

In the context of the discussions around the United Nation's Global Compact for Migration, the idea of Global Skills Partnerships has emerged as a way to associate migration and skills development for the mutual benefit of origin and destination countries, as well as migrants themselves. This concept is not new – it builds on a variety of bilateral skills mobility partnerships already piloted and tested by many OECD countries. However, these programmes have generally remained limited in scope and remain the exception rather than the rule.

*This edition of **Migration Policy Debates** looks at the reasons why existing Skills Mobility Partnership have not been taken up more widely. It proposes concrete measures for making them work more globally: involving employers in both programme design and validation of migrants' skills; acknowledging the diversity of approaches and situations across countries and sectors in how skills development and migration are combined; creating one-stop-shops for promoting skills mobility partnerships, supporting their implementation and conducting evaluation.*

What would make Global Skills Partnerships work in practice?

What is a Skills Mobility Partnership?

Historically, Government-to-Government (G2G) agreements for managing low-skilled labour migration have often had a training component. This has usually been nominal, in the form of a short and superficial pre-departure training covering basic language skills, workplace safety and simple tasks, and cultural orientation. In some cases, a day or two of pre-employment orientation has been provided following arrival in the destination country. In parallel, the bulk of highly-skilled international movements took place outside of agreements, often with major difficulties for tertiary-educated foreign workers, who have invested in their own skill development, to have their skills recognised and valued in the destination country. Traditional recruitment, whether G2G or spontaneous, has largely ignored skills development, cost-sharing of training and ensuring that some benefit of skill acquisition also accrues to the origin country.

Skills Mobility Partnerships (SMPs) offer something different:

- **Skills development and recognition**, in which the migrant acquires new professional skills or improves existing ones building upon prior experience and training;
- **Partnership**, in which mobility is organised, generally within existing legal migration

channels, and the costs of training and matching are at least partially borne by the country of destination and/or employers;

- **Mutual benefit**, in which benefits are provided for all involved: countries of origin (by increasing the potential pool of skills); the destination country (by facilitating access to skills in demand); and migrants (by enabling them to acquire and market new skills).

Although they have accounted only for a small part of total labour migration, programmes combining the elements of SMPs have been around for quite some time. No single model prevails: different cost-sharing structures have popped up to support skills development in origin countries and to ensure that migrants have the skills needed by employers abroad and at home. Examples of these models are provided below.

The idea of combining skills development and migration is not new. For example, in 2009 the OECD called for “support [...] education and training institutions with the objective of increasing the total supply from [...] origin countries and giving graduates privileged treatment in the legal migration queue” (OECD).

Similarly, the European Training Foundation conducted a global inventory of “Migrant Support Measures from an Employment and Skills Perspective” (EFT, 2015) and concluded that “there are promising examples of ‘skills partnerships’

between countries of origin and destination, which combine international development cooperation with migration management policies. Although these two policy fields usually have little to do with each other, there is an added value in combining [them] in certain economic sectors with high international labour mobility.”

Opposition to Skills Mobility Partnerships

The case for SMPs seems incontrovertible, but there has been pushback regarding the use of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to support training initiatives that benefit the donor country. Indeed, as migration flows from developing countries increased in the 1990s and 2000s, ODA-driven initiatives to build skills in origin countries have faced the dilemma of what to do when unintentionally equipping participants with skills and qualifications which allowed – or encouraged – them to emigrate.

The objective of ODA – to support the economic development of less advanced countries – was potentially undermined when participants in training packed their bags and took their new skills to donor-country labour markets rather than staying home. When residents asked for courses explicitly training for emigration (such as language or other destination-country specific skills), they had to be refused since ODA could not be spent to benefit donor countries.

Building on the seminal work of Mountford (1997) and Beine, Docquier and Rapoport (2008), among others, this conundrum has however been mitigated with a call for development assistance to recognise that building skills with an explicit focus on emigration could, under certain conditions, actually increase the total supply of skills in origin countries (“Brain Gain”), through increasing the total pool of skills at origin.

The possibility of return migration, notably in the context of circular schemes popular in the early 2000s, also helped mitigate the fear of a brain drain and to enhance expected benefits for countries of origin in the context of SMPs.

Skills Mobility Partnerships in the Global Compact for Migration

The idea of “Global Skills Mobility Partnerships”, which is currently being debated in the context of the UN Global Compact for Migration, builds on this concept. It appears in the first draft (26/03/18):

“Build Global Skills Partnerships amongst countries that strengthen training capacities and foster skills development of workers in countries of origin and migrants in countries of destination with a view to preparing trainees for the labour markets of all participating countries”¹.

It echoes a proposal previously formulated by Michael Clemens, for an “ex ante public-private agreement to link skill formation and skilled migration for the mutual benefit of origin countries, destination countries, and migrants” (Clemens, 2015).

More specifically, Clemens’ proposal refers to bilateral agreements in which the destination country gets directly involved in creating human capital among potential migrants in the country of origin prior to migration. The rationale of this specific proposal lies in the differential in the cost of training and returns to skills between destination and origin countries, on the assumption that the cost of transferability of skills across borders is lower than the difference in expected returns. The format proposed above is a specific example of a Skills Mobility Partnership, but there are many others.

Existing Skills Mobility Partnerships

In practice, numerous migration programmes have put skills development at the centre of their objectives, enabling workers to gain new competencies.

Such SMP-type initiatives have been implemented based on different models of cost-sharing and migration (Table 1). They differ in terms of their overall objective, the financing of training, and its place. Such programmes include for example:

- Pilot programmes involving **ODA-funded training in the origin country with an option of employment in the destination country**. This modernisation of traditional “guest worker” programmes has been used in partnerships between Spain and Morocco, for example, or Italy and Moldova. The opportunity of employment in the destination country is the key attraction for participants, although in practice not all participants are able to migrate, and in some less successful instances, few if any.

¹ §33(e). Implicit reference to Global Skills Partnerships can also be identified in other parts of the document, notably in objective 5 §20b.

- **Seafarer training for the merchant marine industry.** Major shipping companies contribute to the training, supply equipment and establish curriculum for training institutions which train to an international seaman standard. Seafarer apprentices also pay tuition, but the cost of their training is effectively subsidised by the industry (box 1).
- **International students in higher education,** whether or not they receive scholarships from the destination country. International study is a form of SMP in that skills development is associated to mobility in a specific cost sharing model. With more than 3 million international students in the OECD, this is one of the most common and most important forms of SMPs. Retention rates in destination countries are typically in the range of 30 to 35% which means that many students move on to other countries or return to their country of birth. Notably, all spending in destination countries to support international students from ODA-eligible developing countries is counted as ODA.
- **International trainees,** whether intra-company transfers or under subsidised programmes for technology transfer and capacity building. Here, training occurs in the destination country, but options to remain may be constrained by legislation.
- **Sectoral recruitment programmes in nursing,** where destination country bodies (ministries of health or individual hospitals or health districts) work with origin-country partner institutions (including twinning) or recruiters to train to specific requirements. This has been done in Finland, Germany, Italy and Norway, for example. These small programmes work because of clear and long-term demand, large employer bodies, public-sector approval, and well-defined training programmes. However, they generally recruit from nursing training institutes or practicing nurses in the origin country, raising the risk of sapping skills rather than truly building capacity.
- **Vocational training in the origin country following destination-country standards** (see Box 2). Here, ODA invests in the skills pool in the origin country. The possibility to migrate is not guaranteed, nor, in some cases, is certification in the destination country, which may be done separately – but graduates potentially qualify for

migration opportunities which would otherwise be foreclosed.

- **Vocational training in the destination country.** This may appear as a more attractive option for employers in countries and sectors where the VET system is well developed and recognised. It allows notably for work experience with employers of the destination country and provides employers with reassurance regarding the quality and relevance of education as well as the opportunity to develop language skills in a working environment (see, for example, the German programme MobiPro, in the context of intra-EU mobility). Retention of successful trainees is important for participating employers, so employers are less likely to encourage return migration.

Box 1 Training for seafarers

About one in three of the 1.65 million seafarers working on international merchant ships worldwide was trained in the Philippines. Other leading countries where training occurs are China, Russia and Ukraine. All major shipping companies are directly involved in the training of seafarers in these origin countries. Employment is generally guaranteed for graduates.

For example, the Norwegian Shipowners' Association (NSA), which employs more than 40 000 foreign seamen, has established a Norwegian Training Center in Manila as well as an NSA cadet training project in Russia (in partnership with Admiral Makarov State Maritime Academy), an NSA Class Project in collaboration with the Latvian Maritime Academy, and a joint project with CSG-owned Shanghai Maritime Academy.

In all cases, when the training takes place at origin, the primary benefit for the country of origin accrues when some of those who successfully undertake training remain rather than migrate and those who stay have higher employability and productivity, or if enough return from abroad and use their acquired skills. If the training component consists mostly of retraining or upskilling professionals who were already employed so that they can work permanently abroad, the overall benefit for the origin country will be limited. Similarly, if the selection process for migration after graduation identifies those with the highest abilities and recruits them to jobs abroad, the net effect on the total stock of human capital remaining in the origin country may be marginal. Finally, if those who remain or return have no opportunities to use

their newly acquired skills, any potential benefit is lost.

When the training takes place in the destination country, the potential gain for countries of origin depends on return migration. In addition, returnees should have the possibility to get their skills recognised, and enjoy a return to their skills in the labour market of their origin country.

Too often, a lack of opportunities to use new skills back home limits incentives to return, blocking any benefits for origin countries of training received in destination countries.

Conditions for mutually beneficial schemes can be met, but rely on a close monitoring and evaluation of the costs and benefits of the programme for all stakeholders in order to remove possible bottlenecks and to adapt the design of the programme to improve their efficiency.

A typology and selected examples of Skills Mobility Partnerships

		Training is taking place mainly in the country of ...			
		origin		destination	
Objective - Addressing skills needs mostly at ...		origin	destination	origin	destination
Training mainly paid by ...	Migrant	(not applicable)	Privately funded education for migration	Self-financing international students	
	Employer in destination country	(not applicable)	Multinational firm global trainee schemes		
	Destination country	Australian Pacific Technical College prog. (AUS) Blue Bird Pilot Scheme (NLD)			
	Migrant – Employer in destination country		Seafarers Nurses (e.g. FIN, ITA, DEU)		Seasonal agriculture worker scheme with a training component*
	Migrant – Destination country		Low-skilled workers with pre-departure training (e.g. KOR)	Scholarships and youth exchange programmes	
	Destination country – Employer in destination Country	GiZ “triple win project” (with PHL, GEO, VNM, TUN) ITA (notably in the tourism sector)			Nurses (e.g. JPN), Trades (e.g. DEU, KOR) Traineeship prog. (e.g. CHE, JPN)
Conditions for the programme to be beneficial to the origin country (beyond remittances)		1- Training for origin and destination needs according to common standards → perfect transferability of skills 2- Training enhances employability at origin 3- Some trainees either return or never migrate – and selection is random or protects against “skimming”.		1- Return migration 2- Recognition of skills acquired abroad upon return 3- Demand for skills acquired abroad at origin 4- Indirect transfers (e.g. trade; technology)	

Why have Skills Mobility Partnerships not (yet) been taken up more widely?

With few exceptions (e.g. seafarers and international students), projects corresponding to the typologies above have usually remained in the pilot phase or matured into niche initiatives. Even among the successful examples, no single model has emerged as universal or most effective. Successful experiences have not been able to scale up (Boxes 2 and 3) and most skilled migration occurs outside of SMP-type initiatives.

There are a number of reasons for this. The first is that describing the SMP model as a “triple win” reduces the number of stakeholders to just three – the origin and destination states and the migrant – ignoring other key participants, especially employers in both origin and destination countries. If employers don’t see how it can benefit them, then the SMP will struggle to take off. Adding the employer to the model requires overcoming three key obstacles:

- Origin country training that ignores or fails to meet expectations of employers in destination countries, frustrating employer demand in terms of skills, reliability and even timeliness. In other words, for employers in destination countries, the cost of training is secondary if the quality of the education cannot be guaranteed and the worker doesn’t arrive with sufficient language skills.
- The development-aid model is detached from employer demand, focusing on state-to-state relationships.
- The cost-sharing structure of training has not reconciled training conducted for *origin-country* demand with that specific to *destination-country* (employer) demand.

This critical point was made notably by the GFMD business mechanism (GFMD Business Mechanism 2017), arguing that “an active engagement with the private sector toward a quadruple win scenario would strengthen such agreements”.

Box 2. The Australia Pacific Technical College Programme (APTC)

The APTC was designed as a centre of training excellence, helping Pacific Islanders to gain Australian-standard skills and qualifications for a wide range of vocational careers throughout the Pacific – careers where skilled employees are in high demand. The programme was not designed specifically to promote emigration, but to build skills in islands where local skill basins were insufficient and skilled workers were deployed from developed countries. From this point of view, it has been successful, 5 000 graduates in the first eight years of the programme with employers very satisfied with the skills levels of graduates. However there has been a low migration rate (2%). While the skill base was built up, graduates were unable to take advantage of regional wage differentials. Low mobility was due to the fact that many of the students were already employed and remained with their employer and because many were older (average age: 32), making them less prone to migrate. Yet the migration intentions appeared high among this group.

Obstacles to mobility included the fact that the programme was not connected to any regular labour migration channel, scheme or even international matching mechanism, leaving all international job search to the individuals themselves. Further, while the qualifications were at the Australian standard, they still required a very expensive recognition procedure to be able to use them in a skilled migration application. The lower cost of training in the origin country was not achieved, either, since the programme and the trainers were sent from Australia, and the final cost per graduate (AUD 35 000) was similar to what it would have cost to train them in Australia.

A second explanation is that a SMP, to be truly a “partnership”, requires transfers of resources to the country of origin. These resources can come partly from employers – potentially even public-sector employers. However, public support may be needed, notably through ODA. In that case, the development impact of the programme, by building up the skill base in the origin country, is key to ensure its sustainability. In a number of cases however, SMPs did not fully deliver on that condition because:

- Higher enrolment, graduation or upgraded capacity for training did not lead to locally-relevant skills and therefore did not increase origin country participation and/or capacity.
- Skills acquired in destination countries could have “returned” to the origin country, but only if the return migrant had a chance to use them. Indeed, skills acquired in the destination

country were not always transferable to employment in the origin country.

- Selective programmes could also have “skimmed off” the best candidates for emigration.

As discussed above, SMPs need to go beyond bilateral and G2G agreements to include multiple partners, adding complexity to the process. In addition to employers, key partners include training institutions and certification bodies.

More generally, SMPs should be associated to an overall strategy in origin and destination countries to assess and recognise foreign qualifications (OECD, 2017a).

Box 3. Training abroad for skills needs in the Italian labour market

The annual quotas for labour migration to Italy set aside a certain number of places for nationals who have been trained in the origin country in programmes accredited by the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies. In recent years, this has been one of the only labour migration channels open for workers without special qualifications, yet inflows never fill the allotted quota.

From 2006 to 2011, 9 500 spots were opened, while about 1 630 persons participated in such training courses and 720 were approved to enter. Courses include Italian language instruction (in general, to level A2 of the CEF), basic civic education, and occupation-specific skills. Training was organised with funding from Italian public authorities and, from 2008, from the European Integration Fund. Institutions in partner countries with bilateral labour migration agreements – primarily in North Africa and Southeast Europe – provide courses.

The main obstacle to functioning in these initiatives has been the demand side. A ministry-funded matching database allows employers to identify workers trained in origin countries but this has not led to recruitment under the reserved quota. In other cases, political obstacles hindered uptake: the 430 workers trained in Moldova, for example, were unable to depart due to failed ratification of the G2G labour migration treaty.

How can these shortcomings be addressed?

Take into account the diversity of approaches across destination and origin countries

For SMPs to become truly “global” more must be done than merely increase the size and generalise existing pilot programmes based on training in origin countries. The broader extension of the SMP concept will be achieved by recognising the diversity of approaches and situations across countries and sectors.

Reinforce the offer in terms of legal channels for intermediate skill levels

Much of the experience with SMPs has been oriented towards non-tertiary level skills. Yet many migration systems do not have favourable – or any – provisions for medium-skilled workers, and specific visa or permit channels may need to be opened to allow this kind of migration.

The offer in terms of youth mobility programmes and scholarship grants for international students (see SDG objective 4.b), including in vocational education systems, should be reinforced. OECD (2017b) recommends developing an EU-wide youth mobility scheme for third-country nationals. At a global level, innovative mechanisms for financing a global scholarship programme for people from less developed countries could be envisaged.

Expand the definition of skills within SMPs

Skills are a continuum, making distinctions between “low-skilled” and “high-skilled” necessarily arbitrary, however useful in legal and statistical classification.

Many labour migration programmes in agriculture, hospitality, construction or manufacturing may not have an explicit skills-development component necessary to be considered SMP-type programmes. Yet, some of them successfully achieve the purported “triple win” and are larger than any self-declared SMP currently operating: low-skilled workers gain an earning opportunity in the destination country, with working conditions protected to some degree and an acceptable level of earnings; the origin country relieves unemployment and receives remittances; and the destination country safeguards its resident labour market and reduces the risk of unauthorised overstay.

Acknowledging and reinforcing the skills development component of these programmes will be key to go beyond selected medium-skilled occupations (notably in the health and care sector) which currently occupy the SMP “spotlight”.

Reinforce training mechanisms in existing legal migration channels or initiatives

Most OECD countries already have programmes that can be adapted to turn them into true SMPs.

For example, EU Mobility Partnerships, which are contributing to the operationalisation of the EU Global Approach to Migration and Mobility

(GAMM), offer a framework for tailor-made dialogue and operational co-operation for fostering well managed migration. The skills development component of these programmes could be reinforced, building e.g. on the expertise of the European Training Foundation.

In the same vein, in the context of the European Agenda for Migration, the European Commission is developing targeted legal migration pilot projects which include temporary as well as longer-term migration schemes, based on skills needs and offers in Member States and selected third countries. These pilot projects should be designed with a strong skills development and recognition component to maximise impact.

More generally, a number of private initiatives could be more widespread (Box 4) and existing efforts of training institutions could be better linked to migration opportunities (Box 5)

Ensure that employer requirements in destination countries are built into the process

Employers won’t accept training unless they trust the certification, the institute or the certifier. The more complex and country-specific the training, the more sceptical employers may be of involvement in an SMP. Direct recruitment from trusted institutes – with low-risk trainee options and additional skills development – may be one way to solve this.

Manage returns through relevant incentives in origin and destination countries

Destination countries have also been faced with the question of how to manage returns when migration is meant to be temporary. The biggest incentive to return is to have decent work upon return. Building this possibility into the process from the start is essential.

This can be achieved by identifying and addressing obstacles to return, which go beyond economic and security conditions to potentially include *inter alia* the lack of portability of pension and social rights, fiscal policies, recognition of foreign experience and qualification, access to quality education in the country of origin for the children.

Allow employers in destination countries to retain some workers – especially those who are most suitable

Destination countries making major investments in training – especially if these investments are made

in the higher-cost destination country – generally do so on the assumption that employers will be able to retain any workers who have acquired the skills and productivity to remain. Therefore, selective provisions to remain should be included even in temporary programmes.

Box 4. Porsche Training and Recruitment Center

Porsche is involved in training auto mechanics for its worldwide network. In a project, it supports the identification of underprivileged Filipino youth with basic English-language skills for a two-step training and selection programme. The first phase is ten months basic vocational training, offered through the existing mechanic training at Don Bosco Technical Institute in Manila, to which Porsche has contributed equipment and curriculum. Of these, about 40 top graduates annually are selected to participate in a second nine-month training by Porsche itself. At the end, qualifying graduates are able to be hired by Porsche dealerships anywhere in the world, subject to national immigration rules.

The programme was developed as a corporate social responsibility initiative yet provides a trained workforce with company-specific skills to importers and dealers, and established a regular pipeline for Porsche Service Mechatronics specialists. Dealers hiring the graduates pay a one-time fee which covers the entire cost of the training and placement. Graduates commit to work for Porsche for at least three years.

Box 5. International partnerships for training and education

The [European Training Foundation](#) is an EU agency that helps transition and developing countries harness the potential of their human capital through the reform of education, training and labour market systems, and in the context of the EU's external relations policy. The focus is largely on vocational education training in 29 partner countries mostly in EU neighbourhood.

The [British Council International Skills Partnerships](#) bring together experienced organisations in the UK skills sector with counterparts in other countries to deliver skills development projects. It aims at developing high-quality education that meets the needs of industry and improves the links between education and industry.

Projects have been delivered in a range of sectors from fashion to engineering and finance. They have included the development of joint curricula, quality assurance methodologies, new models of employer engagement, careers guidance programmes and transferable skills training.

Facilitating the development of Skills Mobility Partnerships

To address issues and concerns, the SMP concept needs not only to be expanded but also to be nurtured.

One means to do so is via a multi-stakeholder partnership, as initially imagined in the Sutherland Report (UN 2017)². The report envisioned a structure to provide States with dedicated expert capacity to facilitate the negotiation, implementation and monitoring of bilateral, regional and (possibly) global agreements on labour migration.

The conjunction of the Sutherland Report concept and the SMP concept, coupled with concrete operational innovations, appears promising as a way to make skills partnerships truly global and to overcome the limitations of existing models, notably by greater involvement of employers, training institutions and regulatory bodies in design and implementation.

A partnership-based structure, a global “clearinghouse” for SMPs, could start small, with a backbone around partners in well-tested SMPs, and expand its partnership to encompass additional partners. This would allow more flexibility in the development of initiatives. Each SMP will necessarily vary in terms of:

- Cost structure of training: who pays, with involvement of government and private institutions in the destination country, but also a direct engagement of the potential migrant.
- Location of training: balancing possible lower costs and risks in origin countries with the higher credibility of destination country institutes.
- Responsibility for curriculum development: especially in terms of content specific to the destination country and of little added value for the origin country labour market.
- Links to legal migration channels.

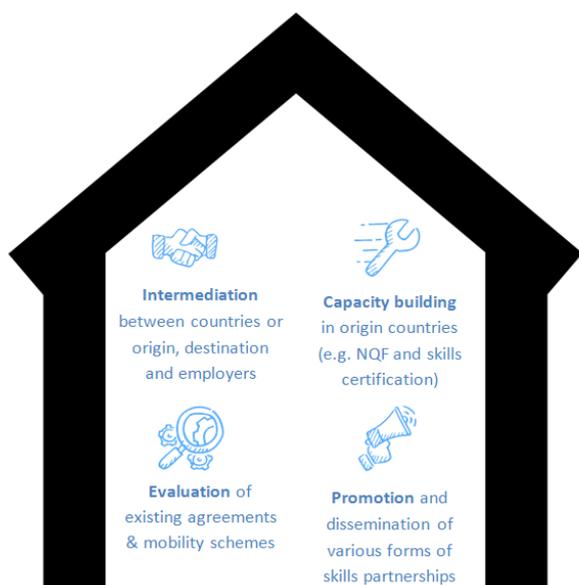
² Recommendation 5 para 59(d) states “Creating a multi-agency support structure now, in 2017, to facilitate labour mobility and advance consensus building ahead of 2018, drawing on the complementary expertise of ILO, IOM, OECD, and the World Bank to provide States with dedicated expert capacity to facilitate the negotiation, implementation and monitoring of bilateral, regional and (possibly) global agreements on labour migration”

- Selection process: ensuring that some of the participants are able to migrate due to sponsorship (employer or otherwise) in the destination country.
- Responsibility for ensuring return: important in the case of participants who, after arrival, turn out not to have the necessary level of skills to meet demand in destination country.

The clearinghouse would welcome and serve all stakeholders including states, training institutes, employers and their representatives, certification and recognition bodies to develop and implement SMPs. It would specifically act in four areas:

- Conduct intermediation, to identify and bring together the right partners in response to initiative by an actor on the demand or supply side.
- Offer capacity building and training, especially on skills recognition.
- Promote the concept vis-à-vis countries of origin and destination as well as employers.
- Provide independent evaluations with a feedback loop into programme design and implementation

A one-stop-shop for promoting skills mobility partnerships



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