

# Newly-arrived immigrants in Estonia: Policy Options and Recommendations for a Comprehensive and Sustainable Support System

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2014



**Research:** Newly-arrived immigrants in Estonia: Policy Options and Recommendations for a Comprehensive and Sustainable Support System

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**Research ordered by:** State Chancellery

The study is carried out by the State Chancellery (*Riigikantselei*) by request of the Fund of Wise Decisions, which is funded by the European Social Fund program "Development and organization of government's work long-term planning systems." The project initiators are the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications and the Ministry of Justice, other ministries involved are the Ministry of Education and Research and Ministry of Culture.

Important contribution for the completion of the research was made by the steering committee of the project, which included: Birgit Lüüs, Kaisa-Maarja Pärtel, Monika Schmeiman, Piret Potisepp, Ursula Tubli, Liana Roosmaa and Mari-Liis Sööt.



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The 'Global Talent rally' began quite some time ago and only now Estonia is making its first steps to enter the competition by developing measures for attracting and retaining foreign talents. So far, strategic discussions over Estonian economic policy have mostly focused on the attractiveness of the business environment, science and development activities and how to stimulate innovation. The main goal of attracting foreign talent is to promote entrepreneurship and Estonian economic competitiveness. However, at the same time, less attention has been paid to the presence of highly skilled foreign workers in Estonia. The Governmental Action Plan for years 2011-2015 envisaged the creation of a favourable environment for the immigration of foreign students and talented workers in order to increase the country's economic competitiveness. The Government that took office in spring 2014 stated in their action plan that immigration regulations have to be analysed and revised in order to support the filling of highly-skilled and highly-paid working positions. The Estonian competitiveness strategy „Eesti 2020“, also has prioritized increasing the immigration of highly skilled workers and talents to Estonia.

These views indicate the Government's goal to engage in the so-called smart migration policy – the Estonian economy can only advance if focused, selective and demand-based migration policy is applied. This approach would contribute to the immigration of highly skilled workers into the private and public sectors, including universities. The first milestone in this process was set in 2013, when the procedure for obtaining residence permits was adapted in order to support and acknowledge the importance of immigration in regards to economic development. Different parties have indicated the need to create an immigration strategy with more specific goals, including measures for shaping appropriate talent policy, which would also create a support system that favours the adaptation of foreigners.

Although Estonia just recently started setting goals for its talent policy, Estonian universities and employers have been actively recruiting foreign students and highly skilled workers from outside Estonia and the European Union for some time. As important as recruiting, are retaining and supporting foreign talents; and this requires a functional and effective support system. The present research focuses on the analysis of the current support system and services provided to highly skilled migrants with the goal of mapping the main bottlenecks and formulating proposals to develop the most optimal system for supporting foreign talents in Estonia. This is important, because so far, regarding the Global Talent rally, Estonia has been a giver and not a taker. A smart migration policy that contains elements for not only attracting but also retaining and supporting foreign talent, is needed for Estonia to achieve the goal of increased economic competitiveness.

In order to map out the bottlenecks regarding the support system and form policy proposals, interviews with people from the target group and stakeholders were conducted in autumn and winter of 2013-2014. In addition, services supporting the adaptation and their providers as well as best practices from other countries were mapped out and the results were validated in a discussion seminar. Interviews that were carried out with foreigners and organisations recruiting them indicated that one of the main obstacles in recruiting foreigners is the lack of services provided for their integration, including the lack of an adaptation programme and functioning support networks; and irregularity in service provision. The inadequacy

regarding support services makes it rather difficult and costly for the employer to recruit and retain foreign talents. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a support system of services facilitating the adaptation of highly skilled workers and foreign students that is sustainable, takes into account the needs of different stakeholders, includes all necessary services and clearly distributes the roles of different institutions.

**Based on the collected data, the following findings on the current situation can be brought out:**

- The analysis indicated that currently Estonia follows the model of ‘workload distribution’, whereby the responsibility for the recruitment and imminent adaptation lies with the employers; while the role of the state is to develop the general supporting structure for recruitment. There are several weaknesses of this model, including fragmented service provision, marginal cooperation between the employers and public sector and duplication of many services, all of which are clearly observable in Estonia.
- Information about the public services provided by the state and local governments in general as well as more specific supporting activities targeted at foreigners, is poorly accessible. The main problem with access to public services lies with the lack of information in English about these essential public services, such as on how to register with a general practitioner or how to find a place for a child in a kindergarten, etc. The lack of appropriate kindergartens and schools was also brought out as a bottleneck.
- The Police and Border Guard Board (Politsei- ja Piirivalveamet, PPA) was criticised with regards to the procedures for the application and processing of residence permits. The information given to applicants was generally insufficient and the services were lacking in customer orientation.
- Although foreign workers and students found that adaptation requires Estonian language skills, the general motivation to learn Estonian was low. Migrants also opposed the idea of mandatory language learning. The language courses provided on the open market are of uneven and unsteady quality and it is difficult to find relevant information about suitable courses.
- It is difficult for foreign students and the family members of foreign workers to find a job in Estonia. The reasons for that include insufficient Estonian language skills but also poor knowledge about the Estonian labour market and the lack of a sufficient social network. As of today, no specific support services have been developed for this target group that would systematically help them adapt and enter the labour market.
- This research indicates a substantial need for a nationally targeted and coordinated talent policy. Universities, enterprises and their umbrella organisations are in agreement that Estonia does not have a clear or detailed strategy for attracting foreign labour and making the recruitment process more effective. Organisations that are currently recruiting foreigners feel the need for the government to take the coordinating role and create a support system for attracting, recruiting as well as retaining foreign talent.

Estonia has taken the first steps towards creating a unified talent policy with the activities planned in the Estonian enterprise growth strategy for years 2014-2020. Based on the current analysis and consultations with representatives from organisations recruiting foreigners and foreigners themselves, the following suggestions for the development of a support system are made:

1. To guarantee the success of talent policy, it is necessary to create an institutional cooperation network that brings together stakeholders from different levels. This should take into account the capabilities of various stakeholders, the number of foreigners coming to Estonia and their needs for support in the adaptation process. Thus, the most optimal solution for Estonia is to develop a support system based on the networking model. In this model, services targeted to foreign talents are combined into a four-layer spiral: business sector and entrepreneurship services, academic sector services, state sector (including local governments) and third sector services. These services should be aggregated to one service platform which is supported by a cooperation network of different stakeholders.
2. In order to make services more accessible, all existing and expected services have to be aggregated into one information portal which supports the service platform managed by the cooperation network.
3. The Police and Border Guard Board (PPA) should continuously pay more attention to guaranteeing a client-oriented approach in the development and provision of services related to obtaining residence permits.
4. The share of services provided electronically online ought to be increased. This includes the notion that PPA should introduce a system for online-applications and tracking of the process for obtaining residence permits.
5. Introduction of a more consistent notification system informing employers about the changes in the process of obtaining residence permits ought to be considered as well.
6. State and local government services that are necessary for the adaptation of foreigners have to be accessible online as e-services to the greatest extent possible. They should be accessible to foreigners as well, meaning that these services should be available in both English and Russian.
7. The state and local governments should take a greater role in the organisation of Estonian language training. It is worth considering offering free Estonian language courses at the basic level to foreigners all over Estonia. This would promote Estonian language learning and therefore the use of Estonian instead of English.
8. It is necessary to consider offering free career counselling and language training to foreign students and spouses/partners of foreign workers. It is also important to develop the foreigners' social network by launching different projects in cooperation of different stakeholders at the local level and at the same time by involving more NGOs.
9. Effective cooperation networks and a general service platform should be developed at the local level similarly to the state level. Here, the initiative can come from local governments, universities as well as entrepreneurs.

See the full report (in Estonian) [here](#).