



HIWE – High-Skilled  
Internationals: Bottom-Up  
Insights into Policy Innovation  
for Work and  
Entrepreneurship in Finland

# How to Promote the Employment, Entrepreneurship, and Participation of Highly Skilled Internationals in Finland?

**Policy Recommendations  
& Roadmap for Action  
2024**

[www.hiwe.fi](http://www.hiwe.fi)

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This publication brings together the key policy recommendations of the HIWE project and presents ways to implement them.

What is recommended?
Recommendations for promoting the employment and entrepreneurship of highly skilled internationals
<b>Recommendation 1.</b> Promote a comprehensive change in mindsets and policy regarding the importance of international talent in society.
<b>Recommendation 2.</b> Ensure that services are easy to find, understand, use, and influence. Develop the service structure and practices of skilled migration to live up to this promise.
<b>Recommendation 3.</b> Develop existing skills-based immigration services to make the labour market more flexible and promote the position of highly skilled internationals in the market.
Recommendations for promoting the participation of highly skilled internationals in policy making, service development, and workplaces
<b>Recommendation 1.</b> Public policymaking for integrating international talent into the Finnish working life should rely more heavily on collaboration between policymakers, internationals, and other stakeholders.
<b>Recommendation 2.</b> Highly skilled internationals should be more engaged in designing and improving public and private services that focus on their employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.
<b>Recommendation 3.</b> Workplace inclusivity and equal opportunities for all employees should be developed in collaboration with the employer, the work community, service providers, and other employers interested in promoting inclusivity.

The policy recommendations have also been published in two policy briefs:

Policy Brief 1: How to Promote the Employment and Entrepreneurship of Highly Skilled Internationals in Finland?

Policy Brief 2: How to Promote the Participation of Highly Skilled Internationals in Policy Making, Service Development, and Workplaces in Finland?

All documents can be found in Finnish and English on the project's website:

[www.hiwe.fi/policyrecommendations](http://www.hiwe.fi/policyrecommendations)



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Research shows that highly skilled internationals bring significant benefits to the economy, innovation, and entrepreneurship of host societies (Boubtane et al, 2016; Nathan, 2014; Oliinyk et al., 2021). This explains why today states compete for international talent. The question of why some countries, regions, and sectors attract international talent and others do not is a pressing one for policymakers.

Finland too seeks to attract international talent. For example, the Roadmap for Education-based and Work-based Immigration 2035 (Finnish Government 2021a), the Sustainability Roadmap of Prime Minister Sanna Marin's government (Finnish Government 2021 b), and the government programme of Prime Minister Petteri Orpo (Finnish Government 2023) portray Finland as an internationally competitive and attractive place to study, work, start a business and live.

As studies show, internationals are attracted to Finland by affordable and high-quality health, welfare and education services, stable society, and reliable institutions (see Välimäki et al. 2023). In contrast, internationals' perception of services specifically aimed at them is more critical. The service system is seen as complex and difficult to use, or internationals are not familiar with the services to start with. The design of services does not take sufficient account of the needs and aspirations of internationals and employers. Their voices are also easily overlooked in policy making. All these factors influence the way internationals assess Finland's attractiveness when considering where to live and advance their careers in the future.

In the HIWE project, we have addressed these challenges from multiple perspectives. [We have interviewed](#) internationals from diverse backgrounds and sectors, mapped [local service ecosystems](#), analysed, [policies](#) and consulted stakeholders. Our research reveals an interesting paradox. On the one hand, Finland has actively developed policies and services to promote the recruitment, entrepreneurship, and work life participation of international talent. On the other hand, talents still face major challenges in all these areas.

As an attempt to solve this paradox, the HIWE project organized [workshops](#) with international talents and representatives from the public sector, cities, labour market organisations, companies, and universities. Discussions within the workshops affirmed that change is needed throughout society: from how internationals are perceived in general and what kind of policies are targeted at them (Policy Guidelines) to how services for talents are organised (Organisation of Services), and how they are implemented and developed at a practical level (Services in Practice). (See Figure 1.)

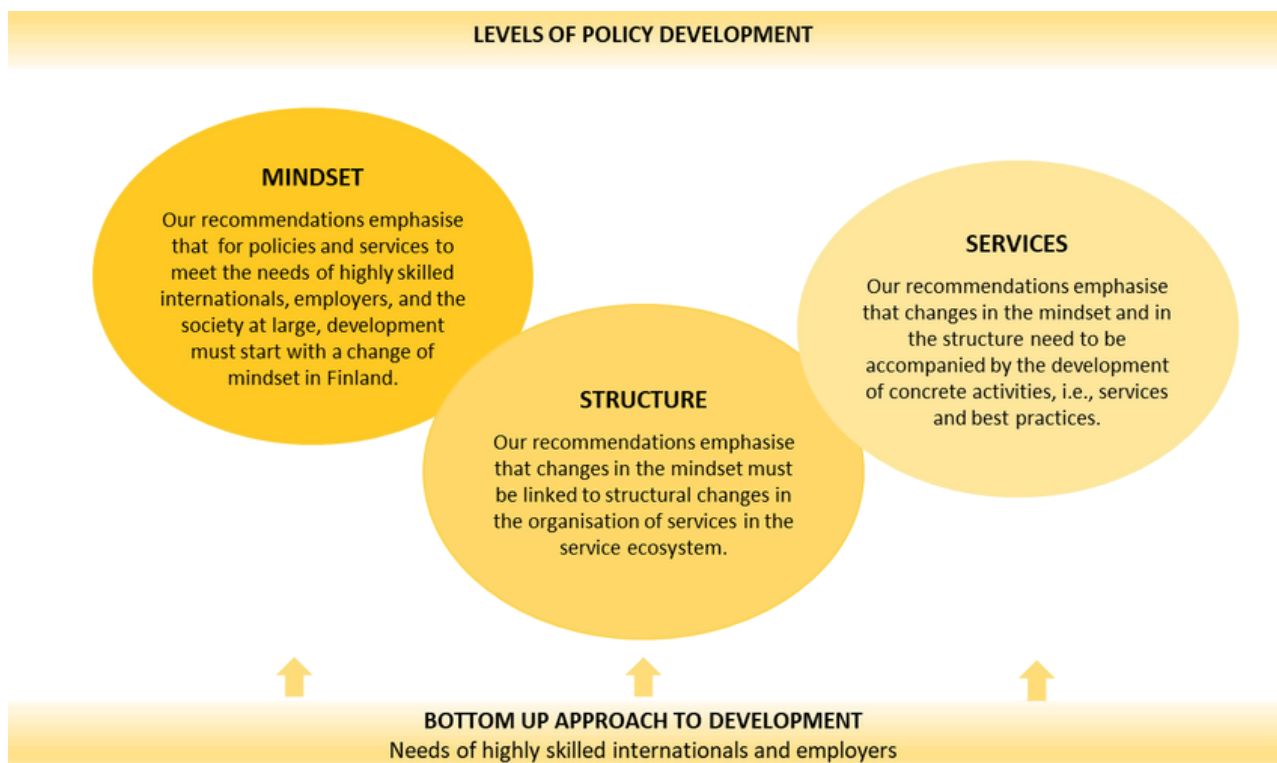


Figure 1. HIWE policy recommendations at three levels of the service system.

Our findings suggest that what is needed is not so much new services but utilizing existing services more efficiently. The recommendations of this policy brief are based on how the current service system looks from the perspective of users (international talent, entrepreneurs, and employers), and how it could be made more responsive to their needs.

In this publication, we focus on the service system for highly skilled internationals. Please also see below our second policy brief “How to Promote the Participation of Highly Skilled Internationals in Policy Making, Service Development, and Workplaces in Finland?” for recommendations on how to increase internationals’ participation in society. Details of both policy recommendations are available on the project [website](#).



# POLICY GUIDELINES

## **Recommendation 1: Promote a comprehensive change in mindsets and policy regarding the importance of international talent in society.**

### **Why is change needed?**

According to the results of the HIWE project, international talents perceive the public debate about the need for foreign talent in Finland as contradictory to their own experiences. In practice, their experience and skills are often not valued. Furthermore, especially the non-European talent experience racism and discrimination. (See also Apter & Heiskari 2023; Ndomo 2024.) For their part, immigration policy experts have pointed out that a consistent immigration and integration policy is hampered by the different priorities of changing governments, the lack of cooperation between policy areas, competition between geographical areas, and the allocation of resources to temporary projects and ad hoc solutions. Experts and practitioners agree that Finland needs a major change in mindsets and attitudes, both in policy making and in society at large. Finland should clarify what it expects from highly skilled internationals and what their rights and obligations are and pursue a coherent policy accordingly.

### **Means for making the change:**

**Vision:** Develop a new long-term vision for skills-based immigration in Finland. The vision takes a holistic view of the social, economic, and cultural importance of international talent for Finnish society (cf. UN pillars of sustainable development). It also outlines the kind of service system Finland wants in the future. The new vision does not 'market Finland abroad' but describes the basic values and objectives of a skills-based immigration policy and establishes a view of Finland as an inclusive society based on DEIB values (diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging). The vision recognises that the primary motivation for international talent to come and stay in Finland is to work and live a meaningful life. It understands that internationals bring with them diversity, innovation, and new skills that benefit society in many ways yet recognises also that internationals need acceptance, support, and opportunities to be part of society in all areas of life. Suggestions for action:

- The vision will be drawn up in collaboration with the government, political parties, the ministries, and civil society actors, such as immigrant organisations.
- The process of drawing the vision can be managed, for example, through the annual round table discussions organised by the Prime Minister's Office, based on the Equality Statement adopted by the Government in August 2023.
- Once adopted, the vision will guide all policy making and service planning related to international talent across government sectors, with a shared commitment between the parties.
- The vision will be actively communicated to the public sector, service providers, the international talent community, and society at large, for example at the SuomiAreena event.

**Mission:** Establish common principles to guide a skills-based immigration policy. The key principles are sustainability, diversity, inclusiveness, supportiveness, and trust. Policies that implement these principles seek to: i) influence cultural attitudes, ii) change societal structures and services, iii) encourage the use of a diverse toolbox, providing actors with opportunities and incentives beyond regulation, iv) involve actors in collaboration (including service design) across geographical and administrative borders, and v) consider the needs of both international talent and businesses. Suggestions for action:

- The Prime Minister's Office and the ministries will set up a working group for each government term to coordinate policy preparation.
- When drafting laws related to immigration and integration policy, statements will also be sought from organisations representing international talent.
- Discussions, workshops, and other collaborative activities will be organised on plans for action programmes aimed to advance the integration of international talent into the labour market, ensuring that the views of talent and companies are also heard.
- Internationals and their networks will be actively informed about immigration and integration policy planning and decision-making, for example through social media channels.

**Leadership:** Develop the public sector as a model for recruiting international talent and diverse and inclusive workplace practices. Increase and monitor the share of international workers in the public sector. Address in a coherent way the challenges of language requirements and the identification of previous education and work experience. Suggestions for action:

- The recruitment of international talent will be promoted by utilising the measures of the Talent Boost Programme and the strategic goals and policy actions of the Roadmap for Education-based and Work-based Immigration 2035 (VN 2021 a).
- The number and share of international employees in the public sector will be regularly monitored. For example, the State Treasury and Keva can collect related information to support decision-making.
- The language proficiency requirements for public sector employees will be streamlined by government decree. The authority's task is also to ensure, through various measures, that the personnel have sufficient language skills to perform their duties.



# ORGANISATION OF SERVICES

## **Recommendation 2: A promise that services are easy to find, understand, use, and influence guides the development of the service structure and practices of skilled migration.**

### **Why is change needed?**

The results of the HIWE project show that, despite the efforts made in Finland, there are still many problems with the services offered to highly skilled internationals. Services are often scattered, difficult to find and access, or they are not available in English. In addition, service providers lack expertise in areas such as skills identification, pertinent guidance of internationals, and language skills. HIWE's research material includes examples of service situations where a talent has been left alone with their problems without advice and guidance forward. There are also problems with services for employers. Although such services exist, they are not widely known and effectively used. In addition, services are not always based on the best available knowledge. Instead, they are often designed without considering the actual experiences and needs of internationals and employers. These findings point to the need for changes in both the structure and the practices of services for international talent.

### **Means for making the change:**

**'One contact':** Promote a practice whereby the first provider takes responsibility for advising the client and refers them on if necessary. Each service point is then the 'right one', and the client is not left to deal with their situation alone. Suggestions for action:

- The service organisations will ensure that the personnel are up-to-date on the services offered and, if necessary, provide them with additional training. Here, for example, the services of the KEHA Center and the digital eOppiva learning environment can be used.

**'One-stop shop':** Promote the practice of permanently concentrating key services in a single point of contact, accessible physically, online, and by telephone. Suggestions for action:

- The development of the International House service concept will continue nationwide with funding secured for the service points.
- Information on the services provided by municipalities to internationals will be collected on a single website (see e.g., the [HIWE ecosystem maps](#)); and/or municipal websites provide up-to-date links to other service platforms (e.g. Work in Finland).

**One identification:** Promote the adoption and development of digital service platforms and digital identity to streamline service processes and reduce paperwork. Suggestions for action:

- The development of e-services (e.g. EnterFinland, Virtual Finland, digital identity) to alleviate service processes will continue.

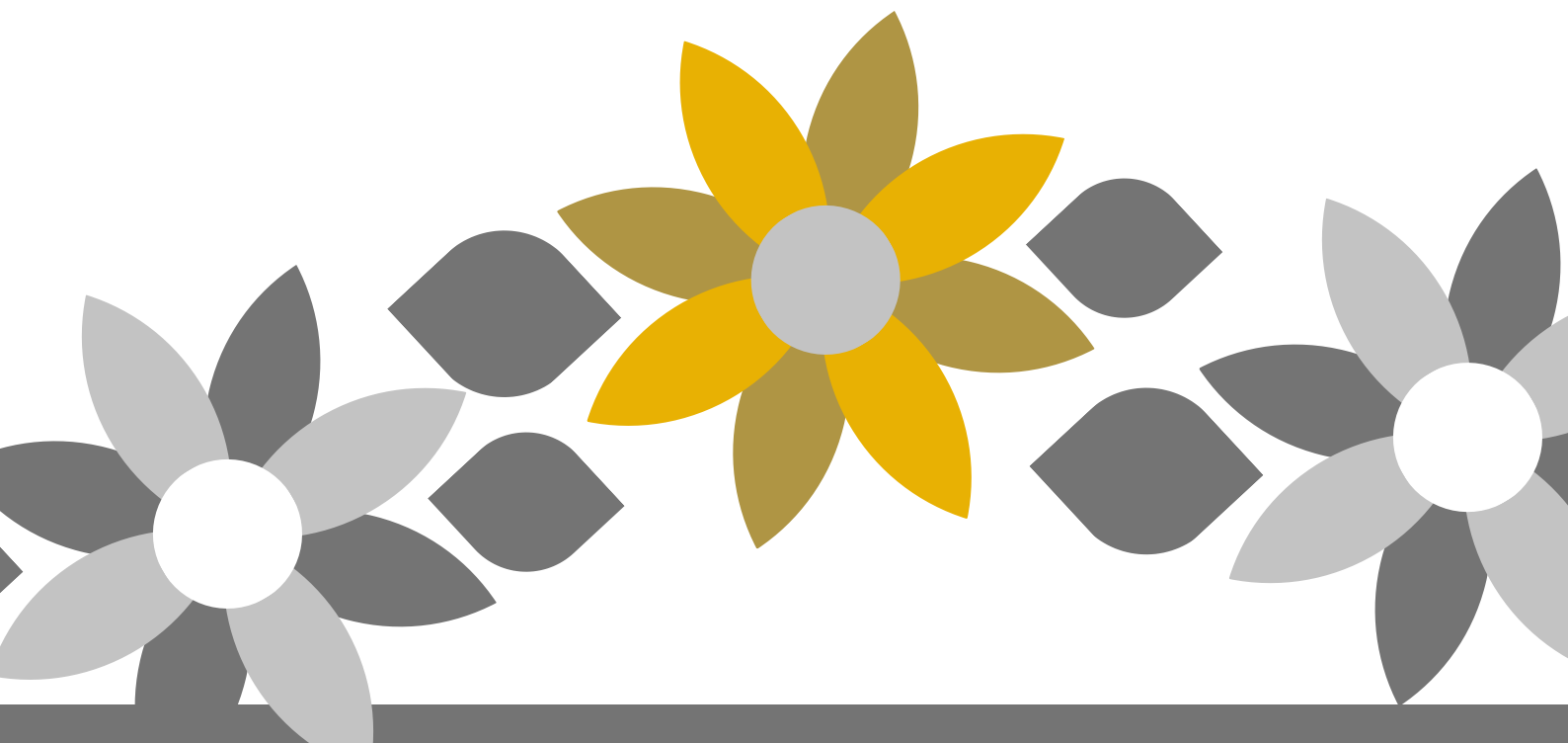


**Multilingualism:** Ensure that services for international talent are also available in (at least) English at all service points. Ensuring that all mandatory documents required for entry, study, employment, and residence can be completed in (at least) English. Suggestions for action:

- Multilingual websites of public services (e.g. employment services, tax services) will be developed.

**Regular communication:** Communicate regularly about services to users in a multi-directional and multi-channel way, using social media, personal communication, associations, migrants' own networks, 'city ambassadors', and other forms of communication. When designing and implementing communication, service providers keep in mind that all encounters and communication with service users provide valuable information about their needs and the performance of services. This information can be used to develop service practices. Suggestions for action:

- Service providers regularly market their services on easily accessible digital platforms (e.g. LinkedIn, Expat Finland). New channels and forms of communication are designed and tested in collaboration with users.
- Information exchange and collaboration between public and third sector organisations providing services will be increased, through for example the Talent Boost programme (Newsroom, Network, Hubs).



## SERVICES IN PRACTICE

### **Recommendation 3: Develop existing skills-based immigration services to make the labour market more flexible and promote the position of highly skilled internationals in the market.**

#### **Why is change needed?**

The HIWE project has found that, from the point of view of highly skilled internationals, the labour market is global, yet in Finland the requirements for working life are often approached from a national point of view. These entail, for example, requiring Finnish language skills, a Finnish degree and work experience, or a network of contacts in Finland. As a result, the labour market in Finland is, in part, inaccessible to international talent. Other perceived problems include the lack of encounters between skilled internationals and potential employers and, relatedly, insufficient guidance from the part of employment services. Those who do find employment may face language barriers, 'glass ceilings', and social isolation. Moreover, internationals do not see entrepreneurship as an attractive career option. This is partly due to current residence permit policies, which do not consider the changing work situations of internationals and do not provide flexible opportunities to move between paid employment and entrepreneurship. In addition, companies need more incentives and support to recruit international talent and to remove bureaucratic obstacles.

#### **Means for making the change:**

**Employment services:** Improve the identification of previous education and work experience of international talent. Develop employment services to match the specific skills of internationals and improve their employability skills. Provide and actively promote a wide range of opportunities for international talent to learn the national languages. Suggestions for action:

- The introduction of the new employment service model from the beginning of 2025 will be used as an opportunity to develop service practices for international talents.
- Employment services and employers will utilise tools such as those provided by the Finnish National Board of Education, the Work in Finland service and SIMHE institutions to identify skills and develop their recruitment skills. The ELY Centres organise regular communication campaigns for employers to raise awareness of the tools.
- Language and work life studies will be included in all higher education degrees offered to international students. SIMHE institutions can be consulted in the planning of the studies.
- Opportunities to study Finnish and Swedish are actively marketed to international talents, for example through the Kielibuusti website and the third sector actors (e.g. community colleges).
- Language learning in the workplace is enabled using the workplace Finnish/Swedish service. Marketing of the service to talents and employers will be increased.

**Entrepreneurial services:** Change residence permit policies so that a single permit and the conditions for its renewal (minimum monthly income and maximum number of unemployment months) allow both paid employment and self-employment. Make sure the process for assessing the business plan of new entrepreneur is transparent and comprehensible for the applicant. Provide more courses for international students on Finnish working life and entrepreneurship. Suggestions for action:

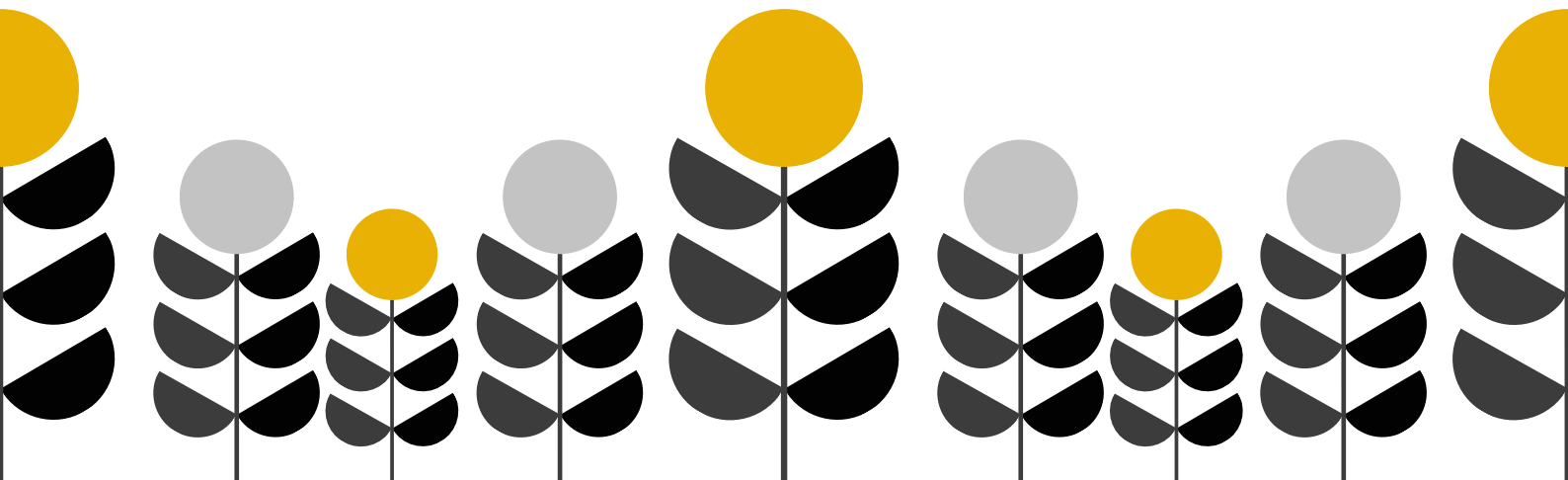
- The current Aliens Act will be amended to make the residence permit rules for entrepreneurs more flexible.
- Financial incentives for international talent setting up a business in Finland or bringing a business to Finland will be considered.
- The assessment of business plans for start-up entrepreneurs by the ELY Centres will be reviewed so that the process is transparent, and decisions are clearly communicated to the applicant.
- Higher education institutions will ensure that all international degree students are offered entrepreneurship and work life studies. These can be developed in cooperation with, for example, local Talent Boost actors.
- A national programme will be designed to support entrepreneurship among international graduates.
- The guidance and services available to growth-oriented entrepreneurs will be regularly promoted through communication channels that reach international talent.

**Employer services:** Promote peer mentoring between companies so that they can exchange experiences of recruiting international workers. Encourage companies to re-evaluate their requirements for language skills and Finnish education and work experience. Develop a DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging) index to assess and compare how companies and organisations are implementing the DEIB values in their workplaces. Suggestions for action:

- Local and regional actors and networks will jointly launch campaigns to promote peer mentoring between experienced and less experienced companies in the recruitment of international talent.
- The use of available tools for enhancing diversity (e.g. the FIBS Diversity Management Self-Assessment) in the workplace will be promoted.
- A financial incentive will be considered for companies that hire their first international employee, increase the number of international employees, or achieve a high score in the DEIB index.
- Local employment services, together with various actors, create new ways of meeting and networking with international talents and potential employers.
- Multinational workplaces (in the public and private sector) hire or train multicultural communication specialists to promote an inclusive workplace culture.
- A new DEIB index is developed in cooperation with ministries, labour market organisations, higher education institutions, and the third sector. The development of the index can make use of existing diversity self-assessment tools.
- Business Finland includes the requirement of DEIB plans (for start-ups) and performance in the DEIB index (for growth companies) in its criteria for business and innovation funding.

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# Introduction

Prime Minister Petteri Orpo's government envisions making Finland a competitive and appealing destination for professionals. Enhancing the participation of highly skilled internationals at all levels of society is crucial not only for realising this vision but also for the retention and well-being of these internationals and the development of Finnish society more generally.

Existing policy programmes and services aim at retaining immigrants and promoting their social integration. However, these initiatives often overlook the importance of including internationals in decision-making processes that directly affect them.

Our research findings reveal that a significant number of international talents feel overlooked within Finnish society and struggle to find outlets to make their voices heard, even though they hope to participate in and influence the service and policy development. However, highly skilled internationals are a heterogeneous group, and their preferences for participation methods and the depth of their involvement differ.

It's vital to find new ways to integrate the unique viewpoints, experiences, and skills of highly skilled internationals in decision-making that regards them. The policy recommendations published here seek to improve the participation of highly skilled internationals in three key areas: public policy making, service development, and workplaces.

The recommendations are targeted at organisations and individuals who initiate and facilitate collaborative processes involving highly skilled internationals, their associations, public and private employers, decision-makers, and various service providers.

The recommendations were developed through several collaborative processes and engaged over a hundred people. Please also see our policy brief "How to Promote the Employment and Entrepreneurship of Highly Skilled Internationals in Finland?", available on our website: [www.hiwe.fi/policyrecommendations](http://www.hiwe.fi/policyrecommendations).



## **Recommendation 1. Public policymaking for integrating international talent into the Finnish working life should rely more heavily on collaboration between policymakers, internationals, and other stakeholders.**

Collaboration between internationals, policymakers, and other stakeholders is crucial for integrating talents into society and fostering knowledge-based policy making. Studies show that immigrants, including international talents, participate less in political and social activities. Also, among internationals, the level of organisation in both labour market and professional associations, as well as in migrant organisations, is relatively low. Engaging highly skilled internationals in collaborative governance in public policy and decision-making is essential. For example, participatory budgeting, citizen juries, or deliberative mini-publics can be employed as methods of participation.

### **Means for making the change:**

**Develop a national online feedback and initiative platform for highly skilled internationals similar to the national Citizen Initiative.** This platform should be accessible to all internationals living in Finland. The platform needs to have a structured process to act on submitted feedback and initiatives.

**Develop regional interaction with highly skilled internationals.** Build a bridge between decision-makers and international talents. Locally, there should be more meetings and regular discussions between internationals and decision-makers, for example through facilitated workshops or Councils of Immigrants.

**Develop and strengthen partnerships between the public sector and migrant associations as well as other civil society organizations.** The role of non-governmental organizations is important in facilitating the participation of highly skilled migrants in public policy development.

**Encourage and enable the participation of highly skilled internationals in civil society and labour market organizations.** Civil society actors and labour market organisations are involved in national public policy development in Finland, making them important channels of influence for highly skilled internationals. To enable internationals to engage more actively with them, organisations need to develop the inclusivity of their practices.

**Encourage highly skilled internationals to form formal associations.** Having formal associations makes it easier to contribute to drafting of legislation.



## **Recommendation 2. Highly skilled internationals should be more engaged in designing and improving public and private services that focus on their employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.**

HIWE project's research reveals that highly skilled internationals often find existing services hard to find, access, and utilise. These services do not always meet their needs, particularly in terms of finding employment. Increased collaboration between service providers is necessary, with well-defined roles and dedicated funding. Currently, service agents are not always aware of the offerings and practices of other providers, leaving international talents without guidance and causing them to fall through the cracks between services. These issues highlight the need for internationals to be more involved in designing the services and ensuring that the services are relevant and user-friendly from their perspective.

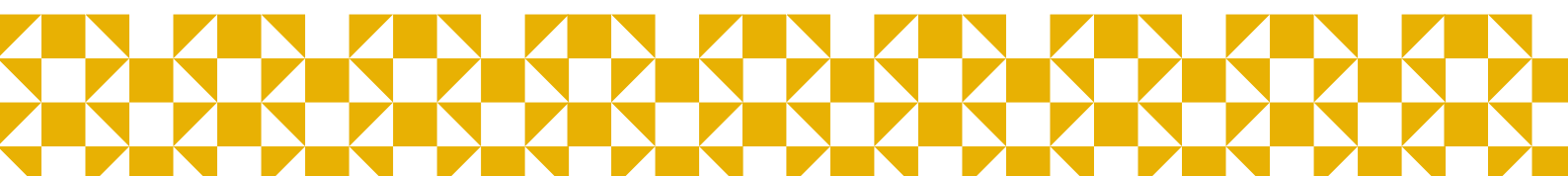
### **Means for making the change:**

**Implement participatory processes that involve highly skilled migrants in the planning, design, implementation, and evaluation of public services.** Using focus groups, collaborative platforms, and co-creation workshops among other methods can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of these services.

**Develop day-to-day feedback collection and utilisation.** View every service encounter with highly skilled internationals as a possibility to learn about their needs, challenges, and problems as well as ideas for addressing and solving them. Strengthen and develop feedback documentation and analysis practices throughout the service chain and encourage service personnel to document the feedback they receive.

**Support capacity building.** Provide capacity building programs for service providers and other stakeholders to enhance their understanding of the needs, expectations, and potential contributions of highly skilled migrants. This can foster a more inclusive and collaborative environment.

**Recognise and reward.** Recognize and reward the contributions of highly skilled migrants to public service development. This can motivate them to participate more actively and can also encourage other migrants to get involved. Increasing involvement of migrants also lowers the power imbalance between different stakeholder groups.





### **Recommendation 3. Workplace inclusivity and equal opportunities for all employees should be developed in collaboration with the employer, the work community, service providers, and other employers interested in promoting inclusivity.**

Private, public, and third sector workplaces should offer equal opportunities for all employees, follow diversity, equality, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) principles, and allow internationals to influence these practices. Interviews of the HIWE project demonstrate that experiences of internationals in Finnish organisations vary. Some appreciate the low hierarchies, autonomy, and work-life balance, while others feel isolated or discriminated against due to their background. As multicultural workplaces become more common, organisations need to understand the needs of internationals, access information on available services and best practices, and support the societal integration of new employees. Collaboration with international talents, service providers, and other employers can help address these issues.

#### **Means for making the change:**

**Enhance psychological safety and support in organisations.** Part of this can be low organisational hierarchies, culture of openness, and offering confidential feedback channels. Lower the threshold for participation.

**Create channels for internationals to voice their opinions and participate in decision-making boards at workplaces.** Engage internationals in discussions and decisions related to the work environment, such as company policies, project directions, or team dynamics. Consider, for example, establishing a DEIB Advisory Board, Council or Committee at the workplace.

**Highlight positive examples.** Publicise positive experiences and success stories of internationals being involved in decision-making. Promote awareness of internationals as an asset and 'added value' to decision-making.

**Be conscious of language used in working and communication.** Use English when appropriate, implement bilingual onboarding processes, and enable language learning for employees at the workplace both formally and informally.

# ROADMAP FOR ACTION: How to Organise Participatory Activities?

**What can be done to make the voice of internationals heard better in society and workplaces?** Levels and forms of participation vary. Beyond just informing internationals and sharing information with them, the level of internationals' participation can range from consulting, involving, and collaboration all the way to empowering. The figure below visualises these different levels and gives examples of activities and methods that can be used in each.

## LEVELS OF INTERNATIONALS' PARTICIPATION



Participatory activities can be initiated by any organisation and/or by internationals themselves. They can be used to solve shared problems, challenges, or tasks. The level of participation and methods used should be determined based on the context, the task at hand, and the individuals involved. Not every situation necessitates the highest level of participation, but avoiding higher levels carries the risk of not fully realising the potential benefits of participatory activities. Participatory activities can result in ongoing small improvements or significant breakthroughs.

# Practical Lessons for Organising Participatory Activities

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The HIWE project designed and organised three co-creation processes tackling the issues of recruitment of highly skilled internationals, impactful employment and entrepreneurship services, and inclusive workplaces, which led to the creation of these policy recommendations. In these, internationals were consulted, involved, and collaborated with.

These insights should be considered when planning participatory activities that include highly skilled internationals.

## Before the activity begins

Effective participatory activities rely heavily on groundwork that starts with a clear but flexible idea of the issue and goals. These should be refined with participants to ensure meaningful engagement. Also decide the appropriate level(s) of participation and the range of participant's influence. Think about what the limits are of what they can and cannot impact.

Participants should be thoughtfully identified and invited. Who should be involved? Who are the key stakeholders besides highly skilled internationals? Make invitees feel valued and integral to the process. Manage expectations transparently – do not overpromise impact. The goals of participation should be clear and transparent to all participants.

For internationals to be heard, consider accessibility in various dimensions: physical, social, cultural, economic, psychological, cognitive, communicative, and technical. Address barriers that may hinder participation; provide training and support for participants as needed.

Participatory activities should be designed to be beneficial to *all* parties involved. Recognize participation costs and potential inequalities; compensate or minimize these. Also, avoid hidden agendas or tokenism with internationals.

## During the activity

We advocate careful planning while also remaining flexible to allow participants to influence the process and adapt to unexpected changes.

Participatory processes often benefit from facilitation, so it is good to decide early on who will facilitate the process. Acknowledge power imbalances between participants and use facilitation techniques to ensure all can contribute. Creating a supportive and welcoming environment also encourages participation.

Some participatory activities are time-consuming and require effort from participants. Maintain interest through concrete, engaging exercises and a flexible process that adapts to group dynamics and evolving needs. Encourage participants to take ownership of both the process and outcomes to ensure participation feels meaningful.

## **After the activity**

Gather feedback from participants and facilitators to evaluate and improve the process. Also, inform participants about how their contributions have been used and the outcomes of the process to validate their involvement and maintain transparency.

Recognise that the participation of highly skilled internationals should be ongoing. Facilitate future interactions, share contact information, and invite continued involvement. Encourage grassroots initiatives and provide resources to support them.



## About HIWE

HIWE project studies highly skilled internationals' experiences of living, working and entrepreneurship in Finland. As an outcome of our analysis, we make recommendations for policies and services that can increase the opportunities of international talents to stay in Finland. HIWE team is most grateful to individuals and organisations who provided valuable insights, experiences, and opinions, which we then synthesised. HIWE project is implemented jointly by the University of Eastern Finland and the University of Turku, and it is funded by Business Finland. [www.hiwe.fi](http://www.hiwe.fi)