Pillar 1 of the Talent Booster Mechanism

Technical Assistance Open Call

HARNESS TALENT
EMPOWER REGIONS

Deadline
20 October 2023

Technical Assistance
Open Call
Guidelines Document

1. Background

1.1. Communication on Harnessing talent in Europe's regions

In early 2023 the European Commission published a Communication titled *Harnessing Talent in Europe's Regions* (17.1.2023). The Communication discusses how the EU is undergoing significant demographic changes, marked by an ageing population, declining birth rates since the 1960s, and an exodus of young, skilled workers from several regions. This demographic shift, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has resulted in a shrinking working age population, decreasing by 1.5 million between 2015 and 2020 and projected to further decline by an additional 35 million by 2050. This trend is not uniform, as certain regions are more severely affected, with significant territorial disparities emerging due to ageing populations and workforce skill shortages. The resulting demographic, economic, and social challenges of a dwindling workforce are intensified in regions with a low and stagnating share of individuals with tertiary education, leading to decreased regional resilience.
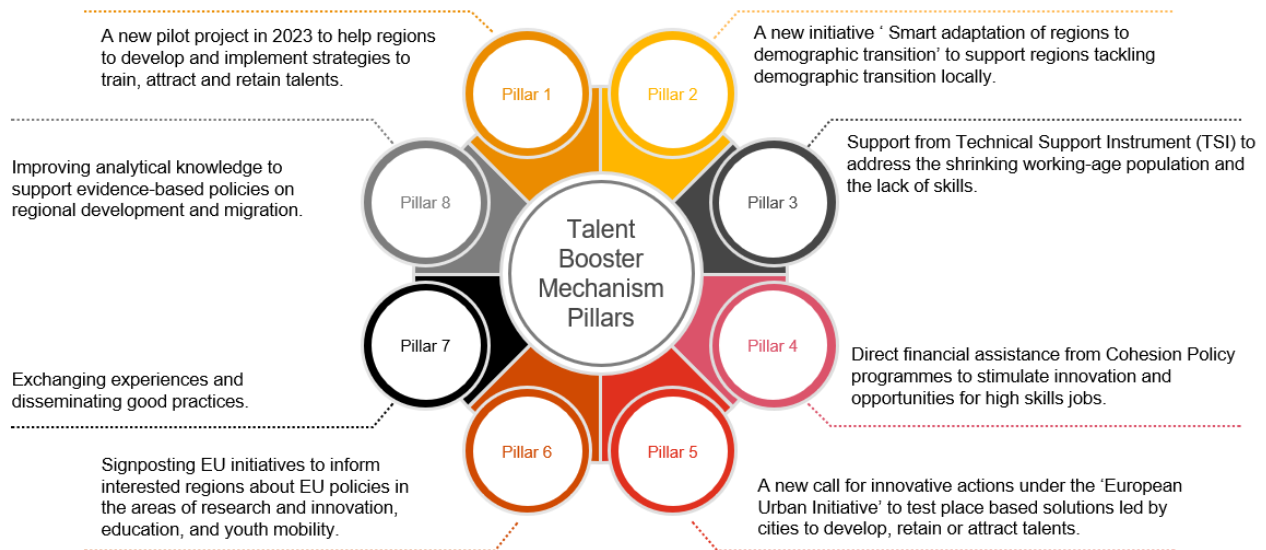
The focus of the communication is on regions facing a unique blend of challenges: steep declines in working age population, stagnation in tertiary educated individuals, and significant youth outmigration. These regions are either already in or at risk of falling into a "talent development trap," as an ageing and dwindling working age population coupled with limited economic dynamism leads to a decrease in highly skilled, younger workers. Socio-economic hurdles such as limited economic diversification, dependency on declining sectors, low innovation capacity, underperforming labour markets, lower adult learning rates, and restricted access to essential services compound the issue. This confluence of challenges restricts the ability of these regions to develop sustainable, competitive, and knowledge-based economies, endangering the overall resilience and competitiveness of the EU in the global race for talent.

Escalating territorial disparities due to the proliferation of talent development traps could lead to increased political discontent and erode public confidence in democratic values and support for crucial reforms, including those pertaining to green and digital transitions. To counteract this trend, it is crucial to stimulate both demand for talent by fostering dynamic and diverse economic opportunities, and supply of talent through strategic investments and reforms. These efforts should be supported by the new generation of Cohesion policy programs and Recovery and Resilience plans, adopting comprehensive, place-based approaches tailored to local circumstances, complemented by sectoral strategies. Enhancing the business environment and quality of life in these regions is vital to their appeal as desirable places to live and work, thereby nurturing the talent necessary for their increasingly knowledge and innovation-driven economic development. Concurrently, the European Semester should facilitate the requisite labour market and education system reforms to stimulate talent development.

1.2. Talent Booster Mechanism & Technical Assistance to Regions

In order to help regions deal with demographic challenges, the European Commission has launched a dedicated eight-pillar **Talent Booster Mechanism** that seeks to boost talent in regions facing or at risk of facing a talent development trap. The 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.

Figure 1 – The eight-pillar Talent Booster Mechanism

A new pilot project in 2023 to help regions to develop and implement strategies to train, attract and retain talents. — Pillar 1

A new initiative 'Smart adaptation of regions to demographic transition' to support regions tackling demographic transition locally. — Pillar 2

Support from Technical Support Instrument (TSI) to address the shrinking working-age population and the lack of skills. — Pillar 3

Improving analytical knowledge to support evidence-based policies on regional development and migration. — Pillar 8

Direct financial assistance from Cohesion Policy programmes to stimulate innovation and opportunities for high skills jobs. — Pillar 4

Exchanging experiences and disseminating good practices. — Pillar 7

A new call for innovative actions under the 'European Urban Initiative' to test place based solutions led by cities to develop, retain or attract talents. — Pillar 5

Signposting EU initiatives to inform interested regions about EU policies in the areas of research and innovation, education, and youth mobility. — Pillar 6

Talent Booster Mechanism Pillars

The Technical Assistance (Pillar 1) shall provide direct assistance to eligible EU regions that would express interest to receive support, with a view to assisting regional and local authorities in developing and implementing strategies to address their untapped potential for tertiary educated labour force and mitigate the challenges linked to demographic change, supporting the identification of needs and priorities and providing advice and methodological support.

Additionally, the **Harnessing Talent Platform (HTP)** will host a **dedicated web presence**, which shall include analytical insight, good practices gathered from stakeholders, access to relevant sources of information and literature, as well as links related to initiatives, events, seminars and funding opportunities. HTP will also facilitate connections between and among public authorities and relevant stakeholders by creating four **working groups** and organising **annual events** to enhance dialogue, exchange of experiences and knowledge building. HTP will also seek to enhance the understanding of drivers underpinning the talent development trap that affect many regions across the EU, by pursuing its own analytical work in addition to collaborating with academics.

2. Call for expression of interest

This section provides information and guidelines to facilitate the expression of interest for **technical assistance** foreseen under Pillar 1 of the **Talent Booster Mechanism**.

The Call for expression is open from the 11th of September 2023 to the 20th of October 2023. There is a dedicated application process, which will seek to identify the need, the potential and motivation to work within the Technical Assistance framework to trigger positive change in the region. The only valid way to express interest is via this EU-Survey questionnaire. Please complete the survey in English. The deadline for submission of the form is: 20th of October, 12:00 AM CEST. The selection of regions will be performed by the HTP Secretariat under the guidance of DG REGIO.
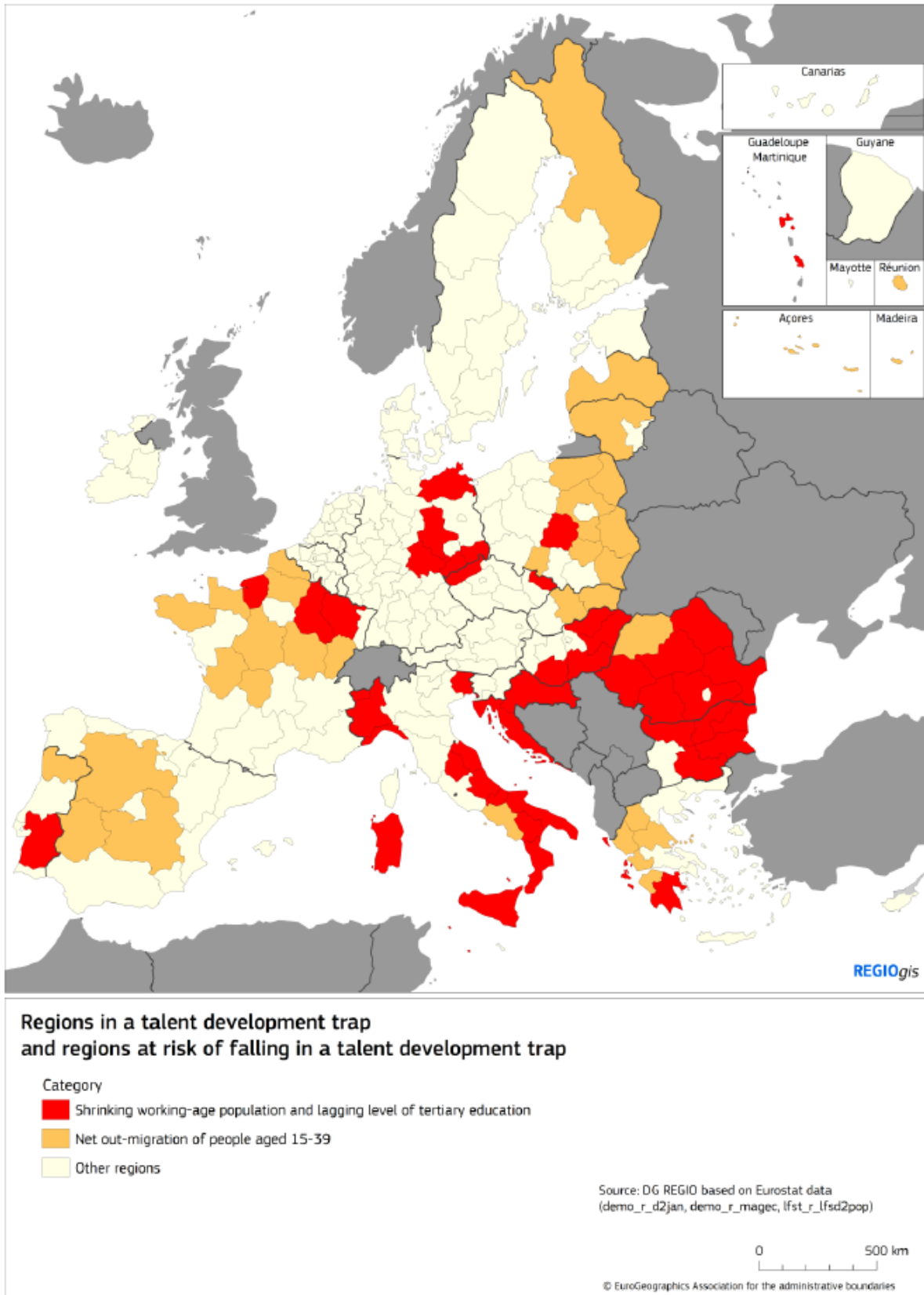
2.1. Target group

The target group of this Technical Assistance comprises the **46 regions** identified by the European Commission Communication (Harnessing Talent in Europe's Regions) as **in a talent development trap** (see regions in Table 1 below and in red in the map below). These regions face an accelerated decline of their working-age population, and a low and stagnant number of people with a tertiary education between 2015 and 2020. The 46 eligible regions are spread across 11 EU Member States. The **Technical Assistance will be delivered to 11 EU regions**, with the objective of providing support to one region per Member State.

Table 1 – Eligible NUTS2 Regions

MS	NUTS2 code	Region	MS	NUTS2 code	Region
BG	BG31	Severozapaden	HU	HU32	Észak-Alföld
BG	BG32	Severen tsentralen	HU	HU33	Dél-Alföld
BG	BG33	Severoiztochen	IT	ITC1	Piemonte
BG	BG34	Yugoiztochen	IT	ITC2	Valle d'Aosta/Vallée d'Aoste
BG	BG42	Yuzhen tsentralen	IT	ITC3	Liguria
CZ	CZ04	Severozápad	IT	ITF1	Abruzzo
CZ	CZ08	Moravskoslezsko	IT	ITF2	Molise
DE	DE80	Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	IT	ITF4	Puglia
DE	DED2	Dresden	IT	ITF5	Basilicata
DE	DED4	Chemnitz	IT	ITF6	Calabria
DE	DEE0	Sachsen-Anhalt	IT	ITG1	Sicilia
DE	DEG0	Thüringen	IT	ITG2	Sardegna
EL	EL62	Ionia Nisia	IT	ITH4	Friuli-Venezia Giulia
EL	EL65	Peloponnisos	IT	ITI2	Umbria
FR	FRD2	Haute-Normandie	IT	ITI3	Marche
FR	FRF2	Champagne-Ardenne	PL	PL71	Łódzkie
FR	FRF3	Lorraine	PT	PT18	Alentejo
FR	FRY1	Guadeloupe	RO	RO12	Centru
FR	FRY2	Martinique	RO	RO21	Nord-Est
HR	HR03	Jadranska Hrvatska	RO	RO22	Sud-Est
HR	HR04*	Kontinentalna Hrvatska	RO	RO31	Sud - Muntenia
HU	HU23	Dél-Dunántúl	RO	RO41	Sud-Vest Oltenia
HU	HU31	Észak-Magyarország	RO	RO42	Vest

Figure 2 – Regions in a talent development trap (red) and regions at risk of falling in a talent development trap (orange)

Regions in a talent development trap
and regions at risk of falling in a talent development trap

Category

- ■ Shrinking working-age population and lagging level of tertiary education
- ■ Net out-migration of people aged 15-39
- □ Other regions

Source: DG REGIO based on Eurostat data
(demo_r_d2jan, demo_r_magec, lfst_r_lfsd2pop)

0   500 km

© EuroGeographics Association for the administrative boundaries

2.2. Criteria for Selection

The following sections outline the overall vision of the selection process, highlighting the eligibility criteria, the points that will be assessed in the application process, and the guiding principles of the selection process.

2.2.1. Eligibility Criteria

- **Geographical scope -** The 46 regions facing an accelerated decline of their working-age population, and a low and stagnant number of people with a tertiary education belong to 11 Member States: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Romania. One region will be selected from each Member State. The list of eligible regions can be found above on page 3.

- **Territorial scope** – NUTS 2 level.

- **Type of Applicants** - regional public administrations, regional development agencies, managing authorities of regional operational programmes, as described below.

  The eligible applicants are the **regional public administrations with implementing powers at NUTS 2 level**, in the countries where these are in place (**Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal**).

  A an exception, only in the Member States where there are no NUTS 2 regional administrative bodies (**Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania**) the eligible stakeholders comprise either of **regional development agencies, managing authorities of regional operational programmes** (in two exceptional cases of Bulgaria and Romania), or **national Ministries with a pilot project representing a particular region** (in two exceptional cases of Hungary and Croatia).

  Eligible stakeholders in the exceptional cases of **Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania**:

  - Bulgaria: Regional Development Councils;
  - Croatia: Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds with a pilot for one of the regions, to be preselected at national level;
  - Hungary: Ministry of Territorial Development with a pilot for one of the regions, to be preselected at national level;
  - Romania: Regional Development Agencies as Managing Authorities of the ROPs.

  These types of administrative entities would have an active role in liaising with implementing stakeholders within the project. For the particular case of Hungary and Croatia, the Ministry would be proposing the region they would like to represent, following the criteria and principles for selection described in the following sections. They would need to submit the application form within the same deadline.

2.2.2. Specific selection criteria

The regions selected to receive support shall prove clarity of expression of interest by articulating the needs of the region as well as describing the regions assets and motivation, based on which meaningful work and positive change can be carried out in the region. In a dedicated application form, applying regions will be invited to reflect on the following points:

- **Identification of challenges and needs:** Regions are invited to briefly describe challenges to attract, retain, develop talent that are linked to demography, economy, education, etc. and identify

areas for improvement. In addition to describing the reality of their region's shrinking working age population and lagging tertiary educational attainment, regions shall describe the territorial disparities they are experiencing, such as, for example: areas with insufficient access to Services of General Interest (SGIs), lagging regions, low quality of life, high migration level, low digital and physical connectivity including access to high speed internet, mono-industrial regions, regions with low number of SMEs, predominantly rural or intermediate regions, regions with high youth unemployment, low regional innovation score, etc.

- **Potential and assets:** Regions shall provide information on whether they already have Integrated Development Strategies, Smart Specialization Strategies, Urban-rural disparities studies/strategies, Strategies for education and life-long learning, Regional Development Plans or other relevant documents and assets that could be useful for the project. Regions could indicate main assumptions, pillars, or directions of the development strategy or another plan outlining the joint development vision at regional level, dealing with demographic challenges and issues related to brain drain. Regions could elaborate on planned policy support for the 2021-2027 programming period, including the expected use of EU funds to tackle demographic challenges and issues related to brain drain. Due to the scope of the project to help regions attract, retain and harness talent, the call would also assess the potential of the regions to work within this framework, based on the existence of a University or research institute (see list of recognized research entities), regional innovation ecosystems or economic clusters (see European Cluster Collaboration Platform) which could be a catalytic factor. Regions are invited to briefly describe opportunities they have already identified linked to attracting, retaining, or developing talent. Additionally, the regions can also describe already existing cooperation efforts in the area for harnessing talent and previous experience in similar projects.

- **Motivation:** The motivation to apply would be determined based on the regions expected results of the project, the solutions and opportunities stemming from demographic challenges and issues related to brain drain that the region can identify. The call will also ensure that the applicant is ready to commit resources for the duration of the implementation.

2.2.3. Guiding principles for selection

The Technical Assistance will seek to contribute to positive advancements towards harnessing talent and the mitigation of brain drain. Ideally, these advancements will be representative for a variety of regional specificities, thereby helping other regions that are experiencing the same issues in developing their own place-based approaches. Therefore, the selection of regions will take into consideration regional territorial specificities stemming from but not limited to Article 174 TFEU. The selection of the regions will be conducted by the Secretariat of the Harnessing Talent Platform in close collaboration with DG REGIO. In selecting the regions, particular attention will be placed on:

- **Typology of regions** – Consideration will be given to regions dealing with the challenges of demographic change and brain drain across a wide range of different realities (coastal/island regions, mountain regions, regions with sparsely populated areas and regions affected by industrial transitions, cross-border regions - in particular those suffering from closed eastern borders and as a result closed businesses, lack of economic activity and jobs). Collaborating with regions that have a diversity of challenges will result in different types of possible mitigating actions.

- **Level of maturity -** The level of maturity of each region's efforts for in putting in place strategic and operational mechanisms for dealing with demographic and brain drain challenges will be considered.

- **Level of development of regions:** As much as possible, the support will primarily target regions that are less developed.

As suggested in the selection criteria section above, applicants will be assessed based on:

- Clarity of motivation to receive expert support;
- Relevance and articulation of a specific challenge in the view of diagnosis included in the Communication;
- Demonstrated operational readiness to engage with the experts;
- Demonstrated potential for embedding results of the support in the respective Cohesion Policy framework.

3. Type of support provided

The purpose of the support is to assist regional and local authorities in addressing their untapped potential for tertiary educated labour force and mitigate the challenges linked to demographic change and brain drain, supporting the identification of needs and priorities and providing advice and methodological support in order to attract, retain and develop talent.

Selected EU regions will have at their disposal experts who are able to provide assistance that will vary depending on whether or not the region has incipient strategies/efforts to address brain drain and demographic challenges or whether it would only now start this process.

While support will be tailor-made to the needs of each region, below is a non-exhaustive list of possible types of technical support that can be provided.

Possible types of support for selected regions:

- Addressing gaps of selected regions in designing appropriate policy and investment responses, by identifying gaps and already existing efforts for tackling demographic challenges and mitigating brain drain in the existing strategies and opportunities for a more effective action.

- The expertise would diagnose the existing strategic and policy framework and propose actions to address the lack of cross sectoral integration of demographic considerations in the view of regional specificities (coastal, rural, transition, etc.). The 2021-27 Cohesion Policy programmes should provide for embedding for any recommendations in terms of tuning and scaling up investment interventions in medium term.

- In the context of Cohesion Policy PO5 urban and rural development strategies, there will be a strong focus on improving quality of life so that regions are attractive for young and highly skilled workers while complementing strong economic development narrative.

- Identifying, connecting, and coordinating relevant stakeholders to leverage synergies and create joint forces. To make the strategic planning process effective and to reduce implementation risks, strategic planning should be participatory.

- Tailored support could be provided for identifying improvements related to the regional infrastructure (internet connectivity, etc.) and Services of General Interest (healthcare, social, etc.) that would be crucial factors in retaining talent and boosting economic development.

- Support will be tailor-made to the needs of each region, as identified in the beginning of the implementation process. Therefore, the support will also foresee actions like identifying opportunities for collaboration and transferable knowledge from other regions to improve existing strategies, building capacity, identification of sources of funding and financing to complement technical assistance, without being limited to these.

3.1.1. Scope or level of support provided

While the above describes some possible types of support, the precise objectives, scope and degree of support will be defined in close dialogue with the beneficiary and DG REGIO and agreed upon in the inception phase of each assignment for support. The expected level of resources allocated to each region is estimated to be in the range of 55 expert-days. This range may differ depending on the scope of the technical assistance needed and the overall demand for the support.

The Technical Assistance will be delivered in close dialogue with the beneficiary and DG REGIO to ensure that the most appropriate approach is chosen, which is directly tailored to the needs of the region. The delivery modes can consist of **study and field visits**, **workshops**, **research support**, **trainings**, **co-thinking labs**, **strategy development sessions**, and **hands-on-expert support**. Such support will be tailored to the local needs, depending on the context of each region.

Throughout the period of assistance, the selected regions will also have the possibility to request an **analytical paper** on specific issues that need deeper analysis. This will allow regions to develop more profound insight into challenges that are particular to their region. Moreover, spaces will exist for regions to explore and discuss their particular challenges and opportunities in **dedicated reflection and consultation sessions** with the [four working groups (Health, R&I, Digital, Territorial Development)](#) that are part of the Harnessing Talent Platform. This will provide a valuable opportunity for regions to present and discuss challenges and potentials with experienced experts and practitioners in different fields. At the end of the period of support, each region will receive a **comprehensive report**, which will include a review of the analysis and work done in each region as well as a **dedicated strategic roadmap** that describes an **action plan** with orientations for future steps.

The support provided as well as materials published will primarily be in English, yet provisions for translation will naturally be considered, where necessary. No direct funding is provided to the beneficiaries as part of technical support.

3.1.2. Timeline

- The call for expressions of interest for regions will be open between **11 September and 20 October 2023**. The call will **close at 12:00 AM CEST on 20 October 2023**.
- The assessment of applicants will be carried out in October – November 2023.
- In November, the selection results will be announced and the first kick-off meeting with regions will take place in November and December 2023.
- The implementation process with the regions will start in **January 2024 and will carry on until January 2026**, though specific timelines will depend on the circumstances and needs of each region.

3.2. Contact information

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact the HTP Secretariat directly: TA@harnessingtalentplatform.eu