

Workshop 9: Economic migration: brain drain or brain gain?

Free movement potential:

By Ferdinand Koenig

There are few political potatoes that are hotter than immigration. And yet, as workshop 9 made clear, the European economy will need ever increasing numbers of migrants if Europeans are to maintain the standard of living to which they have become accustomed.

Free movement is not just an economic necessity, as Tobias Billström, the Swedish Minister for Migration and Asylum stressed in the opening speech of the workshop. Migration has been an enriching source of human development for centuries.

A 'demand driven' system, Billström continued, is the model to which European countries should aspire. Sweden, he explained, has established a flexible and open immigration system which is based on the needs of employers. Work permits are granted on the basis that the advertised job vacancy cannot be suitably filled by an EEA national. Flexibility and openness, says Billström, is the only adequate way of addressing Europe's labour shortage, which is set to dramatically increase in the next decades.

The Swedish Minister for Migration's speech was complemented by the presentation that followed. While Tobias Billström's speech concentrated on Europe's needs, Moroccan Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Dr Latifa Akharbach, articulated the concerns of many developing nations.

She said that Morocco is trapped in a vicious cycle, whereby the Moroccan government finances the education of citizens who then leave as they feel there is a lack of opportunity in their home country. This in turn ensures that future opportunities are limited, leading to further emigration.

Later in the workshop, during the question and answer session, the Moroccan Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs mentioned that she felt Morocco should be consulted more when labour market legislation – for example the European 'Blue Card' – was being drafted, a point with which the Swedish Minister for Migration agreed in principle.

Tobias Billström disagreed however with the idea that emigration was hurting developing countries, stating that remittances were three times higher than the global aid budget. Dr Akharbach replied by saying that when she spoke about 'brain drain' she was referring to high skilled emigration, such as healthcare professionals, who she felt could only harm the development potential of their home countries by leaving.

Emigration was also a major theme of the speech by Professor Maria Rodrigues – Special Advisor on the Lisbon Agenda. Interestingly, she said that talented young people in Europe should be given incentives to emigrate and thus take their skills to other, less developed regions of the globe. She also called on European leaders not to lose sight of long-term goals now that they are under pressure to pursue narrow, short-term interests.

The call to avoid the lure of nationalist policies was also a feature of the presentation made by Ben Noteboom – CEO of the global recruitment firm Randstad. Presenting some stark statistics, he made

clear that European countries had little choice but to increase their levels of migration. He also mentioned that to meet the Lisbon criteria on labour market participation, European countries would have to be bolder in pursuing labour market reforms.

The last person to speak was Juan Cajiao –President of AISEC International, the world’s largest youth organisation. The emphasis of his presentation was the added value that student exchanges contribute to young people and he asked European politicians to expand programmes such as Erasmus Mundus. He also asked governments to better prepare their citizens for a world in which intercultural dialogue is a central feature of everyday life.

The problem of integration was touched upon in the question and answer session and Tobias Billström mentioned ways in which governments could better integrate new arrivals. The underlying message of the workshop was not however to hammer out policy detail – rather it was to emphasise that European countries are falling behind their international partners and competitors when it comes to recruiting the very best in international talent.

Greater immigration is not an option was the conclusion, it is a necessity – but one that if handled correctly will be to the benefit of Europeans and third country nationals alike.