

Country Profile

The Netherlands

Migration and Skill Corridors

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January 2025

This report highlights the Netherlands' efforts to address worker shortages in construction, healthcare, and STEM through government migration policies for high-skilled talent and private recruitment for medium-skilled workers. While new migration corridors with countries like India and Ukraine have emerged, older corridors tied to colonial ties and state-led recruitment are underutilized.

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>



The Link4Skills project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 101132476

1. Introduction

The Netherlands is a ‘country of immigration’, with a substantial part of the population having a migrant background. Indeed, immigration is the country’s primary driver of population growth (Jennissen et al. 2023). In 2023 the Netherlands had a population of approximately 17.8 million. About one in four people in the country was either born abroad or has at least one parent who was. This share is projected to rise to nearly one-third by 2050. Labour migration contributes to population growth and will remain important in the coming decades given the labour shortages in various sectors of the economy. With the old-age dependency ratio¹ in the Netherlands expected to increase from 31% in 2020 to 52% by 2070 (WRR 2024), migration is projected to continue shaping Dutch society significantly.

2. The Netherlands Migration Profile

Most immigrants to the Netherlands in the past century originated from neighbouring countries such as Germany and Belgium, as well as from former Dutch colonies, including Indonesia, Suriname and the (former) Dutch Antilles. Additionally, migrants came from countries like Turkey and Morocco due to recruitment policies in the 1960s and 1970s (Table 1). Since the late 1980s, the diversity of origin countries has significantly increased. By 2017, the Dutch population included people from 223 different countries of origin (Jennissen et al. 2023). In recent years, the largest growth comes from countries like Poland, India, Syria, and Ukraine, among others.

Table 1. Dutch residents by country of origin, 1 January 2023

Total	17,811,291	% 100.0
Total residents with a Dutch background²	13,116,429	73.6
Total residents with a migrant background³	4,694,862	26.4
of whom top 10		
1. Turkey	443,569	2.5
2. Morocco	424,862	2.4
3. Surinam	361,330	2.0
4. Indonesia	346,345	1.9
5. Germany	339,049	1.9
6. Poland	232,406	1.3
7. (former) Soviet Union (including Ukraine) ⁴	218,317	1.2
8. (former) Netherlands Antilles, Aruba	182,114	1.0
9. Belgium	123,674	0.7
10. Syria	144,917	0.8
16. India ⁵	77,262	0.4

Source: Dutch Statistics

¹ This ratio measures the number of people aged 65 and over relative to those aged 15-64.

² Persons whose parents were both born in the Netherlands are considered to be of Dutch origin, irrespective of their own country of birth. All other persons are classified in the first instance according to the country of their own birth. If this is the Netherlands, as is the case for people with a second-generation migrant background, the country of their mother’s birth determines their country of origin. If that is also the Netherlands, the father’s country of birth is decisive.

³ Someone with a *migrant background* is a person living in the Netherlands who has at least one parent born abroad. Most migrants in the Netherlands therefore have a migrant background, but many people with a migrant background are not themselves migrants. People with a migrant background who were themselves born abroad belong to the *first generation*; those born in the Netherlands comprise the *second generation*.

⁴ In 2023, there were over 123,000 Ukrainians residing in the Netherlands.

⁵ India is included because of its relevance for the Dutch contribution to the Link4Skills project.

2.1 Dutch labour migration policy

Table 2 summarizes changes in labour migration policy between 1960 and today. There has been a gradual shift from a recruitment-based policy aimed at low-skilled labour migrants to a more selective one prioritizing the highly skilled, and currently also a focus on medium skilled migration. The Netherlands offers several schemes to attract highly skilled workers, including the Highly Skilled Migrant Scheme (*Regeling Kennismigranten*), the EU Blue Card, and incentives for foreign graduates. Wage criteria define eligibility for highly skilled labour in these schemes. Since June 1, 2021, a pilot programme has introduced a new residence permit for essential or experienced staff of startups, aimed at enabling young, innovative businesses in the Netherlands to attract non-EU talent more easily (Odé, Korf & Lazëri 2024).

Table 2. Dutch labour migration policy, 1960-present

Policy characteristics	Nature of labour migration	Typical policy measures
Active recruitment 1960-1975	Regular low skilled migration	Until the recession of 1966/1967, prospective migrants could use a tourist visa to spend 2 weeks looking for work in the Netherlands (the so-called ‘spontaneous arrivals scheme’). Recruitment agreements with Mediterranean countries: Italy (1960), Spain (1961), Portugal (1963), Turkey (1964), Greece (1966), Morocco (1969), Yugoslavia (1970), and Tunisia (1971). Introduction of the foreign labour act in 1969. Active recruitment ends in 1975.
Liberal 1975-1990	Irregular low skilled labour migration; and postcolonial migration from Suriname.	Regularization of irregular labour migrants (1975, 1980).
Restrictive 1990-2005	Irregular low skilled labour migration	Restrictions to combat illegal residence (linkage of social security and tax numbers in 1991; Benefit Entitlement (Residence Status) Act 1998)
Selective 2005-present	Skilled labour migration	Introduction of highly skilled migrants scheme in 2004. Modern Migration Policy Act 2013 EU Blue Card Scheme for Intra Corporate Transferees Measures aimed at foreign graduates Residence scheme for essential staff of start-ups 2021

Source: Jennissen et al. 2023; Odé, Korf & Lazëri 2024.

3. Migration skill corridors

3.1 The making of migration skill corridors

The Dutch labour recruitment policy from the 1960s and 1970s established migration corridors (first based on labour migration followed by family migration) between the Netherlands and former ‘guest worker’ countries like Turkey and Morocco. Today, these established corridors play a limited role to meet current labour demands. Contemporary selective ‘modern’ labour migration policies have fostered new migration skill corridors between India, China, and the Netherlands, characterized by high-skilled migration. The number of Chinese and Indian

knowledge workers - as well as students - in the Netherlands is steadily growing, with the majority working in STEM sectors and research.

Other migration corridors emerged from decolonization linking the Netherlands with Indonesia, Suriname and the (former) Netherlands Antilles. Today, the corridor with Indonesia is used on a limited scale to recruit medium-skilled health personnel, mainly through private labour recruitment agencies and individual companies, also active in the Philippines. Earlier efforts to recruit Filipino health care workers has not been successful because of low cultural sensitivity at Dutch health institutions, language barriers, diploma recognition issues, inadequate housing, and complex (visa) regulations (Isbouts et al. 2024).

The 2004 and 2007 EU enlargements created new migration skill corridors within Europe. Initially, migrants from Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania filled Dutch labour shortages primarily in the secondary labour market (e.g., horticulture). Today, many work in mid-level jobs, especially in the metal industry, energy transition (including construction), and healthcare (Corvers et al. 2021). Additionally, there is a growing presence of Ukrainian workers in the Netherlands, often engaged as posted workers (Heyma, Bussink & Vervliet 2022). Posted work, a growing phenomenon, allows companies in one EU country to employ workers in another while adhering to Dutch employment regulations but retaining the social security rights of the sending country. This structure, rooted in the EU's freedom to provide services, brings significant risks for posted workers in labour-intensive sectors (Advisory Council on Migration 2024; Arnholtz & Lillie 2023).

Furthermore, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainians also sought safe haven in the Netherlands. The Netherlands has over 125,000 Ukrainian registered displaced persons (mainly women and children). More than half found work fairly quickly. Despite their relatively high level of education, Ukrainian displaced persons in the Netherlands rarely find work in their own field of work and at their own level of education (Dagevos & Rusinovic 2024).

3.2 Migration skill corridors overview

In this country profile, we focus on three migration skill corridors relevant to the Link4Skills research project. The Netherlands-India and Netherlands-Ukraine corridors are particularly significant for meeting the demand in the Netherlands for highly skilled and medium-skilled workers. The substantial Netherlands-Morocco migration corridor is especially pertinent for examining why its potential remains underutilized.

Netherlands-India

Currently, nearly 80,000 residents with an Indian background live in the Netherlands, with their numbers progressively increasing.⁶ In 2022, most labour migrants from outside the EU/EFTA region came from India (22.4%). Additionally, India ranks second after China

⁶ The Netherlands is, after the UK, the country with the second largest population of people of Indian descent in Europe if we also consider immigration from people who have migrated from India to Surinam and afterwards to the Netherlands (Van Meeteren et al. 2013).

(14.25%) in terms of international students, with 9.1% of international students coming from India (Odé, Korf & Lazëri 2024). The Netherlands-India migration skill corridor is dominated by STEM sectors. Indian workers are employed in sectors such as ICT, as well as professional, scientific, and technical services. These industries offer above-average hourly wages. On average, Indian employees working in the Netherlands earn €37 per hour, compared to €27 and €23 per hour for Dutch and Chinese employees, respectively (CBS 2023). Recruitment of skilled Indian workers mainly occurs through individual companies and favourable policies for knowledge migrants.

Notably, there are two major spatial concentrations of skilled Indian migrants: around Eindhoven and Amstelveen (near Amsterdam). Both municipalities have developed policies to support the integration of (Indian) knowledge workers, including: housing initiatives, international schools, international service desks, English-language information resources, Support for spouses and volunteering opportunities, and efforts to promote social cohesion among city residents.⁷ In the metropolitan areas of Amsterdam and Eindhoven (Brainport), additional initiatives have been launched to recruit and retain skilled workers, often in collaboration with the national government.⁸

Netherlands-Ukraine

The Netherlands has never been a main destination for Ukrainian settlement. Some groups arrived after WWII, and a subsequent wave of migration from the Ukrainian S.S.R. occurred with the start of ‘perestroika’ in 1985. The 1986 Chernobyl disaster allowed Ukrainian families to migrate to the Netherlands on humanitarian grounds. Additionally, some Jewish Ukrainians sought asylum in the Netherlands due to discrimination in Ukraine. A few thousand Ukrainians arrived between 1985 and 1991. When the Soviet Union dissolved, Ukrainians could no longer migrate to the Netherlands as refugees (van Meeteren et al. 2013). After Ukraine's independence, and especially following EU enlargements, migration increased, particularly family migration (Ukrainian women marrying Dutch men) and later irregular labour migration (men working in horticulture).

Migration from Ukraine to the Netherlands expanded significantly after the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007 through posted-worker arrangements, where Ukrainian labourers (mainly men), facilitated by labour recruitment agencies in Poland and the Baltic states, came to work in the Netherlands. They are primarily employed in road freight transport, as well as in sectors like electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply; construction; agriculture; manufacturing; and mining (Heyma et al., 2022). The Russia-Ukraine war has significantly impacted this skill corridor, with over 125,000 displaced Ukrainians currently registered in the Netherlands (mainly women and children). Those who work are employed temporarily, often in low-wage sectors with labour shortages, where employers generally invest little in skill development. This has sparked a debate in the Netherlands about the need for additional training to help displaced Ukrainians get more skilled jobs that match their qualifications.

⁷ <https://www.amstelveen.nl/informatie-en-advies-voor-internationals>

⁸ <https://brainporteindhoven.com/int>; <https://www.metropoolregioamsterdam.nl/about-mra/>

Netherlands-Morocco

There is an established migration corridor between the Netherlands and Morocco, created by labour recruitment policies in the 1960s and 1970s, which ended in the mid-1970s. This labour migration led to substantial family migration (initially family reunification, later family formation). Currently, Moroccans make up the second-largest migrant population in the Netherlands. In 2022, there were a total of 420,000 Dutch residents with a Moroccan background, of whom 174,000 were born in Morocco. Most Moroccan migrants in the Netherlands originally come from the Rif Mountains in the north. The majority of first-generation low-skilled Moroccans now living in the Netherlands were born in the provinces of Al Hoceima, Taourirt, and Nador (Fokkema & Harmsen 2009). In addition, there is a smaller presence of Moroccans from the Souss Valley in the South, and from the major cities of central Morocco, such as Casablanca, Rabat, Fez, and Meknes. This latter group is relatively well-educated and constitutes a minority among Moroccans in the Netherlands (Van Meeteren et al. 2013; Engbersen, Snel & Esteves 2016). The reanalysis of EUMAGINE and THEMIS data (Link4Skills Task 4.2) also suggests that Moroccan migrants more often have lower educational levels.

In recent years, the migration corridor between the Netherlands and Morocco is mainly characterized by family formation, modest asylum migration, and return migration. For the Link4Skills project, this corridor is particularly relevant due to its underutilization. One of the key questions is why this underutilization occurs. Morocco has a skilled population that could be significant in addressing skill shortages. The answer to this question partly lies in the unwelcoming and restrictive policies in the Netherlands. For many highly skilled Moroccans, the Netherlands is not a preferred destination; they tend to favour other EU countries, such as France and Germany, or countries like the United States and Canada (Engbersen, Snel & Esteves 2016). Germany has developed mobility partnerships with Morocco, which warrants further investigation. The strong transnational connections between Moroccans in the Netherlands and their country of origin could potentially facilitate (circular) skilled labour migration.

Conclusion

Since 2004, the Netherlands has implemented various measures to attract skilled non-EU foreign workers, primarily through wage-related incentives. These efforts are supported by regional and local policies aimed at facilitating the integration of highly skilled workers into Dutch society. In contrast, policies for medium-skilled workers are far less developed, with private actors, such as international recruitment agencies and individual companies, playing a central role. Unlike countries like Austria and Germany, the Netherlands does not have Skills Mobility Partnerships with specific countries in place. This raises questions that warrant further analysis, including how existing migration skill corridors could be better utilized.

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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.

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The Link4Skills project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 101132476