

# Refugees and the labour market: the role of skills in facilitating access

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## A skill-based approach

Cedefop has been investigating the potential of [skills based pathways to refugee protection](#), in collaboration with the International Centre for Migration Policy Development. The aim of this initiative is to increase the evidence base in support of designing and implementing complementary pathways mechanisms for admitting adult refugees from a first host country (within or outside the EU) to an EU country while taking into account, and making use of, [VET, skills and the qualifications](#) and linking them to the labour market needs. This blog article aims to explore how relevant is this initiative from a policy perspective and also explain the rationale of such an approach.





## Pathways for protection

References to skills of refugees with the aim of creating pathways for protection can be found in the context of the [Global Compact on Refugees](#) but were (at least initially) also intended to lead to a more purposeful relocation of asylum seekers from Italy or Greece to other EU MS under the EU relocation programme. A recent blog by Schultz *et al.* (2018) discusses five practical examples around whether “*Labour mobility for refugees and asylum seekers would mend or erode protection systems*”. Most of these foresee the refugees taking a shift in their status from (refugee) protection status to a work-related migration. One of the examples, the Australian Community Support Programme combines resettlement with skills by letting the refugee arrive as a refugee with a concrete labour market offer in hand. The authors conclude that this option would result in cherry picking and reduce the already scarce protection places via resettlement. Ruhs (2019) questions whether theoretically “Labour Market can work for Refugees?”. Ruhs identifies three possible policy approaches: a) refugees gaining access to existing labour immigration programs without policy adjustments for “refugees workers”; b) employers who should be incentivized to recruit refugee-workers within existing labour market schemes and, c) creation of labour market immigration programs exclusively for refugee workers.

## Some preliminary Cedefop evidence

All the concerns raised in the works above were reflected in stakeholder consultations conducted under the Cedefop study. Employers are reluctant to invest in upskilling an employee whose legal status is only of temporary nature. Humanitarian stakeholders raised concerns that instead of broadening pathways for refugees to protection, such a scheme could result in cherry picking by at the same time reducing already limited places for resettlement for vulnerable people. The idea of skills based complementary pathways is thus met with some doubts, mainly connected to practicalities as well as concerns about watering down the traditional divide between humanitarian and non-humanitarian mobility purposes.

Indeed, the links between labour market and refugee protection are neither new nor without friction. Refugee protection evolved as a rather exclusive category of third country nationals with a broad range of special rights vis-à-vis other third country nationals. As refugees are resettled predominantly based on vulnerability criteria, their skills play (so far) only a little - if not any - role. This completely neglects that refugees –vulnerable or not – have skills that may be of value to receiving countries and their labour market needs and thus – if carefully matched – could improve refugees’ self-reliance. [Making use of refugees’ skills](#) for a more purposeful matching of refugees with destination countries’ labour market needs seems thus a rather logical way to go.

## Skills as a means of mitigation

So, what if a refugee would retain the refugee status when admitted to a destination country based on her/his skills? And what if the skills of refugees would be used to resettle the refugee to a country where such skills are on demand by the local labour market?

Evidence from Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB) showed that employers may embrace the possibility to hire refugees from third countries if they have a labour demand that cannot be satisfied by the local market and if administrative hurdles can be kept low. The Skills Panorama provides comprehensive evidence about skill needs across [Member States](#). On the other hand, it is well documented that refugees do possess skills and qualifications.

At the same time, there seems to be no good reason why refugees could not be resettled based on their skills using established pathways for regular resettlement, admission or sponsorship schemes. The argument of cherry picking refugees with skills could be met by setting certain safeguards that resettlement countries need to engage in both humanitarian and non-humanitarian driven resettlements.

Allowing refugee resettlement based on skills may open doors to countries that traditionally are sceptical towards refugee admission. If contributing to address global resettlement needs is at the same time satisfying local labour shortages, it could be easier argued in front of anti-immigrant leaning electorates. Refugee status allows for a more stable and secure residence than a permit connected to a certain employment. Allowing refugees to keep their refugee status while entering skills based pathways to protection would make their stay predictable and not inevitably lead to filing asylum applications once the work permit ends.

Summarised, most complementary pathways pertain to either student scholarship programmes or community based sponsorship programmes but there is less experience of skills based complementary pathways. The target of Cedefop 's study that is taking place from January 2018 to July 2020 is to fill this action gap, thereby engaging with and drawing on many experiences gained in similar settings. Seeking ways to expand refugees' access to protection is definitely a policy idea worth to be examined and therefore should be well tested instead of prematurely searching for reasons to close the respective doors.

## References

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