration policy. He sees the discussion on the Finnish language and the related requirements as the tip of the iceberg on which the work community's readiness to welcome foreign people in Finland is culminated. A comforting message is that, in the end, enabling integration comes down to very small factors and that people are usually simply seeking an ordinary life in a safe society. The other priority is related to the need of workforce. According to Naghian, recruitment must be future-oriented and the goal must be to employ international workers in industries that will grow in the future so that we can ensure the supply of employees in the necessary industries. Raunio points out that, in addition to identifying the key industries and employing workers where they are needed, it is



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important to remember that immigration also works as a generator for human capital and it may not be necessary or rational to determine its end results.

Finland faces a huge task, we hold the key to success

As a conclusion of the panel, we can state that Finland is facing a huge task; in ensuring the functionality of the Finnish labour market, the ultimate question is the retention of the entire welfare state. However, the atmosphere after the second panel is optimistic. Finland has a good starting point and there are many actors in the Finnish labour market and in the general society who can help achieve this goal. All the panelists agree that it is important to avoid the politicisation of the issue. It is a fact that Finland needs more workforce to retain its vitality. Accepting this fact cannot be dependent on political fluctuations; it must be acknowledged by every decision-maker. At the end of the successful panel discussion, it was easy to agree with the ending words of Minna Hulkkonen: "There are many of us who want us to succeed, which makes me believe we can achieve this goal."

Practical example: the German Triple Win programme

The final section of the conference examined a practical example of international recruitment. The German Triple Win programme is related to the sustainable recruitment of nurses from the Philippines. The Triple Win project was presented by Björn Grüber and Raymond Pascubillo from GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH).

The Triple Win programme is based on the idea of sustainable, responsible immigration. As its name suggests, the programme uses a 'triple win' approach in international recruitment. The goal is that each party wins; the country of origin, Germany and the nurses. From the perspective of the country of origin, it is essential to review whether the country has a surplus of qualified nurses that could travel abroad for work. International recruitment from the country in question is only possible if there is a surplus of qualified workers, in other words there are unemployed workers. If there is a surplus, as is the case for the Philippines, employing nurses abroad improves the nurses' skill level and the remittances to their families reduce poverty in their country of origin. For the receiving country, in other words Germany, the benefits are obvious; skilled immigrants can respond to the staff shortage in the health care sector. Through the programme, nurses have the chance to improve their knowledge and skills, gain new employment opportunities and, of course, receive financial gain in the form of salary. Moreover, the Triple Win programme protects nurses moving abroad against certain risks that may be related to the immigration of workers moving from countries with a lower income level. For example, the language training is funded, meaning that the employee does not have to pay the costs. In addition, the salaries of nurses employed from abroad are clearly agreed upon and they are the same as for German workers.

The goal is that the nurses arriving through the project receive a permanent residence permit and work permit in Germany, which seems to be the case; the project was launched in 2013, and the majority of nurses who have entered Germany through the project are still working in Germany. According to Grüber, one of the essential factors in the success of the programme is that Filipino nurses can take their time integrating in Germany and in the German labour market without having to fear a quick return to their country of origin.

The recruitment of the nurses happens in stages. The first stage consists of consulting the employers and signing the contract. In the second stage, the German employers are matched with candidates from the Philippines. The third stage covers the preparations before departure, including obtaining a residence permit



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and carrying out language and cultural training in the country of origin. The employers are also informed of the working methods of Filipino nurses in employer workshops. In the fourth stage, the nurses arriving from the Philippines receive support in Germany. The Triple Win programme supports the nurses in credential recognition processes, among other things. Of all the nurses who have arrived in Germany through the programme, 90–95% have their credentials recognised during their first year of working.

The programme has been successful and, at the moment, more than 3,400 nurses who have arrived through the programme are working in the German health care sector. About 300 German employers are involved in the programme.

Comments on Triple Win from the perspective of Finland's own experiences of foreign recruiting

The Triple Win programme was commented on by Päivi Vartiainen from Tampere University of Applied Sciences. Vartiainen has studied the recruitment of Filipino nurses in Finland. According to Vartiainen, the Triple Win programme is an excellent example of sustainable, legal and fair international recruitment. She believes that Finland should learn from the German Triple Win model as it entails certain benefits compared to the Finnish recruitment of foreign workers. In Finland, Filipino nurses work as nursing assistants even if they have completed four years of nursing studies. Unlike in Germany, nurses in Finland lack a clear path for continuing their studies in Finland to gain the qualification and professional title of a licensed nurse. Another weak point in the Finnish recruitment policies is that the employment contracts of nursing assistants are usually fixed-term. Vartiainen states that nurses arriving from abroad should be guaranteed long-term professional and social integration in Finland. Vartiainen suggests cooperation between Finland and Germany so that Finland could learn from the German practices of recruiting foreign nurses. There are also opportunities for collaboration at EU level, and Vartiainen would like to see all the EU countries suffering from labour shortages join forces. This was also proposed by Silvio Grieco from the European Commission in the first panel of the day.

Ending words of the conference

At the end of the fruitful conference, the participants were asked to share their ideas of the most important factor in promoting labour immigration in Finland. The responses sent through the chatroom formed a word cloud where attitudes seemed to arise as the key target for development.