Labour migration: improving legal avenues to work in the EU

Find out about different work permits for workers from outside the EU and how the EU is revising them to bolster legal labour migration.

Europe is facing demographic changes with a rapidly aging population and low birth rates. Pensioners are expected to account for about one third of the EU population by 2050. This will have significant social and economic consequences, including increased demand for health care and social services, lower productivity and higher public expenditures.

To help address these challenges, the European Union has been encouraging legal migration to address labour shortages, fill skill gaps and boost economic growth.

Take a look at some of the legal pathways into the EU job market and what the European
Parliament is doing to improve some of them.

**Further information**
Find out more about EU action on migration and asylum

**Blue Card: attracting highly-skilled workers to the EU**

The EU Blue Card is a work and residency permit that allows non-EU citizens to work and live in an EU country, provided they have a degree or equivalent qualification, and a job offer that meets a minimum salary threshold.

Revised rules come into effect by the end of 2023, setting the period of the job offer to a minimum of six months and reducing the salary threshold to at least 100% of the average gross annual salary in the country of employment.

The Blue Card is valid for up to four years and can be renewed. Cardholders may bring their family members to live with them in the EU.

It is recognised in all EU countries, except for Denmark and Ireland.

**Further information**
Read more about the EU Blue Card and its reform

**The Single Permit: a temporary and country-specific work permit**

For those who do not qualify for the EU Blue Card, the Single Permit is an option. It is a combined work and residency permit, issued for up to two years by the EU country where the non-EU citizen will work and live.

In January 2024, Parliament and the Council agreed on improvements to the 2011 Directive to issue the permit more quickly. To make the EU a more attractive prospect, the revised rules cut the application process to 90 days from four months. The agreement was approved by MEPs in March 2024.

The permit will no longer be tied to a specific employer, allowing workers to change jobs, facilitating labour matching and reducing the worker's vulnerability to exploitation.
Workers who have had the single work permit for under two years would also be allowed to retain the single permit while unemployed for up to three months, while those who have had the permit for over two years can retain it if they stay unemployed for up to six months.

National authorities will still be allowed to set a minimum period for which a holder of the single permit is required to work for the first employer before being allowed to change.

Parliament endorsed the final version of the updated rules on single permits in March 2024 and the Council followed in April 2024. EU countries will have two years after the revised rules enter into force to introduce it in their national laws. This law is not applicable in Denmark and Ireland.

Who is the Single Permit for?

The Single Permit applies to almost all non-EU workers and their families. However, refugees and asylum applicants, ship workers and self-employed workers cannot apply for the Single Permit.

EU long-term resident status

EU long-term resident status allows non-EU citizens who have been in the EU legally for five continuous years to stay and work in the EU for an indefinite period. It was introduced in 2003 as a means to better integrate non-EU citizens. Once someone has been granted the status, they can move and work anywhere within the EU.

In order to be eligible for the EU long-term resident status, non-EU citizens must prove that they are able to financially support themselves and their family. Once an application has been filed, national authorities have six months to issue their decision. An application can be rejected for reasons related to security or public policy, but not for economic reasons.

If the application is approved, the non-EU citizen will be granted a five-year residence permit which will be renewed automatically. Recognised long-term residents have the right to equal treatment with the country's nationals in areas such as employment, education and social security.

The laws on the EU long-term resident status do not apply in Denmark and Ireland.

Recognising migrants’ qualifications
In 2019, about 48% of highly-skilled migrants worked in low or medium skilled jobs, compared with just 20% of EU citizens. The most common form of occupation is as a cleaner or domestic helper, while 62% of computer programming firms and 43% of construction companies are reporting labour shortages.

In a 2021 resolution, MEPs called for EU rules recognising the qualifications of migrant workers in a quicker, fairer and more streamlined manner across the EU.

In November 2023, the Commission issued a recommendation saying said that countries should work to reduce barriers to the recognition of skills and qualifications that make it difficult for people to legally migrate to that country.

More on migration

- Asylum and migration in the EU: facts and figures
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- Returning migrants: facts and figures
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