

Working Groups Open Call

LET'S DRIVE CHANGE TOGETHER!

Digital WG

Health WG

Research & Innovation WG

Territorial WG

Deadline: 15 September 2023



HARNESSING TALENT PLATFORM

A new boost for EU Regions



**European
Commission**

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1. Introduction

The Commission has published a [Communication on Harnessing talent in Europe's regions](#) and is launching the Talent Booster Mechanism, which aims to bring a fresh impetus for reskilling and upskilling as the first key initiative in 2023 to contribute to the [European Year of Skills](#).

This Mechanism will support EU regions affected by the accelerated decline of their working age population to train, retain and attract the people, the skills and the competences needed to address the impact of the demographic transition.

In this context, the **Harnessing Talent Platform (HTP)** has been launched by European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO).

The Harnessing Talent Platform (HTP) is a newly established platform dedicated to building knowledge and facilitating the exchange of experiences. Its primary objective is to support regions in addressing the consequences of demographic changes and mitigating challenges related to the decline of tertiary-educated populations throughout the EU, especially the 46 regions currently facing a talent development trap, but not only. The HTP ensures that affected regions have access to the necessary guidance, information and knowledge to develop tailored and comprehensive strategic plans for training, attracting and retaining talent.

As a part of activities within the HTP the creation of dedicated working groups is foreseen. The main goal of the working groups is to bring together stakeholders from different territorial levels to discuss on the topic of harnessing talent in Europe and the territorial consequences of demographic dynamics that are linked to it. These working groups serve as a forum for strategic exchange on how sectors such as: **Digital, Health, Research & Innovation** and **Territorial** – in particular urban-rural linkages and quality of life - can influence a region's ability to be competitive and attractive for young and highly skilled workforce.

The work of the groups will allow to have a deeper insight into how regions dealing with demographic challenges can attract, develop and retain talent, by exploring potential solutions and devise instruments linked to the topic of the working group. As such, working groups will develop and share knowledge and expertise, articulate challenges, promote good practices and translate findings into policy recommendations and technical guidance.

2. How to apply

2.1. Application process

Interested stakeholders are invited to express interest for joining one or several working groups by completing the form in [EU-survey](#) in English, through the platform, **before 24:00 CET on 15 September 2023**.

Please read the third section of this background document (Terms of Reference), which outlines the mandate of the working groups, their composition and selection criteria, as well as their organisation.

The final selection of Working Group members will be based on the criteria outlined in section 3.2.2. of the Terms of Reference. DG REGIO, with the support of the HTP Secretariat, will determine the final composition of the working groups.

Shortlisted candidates might be invited for a 30-minute telephone interview. If you have any questions, please contact working-groups@harnessingtalentplatform.eu.

2.2. Next steps

Open call for expressions of interest – 18 July 2023 to 15 September 2023

Approval of working group membership and communication of decisions to candidates – October 2023

First Working Groups meeting in Brussels – 24 November 2023.

2.3. Who can apply?

Stakeholders involved in understanding or addressing labour market challenges in the EU or specifically in the digital, health and/or R&I sectors, or interested in contributing to a better understanding of the working group topics, can apply to be part of one or several working groups. The list of eligible stakeholders includes and is not limited to:

- relevant public authorities at EU, national and regional level - especially in the regions particularly affected by the declining share of tertiary educated labour force in the aforementioned sectors;
- research and academic institutions and think tanks;
- public or para-public agencies and associations;
- business associations;
- umbrella organisations, collaborative network, cluster and intermediary organization;
- pan-European organisations for regions;;
- civil society organisations, including for instance representatives from workers and employers, NGOs.

For stakeholders applying to multiple working groups, please note that the meetings will be held in parallel, therefore a higher engagement in terms of human resources would be needed.

3. Terms of reference

These Terms of Reference outline the mandate, composition and organisation of the four Working Groups set up under the Harnessing Talent Platform (HTP).

3.1. Mandate

The working Groups will be active from November 2023 until May 2026.

3.1.1. Objectives of the working groups

The **objectives of the working groups** are:

1. To bring relevant actors together and enhance dialogue, exchange of experiences and knowledge building between them;
2. To identify opportunities and approaches to help mitigate challenges associated with population decline of tertiary educated population and how to harness talent in EU's regions.

3.1.2. Mission

The main **missions** of the working group will be to:

1. Develop a network of experts, with various types of stakeholders involved in or interested in understanding or addressing challenges related to the declining share of tertiary educated labour force and how to harness talent;
2. Developing and sharing knowledge pieces and expertise, such as analytical tools and guidelines, policy recommendations, best practices and case studies, resources, within the group and externally;
3. Articulate the challenges related to the declining share of tertiary educated labour force and how to harness talent;
4. Identify and promote good practices and evidence-based approaches to mitigate these challenges and harness talent;
5. Promote research in the selected areas;
6. Ensure participation in meetings and continuous discussions on a variety of topics related to these challenges;
7. Translate the findings into advocacy messages, policy recommendations and technical guidance for an actionable framework dedicated to EU's regions dealing with demographic challenges and brain divide issues.

3.1.3. Scope

Four working groups will be set up:

- **Digital working group:** Ensuring a digital transition that works for people and businesses, while helping to achieve the target set by the EU's digital strategy of a climate-neutral Europe by 2050, is one of the EU's overarching priorities and is present in the majority of EU policies. The Communication of the European Commission on Harnessing talent in Europe's regions¹

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/communication/harnessing-talents/harnessing-talents-regions_en.pdf

highlights a significant digital skills gap, whereas the digitalisation of the regions is identified as an opportunity for growth and economic development for regions already in or at risk of falling into talent development trap. As such, strengthening the digital skills of the population, improvement of digital connectivity, the pooling of human resources, equipment and infrastructure, as well as the availability of digital public services, is also essential for regions in a talent development trap, as they can improve accessibility to public services and provide more job opportunities in a cross-border labour market.

The *Digital* working group will focus on the challenges and potential solutions related to harnessing talent in the ICT sector (how to enhance the effectiveness of education and training systems to tackle the digital skills gap and skills mismatch) and on wider digitalisation topics that impact the regions' opportunities to harness talent (digital connectivity, availability of human resources, equipment and infrastructure, availability of digital public services).

- **Health working group:** The healthcare and long-term care systems across the Member States are under increasing pressure, as demonstrated during and aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This pressure is expected to be exacerbated due to the increased demand for healthcare professionals in response to the ageing population of the EU². Population ageing also entails additional needs, including the need to adapt our workplaces, welfare and public health systems to accommodate the increased demand for accessible and affordable quality health care and long-term care.

Some regions also experience an increased pressure of their system due to a declining share of tertiary educated labour force in the health sector. The increased mobility of health professionals can lead to or escalate several problems, such as shortages or skill-mismatches which affect the health systems of the EU. Low wages, poor resources and working conditions, the lack of appropriate local medical training and the lack of recognition/equivalences of qualifications and diplomas are influencing factors to the talent development trap in some regions.

In general, a declining share of tertiary educated labour force specifically in the health sector leads to additional strain on the healthcare and long-term care systems, and, in fact, can jeopardise both the provision of healthcare and the well-being of the population. Moreover, equal access to quality services and infrastructure for health- and long-term-care plays a crucial role in the global competition to develop, attract and retain talent. The *Health* working group will investigate these challenges and develop recommendations to mitigate them.

- **Research and Innovation (R&I) working group:** Research and Innovation (R&I) forms a cornerstone of the European Union's strategic agenda, primarily due to its crucial role in fuelling economic growth, fostering job creation, enhancing competitiveness and addressing societal challenges. It is well understood that human capital is the lifeblood of R&I. Talent fuels innovation, powers research breakthroughs and enables EU regions to translate smart specialisation strategies (S3) into tangible economic and social outcomes.

The successful implementation of S3 is closely intertwined with a region's ability to develop, retain and attract human capital. However, there are disparities in the ability of different EU regions to develop, retain and attract talent. Several factors contribute to this, such as the level of economic competitiveness, quality of institutions, governance structures for effective R&I, availability of R&I funding and the competitiveness of the broader innovation ecosystem. In addition, stimulating dynamic innovation ecosystems through smart specialisation strategies and technological and innovation is key to harnessing talent and overcoming talent development traps.

Regions in development traps face significant socio-economic challenges, such as the lack of economic diversification, over-reliance on declining sectors and low innovation capacity. This is closely linked to underperforming labour markets, lower adult learning rates, poorer social

² European Commission (2020). Report From the Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of the Regions on the impact of demographic change. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0241&from=EN>

outcomes and a more limited access to essential services. This combination of challenges limits the capacity of these regions to build sustainable, competitive and knowledge-based economies. Moreover, demography related disparities can generate economic, regional and social divide. Some predominantly rural and less developed EU regions are experiencing an accelerated reduction of their working age population and lag behind in developing, attracting and/or retaining the talent needed for their development. This combination of challenges may put them at a higher risk of failing to catch up with more advanced regions. The *R&I* working group aims to develop deeper insight into these problems and explore potential solutions.

- **Territorial working group:** This working group will focus on the territorial dimension of talent development trap, with a closer attention to the topic of urban-rural linkages and quality of life, which play a crucial role in harnessing talent in Europe's regions. In the EU, the discussions around urban-rural linkages and quality of life have gained significant attention as an essential factor in harnessing talent and promoting balanced regional development. Recognizing that urban and rural areas are interconnected and function as integrated systems, EU policymakers and stakeholders have been actively exploring ways to strengthen these linkages and improve the overall well-being and living conditions of individuals and communities. The Communication on Harnessing talent in Europe's regions stresses necessity to apply targeted solutions to attract or retain talent in rural areas with a view to transform shrinking regions into more dynamic talent-driven locations and to help stimulate urban-rural linkages.

Integrated development policies, promoted by Cohesion Policy instruments and funds are crucial to help regions improve both their business environment and quality of life and become more attractive places to live and work. These spur demand for talent, by multiplying and diversifying employment and business opportunities and increasing the supply of talent by creating more education and training opportunities for all.

This working group will explore targeted solutions to attract or retain talent with a view to transform shrinking regions into more dynamic talent-driven locations and to help stimulate urban-rural linkages. It will look into integrated development policies promoted by Cohesion Policy and EU funds to help these regions improve both their business environment and quality of life and become more attractive places to live and work.

3.2. Working group composition and selection criteria

3.2.1. Composition

Each working group will have 20 core members to be selected amongst the pool of stakeholders. From the 20 selected applicants, 2 will have the role of working group leaders.

The HTP Secretariat will support the working groups by providing for each:

- a working group facilitator
- a support team to the working group.

In addition, each working group will benefit from expertise provided through the HTP Secretariat. The Secretariat will also mobilize a pool of external experts, which will support each group, on case by case basis, in their thematic activities.

The table below summarises the roles and responsibilities of each category of stakeholders, as well as their organisation and governance.

Table 1: Roles and responsibilities of working group members per category

Category		Estimated number of members	Role and responsibilities	Organisation and governance
HTP Secretariat	Facilitator of working group	1 per working group	- the reference expert to drive the learning exchange	Administrative function, constant support and interaction with working group members.
	Support team	-	- continuous support along the process and will be in charge of managing the online life of the working group as well as the content and logistics of the peer learning process activities and meetings.	
Core team	Leaders of the working group	2 members per working group	- Drive the activities of the working group with the support of the project team.	Applicants can apply for a working group leader position (2 members). The working group leaders will support and co-lead the working group with the working group facilitator from the project team. The leaders of the working group are part of the Core team of the working group.
	Core members	Maximum 18 members/ working group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Validate the driving strategy, priorities and sub-topics of analysis of the working group, as well as the agenda of each gathering. - Validate the action plan of the working group. - Engage in the assessment of good practices as well as the analysis of their transferability - Develop recommendations for the regional authorities. 	Sub-topic leads (up to 3 per working group) might be appointed within the working group core members and will be responsible for leading and overseeing the work being conducted for each of the sub-topics selected. The core team members will also constantly interact and exchange through emails chains, progress calls and the wider working group meetings.

Category		Estimated number of members	Role and responsibilities	Organisation and governance
External team	Experts	No limitations: around 30 experts foreseen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide guidance and expertise throughout the implementation of the working group activities, and in particular on the identification of good practices. - Present and discuss best practices and engage with the analysis of their pros and cons. 	The pool of experts might be mobilised by the working group core members to share knowledge and experience on good practices. Following a decision of the working group leaders and core members, they might be invited by the project team to some of the progress calls and the wider working group meetings. External experts are going to be selected through different application procedure.

Please note that engagement in the Working Groups is a voluntary activity and there will be no financial support offered. Working group members will be compensated for travel and accommodation for 1 in person meeting per year, taking place in Brussels, Belgium.

3.2.2. Selection criteria

The final selection of working group members will be operated according to key criteria, including:

- **Expertise and experience:** Alignment of the applicants' professional experience and expertise with the working group's thematic focus and objectives will be a prerequisite. The working group will have a balanced composition between the types of stakeholders, taking into consideration the multi-level governance principle as well as diversity of expertise.
 - Stakeholders who apply for a working group leader position would demonstrate experience in project management, specifically concerning projects and initiatives in European/international contexts;
 - As the topics of the working groups are broad, the selected members would ensure diversity of expertise in relations to the thematic area, as well as specific knowledge and practices.
- **Geographical coverage:**
 - Diversity across the 3 key categories of regions (less developed, transition and developed regions);
 - Broad geographical balance;
 - Scope of the platform: National and regional stakeholders would be, as much as possible, representing the territories identified as being in /or at risk of being in talent development trap, through the [Communication on Harnessing Talent in Europe's regions](#)
- **Motivation:** Willingness and motivation to contribute to the working group's work and, more generally, to contribute to mitigating challenges associated with population decline of tertiary educated population in Europe and how to harness talent;
- **Commitment and availability** to take part in the working group's activities over its whole duration;

- **Expected results of the working groups:** working group's members would provide insights in the proposed expected results of the working group.

Please note that by the first meeting of the working groups, the selected members would be required to provide an official commitment letter signed by a high level representative of their institution, stating the participation of the institution to the activities of the Working groups throughout the whole duration, and nominating the participating representative/s.

3.3. Organisation of the working group

3.3.1. Format and meetings

3.3.1.1. Overall management of the working groups

Between November 2023 and May 2026, working groups will meet at least three times per year, of which at least two meetings will be online and one meeting will be organised as physical meeting in Brussels, within the premises of the European Commission.

Overall coordination between the working groups will be supported by the HTP Secretariat **with timely and comprehensive documentation of the discussions** in each working groups, to ensure all relevant knowledge is shared. Moreover, one half-a-day **cross-working groups initiative** per year will be conducted, and will take the form of a webinar with contributions from each of the working groups. The objective of this webinar will be to identify horizontal issues that should be tackled, as well as potential solutions to address these challenges.

Alignment and coordination with other relevant platforms such as Just Transition Platform, Digital Skills and Jobs Platform, Smart Specialisation Platform, European Cluster Collaboration Platform, Rural Revitalisation Platform will also be ensured: the stakeholders of the working groups of these platforms will be invited to the annual cross-working groups seminar mentioned above, and the members of the working groups will be available to attend these platforms' working groups meetings to present good practices and share knowledge when needed.

3.3.1.2. Language

All communication will be held in **English**.

3.3.2. Timeline

The working groups will be set up for **three years** and will be active until May 2026. The figure below summarises the timeline proposed.

Figure 1: Proposed timeline



3.3.3. Main activities of working groups members

The main activities to be conducted will include:

- Reflecting on the questions raised in the issue paper;
- Sharing updates, good practices, knowledge and experience on the topic;
- Preparing presentations for the working group meetings;
- Reflecting on solutions and recommendations and their potential transferability;
- Refining the issue paper with knowledge and answers to the questions raised;
- Preparing guidance documents and toolkits for different levels of regional policy management on how to tackle the problems;
- Contributing to the production of the articles/academic papers and factsheets on good practices developed under other streams of the Harnessing Talent Platform (support the activities of the dedicated platform for knowledge building and the exchange of experience) where relevant;
- Elaborating case studies and recommendations feeding the technical assistance provided to regions in talent development trap, as identified by the Communication on Harnessing talent;
- Participation in meetings;
- Cross-reference the work with the other Working Groups and other relevant platforms such as: Just Transition Platform, Digital Skills and Jobs Platform, Smart Specialisation Platform, European Cluster Collaboration Platform, Rural Revitalisation Platform.

The HTP Secretariat’s support team will continuously update the working group on recent developments (e.g. new academic article or policy) related to the topic of the working groups, and with updates on the activities of the working group.

The outcome of the working groups on the topic would allow to have a deeper insight into the problem, explore potential solutions and devise instruments to overcome obstacles. The proposed solutions/recommendations would be then embedded in the Cohesion Policy and investment programmes, to give the regions a possibility to use them in their operations.

The HTP Secretariat will prepare a list of sub-topics related to the thematic of the working groups and the selection by the Core team of three sub-topics per working group to explore as part of the working group activity. Issue papers will be prepared for each of these sub-topics. The list of proposed sub-topics is summarised in the table below. This list is non-exhaustive and will be refined at a later stage with the selected members of the working Group:

Working group	Non-exhaustive list of potential sub-topics
Digital	<p>Enhancing the effectiveness of education and training systems to tackle the digital skills gap and skills mismatch: The EU is particularly facing a significant digital skills gap, which - if left unaddressed - will continue growing. Already now, 90% of jobs require some level of digital skills whereas millions of companies struggle to find digitally skilled workers, particularly ICT specialists. To face these challenges, and through various programmes, initiatives and funds (e.g. ESF+, EAFRD), the EU aims at increasing the number of adults with basic digital skills from the current 54% to 80% by 2030, and at increasing the amount of employed ICT specialists to 20 million by 2030 while promoting the access of women to this field and increasing the number of ICT graduates.</p> <p>Digital divide: The digital divide has been substantially reduced over the last decade in Europe, but the gap remains far from closed. According to the 2015 European Commission's Digital Agenda Scoreboard, two related targets have already been met (all EU households can access basic broadband and 75% of all Europeans are regular internet users), however, there is a danger that targets related to fast and ultra-fast speed broadband will be missed, especially in rural areas. The digital divide also varies across Member States, and may vary within a region. The improvement of the digital connectivity of regions in a talent development trap is essential, in order to reap the full benefits offered by the digital transition.</p> <p>Digital Public Services: Smart public services, also known as digital public services or eGovernment, refer to the use of technology to provide services to citizens at local, regional and national levels. They bring many opportunities to both citizens and businesses. Better provision of e-services – and eHealth in particular – could improve the quality of life of people in rural and remote regions. In particular, the provision of integrated and long-term care remotely, with the help of digital technologies, could lead to a significant improvement in the physical and mental health and wellbeing of people. Moreover, the availability of digital public services working cross-border can improve accessibility to public services and provide more job opportunities in a cross-border labour market. This would enhance interactions between stakeholders from neighbouring regions and, thus increase job prospects on the other side of the border, allowing cross border regions to retain more talent.</p> <p>Supporting the development of digital technologies and digital innovation ecosystems: While the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) for 2022³ show that</p>

³ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi>

Working group	Non-exhaustive list of potential sub-topics
	<p>most Member States are making progress in their digital transformation, the adoption of key digital technologies by businesses, such as artificial intelligence and big data remains low, including among the EU frontrunners. Supporting the development of digital technology (e.g. through Horizon Europe and the Digital Europe Programme funding) and promoting collaboration between academia, industry, and government is key to foster digital innovation and entrepreneurship.</p> <p>Changes in labour market triggered by digital transition: The digital transition and the possibility to work from home has the potential to enable people to join the labour market remotely. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic may have encouraged more people to move from predominantly urban to rural areas due to the widespread possibility of working from home. Moreover, digitalisation also coincides with an increase in new and non-standard forms of employment that differ from standard full-time employment: increases in non-standard and novel forms of work are likely to be partly attributable to both 'push' and 'pull' factors.</p>
Health	<p>Improving wages, service models and working conditions of health workers: A skills and labour shortage in the healthcare sector can be found in many regions across EU member states. An ageing population is further fuelling the demand for health services. In addition, the pandemic has often led to an increased workload combined with emotional pressure, encouraging numerous health workers to look for different opportunities outside the sector. Emigration of health workers to countries with better wages or working conditions puts additional pressure on the health sector within certain regions and countries. Improving wages, designing new flexible working/service delivery models and overall creating better working conditions for health workers can therefore be considered as one of the main challenges when seeking to address the talent development trap in this sector.</p> <p>Fostering locally relevant medical & paramedical training and research: Fostering relevant medical and paramedical training and research plays a crucial role when trying to tackle a talent development trap within the health sector of an impacted region. Addressing local healthcare needs by tailoring specific training programmes can lead to an improvement of the overall quality of life within the region and therefore become a pull rather than a push factor for emigration and brain drain. Fostering locally relevant training and research can furthermore lead to talent retention as well as attraction. Investing in research and educational infrastructure locally enhances the attractiveness of the region for healthcare professionals and students. Establishing well-equipped medical schools, research centres and academic institutions creates an environment that supports learning, innovation and professional development. This not only helps retain local talent but also attracts healthcare professionals and students from other regions, fostering a diverse and skilled workforce. It would be interesting to discuss how policy support and public funding can help to prioritize particular investments in the training and research infrastructure.</p> <p>Facilitating mobility and improving recognition of qualifications and in the healthcare sector across Europe: Many qualifications in the health sector are driven nationally, which presents barriers for mobility in the sector. Streamlining the process for the recognition of qualifications and facilitating mobility within the EU can help address brain drain and tackle the talent development trap. The discussion should focus on the questions how to further streamline and ease the recognition process by</p>

Working group	Non-exhaustive list of potential sub-topics
	<p>leveraging the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) as well as the European professional Card (EPC) as a means to digitalise the recognition process.</p> <p>Challenges brought by a decreasing and ageing population: The shrinking working-age population puts pressure on labour markets and welfare states. An ageing population entails additional needs, including the need to adapt our workplaces, welfare and public health systems to accommodate the increased demand for accessible and affordable quality health care and long-term care. Topics that would be relevant to discuss are, without being limited to: service delivery methods, remote consultations and digital infrastructure required to deliver services remotely, silver economy and health insurance systems adapted to ageing populations.</p> <p>Integration of persons with health issues in the labour market: The digital transition and the possibility to work from home has the potential to enable people to join the labour market remotely. Remote or hybrid working could be an advantage to persons with health issues and less mobile persons in general, as well as workers with care responsibilities. The provision of integrated and long-term care remotely, with the help of digital technologies, could lead to a significant improvement in the physical and mental health and wellbeing of people.</p> <p>Cross-border collaboration in healthcare: The aim of the discussion should be to explore the benefits and challenges of cross-border healthcare cooperations within the EU and examine the role of cross-border healthcare networks in addressing regional disparities and brain drain. Here it should particularly be discussed how partnerships can create career development opportunities without the need for emigration. This can e.g., be achieved through cross-border cooperations leading to the engagement of individuals in time-bound international projects or the establishment of exchange programmes for students and professionals. Such and similar initiatives allow professionals to remain in/return to their home regions while still benefiting from international expose and collaboration with other experts.</p> <p>Health tourism and regional development: Health tourism can stimulate regional development and attract investment and may come with wide-spreading positive impacts on other sectors such as tourism and hospitality. It therefore appears to be relevant to assess the potential of health tourism for particular regions. The discussion may focus on opportunities and potential benefits of health tourism in a particular region and could support the development of policies and policy initiatives that may promote medical tourism in these regions.</p> <p>Digitalisation of the health sector: The digitalisation of the health sector comes with several challenges and opportunities. On one hand, the sector may strive for efficiency and enhanced patient care as the implementation of the right tools can lead to a reduction of workload and associated costs while the generation of health data allows for better research but also supports better planning and resource management. On the other hand, employers in the health sector are tasked with new challenges such as data privacy, security or ethical and legal considerations. In addition, jobs required for a successful digital transformation are scarce and, in this case, the sector is competing with other sectors, which are often able to offer better compensation or more flexible working models. Here it is to be discussed to what extend digitalisation can support short term relief and long-term sustainable development.</p>
R&I	<p>Harnessing skills for smart specialisation: The revitalisation of regions requires a diversification of their economic fabric together with an upgraded accessibility to</p>

Working group	Non-exhaustive list of potential sub-topics
	<p>services in the framework of place-based strategies. Without economic dynamism and the right skills base to attract high-potential activities, the growth opportunities and benefits of the green and digital transitions for the development of these regions will not be fully exploited. Given that these transitions require innovation and new technologies and that workers adjust their skills and change jobs or occupations, the ability to maintain a good skills base and training opportunities will be particularly relevant. In this context, smart specialisation strategies play a significant role. While much emphasis is placed on identifying and defining priority domains in the context of smart specialisation strategies, more focus needs to be placed on ensuring that skilled workers in those priority fields are developed, retained and attracted. The discussions of the working group would thus explore how to better align skills (talent) development more closely to priority areas defined in regional S3 strategies and discuss what conditions are necessary to ensure that R&I talent can be retained in regions that often face an outflow of such human capital.</p> <p>Bottlenecks to R&I: Discussions on this topic would seek to uncover factors that could act as a brake on successful R&I activities. The EC Communication (Harnessing talent in Europe's regions) discusses several structural issues, such as the lack of high-quality research facilities or the lack of a tertiary educated workforce. In addition to those, discussions would be aimed at mapping other possible weaknesses that make for a low innovation performance. These may include, inter alia, unfavourable tax regimes or path-dependency with respect to traditional sectors of industry. Engaging a wide number of experts to discuss these issues may result in a more accurate understanding of limiting factors, and how to turn them around.</p> <p>Governance structures for effective R&I: Effective governance structures provide a framework for collaboration, coordination and decision-making, enabling researchers and innovators to thrive and deliver meaningful outcomes. Discussions of the Working Group on this topic could cover a wide range of aspects, for example, how to establish a clear vision and strategic direction for regions that wish to reinforce and stimulate their innovation ecosystem; or how to set up collaborations, and what partners should be engaged to raise innovation output. The potential of public-private partnerships is a notable field of inquiry with this respect.</p> <p>This discussion could be tackled from two perspectives. On the one hand, with relevance to the Communication on harnessing talent, the working group will take a bottom-up perspective, exploring the above-mentioned dimensions while keeping the centrality of the region as a core precept. On the other hand, bearing the most relevance to the achievement of Cohesion, the working group will take a pan-European perspective. This to ensure that low-innovation regions can be connected to high-innovation ones to foster the circulation of knowledge and the adoption of new practices, in line with the work carried out by the European Institute of Technology (EIT).</p> <p>Green technologies: While a separate working group will focus on digital technologies, this working group would be used to address the second dimension of the twin transition, namely green technologies. The European Union have proved to be a global leader in the development and adoption of green technologies, as EU companies lead the way on high-value green patents and green patents in energy intensive industries, acknowledged by the EU New Innovation Agenda. The Communication acknowledges the indispensability of R&I to achieve climate neutrality objectives. However, regions in talent development traps are often over-reliant on declining, high-emitting industries. Creating opportunities for research on this topic can strengthen the employment landscape of the regions in distress while advancing the energy transition and generating economic growth. Furthermore, discussions on this topic will encompass the</p>

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	<p>importance of green skills, how to develop them, how to certify them and how to bring them to fruition in the labour market.</p> <p>Stimulating dynamic innovation ecosystems via Smart Specialisation and Technological/Social Innovation: This theme will address the structural challenges of regional economies, which often contribute to a lower percentage of high-skilled jobs in regions in a talent development trap. The working group would delve into how to create fresh economic perspectives and corresponding high-skilled job opportunities, which are vital for retaining tertiary-level educated individuals within these territories. It will examine synergies with existing initiatives such as Smart Specialisation Strategies, Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs), the EIT Regional Innovation Scheme and other related programs to stimulate dynamic, innovative ecosystems in these regions. Moreover, as described by the Communication, innovation should adopt a “broad” character. As such, this working group would also address examples of social innovation, whereby business principles are innovatively combined with a social mission. Novelties of this type can include micro-finance schemes, open-source platforms for innovation, or social enterprises. The focus on the social impact of innovative initiatives is relevant in the context of harnessing talent, since it is critical to generate high quality services and amenities for people to be drawn to the regions in talent development traps.</p> <p>Gender balance in R&I: Diversity and inclusivity in R&I are topics that need to be addressed. With respect to the gender gap, it appears that strong divides still exist, with only 24% of top positions in higher education filled by women and persistent underrepresentation of women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines. These shortcomings have been acknowledged in the Ljubljana Declaration on Gender Equality in Research and Innovation. In the context of the harnessing talent in Europe’s regions, these gaps in representation and opportunities reduce the innovation potential of regions, as only a smaller subset of the talent pool is currently considered for R&I activities. The working group would thus examine specific issues such as barriers to women's advancement in higher education and STEM fields, including structural and cultural challenges. It would also discuss potential policy interventions and best practices for promoting gender balance, drawing from successful cases within the EU. The group could also explore how to improve mentorship and networking opportunities for women in R&I, while considering ways to enhance female representation in leadership positions within these sectors.</p> <p>Mobility of researchers: The mobility of researchers is a complex issue to address, since on the one hand, it should be encouraged, as this is generally strongly associated with the circulation of knowledge. On the other hand, researchers are generally drawn to places where innovation output is already high, usually on the account of good quality research facilities and the possibility to engage with a like-minded network of scientists and professionals. This can lead to <i>snowballing</i> effects, as most scientific talent will be concentrated in specific areas. Discussions on this topic would include reflections on how to make less popular regions more attractive to researchers, and the role of policy in encouraging a more balanced distribution of scientific talent.</p> <p>Translating research excellence into commercial opportunities: Some studies have shown how, in comparison to the United States, research projects carried out in Europe are less likely to develop into viable commercial opportunities. Discussions on this topic shall be aimed at understanding why this might be the case, vetting factors as varied as the regulatory regime, market framework and socio-economic trends. Furthermore, this discussion will encompass a reflection on the 'third mission' of universities – that of utilizing academic knowledge to tackle diverse societal challenges</p>

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	<p>and facilitating technology and innovation transfer through cooperation with public and private enterprises. The goal is to explore how this third mission can be leveraged to convert research excellence into viable commercial opportunities on a regional level.</p> <p>Financing R&I: In the past decade, European funding instruments have been devoted to fostering local R&I activities, primarily through the European Regional Development Fund. With a new set of instruments available to policy makers (in particular, through the Recovery and Resilience Facility), discussions could be initiated to ensure the highest possible synergy between the various funding opportunities and understanding the role of public funding in catalyzing private-sector investment into place-based innovation projects. How can public funding be designed to de-risk private investment, and what role can policy play in this context? The group may also discuss best practices for collaboration between the public and private sectors in the realm of R&I financing. This exploration would extend to examine innovative financing mechanisms and models that could be employed to boost R&I in regions experiencing talent shortfalls.</p> <p>Revitalising regional innovation capacity in rural and less developed areas: Some, predominantly rural and less developed, EU regions are experiencing an accelerated reduction of their working age population and lag behind in developing, attracting and/or retaining the right talent needed for their development. This combination of challenges may impede their capacity to build sustainable and competitive economies, and puts them at a higher risk of failing to catch up with more advanced regions. The discussions of the working group could investigate targeted solutions to boost economic dynamism of rural regions and promote stronger urban-rural connections. This exploration includes the potential of multiplying and diversifying business and employment opportunities, as well as expanding education and training programs, to enhance the local talent pool.</p>
Territorial	<p>Urban-rural collaboration for talent development: This topic could address the importance of collaboration and synergies between urban and rural areas in talent development.</p> <p>This would involve exploring innovative models for collaboration, such as knowledge-sharing platforms, mentorship programs and industry-academic partnerships, to harness the strengths of both urban and rural regions. The aim would be to discuss ways to create a conducive environment that promotes talent exchange, skill development and career opportunities.</p> <p>It could explore the role of infrastructure development in connecting urban and rural areas and the importance of equal access to quality services by identifying solutions for improving transportation networks, digital connectivity and essential services to facilitate talent mobility, enhance quality of life, and promote balanced regional development. Focus could be placed on accessibility to early childhood education, healthcare, affordable housing, cultural amenities, transportation, energy supply, and internet access, supporting talent development in vulnerable regions.</p> <p>Through this topic the working group could also analyse the issue of talent migration from rural areas to urban centres and delve into the significance of work-life balance in talent retention. It could explore the reasons why tertiary-educated individuals tend to migrate to cities and examine how the availability of amenities, recreational facilities, affordable housing and family-friendly policies impact the decision of talented individuals to stay or relocate. The focus could be on identifying measures to improve</p>

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	<p>work-life balance in both urban and rural areas, ensuring a conducive environment for talent harnessing and retention.</p> <p>Place-based approaches for economic revitalization and harnessing talent: Integrated development policies that are promoted by Cohesion Policy at local level, will contribute to the development of rural areas and stimulate urban-rural linkages. They can attract new economic activities, close the digital gap, provide more education opportunities, improve access to infrastructures, services and cultural amenities and raise the quality of life, thus attracting and retaining talent in rural areas. This topic would delve into the potential of place-based strategies to support the economic revitalization of regions facing a talent development trap. It would explore how these strategies, in coordination with EU Cohesion Policy and rural development initiatives can support long-term investments. The discussion would focus on efficient governance, involvement of local actors and the role of regional and local authorities in defining and implementing funding priorities. Additionally, the topic would address how place-based strategies can address rapid industrial transformation driven by climate change mitigation objectives, ensuring the full exploitation of growth opportunities and benefits of green and digital transitions.</p> <p>Promoting lifelong learning and upskilling in regions facing a talent development trap: This topic explores the importance of promoting lifelong learning and upskilling in regions struggling to attract, retain and develop talent. It examines how investments in education and training can enhance the competitiveness of these regions, bridge regional and intra-regional disparities, and improve the quality of life. The discussion highlights the relevance of this topic within the current Cohesion Policy context, as it aligns with the objective of reducing disparities and promoting social and economic convergence. It delves into specific measures and initiatives that can be implemented to ensure that individuals in these regions have access to relevant and high-quality lifelong learning opportunities, fostering their employability and contributing to their personal and professional development.</p> <p>Silver economy: The ongoing demographic transition, characterized by an aging population, presents opportunities for individuals and society as a whole. With longer and healthier lives, individuals have more opportunities for personal and professional development. Moreover, businesses and employment practices need to adapt to a shrinking workforce, creating opportunities for underrepresented groups to contribute their talent to the labour market. The concept of the "silver economy" emerges as a sector that harnesses the potential of the aging population. This sector focuses on providing innovative products and services that enhance the quality of life for older people, including digital solutions. By promoting the development of the silver economy, regions can tap into this growing market, foster job creation, and improve the well-being of their aging population.</p> <p>Inclusion and diversity - policies that promote gender equality, multiculturalism, social integration: Promoting inclusion and diversity is crucial for regions aiming to attract, develop and retain talent. Policies that promote gender equality, multiculturalism and social integration are key drivers of creating a supportive and inclusive environment. Gender equality initiatives seek to eliminate barriers and biases that limit the participation of women in the labour market and leadership positions. Multiculturalism policies recognize the value of diverse backgrounds and experiences, fostering social cohesion and intercultural understanding. These policies aim to ensure that individuals from different cultural backgrounds can actively participate in society and contribute to regional development. Social integration policies focus on providing</p>

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	<p>support and opportunities for disadvantaged groups, facilitating their inclusion in economic, educational and social spheres. By embracing inclusion and diversity, regions can leverage the talents and contributions of a wide range of individuals, fostering creativity, innovation and social progress.</p>