

To facilitate regular migration by workers with vocational skills, UN member states should cooperate to establish mutually recognized standards and curricula for vocational education and provide vocational training

Global Compact on Migration

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PANEL 3: Recognition of skills and qualifications and relevant measures

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An important challenge in expanding safe, orderly, and regular labor migration is to equip potential migrants with relevant vocational skills, and to certify these skills so that destination country authorities and employers will recognize them. This challenge applies especially to potential migrants whose education is below university level. By contrast, university graduates can often work in high-income countries if their salary is above a certain threshold.

In many high-income destination countries, certified skills are a precondition for decent employment. Without recognized vocational skills, migrants would find it difficult to provide for themselves and their families in a sustainable manner. At the same time, many high-income destination countries will not admit immigrants who cannot reliably sustain themselves and might instead rely on the welfare state.

Therefore, providing potential migrants with certified skills is key to replacing irregular with regular labor migration. Under the proposed Compact, UN member states, including both, countries of origin and destination, should commit to cooperating even more closely in establishing mutually recognized standards and curricula for vocational training, across a growing range of professions and occupations. On this basis, they should also cooperate in expanding access to such vocational training for workers based in developing countries.

At least four challenges need to be addressed for this approach to succeed. First, migration opportunities linked to donor-supported vocational training could lead to a brain drain from low-income countries. To make sure this does not happen, vocational training standards and curricula should be attuned to labor market requirements in both, countries of origin and destination. Where these differ substantially, vocational training may be organized in modules, with only a sub-group of

trainees going on to those modules that are specific to high-income destination countries (including foreign language classes). A brain drain will be avoided if enough workers acquire relevant vocational skills and remain in the country of origin. In fact, research based on the "new new" economics of migration suggests that the opportunity to emigrate may constitute an important incentive to acquire skills, outweighing any depletion of the national skills base due to some workers leaving. Therefore, in the proposed Compact, UN member states may want to commit to expanding the skills base in countries of origin along with equipping potential migrants with relevant skills for destination country labor markets.

Second, in some high-income countries, formal skill requirements for some occupations appear to be excessively high relative to labor market needs. Many real-world jobs can probably be performed in a satisfactory manner with fewer skills than are taught in a full-blown course of vocational education. At the same time, certain skills may be crucial and a certificate may be a necessary precondition for employment. In such cases, it would be useful to modularize vocational training and implement innovative approaches to test and certify practical skills. Not only potential new migrants would benefit from a more flexible approach, but also local youths who find the academic content of a full vocational education too demanding or earlier immigrants, including recent refugees, who find a full vocational training course beyond their reach but do have relevant practical skills. In the proposed Compact, UN member states may want to commit to updating and modularizing vocational training and skill certification where appropriate to facilitate migrants' access to destination country labor markets.

Third, many national regulations and vocational training practices are highly idiosyncratic. Therefore, bilateral cooperation between countries of origin and destination will be a crucial first step towards enabling more potential migrants to acquire the necessary skills and certificates to gain access to employment in high-income countries. At the same time, although regional cooperation may take longer to realize, it may offer opportunities for more substantial progress. For example, if mutually recognized certificates and standards for a particular occupation were established in the European Union, this would facilitate not only intra-EU mobility for this group of workers, but also immigration from outside the Union to all EU member states. Therefore, in the proposed Compact, UN member states may want to encourage regional cooperation to harmonize standards and curricula for vocational training.

Finally, while they are still abroad, it is nearly impossible for migrants to undergo tests, to have skills certified and paperwork processed, and to look for jobs – especially jobs that require language and social skills and, hence, are filled through personal interviews. Therefore, to expand regular migration by workers with vocational skills, UN member states should commit to liberally granting visa for purposes of vocational training, skill certification, and job search.