

Country Profile

Germany

Migration and Skill Corridors

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Germany's political economy of labour migration has oscillated between liberalizing and restricting policies. Recently, a highly proactive approach to attract skilled migrants has been adopted. Compared to other destination countries, Germany has invested significantly in the re-establishment of transnational, state-funded infrastructures and programs to support desired skilled mobility. Though still small in scale, these new approaches follow ambitious political claims of relatively large cross-border skill flows accompanied by ethical, transparent, secure and fair recruitment. This country profile offers general insights into Germany's skilled labour migration policies and gives particular attention to major skill migration corridors involving India, Morocco, Philippines and Indonesia.

Produced by the EU-funded Link4Skills research project, this profile is part of a series providing relevant information about countries where the project is conducting empirical fieldwork. Our focus is on transnational labour migration with particular attention given to migration skill corridors. Countries investigated by the consortium include Austria, Canada, Germany, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Morocco, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the Philippines, Poland and Ukraine.

<http://link4skills.eu>



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1. Introduction

Germany's political economy of labour migration has oscillated between liberalizing and restricting policies. Openings and closures were often rather ad-hoc, with openings justified by high labour force demand and closures reflecting anti-immigrant resentments. Due to Germany's delayed and reluctant recognition of itself as an immigration country in 2000, a welcoming environment and labour migration policies aimed at attracting large numbers of immigrants are not yet a given. Between 1955 (when the first bilateral labour migration agreement was signed and the 'guest worker' era began) and 1973 (marked by the oil crisis, recession, and suspension of active recruitment), the reconstruction and economic upswing of Western Germany's economy relied significantly on foreign workers.¹ The 'guest worker' regime was driven by the idea of temporary migration (mostly into low-skilled and low-paid work) and return, although many migrants actually stayed and their families followed. Since the 2000s, demand for migrant workers has increased significantly, and a cautious political shift towards liberal labour migration followed. With the *Green Card* an emergency program for highly skilled IT professionals was initiated that served as a catalyst for political and public reorientation regarding immigration and integration debates. But the policies prioritized high and formally recognized skills in professions with labour shortages and followed an employer and work contract logic. After 2015, a rise in the number of refugees from Syria and other countries and persistent and broad skill shortages focused attention once again on the importance of international recruiting and 'legal' pathways for labour migration. It is estimated, for example, that 400,000 to one million migrant workers are needed annually to keep the labour force potential constant (Fuchs, Söhnlein & Weber 2021; Köhler-Geib 2023).

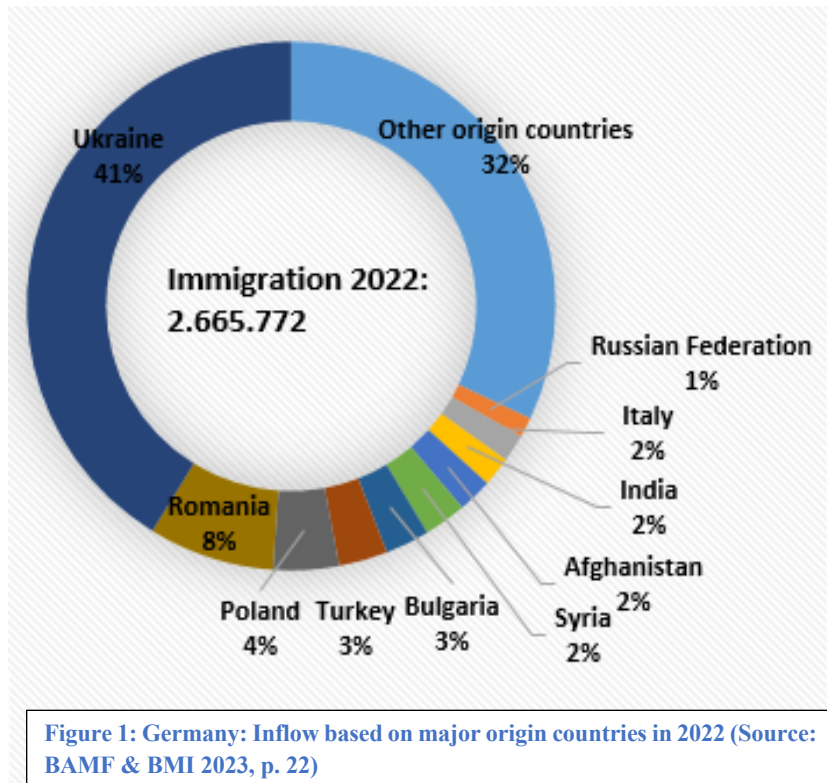
To date, around one quarter of the German total population (84.6 Mio.) has a 'migration background'². In 2022, the top countries of origin of inflow were Ukraine (due to the recent war), Romania and Poland, followed by Turkey, Bulgaria, Syria, Afghanistan and India (see figure 1).

With the Foreign Employment Promotion Act (2019), the Skilled Immigration Act (2020), and the law on its further development (2023) Germany has recently adopted a proactive approach to secure skilled labour migrants. The reforms mark a paradigm shift from highly selective policies (mostly targeting highly skilled and formally recognized migrants of bottleneck professions) to large-scale policies. In addition to targeting experienced experts, these large-scale policies also facilitate mobility for medium or low skilled migrants in specialist areas and job-seeking migrants with employment potential – regardless of profession, skill level and formal recognition. To attract international 'talents' and remain competitive in the global labour market, the policies and programs aim to accelerate and ease recruiting, recognition, entry, and residency. They are also designed to support integration and retention while allowing for return. The policy changes included the expansion of the skilled worker definition (equally addressing vocationally and academically trained migrants), recognition partnerships, facilitated immigration and residency

¹ For the former Western part of Germany: Chile, Greece, Italy, Japan, Morocco, Portugal, South Korea, Spain, Tunisia and Yugoslavia; for the former Eastern part of Germany: Angola, Algeria, China, Cuba, Hungary, Mongolia, Mozambique, North Korea, Poland and Vietnam.

² That is all people who were either not born with German citizenship themselves or who have at least one parent who was not born with German citizenship.

options, and fast-track administrative procedures. However, the policies do not always match reality. Both employers and labour migrants themselves have argued that these procedures take too long and are highly complicated.



While long established historical, cultural, or post-/colonial ties with origin countries play a minor role compared to countries such as the UK or France, Germany is a pioneer in demand-driven and state-led labour migration governance based upon bilateral political agreements. Compared to other destination countries, Germany invested significantly into the re-establishment of transnational, state-funded infrastructures (language courses, recruiting and integration programs, etc.) to support desired skilled mobility. Skill mobility partnerships (SMP) such as the much cited and advertised *Triple Win*³ approach are implemented through cooperation with multiple stakeholders on both corridor sides, including local ministries, public and private employment agencies, training and language centres, professional chambers, welfare and civil society organizations, migrant and returnee associations as well as employers. Often together with so-called *Centres of Migration and Development (CMD)*⁴, they constitute a key political instrument.

³ <https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/vor-ort/zav/projects-programs/health-and-care/triple-win>

⁴ <https://www.bmz.de/en/issues/german-centres-for-migration-and-development>

2. Skill Migration Corridor Overview

Between 2010 and 2020, labour migration was only 8% of total immigration from third countries (Adunts et al. 2022). The numbers continuously increased from 30,000 per year in 2010 to 64,000 in 2019. In 2022, 73,065 labour migrants entered Germany (BAMF & BMI 2023, p. 48). The most common places of origin were India, Western Balkan countries, Turkey, the Russian Federation, the United States, and China. While the skill migration corridor with India is rather established (at least in certain regions and professions), the corridors linking Germany with Morocco, the Philippines and Indonesia are still emerging.

2.1 Germany – India

India is the top origin nationality among labour migrants in Germany accounting for 14.4% or 10,515 persons in 2022. (BAMF & BMI 2023, p. 50). These include highly skilled migrants with academic qualification (mostly Blue Card EU holders, often in the STEM/IT sector) as well as job searching migrant. Bilateral agreements and programs on skilled labour migration and development were recently further strengthened and reestablished, including a Migration and Mobility Partnership Agreement (2023). Germany also adopted a Skilled Labour Strategy for India (2024) to further foster cooperation. The numbers of Indian nationals migrating to Germany for vocational training purposes jumped from 90 in 2021 to 380 in 2022 (BAMF & BMI 2023, p. 234). Since 2013 the *Triple Win* program for licensed nurses with recognition and post-qualification in Germany has been implemented in collaboration with local organizations.⁵ The project *ProRecognition* is an example of recognition partnership. There are also smaller initiatives to support TVET reforms in the STEM sector and facilitate transnational matching processes. Additionally, several return and reintegration programs were initiated between Germany and India such as *Perspective Homeland*, *StarthilfePlus* and the *Joint Reintegration Services*. Return numbers to India are comparatively high, with 10,190 persons returning in 2022. (BAMF & BMI 2023, p. 124). The corridor is shaped by rather established skill mobility, recognition, and return partnerships with a focus on high and medium skills in the STEM/IT and healthcare sectors and includes the prospect of return or circular migration.

2.2 Germany – Morocco

Morocco is an increasingly important partner for Germany in terms of labour migration governance, often linked with EU-wide political efforts to reduce irregular migration and strengthen returns. It recently became the second most common nationality after Vietnam among vocational training migrants in Germany, accounting for 12,5% or 1,006 persons in 2022 (BAMF & BMI 2023, p. 77). The corridor is characterized by mixed sector/occupations, including healthcare and construction and medium and low skill levels. Privately led skill partnerships were recently signed with the National Agency for Employment and Skills Development (ANAPEC). These partnerships involve vocational training in Germany for the construction, hotel, and restaurant industries. Direct recruiting for German hospitals also takes places for prequalified

⁵ Compared to, for example, Ghana and Nigeria, India as well as Indonesia and Philippines are currently not on the WHO health workforce support and safeguard list (as for April 2024). To guarantee ethical international recruiting of healthcare workers a global code of conduct was established that identifies and protects countries with shortage in healthcare workforce. See <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240069787>.

young talents in the healthcare sector. Since 2017 flagship initiatives involving the *Centres for Migration and Development* have been launched in Morocco and other countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, and Indonesia to support skilled migrants at any stage of the migratory process.

2.3 Germany – Philippines

The Philippines is the fourth largest country of origin among skilled migrants in Germany after India, Serbia and Turkey. In 2021 there were 512 skilled persons from the Philippines documented in Germany (BAMF & BMI 2022, p. 49). The following year there were 325 vocationally trained Filipinos in Germany, making up 12,4% of all vocationally trained migrants (2,620 in total) and making the Philippines the top country of origin (BAMF & BMI 2023, p. 51). Most Filipinos in Germany work in the health- and elderly care sector (BAMF & BMI 2022, p. 49). Over 90% of them are vocationally trained, and more than 70% are female. A high number of Filipinos also migrate to Germany for skill recognition measures – i.e. qualification measures to acquire or determine equivalence of qualifications or diplomas (§16d Residence Act). In 2022 Filipinos accounted for 15.6% of the total (640 persons out of 4,240), the second largest group after Syrians (BAMF & BMI 2023, p. 78).

Return migration to the Philippines is rather modest compared to India, Morocco, and Ukraine. Like Indonesia, the corridor with the Philippines is dominated by the healthcare sector and high and medium skill levels. Since 2013 skill mobility for registered Filipino nurses (like those from Indonesia) has been facilitated through the *Triple Win* program between the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) and the German Federal Employment Agency (BA/ZAV). There were approximately 600 placements of Filipinos in hospitals and elderly care in 2022. In cooperation with the Goethe Institute, pre-integration courses are provided with language, intercultural and sector-specific training. Beyond that, there is a VET system of cooperation for various craft professions involving close partnership with Germany's small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). A notable example is *IMOVE training – made in Germany*. Also, German hospitals are undertaking direct recruiting missions of qualified healthcare workers more and more frequently.

2.4 Germany – Indonesia

After Vietnam and Morocco, Indonesia is the third top origin country for migrants seeking vocational training in Germany. Of the 8,045 people in this category in 2022, approximately 435 were from Indonesia (BAMF & BMI 2023, p. 234) and the numbers are increasing. Recently, new agreements were signed with the Indonesian Migrant Worker Protection Board (IMWPB/BP2MI) for recruiting nurses and healthcare workers. These agreements include for recognition after arrival and accelerated administrative procedures). As with India and the Philippines, Germany started a cooperation with Indonesia under the *Triple Win* project. Pre-integration courses are implemented by the Goethe Institute. Also, direct recruiting of healthcare personnel by German hospitals increasingly takes place. As in the case of the Philippines, the emerging Indonesian corridor is shaped by the healthcare sector with high and medium skill levels. There are also train-the-trainer projects underway in various sectors, including mechatronics. These are arranged in cooperation with German SMEs and are initiated under the project *IMOVE training – made in Germany*. Like Morocco, Indonesia is one of the German partner countries for the *Centres for Migration and Development*.

3. Migration and Skills

Germany is an example of high-demand-driven, state-led investment into skill and talent mobility partnerships and political agreements on recruiting, recognition, retention and return. However, in assessing the impact of Germany's new policies and programs for skilled migrants (whether vocational trainees, experienced specialists, or job seekers), it remains unclear who really benefits and to what degree. More research in this area is warranted.

The *Triple Win* approach and state-led initiatives such as *Fair Recruitment Healthcare Germany*⁶ (a quality seal for private agencies) are aimed at ethical, transparent, secure, and fair regulation of skilled migration. They are intended to produce economic benefits for the destination country, to benefit the labour market, to contribute to the development of the origin country, and to provide new options for personal and career development of the skilled migrants themselves. But it is unclear whether the support programs actually achieve these ambitious, holistic political claims of sustainable cross-border skill flows on the ground and de facto reduce one-sided skill usage, mismatches, or exploitation.

Questions remain about the role that state-backed infrastructure plays in enabling or hindering skill migration flows. This includes state and private agencies, companies, training facilities, and language centres at both ends of a skill corridor. Among those who evaluate and negotiate migrants' skills and potential (practitioners and organizations), there is significant variation in their expertise and interests in international and ethical recruiting and migration support. This also applies to how they influence individual and collective migration decisions (including integration or return) and perceived opportunity structures. Little is also known about the practical approaches in skill mobility partnerships in terms of recognition, training, circular mobility and the migration-development agenda.

Despite its high degree of state engagement, Germany is still behind countries such as Canada, the United States, and Australia in the 'global race' for attracting skilled migrants. Germany's image as a welcoming, receptive and fair 'nation of skilled labour' stands in stark contrast to frequent reports from migrants about frustrating pre-departure bureaucracy, limited career opportunities and difficulties in skill recognition. Further research is required to assess the impact of skill mobility partnerships and evaluate how persistent reports of discriminatory or denigrating social and work environments affect decisions to stay or leave.

⁶ <https://www.faire-anwerbung-pflege-deutschland.de/>

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About the Link4Skills project

Link4Skills is an EU-funded research and project addressing the global challenge of skill shortages and mismatches through innovative, sustainable solutions that foster fair skill utilization and exchange across continents.

Focusing on Europe, Africa, Asia, and America, the project seeks to bridge the gap between skill supply and demand by facilitating re/up-skilling, promoting automation, and encouraging migration as policy options.

Link4Skills is creating an inclusive, participatory policy decision-making environment by integrating a diverse range of stakeholders, including EU decision-makers, inter-governmental institutions, national and subnational decision-makers, employers organizations, employees organizations, and civic society co-development institutions.

Project Coordinator: Professor Izabela Grabowski

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