

# Improving the Economic Migration Framework to Attract and Retain Qualified Talent in Flanders

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Supporting Migrants' integration into the Labour Market

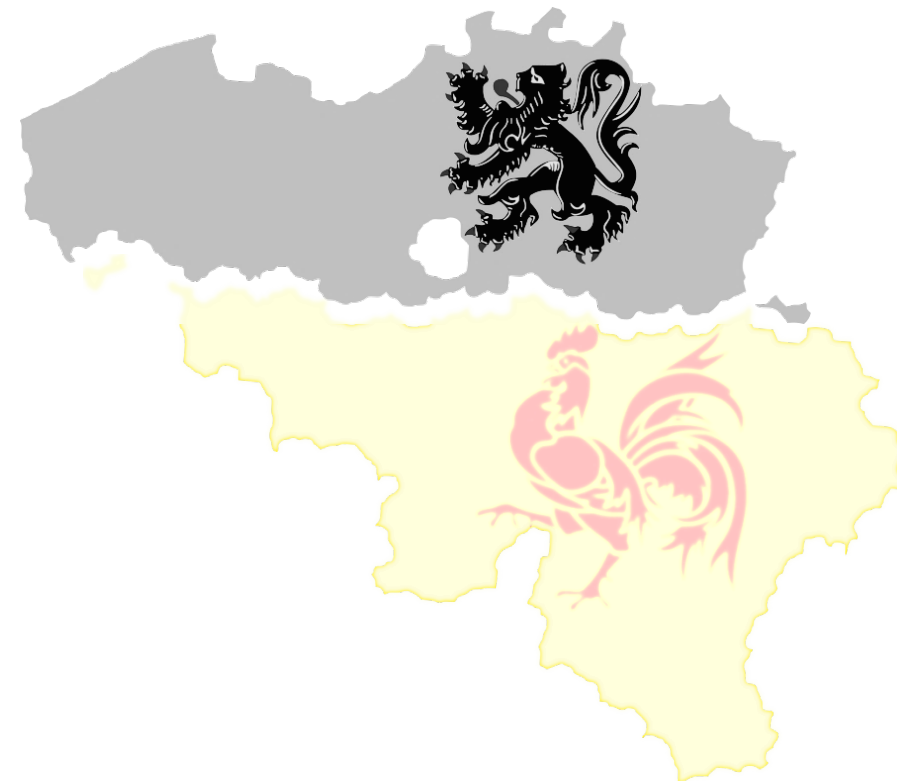
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## Flanders and Wallonia requested support in achieving reform

- Both regions face labour shortages, unfilled vacancies, inefficient migration management and limited global visibility
- Target group
  - > Qualified workers from non-EEA countries
  - > Employers
- Recommendations for separate reforms in each region to better attract and retain qualified non-EEA workers



## Analysis, discussion, exchange...

### Strengths and Weaknesses analysis

Main (perceived) challenges linked to the use of international recruitment of third-country nationals from outside Flanders to meet demand for skills  
Stated objectives of Flanders in this area

### Draw on international practice

What initiatives aimed at attraction, retention and migration governance are relevant to Flanders

### Recommendations

Regulations and procedures (e.g., SOL)  
Conditions (e.g, duration of permits, procedures, mobility)  
Talent attraction and retention (e.g. outreach, orientation, etc.)  
Risk reduction (fraud, illegal employment, exploitation)  
=>Short-, medium- and long-term approach to recommendations



# Who we met in the project

	Belgium / Federal	Flanders / Regional
<b>Social partners</b>		SERV
<b>Employer federations</b>	VBO, UNIZO	VOKA
<b>Employers</b>	Basf, umicore, j&j, solvay, imec, ...	
<b>Sector federations</b>	Agoria, Embuild, febeg, febeta, boerenbond, comeos, ...	
<b>Trade unions</b>	ACV, ABVV, ACLVB	
<b>Law firms</b>	Fragomen, Deloitte, E&Y, C&E	
<b>Recruitment agencies</b>	Accentjobs	
<b>Gvt administrations and agencies</b>	DVZ	DWSE, now WEWIS (Economic migration unit, policy unit)
	RSZ	VDAB
		ABB (Agi, Atlas, Amal)
<b>Social inspection</b>	SIOD	Flemish social inspection (DWSE, now WEWIS)
<b>Municipalities</b>		VVSG
<b>International houses / expat centres</b>		IH Leuven, Expat centre Ghent, POM Limburg
<b>Relocation agencies</b>	Expat Management Group, Abra, Altair, ...	
<b>Migrant organisations</b>	Myria, Fairwork	
<b>International recruitment</b>	IOM, Enabel	
<b>Investment &amp; trade</b>		Flanders Investment and Trade (FIT)
<b>Recognition qualifications</b>	FPS Health	AHOVOKS, NARIC, Dep. Care
<b>Care sector</b>		Flemish care ambassador
<b>Higher education sector</b>		Flemish interuniversity council (VLIR)

International practice examples:  
 NLD, DEU, DNK, EST, FIN, IRL,  
 CAN, AUS, ITA...



## Overall diagnosis

- Flanders should be attractive, but is underperforming
- Firms are discouraged from recruiting talent from abroad due to long and uncertain processes, difficulty with recognition of foreign qualifications
- Retention is low for highly qualified talent
  
- There are many disconnected initiatives to support attraction, but no strategy, policy, coordination, branding or plan
- Competing regions and countries are ahead of Flanders in their approach to talent attraction



- > A paradigm shift: develop a Flemish talent attraction strategy
  - > One lead department mandated to lead strategy development and coordinate regional actors
  - > One brand and coordinated information and communication (one website)
  - > Review procedures and processes to increase efficiency, improve oversight, reduce abuse
  - > Improve data collection, analysis and dissemination for more evidence-based and better evaluated policy

(Not about numbers, but about the attraction, selection and retention of the best suited and most promising talent to meet Flemish needs)

# Attract and Retain Qualified Talent in Flanders

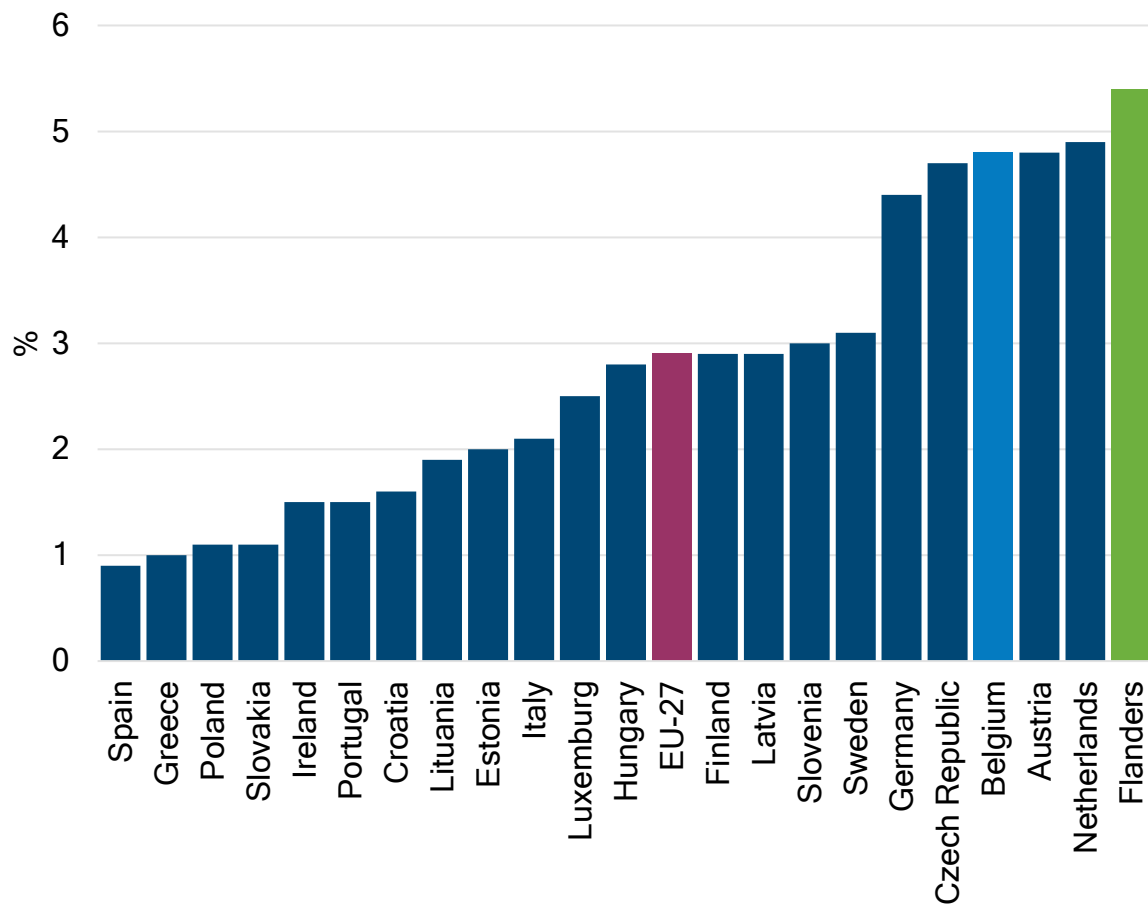


**Context for labour migration to Flanders**



# Tight Flemish labour market: many vacant jobs and few available workers

Percentage of job vacancies in relation to the number of posts (job vacancies and occupied posts), 2022



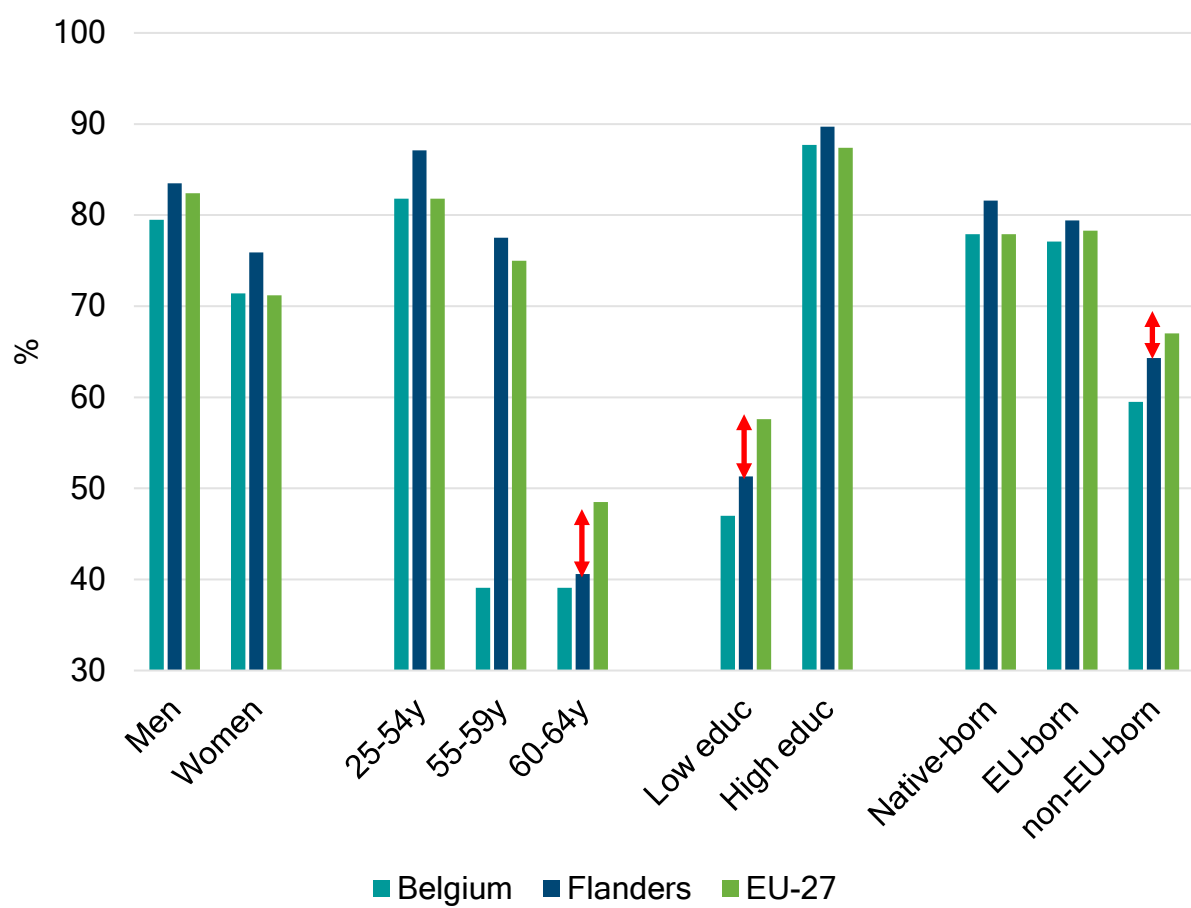
- > Flanders has a **tight labour market**, with the **highest vacancy rate** in the EEA and one of the **lowest unemployment rates**
- > **Shortages** are evident across **various sectors**, encompassing **highly qualified occupations, trades professions**, as well as **hospitality and domestic services**
- > Despite being highly regulated, unionised, and with high social charges on employment, **employers** are actively **seeking to hire across all skill levels**
- > Flemish businesses are increasingly facing **production constraints due to staff shortages**
- > **Unfavourable longer term labour force prospects: total labour force is not expected to grow** over coming decade due to ageing cohorts, while youth cohorts diminish and **workforce ages**

Note: The data for Denmark and France is not available.  
Source: Eurostat & Statistics Belgium – Job Vacancy Statistics.



# Activation policies and measures encouraging labour mobility take time to have impact

Employment rates by sex, age, level of education, and country of birth, 25-64y, 2022



- > There is **reserve capacity** within the labour force, particularly among **older, less educated, and non-EU migrant workers**
- > **Activation policies** have targeted these groups with some success, but there **appears to be a limit** to how much this reserve can further be tapped to meet current needs
- > Both **inter- and intra-regional mobility remain low**, with disparities in labour market tightness persisting even within Flanders
- > **Reskilling efforts are underway**, but there also seem to be **limits** to how much this can address demand

Flanders will have an **increased reliance on recruiting foreign workers** in most scenarios, numerically, even disregarding specific skill deficits and talent attraction

Source: Policy Research Centre Work – Flanders in Europe, based on Eurostat-Labour Force Survey.

# Attract and Retain Qualified Talent in Flanders

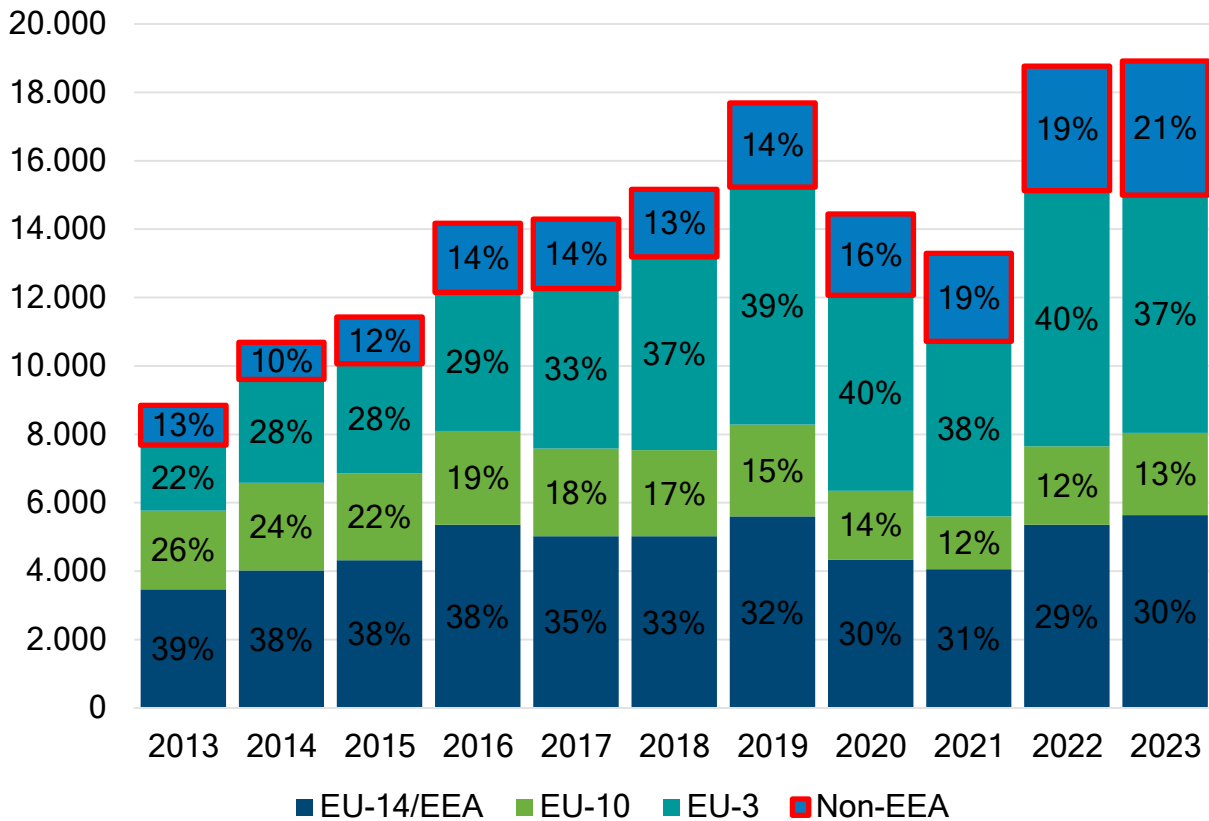


**Evolution and characteristics of labour migration to Flanders**



# Flanders receives most labour migrants from other EEA countries

Number of first-issued residence cards/permits for work reasons, by nationality, Flanders



- > Most of the almost 20,000 first-issued residence cards/permits issued annually for employment purposes are issued to EEA nationals, who are not subject to any restrictions
- > Non-EEA nationals (with work and residence permits) comprised about 4,000 first-issued permits in 2023
- > This corresponds to about 1 non-EEA worker per 1,000 working-age inhabitants, which for 2023 is much lower than neighbouring Netherlands (2.9), but also Germany or France (1.7)

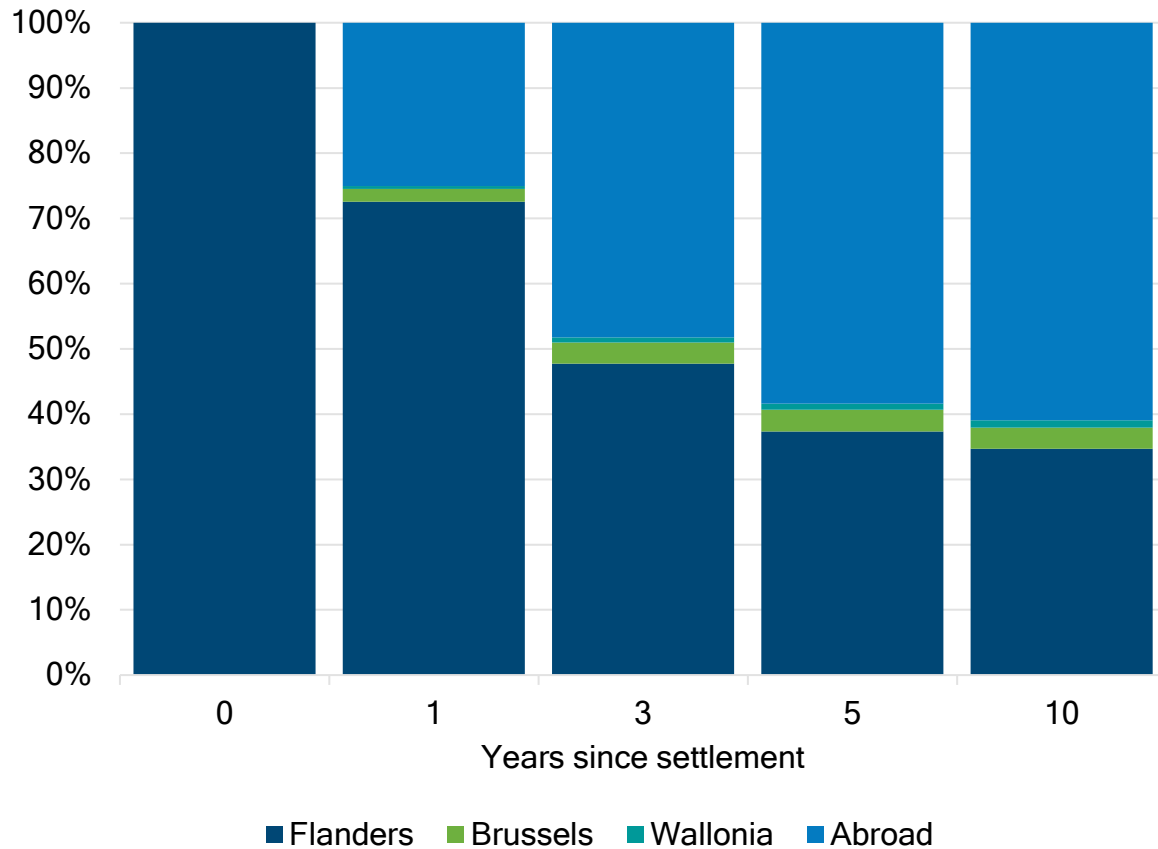
Flanders is not recruiting non-EEA workers at the same scale as neighbouring countries, and attracts fewer qualified migrants than neighbouring countries

Note: Individuals aged between 18 and 64 at the time of settlement.  
Source: Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration.



# Low retention in Flanders of non-EEA labour migrants

Stay rates of non-EEA labour migrants, by years since settlement, 2010-2020 settlement cohort, Flanders



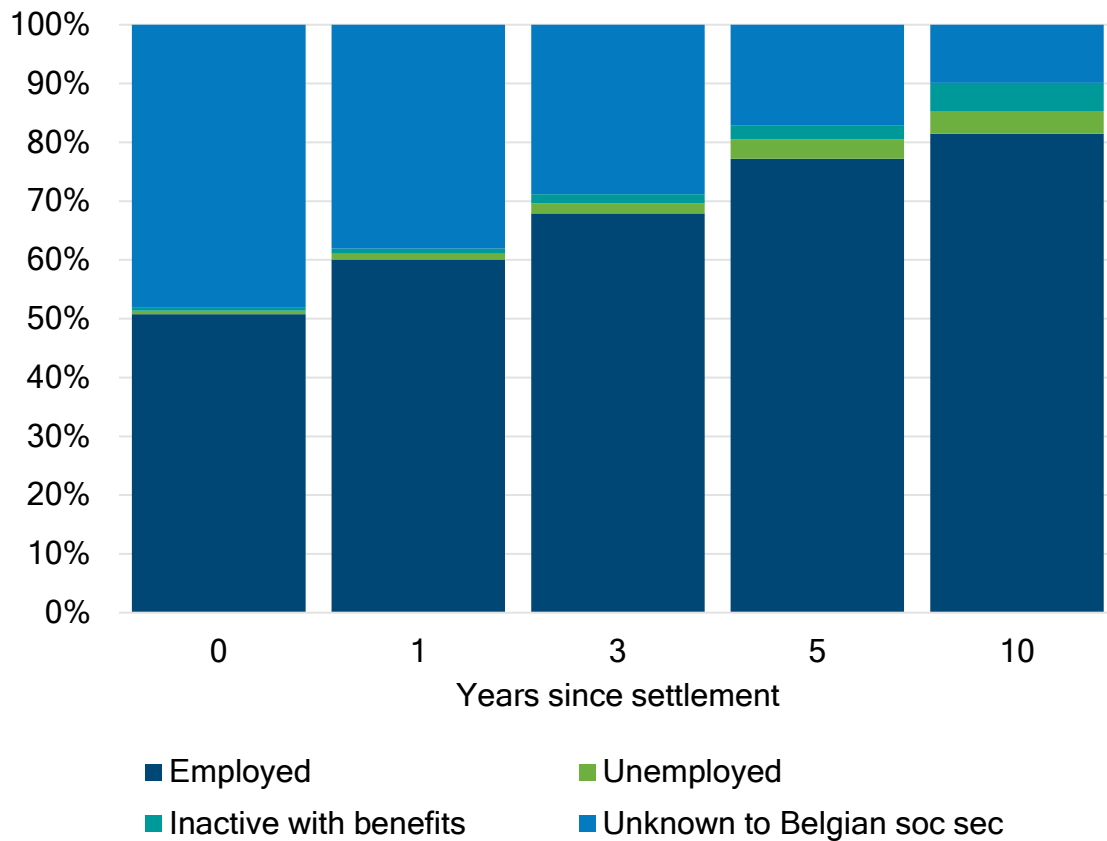
- > Non-EEA labour migrants mostly do not remain in Flanders or even in Belgium. After 3 years, half of them have left, and about one-third stay for 10 years

Note: Individuals aged between 18 and 64 at the time of settlement. Figures are calculated on a population changing in size (e.g. stay rates at t=10 are calculated based on the 2010-2011 cohort). Source: Crossroads Bank for Social Security.



# Labour migrants who remain in Flanders tend to stay in employment

Labour market position of non-EEA labour migrants, by years since settlement, 2010-2020 settlement cohort, Flanders



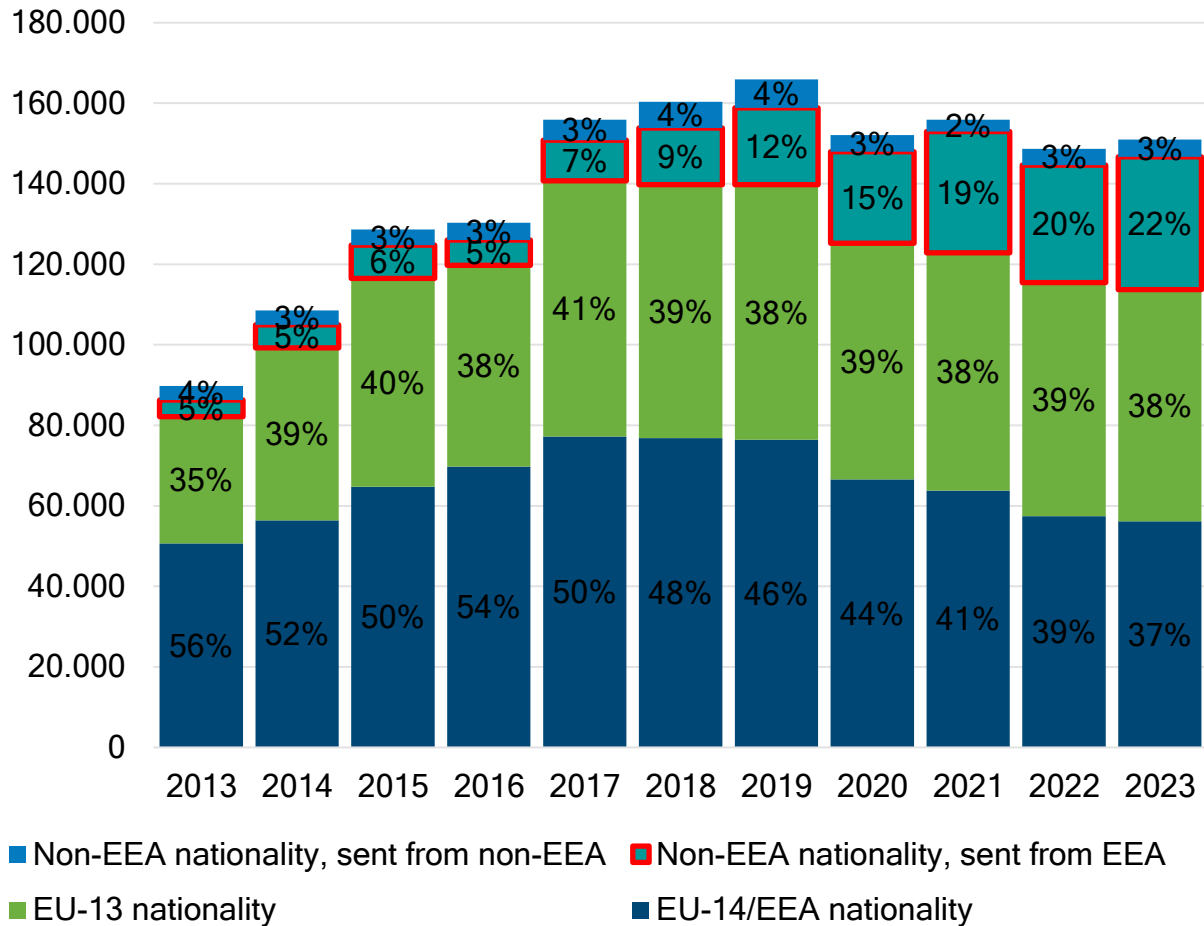
> Those who remain in Flanders tend to stay in employment: after 10 years, 93% of labour migrants are not drawing benefits

Note: Individuals aged between 18 and 64 at the time of settlement. Figures are calculated on a population changing in size (e.g. outcomes at t=10 are calculated based on the 2010-2011 cohort). Labour market outcomes are only observed for those living in Flanders in the year of observation.  
Source: Crossroads Bank for Social Security.



# Far more non-EEA migrant workers come through posting

## Number of incoming posted workers, by nationality and sending country, Flanders



- > **Residence permits** are typically required for migrants intending to stay **90 days or longer**, meaning that **shorter stays for the purpose of work are not captured**
- > Flanders receives **many temporary non-EEA labour migrants**, primarily **posted** from other EEA countries to Flanders
- > These comprised more than **33,000 individuals in 2023**, out of a total of 150,000 posted workers
- > Not all of this posting is for short term work: close to **one in five postings** of non-EEA nationals lasts **more than 3 months**, and **one in five workers** perform **repeat spells of employment** in Flanders over 3 years

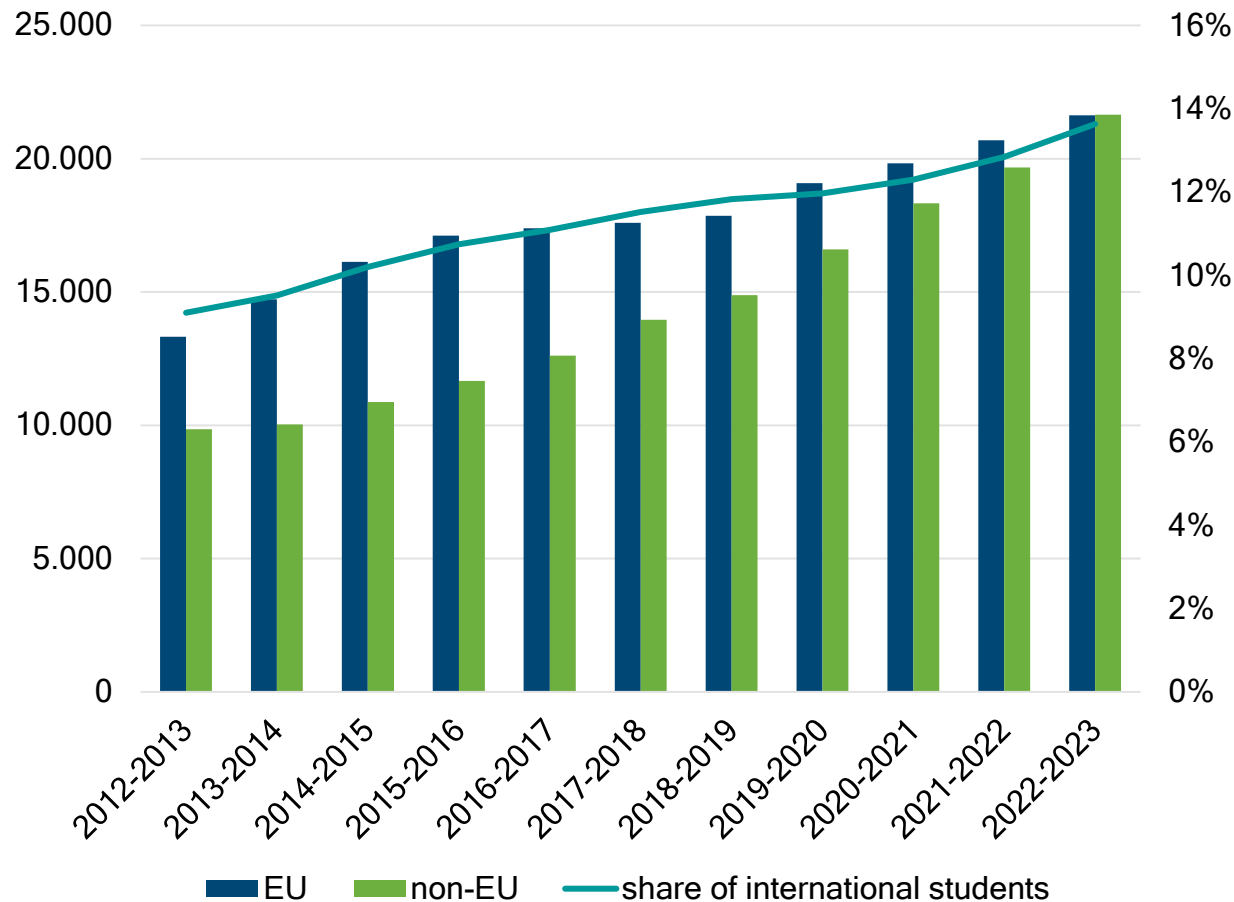
There is a **part of posting** which is **likely substituting work permit migration**, since it is **easier and more reliable** than the WP/SP process

Source: NSSO-LIMOSA



# International students should be a source of high-skilled migrants in Flanders

Number and share of international students, by nationality, Flanders



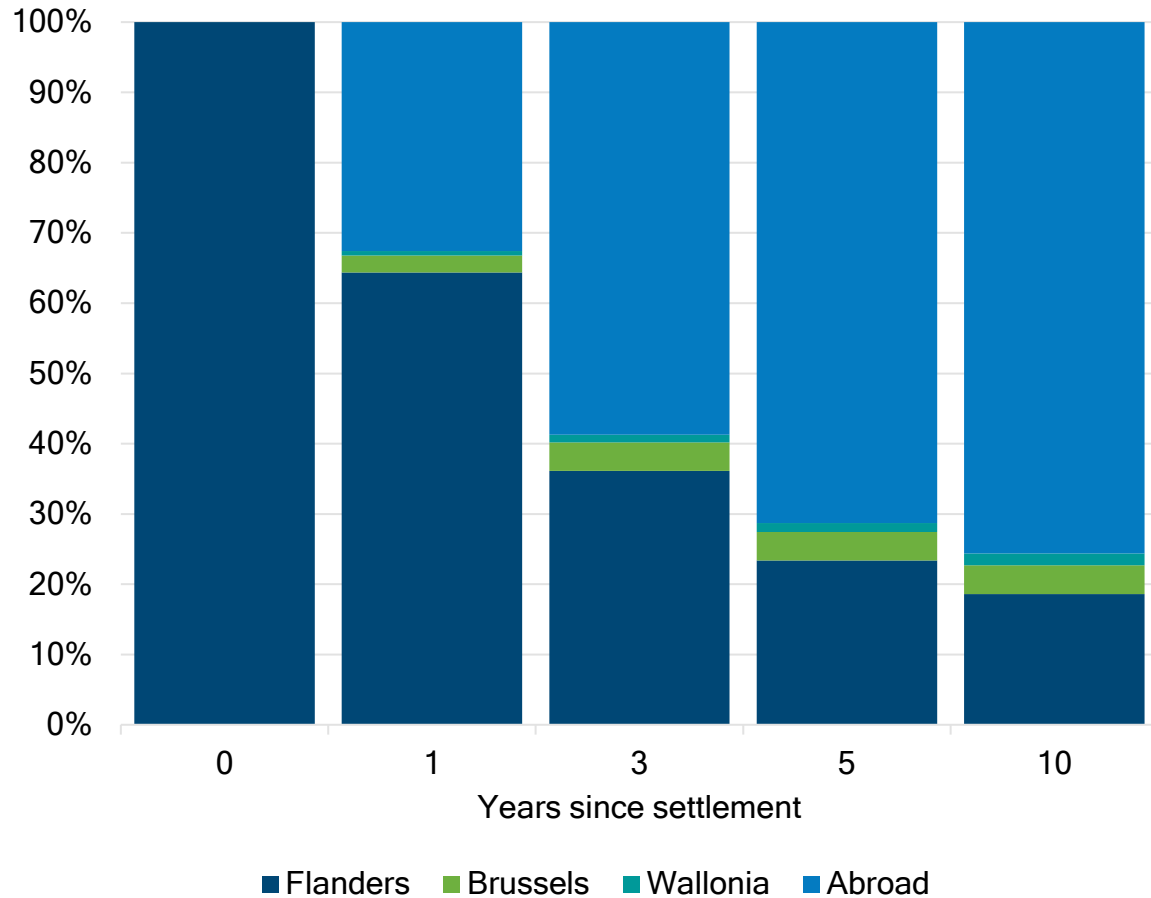
- > Flanders hosts more than **20,000 non-EEA international students**
- > The number of **first-issued permits** to non-EEA students rose from 3,700 in 2016 to nearly **4,700 in 2023**
- > However, **they do not make the same contribution to the skilled labour force** as they do in other European destinations

Note: International students are identified on the basis of their nationalities, i.e. foreign students.  
Source: Flemish Department of Education and Training.



# But most non-EEA students leave after a few years

Stay rates of non-EEA student migrants, by years since settlement, 2010-2020 settlement cohort, Flanders



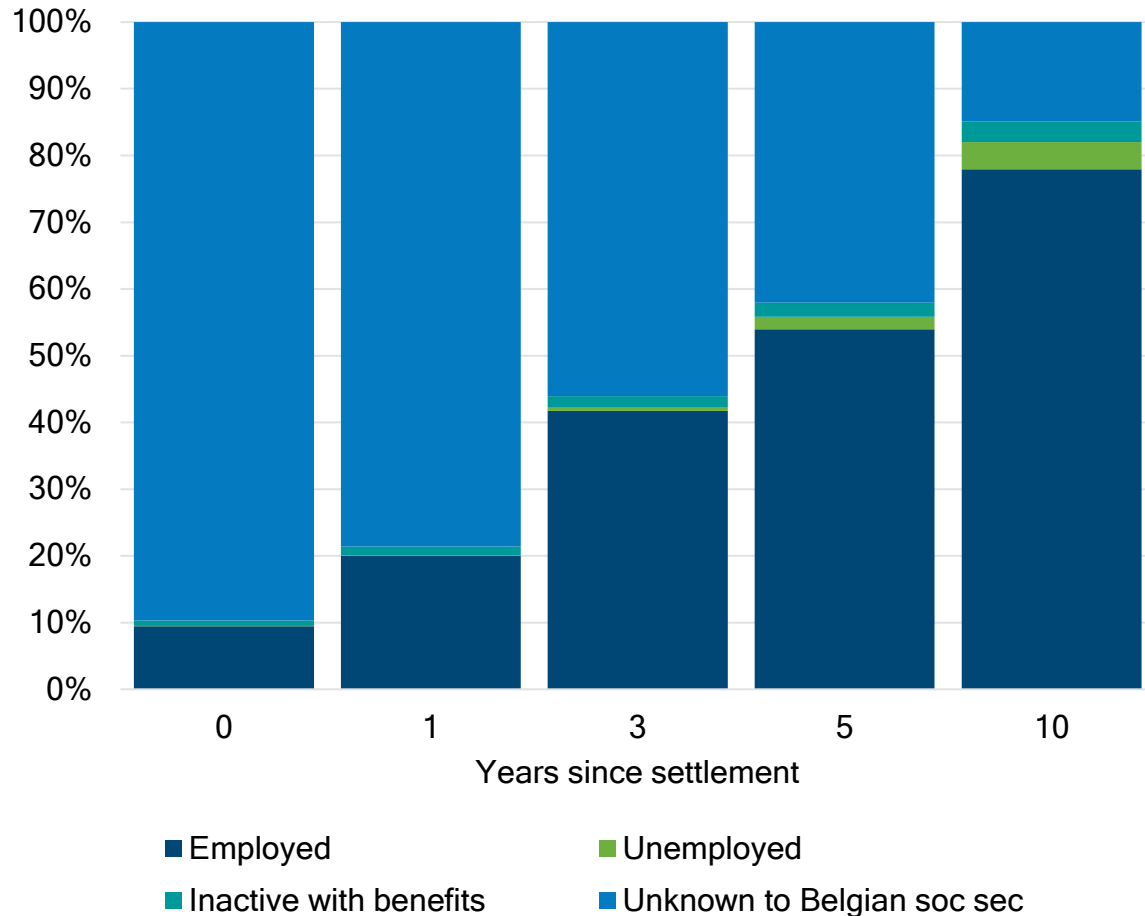
- > Most non-EEA students leave after a few years: about 20% were in Flanders five years after arrival, similar to the Netherlands, but lower than Germany (50%) or France (40%)

Note: Individuals aged between 18 and 64 at the time of settlement. Figures are calculated on a population changing in size (e.g. stay rates at t=10 are calculated based on the 2010-2011 cohort). Source: Crossroads Bank for Social Security.



# Those who do remain in Flanders tend to have high employment levels

Labour market position of non-EEA student migrants, by years since settlement, 2010-2020 settlement cohort, Flanders



> Those who stay have high levels of qualified employment and high wages

Note: Individuals aged between 18 and 64 at the time of settlement. Figures are calculated on a population changing in size (e.g. outcomes at t=10 are calculated based on the 2010-2011 cohort). Labour market outcomes are only observed for those living in Flanders in the year of observation. Source: Crossroads Bank for Social Security.

# Attract and Retain Qualified Talent in Flanders



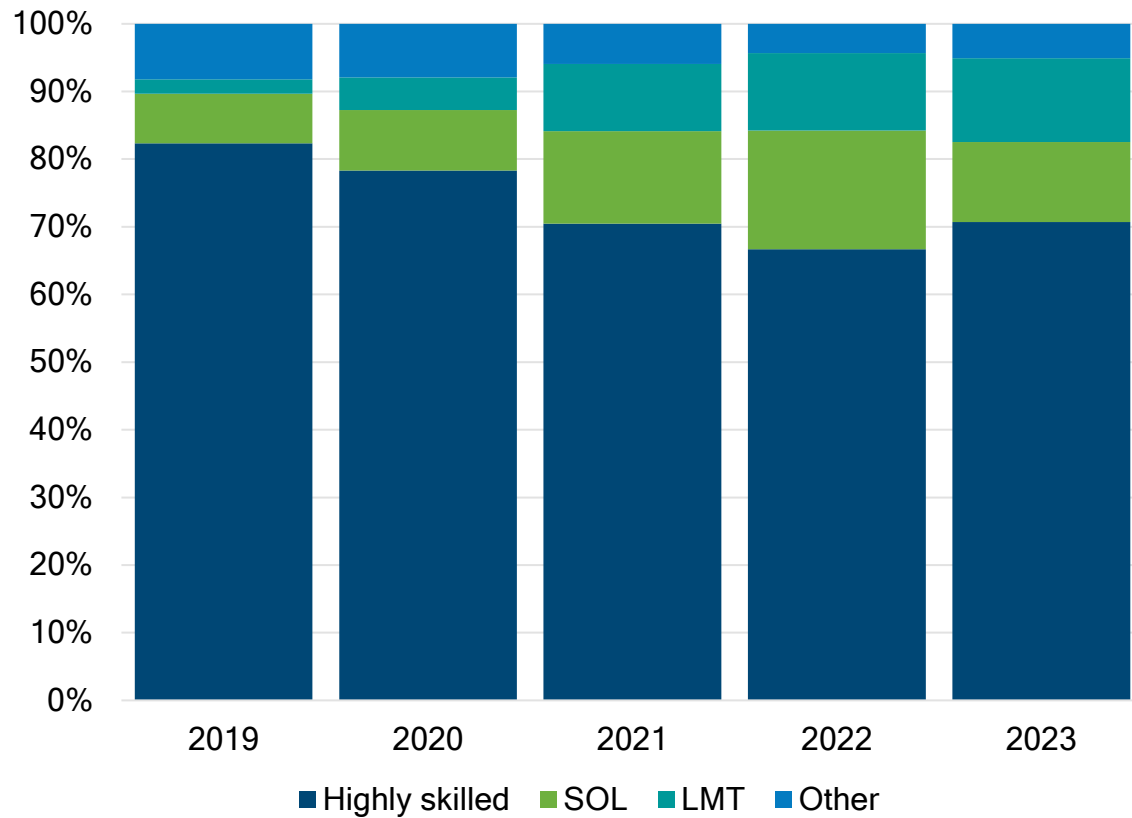
**Labour migration regulations and practice for non-EEA migrants**



## Evolution of labour migration management in Belgium / Flanders

- > Belgium adopted a **demand-driven, employer-led system** focused on high-skilled non-EEA workers
- > **Pre-2014**: Labour migration **regulated federally**; regions only issued permits, not policy
- > **2014 state reform**: **Regions** gained full authority over **labour migration policy**, while the **federal level** retained control over **residence and entry**
- > **2014-2018**: System remained unchanged – around 7,000 permits/year, mostly for **high-skilled workers**; but work permits were issued **quickly and flexibly**
- > **2019: Flemish reform**
  - > Transposed the **EU Single Permit Directive**
  - > Introduced a **migration list for medium-skilled occupations**
  - > Extended **high-skilled permit duration** (3 years)
  - > Granted unlimited access to LM after 4 years
  - > Abolished nationality requirement
- > **2021**: Digital platform **Working in Belgium** for single permit applications
- > Surge in number of work and single permits – 11,000 in 2019 → 17,000 by 2023
- > **Current challenge**: **Administrative strain** and **delays in processing** due to rising demand

## Composition (weighted) of first issued work/single permits by category, Flanders



Source: DWSE, work permit database.

- > **Work authorisation required** for all non-EEA nationals (unless exempted)
- > Access follows a **concentric model**: employers must first seek candidates in **Flanders** → **other regions** → **EEA**, before recruiting from outside the EEA
- > Two main **exemptions** from the labour market test:
  - > **Highly skilled workers** (presumed shortage; diploma and salary requirement)
  - > **Medium-skilled workers in shortage occupations** (listed exemptions; SOL)
- > Other smaller exempted categories: short-term postings, trainees, au pairs, volunteers, athletes, artists, clergy, journalists
- > System aims to **balance labour market protection** with **targeted flexibility** for key skills

# Attract and Retain Qualified Talent in Flanders



**Assessment and 99 recommendations**



# The labour migration framework in Flanders is complex to use for employers and candidates

## Application

The employer applies for a SP via “Working in Belgium”



## Employment decision

The regional level (EMS) assesses whether the necessary conditions are met and decides on the WP within 120 days of admissibility



## Residency decision (annex 46/47)

The federal level (IO) assesses whether the necessary conditions are met and decides on the RP within 120 days of admissibility



## Visa application

With annex 46/47 the worker can apply for a visa long stay at the competent embassy or consulate



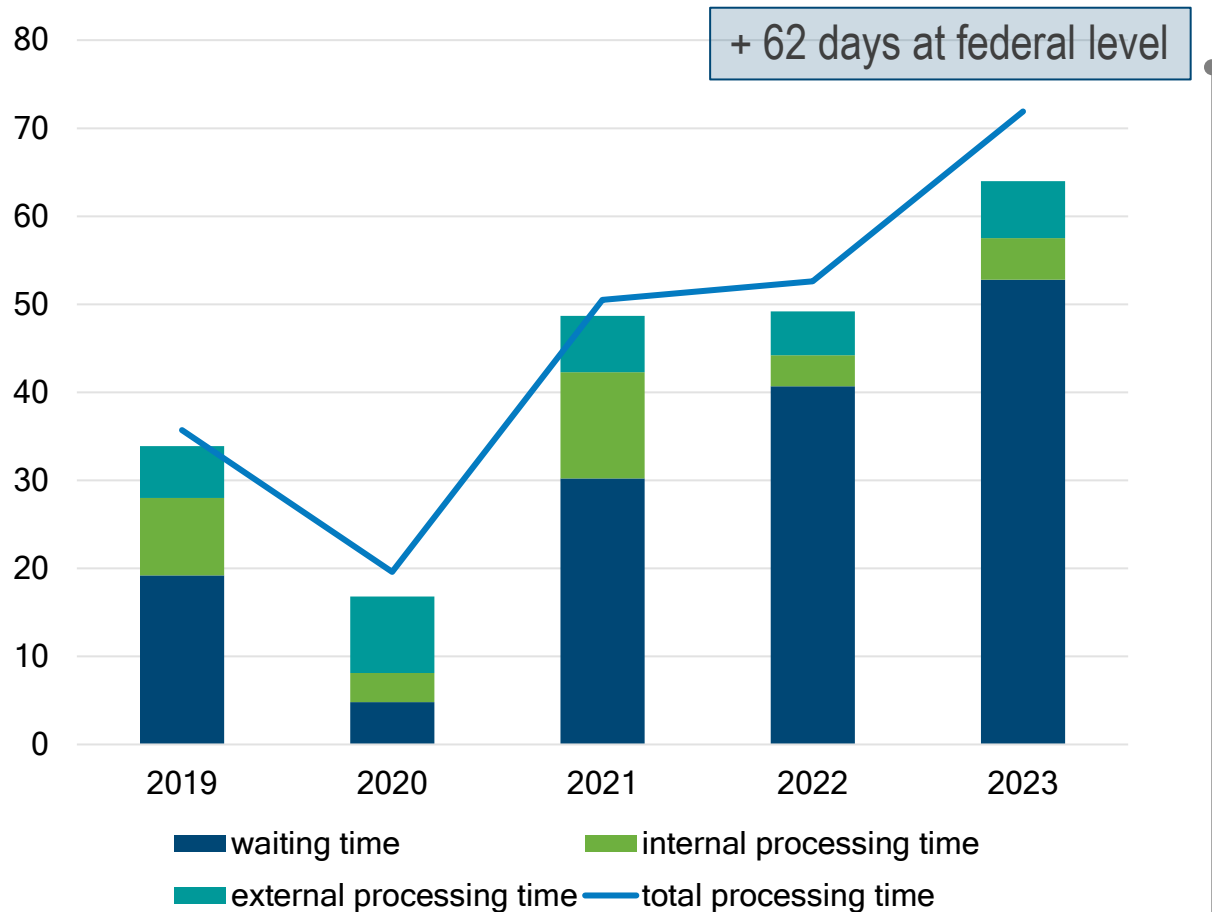
## Arrival/residence check

After arriving in BE the worker must report to the muni within 8 days to receive annex 49. After a residence check, the muni issues the el. residence card A



# Lengthy processing times in Flanders damage workers' migration projects

## Breakdown of EMS processing times for first applications of single permits, Flanders



- > The 6-to-9-month total duration is partly attributable to involvement of **multiple authorities at federal, regional, and local levels**, alongside a **sequential processing** approach
- > Staff shortages contribute to **prolonged waiting periods** before file processing even starts
- > **Admissibility phase** in the WP assessment **artificially prolongs maximum processing times (120 days)**, resulting in **unpredictability** for employers and workers

Note: Only applications for which the EMS has made a decision are included.

Source: DWSE, work permit database



## Faster, more transparent & more accessible permit procedures (29)

- Single permit applications often exceed the 120-day EU deadline, due to capacity issues and sequential processing
- Labour migrants face delays in municipality registration and obtaining necessary documents
- Workers frequently experience disruptions in their legal residence, even when their employers have submitted correct and timely applications
- While highly skilled profiles receive SP valid for up to 3 years, others must undergo a repetitive and burdensome annual renewal process
- Increase capacity at regional and federal level
- Accelerate processing for low-risk categories (Fast-Track)
- Establish parallel processing of low-risk cases (in cooperation with federal level)
- Support municipalities to accelerate operations, and to provide accessible orientation
- Push federal level to establish bridging stay documents to avoid gaps in legal residence
- Speed up renewals by improving data integration onto WiB platform (e.g., wages paid)
- In line with expanded continuous monitoring capacity, extend single permit validity beyond 1 year for persistent shortage occupations

## Better protected and informed workers (6)

- > Non-EEA workers depend on employers for guidance on permits, labour, and residency rights
- > Existing resources are employer-focused and available in few languages
- > Workers have limited access to the Working in Belgium platform to check employer-submitted information
- > Consulates and municipalities provide limited information during visa collection or registration
- > Both regional and federal authorities have no direct channels of communication with workers
- > During the permit's validity, workers receive no proactive communication about their rights and obligations, which can lead to problems
- > Workers also struggle to find information on how to report abuse or exploitation
- > Inform workers about their right to access the WiB platform and offer guidance
- > At application and renewal, require the provision of the worker's contact details
- > Improve information provision to workers at key contact moments
- > Develop multilingual resources (e.g., digital brochures, information sheets, mobile apps) detailing workers' social and labour rights
- > Require embassies, diplomatic posts, and municipalities to provide labour migrants with such resources

## Better protected and informed workers (6)

- > Eligible workers are not informed about indefinite single permits or EU Blue Cards; employers often lack incentives to request them.
- > Many workers are unaware of their right to a 3-month job-search period and 2-month unemployment benefit after job loss, as employers often fail to inform them
- > Workers on single permits cannot change employers without a new permit application – procedural and practical obstacles limit the ability to change jobs, leaving workers dependent on their initial employer
- > Social security portability is likely an issue for the one in four single permit holders who come from countries without bilateral agreements
- > Inform non-EEA workers in English about permit statuses, rights, and obligations directly, in addition to through their employers
- > Simplify employer change, in line with the recast Single Permit Directive
- > Pursue bilateral agreements with non-EU countries or explore unilateral measures to ensure portability of social security rights
- > Explore the possibility of granting transitional permits to workers who are victims of exploitation



## Improve recognition of foreign qualifications & skills (17)

- > Lengthy academic recognition procedures (9 months for specific recognition) due to limited capacity at NARIC-Flanders and reliance on HEIs for advice
- > Gaps in information and coordination make it difficult for applicants to navigate further steps (e.g. higher education) after a negative decision
- > Even after academic diploma recognition, foreign workers in regulated professions face complex federal licensing procedures
- > Improve coordination in RFQ by creating a central body to oversee processes between NARIC, HEIs, and professional recognition bodies
- > More online tools to provide step-by-step orientation
- > Improve access to recognition processes
- > Develop partial recognition for shortage occupations
- > Link recognition agreements to Flemish priority occupations and countries of origin

## WOGA to settlement and integration (23)

- Decentralised provincial International Houses provide support but are not structured
  - Labour migrants struggle to secure housing due to restrictive housing regulations
  - Labour migrants' accommodation and housing conditions are not monitored on a regular basis
  - Labour migrants face significant barriers to enrolling their children in Flemish schools
  - Partners of non-EEA labour migrants have unrestricted access to the labour market, yet they receive limited support
  - Participation in the civic integration programme is modest, due to work-study balance issues, limited employer support, and inadequate adaptation to their needs
- Bolster International Houses
  - Support accessibility of suitable housing through orientation and removing barriers
  - Establish housing inspection mechanism
  - Facilitate school access by easing enrolment rules, providing coordinated assistance with school placement, and expanding international education capacity
  - Improve employment access for partners of labour migrants through better information and guidance
  - More language and social orientation options, including a talent-targeted civic integration course (tailored and shorter) and pre-departure training options



## Focus on international students as a source for talent (6)

- Flanders has much lower international student retention than France, Germany
- The 12-month orientation year is often too short, with long permit processing times causing interruptions in residency and delaying eligibility for permanent status
- Students and employers struggle with the transition to labour migrant status due to limited guidance and unfamiliarity with permit requirements
- Ensure that the post-graduate orientation year can be fully used
- Improve information and orientation for graduating students and employers

# Attracting and retaining qualified talents in Flanders and Wallonia

A project to design the economic migration policy reform in the Belgian regions of Flanders and Wallonia, coordinated by the Department of Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy (WEWIS) – Flemish Government and the Walloon Public Service Economy - Employment - Research – Wallonian Government, carried out with the support from the OECD with funding from the European Commission through the TSI 2023 Flagship technical Support project: Migrant integration and talent attraction

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[www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/dg-reform/attracting-and-retaining-qualified-talents-in-flanders-and-wallonia.html](http://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/dg-reform/attracting-and-retaining-qualified-talents-in-flanders-and-wallonia.html)