



FINAL REPORT

Qualitative study to inform the project “Trabajadores Colombianos Especializados para Alemania” (TEAM) of the Public Employment Service Unit in Colombia

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RESEARCH | TRAINING | PROJECT DESIGN

From Colombia to Germany:

Documenting the Journey and Experiences of
Colombian Migrant Workers and their German
Employers

Final Report

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Executive summary

Labour migration has emerged as a significant topic of economic and social development, both in countries of origin and in destination countries. Managed well, labour migration is increasingly seen as an effective means to alleviate poverty and unemployment in countries of origin and as a vehicle to spur economic growth and innovation in destination countries. The World Development Report (WDR) 2023 recommends that governments in origin countries should make labour migration an explicit part of their development strategy, while governments in destination countries should use “strong match” migration to meet their labour needs. Colombia and Germany are an exemplary case of this dynamic. In Colombia, economic challenges push workers, particularly youths, to seek better economic opportunities and social mobility abroad. Meanwhile Germany, facing skills shortages, is increasingly turning to countries like Colombia as potential sources of skilled workers. The need to respond to domestic structural transformations such as digitalization, demographic change, and decarbonization, combined with an interest to expand its development cooperation portfolio, has seen Germany positioning labour migration as a “triple win” that benefits countries of origin, host countries, and migrants alike.

The “*Trabajadores Colombianos Especializados para Alemania*” (TEAM) project provides a valuable case study to document lessons for institutions formulating labour migration policies, employers recruiting foreign talent, and migrants seeking new opportunities. Initiated in 2021 by the German Federal Employment Agency (*Bundesagentur für Arbeit*, BA) and the Colombian Public Employment Service (*Servicio Público de Empleo*, SPE), the TEAM project aims to address persistent skills shortages in Germany through recruiting skilled workers from Colombia with qualifications in industrial electrical technology, telecommunications, landscape gardening, early childhood education, mechatronic systems automation, metal carpentry and professional nursing. The project spans all stages of the migration process: from emigration in Colombia, through integration in Germany, to permanent settlement or potential return. Undertaken in the spring of 2024, the present report mainly concentrates on the initial phases— emigration and integration—due to the recent start of the project. The goal of the study is to shed light on the experiences of both migrant workers and their German employers, and to explore the support offered by relevant institutions and service providers that accompany them on their journey. It aims to identify the achievements and the challenges of creating an effective labour migration pathway that benefits all parties involved.

As of June 2024, more than 80 Colombian migrant workers have taken up employment in Germany through the TEAM project, while another 260 are currently preparing in Colombia to emigrate within the next 10 months. Overall, there are 10 German employers that participate in the project and contribute resources to facilitate and finance the recruitment of these workers. The motivation to participate in the project is a case in point of a “strong match” as proposed by the “match and motive matrix”¹ of the WDR 2023: The Colombian migrant workers choose to participate in the project because they see opportunities in Germany to achieve a higher quality of life, a better income, and a more secure environment. Those with children are also attracted by better and more accessible educational opportunities. In Germany, the benefits of receiving Colombian skilled workers by far exceed its costs: most employers are pressed to find skilled workers and struggling to find these on the German market, therefore expanding to foreign labour markets. Some also value the cultural diversity and social integration that such international recruitment can bring to their workforce. Finally, there are more than 15 service providers, including Colombian transnational employment agencies, German language schools and Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Crafts that are engaged in the different stages of the project, providing vital guidance and services to the migrant workers and employers. These service providers participate in the project either out of financial interest and/or because of their respective institutional mandates.

¹ “Match” refers to the degree to which a migrant’s skills and related attributes meet the demand in the destination country. “Motive” refers to the circumstances under which a person moves— whether in search of opportunity or because of a “well-founded fear” of persecution, armed conflict, or violence in their origin country. See World Bank (2023). The Match and Motive Matrix. Online: <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/ece3855e7b5a517b3490747cb055ebde-0050062023/original/Chapter-1-Key-Messages.pdf>

The emigration phase in Colombia is the most critical first phase of the TEAM project and presents participants and employers with both considerable risks and opportunities. Participants who pass the selection process typically leave their current employment in Colombia to dedicate themselves to a full-time, intensive German language course for up to nine months, in exchange for a modest stipend. If they pass the required language exams, they are recruited and begin working in Germany, gaining a higher living standard and new opportunities for themselves and their families. If they do not pass after a second attempt, they must exit the project and re-enter the Colombian labour market without further support. Employers invest considerable time and resources to select participants and sponsor the language course, monthly stipend, and costs related to skills recognition and visa issuance. If participants pass the language exams, employers can recruit the skilled workers they need. If not, employers lose their investments and are unable to expand their workforce.

The recruitment and pre-selection of candidates is decentralized and conducted by the Colombian Transnational Employment Agencies (TEAs). Participants and employers are generally satisfied with the process. However, in earlier project cohorts, communication challenges and a lack of lead-up time meant participants only learned about their in-person interviews at the last minute and either had to pay for expensive transportation and/or were not able to take time off work and thus missed their interview. However, this situation has improved, and employers are happy with the quality of the candidates pre-selected.

The interviewing and final selection is generally done in person in Bogota, with many employers choosing to travel there too. While there have been a number of organizational issues in some cohorts, with one major employer dropping out on the day of the interviews or facing a lack of rooms to conduct them, the process generally runs smoothly. Companies have come up with innovative techniques to test candidates' knowledge despite the cultural and language barrier. A feedback process for the candidates who were not selected is currently not in place, leaving both applicants and TEAs wondering whether or not they should apply again.

Once selected, German language learning is a critical element of the preparatory phase that poses most participants with significant challenges. Given the absolute beginner level of the participants and the pressure to achieve a proficiency level² between A2 and B1 within six to nine months, the language courses are extremely intensive and, depending on the cohort and language school, exam failure rates have been as high as 85%. The A1 and A2 courses are usually in a digital format, which makes them more accessible for those living outside of Bogota but creates challenges for those with limited internet and computer access. In addition, candidates receive a set monthly stipend of between EUR 350 to EUR 450 (which is the equivalent of approximately 1.5 times the Colombian minimum wage in 2024)³ to give up their jobs and focus solely on their language course. While this is appreciated by the participants, those with children, coming from higher-paying jobs and living in urban centres struggle to cover their needs with this amount more than others. This highlights a need for more tailored language training programmes and financial support to meet individual needs and ensure all candidates can attain the necessary standards.

Participants require extensive logistical and administrative support throughout the preparation phase, including assistance with visa applications, travel arrangements and the homologation process. While this support helps reduce the stress and complexity associated with international migration for the participants, it comes with an unexpectedly high workload for the employers, who often choose to outsource some of the support services to the Colombo-German Chamber of Commerce (*Außenhandelskammer*, AHK). Particularly the homologation is extremely complex given Germany's federal system and fractured Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system, creating difficulties in making realistic prognostics regarding the duration of the homologation process. This has led to disappointments and frustration later in the migration process for some occupational groups.

² The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages organises language proficiency in six levels, A1 to C2, which can be regrouped into three broad levels: Basic User (A1, A2), Independent User (B1, B2) and Proficient User (C1, C2). See: Council of Europe (2024). Global scale - Table 1 (CEFR 3.3): Common Reference levels. Online: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-1-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-global-scale>

³ In 2024 the Colombian minimum wage was set at COP 1.3 million or approximately EUR 295. See Ministerio de Trabajo (2024). En el 2024 el salario mínimo es de un millón 300 mil pesos y auxilio de transporte de 162 mil pesos. Online: <https://www.mintrabajo.gov.co/comunicados/2023/enero/en-el-2024-el-salario-minimo-es-de-un-millon-300-mil-pesos-y-auxilio-de-transporte-de-162-mil-pesos>

Cultural and social awareness training is another critical element to prepare participants to successfully integrate into life and work in Germany. While the language schools offer some cultural immersion trainings, employers have also become increasingly active throughout the phases in accompanying their candidates via WhatsApp groups and virtual calls. This is an important development, as the Colombian migrants currently in Germany have commonly stated that they did not feel well-prepared for important elements of work and life in Germany, such as the tax burden or the darkness of winter.

A significant number of participants exit the project during the preparation phase. During the second TEAM cohort for example, more than 32% of all participants exited the project because they either failed to pass the language exams, strongly disliked the language course, were unable to cover their living expenses through the monthly stipend, or lost interest in the job offer. This represents a significant financial loss for the employers, who try to keep their candidates motivated through personal interaction, thereby adding further to their own workload. It also creates considerable financial stress for the participants who did not leave the project voluntarily and, as a result, suddenly find themselves unemployed and without any further support from the project.

The arrival in Germany is an ambiguous moment for participants, who report feeling both excitement about starting a new life and a cultural shock as they try to integrate into the workplace and German society. The employers receive the participants in different ways, albeit all with great support. The most common first interactions with the employer are reception at the airport, arrival either at a hotel or pre-arranged apartment, and some form of welcome meeting or retreat. However, many of the migrants also report falling into a psychological hole once the initial excitement subsides and reality sets in, not understanding much of the language and struggling to do the most basic things by themselves. At the same time, those employers who are less familiar with recruiting foreign workers feel overwhelmed with the administrative work and struggle to find institutional support beyond the BA.

The pace and success of workplace integration are correlated to the extent to which participants' qualifications and work experience match those of the German reference occupation. For those recruited to perform a very similar job as they did in Colombia, both employers and migrants are happy with their integration despite the initial language barrier. Those who discover that they are more unfamiliar with the tasks than expected not only have a harder time catching up with their coworkers but also experience more conflicts at work. This is also difficult for the employers who must invest more resources than anticipated into training. In terms of work conditions, while some migrants need to adapt to harder physical work than before, all appreciate the work-life balance in the companies and respect of holidays by their employers. One employer stands out as a negative example, where work accidents and subsequent neglect have forced all participants to leave. In terms of income, many of the migrants are shocked by the level of taxes and claim that they were unaware of how much lower their net salary would be before arriving in Germany. Particularly the financial situation of those with dependents in Colombia is tight, and those who had well-paid jobs in Colombia do not see much of an improvement following migration. Nevertheless, all manage to send remittances to support their families or take care of debts.

Creating a social life is not easy for the Colombian migrants in Germany, and many report feeling lonely. Limited German skills prevent participants from integrating into the local society, and those in rural areas are faced with few leisure options and rudimentary public transport. However, many are grateful to their Colombian peers and other Latinos they met, and some have also found friends amongst their German colleagues. Another common way of creating social ties is through the church and sports clubs, which is where the migrants obtain moral and practical support when needed. While many report experiences of xenophobia and some feel deeply troubled by them, all of the participants still declare they feel more secure in Germany than in Colombia.

The process and requirements for obtaining the residency permit were affected by legislative changes in 2024, resulting in uneven outcomes and confusion among employers and migrants. Smaller employers struggled to carry the administrative burden of dealing with the German migration authorities, while larger employers faced difficulties managing the substantial paperwork of a greater number of TEAM participants. Additionally, in larger German cities, the migration authorities are notoriously under-

resourced, causing administrative procedures to take much longer than expected. As a result, one employer opted to hire an external service provider to handle these processes. This is often a stressful experience for participants, as their legal stay in Germany depends on the success of these procedures. They frequently have little understanding of the bureaucratic structures and processes unfolding in the background.

Homologation is the most important preconditions for a permanent stay in Germany but has turned to be for many participants and lengthy and complex administrative process. The duration of the homologation process depends on a plethora of factors, including the German reference occupation chosen by the employer, the individual work experience and the cooperation of the respective federal authority. This complexity was initially underestimated, leaving both employers and migrants with unrealistic expectations regarding the speed of the homologation process, particularly for the gardeners. It caused considerable frustration among employers who invested in intensive training, and among participants who realized only after arriving in Germany that it would take much longer—in some cases nearly three years—to achieve the same professional status as their German co-workers. This delay has direct implications on their income levels and their ability to obtain a permanent residence permit. The example of one employer who managed to identify a close match between the qualifications of the participants and the German reference occupation stands out. As a result, all participants working for this specific employer were able to have their qualifications fully recognized even before they left Colombia.

Family reunification is the ultimate goal of all migrants with spouses and children but has taken—to the dismay of the participants—much longer than expected. Many participants complain that they did not receive clear information and support regarding family reunification processes early on. They later discovered that it would take longer than initially communicated, and depended on additional requirements such as an indefinite work contract, which in turn depended on other factors such as obtaining a driver's license. To date, none of the more than 80 participants have brought their families to Germany.

Most TEAM participants have not been in Germany for more than one year and it is too early for them to judge whether they will stay indefinitely. However many already have plans for their future in the country. A common thread is integrating into German society, bringing the family from Colombia, and helping their children have a better education and cultural opportunities. Many want to homologate their other titles from Colombia, finish degrees that were abandoned in the migration process, or pursue new ones through the German system. Most participants plan to continue working with their employers at least for some time, recognizing that they are still in a learning process and being grateful for how much the companies have supported them. However, others are also considering returning to Colombia if their financial situation does not improve and the family reunification drags on. As of May 2024, only two participants have left Germany due to personal and health reasons. Once the period for homologation for the first cohort ends, it will become clearer whether all participants were able to obtain their German titles and thus the premise for remaining in Germany. Moreover, the remaining participants will find out over time if life in Germany fulfils their expectations or if they prefer to return to their country of origin.

Overall the TEAM project can be considered a success that provides an illustrative example of the intricacies of labour mobility initiatives. One of only a few existing employer-funder schemes of this nature, it has established a solid reputation by now, with participants consistently highlighting the legal and safe nature of the migration process as one of the project's distinct advantages. The high number of applicants in each recruitment round bears testimony to this and bodes well for the project's sustainability.

At the same time, the study documents a series of both project-level and systemic barriers that impede exploiting the project's potential further. Many project barriers identified, including administrative complexity for employers, standardized language teaching and a lack of structured post-arrival support, are the result of a one-size-fits-all approach whereby project activities are implemented in a generic, standardized manner—at times with the rationale of creating equitable conditions for everyone. Perhaps counterintuitively, however, more customization would actually be needed to create more equitable conditions and improve the prospects of participants, not least in the face of systemic barriers that include the challenge of rapidly learning the German language, the complexity of the German TVET system, the absence of a whole-of-government approach to labour migration in Germany and a weak welcome culture.

While the TEAM project is not able to address all the bottlenecks encountered during the migration process from Colombia to Germany, there are a number of tangible measures that could be envisaged by project partners to strengthen future cohorts. Above all, future iterations of the TEAM project should prioritize involving all key actors in the labour migration ecosystem of both Colombia and Germany. This includes German immigration support networks, Colombian consulates in Germany, and pension funds. Adopting this whole-of-government approach would enhance the program's impact, reach, and sustainability. In terms of institutional arrangements, this includes strengthening SPE staff capacity, establishing a robust monitoring-and-evaluation framework with adaptive management practices, setting up an anonymous grievance and complaints mechanism, and broadening employer outreach. For the migration phase, initiatives could include offering more comprehensive pre-selection information to candidates, optimizing the effectiveness and efficiency of the selection process, and tailoring the language programme to the individual needs of participants. Regarding arrival and integration in Germany, further support could entail providing a list of resources of contact points, establishing an online exchange portal, and a dedicated counsellor position within the BA-ZAV, the consulates or similar institution. Additionally, the TEAM project could proactively support participants in navigating and facilitating the family reunification process—a crucial aspect that has not yet been satisfactorily addressed. Family reunification is a key prerequisite for the successful integration and long-term stay of participants in Germany..

Finally, strengthening the return phase is particularly crucial, as it has not yet been fully integrated into the project but is due to become increasingly important as more participants will return to Colombia in the future. A key future task of the TEAM project will be to support returning participants to successfully reintegrate into Colombian society through e.g. negotiating a reintegration allowance with the German employers, providing career counselling, job search assistance and facilitating the recognition of their German qualification in Colombia. This approach will not only help returning participants secure their livelihoods but also enable them to effectively apply the skills and knowledge acquired in Germany to contribute to Colombia's development.

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While every effort was made to ensure that the information contained in this report is accurate and complete, the findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this study are entirely those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the institutional views of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank and its affiliated organizations, or those of the Executive Directors of the World Bank or the governments they represent.

Abbreviations

AHK	Colombo-German Chamber of Commerce (<i>Außenhandelskammer</i>)
AZR	Central Register of Foreign Nationals (<i>Ausländerzentralregister</i>)
BA	Federal Employment Agency (<i>Bundesagentur für Arbeit</i>)
BA-ZAV	Central Foreign and Professional Placement Office (Zentrale Auslands- und Fachvermittlung) of the Federal Employment Agency
BMBF	Federal Ministry for Education and Research (<i>Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung</i>)
COP	Colombian Peso
DANE	National Administrative Department of Statistics, Colombia
DAS	Administrative Department of Security (<i>Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad</i>)
DIN	German Institute for Standardisation (<i>Deutsches Institut für Normung</i>)
ESF+	European Social Fund Plus (funding programme)
EU	European Union
FIMA	Fit for the Labour Market (<i>Fit für den Arbeitsmarkt</i>)
GaLaBau	Garden Landscaping (<i>Garten und Landschaftsbau</i>)
GCM	Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration
GIZ	German Corporation for International Cooperation GmbH (<i>Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH</i>)
HWK	Chamber of Crafts (<i>Handwerkskammer</i>)
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IHK	Chamber of Industry and Commerce (<i>Industrie- und Handelskammer</i>)
IOE	International Organization of Employers
IOM	International Organization for Migration

IQ	Integration through Qualification (<i>Integration durch Qualifizierung</i>)
IT	Information Technology
LWK	Chamber of Agriculture (<i>Landwirtschaftskammer</i>)
MERCOSUR	Southern Common Market (<i>Mercado Común del Sur</i>)
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
SENA	National Training Service (<i>Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje</i>)
SPE	Public Employment Service (<i>Unidad del Servicio Público de Empleo</i>)
SOP	Standard Operating Procedures
TEAM	Colombian Skilled Workers for Germany (<i>Trabajadores Colombianos Especializados para Alemania</i>)
TEA	Transnational Employment Agency
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USD	United States dollar
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

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Introduction

This study documents the experiences and perceptions of actors involved in the “*Trabajadores Colombianos Especializados para Alemania*” (TEAM) project. Initiated in 2021 between the German Federal Employment Agency (*Bundesagentur für Arbeit*, BA) and the Colombian Public Employment Service (*Unidad del Servicio Público de Empleo de Colombia*, SPE) in response to acute skills shortages in Germany in key strategic sectors such as healthcare, decarbonization and digitalization, the TEAM project provides a valuable case study to document lessons for institutions formulating labour migration policies, employers recruiting foreign talent, migrants seeking new opportunities, and service providers assisting with language learning, visa issuance and skills recognition.

The study is organized into three parts.

Part One provides a global introduction to labour migration, explains the rationale behind the study, and details the TEAM project’s origins, characteristics and roles. It also outlines the conceptual framework and research strategy used for data collection and analysis.

Part Two describes Colombia’s migratory patterns and policies over the past two decades, explaining the context for the SPE’s involvement in the TEAM project. It then examines Germany’s migration trends, strategies, laws and key pilot initiatives promoting labour immigration.

Part Three presents the empirical findings, structured along the migratory cycle. *Emigration from Colombia* explores the experiences of Colombian migrant workers, German employers and services during recruitment, training, visa application and skills recognition. *Arrival and Integration* chronicles the ups and downs in the professional and personal lives of Colombian migrant workers in Germany and discusses employer perspectives on integrating these workers into their companies. *Permanent Stay in Germany* presents the aspirations and challenges of Colombian migrant workers seeking permanent residence in Germany, including the obstacles they face in achieving residency and family reunification. *Return to Colombia*, finally, provides insights into why some migrant workers decide to end their employment in Germany and their prospects for reintegrating into Colombia.

The report concludes with a brief section that situates the TEAM project within the broader context of German labour migration policy and offers recommendations to enhance the project’s impact.

Part 1: Research Context and Background Information

Context

Migration is an intrinsic part of human history and a critical driver of socio-economic development. From the early movements of human civilizations to the expansion of ancient and modern empires, and through successive waves of globalization, the pursuit of better opportunities has consistently motivated people to leave their homelands.

Today, more than three per cent of the world's population—some 281 million people—are living and working in a country other than that of their birth. The prospects of higher wages and improved access to services continues to be a strong motivating factor for migration. In 2020, approximately 84 percent of migrants resided in a country wealthier than their own. However, the costs associated with moving are typically prohibitive for the poorest individuals. Most migrants come from middle-income countries and are neither the poorest nor the wealthiest in their country of origin.⁴ At the same time, migration has become an important source of household income and foreign exchange reserves. Between 2000 and 2022, international

⁴ World Bank (2023). World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies. Accessed online: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2023>

remittances increased by a more than 650 per cent, rising from USD 128 billion to USD 831 billion, often surpassing foreign direct investment flows in countries of origin and underscoring the criticality of migration as a driver of development and economic growth.⁵

Demographic changes have intensified global competition for workers and talent, altering where workers are needed and where they can be found. Regardless of political considerations, wealthy countries will need foreign workers to sustain their economies and fulfil their social commitments to older citizens. Many middle-income countries, traditionally the main sources of migration, will soon need to compete for foreign workers—and many are unprepared for this shift. Low-income countries have large numbers of unemployed and underemployed young people, but many of them lack the skills currently in demand in the global labour market.⁶

Workers view migration as an essential strategy to leverage their human capital in order to find productive employment and better opportunities in life for themselves and their families. Strict immigration laws, in particular from lower- and middle-income countries to high-income countries, can limit migrants' ability to pursue these goals. Some workers are willing to undertake perilous journeys to enter their aspired countries of destination, including through irregular channels, while others utilize formal channels to access foreign labour markets and establish new lives.

Employers generally consider migration to be a necessary and positive phenomenon that helps balance labour supply and demand, fosters innovation, and facilitates the transfer and dissemination of skills. Conversely, labour market protectionism can have severe consequences for businesses, making it increasingly difficult for employers to recruit cross-border talent. Such restrictions not only limit the availability of skilled labour but also stifle potential business growth and innovation. Consequently, in multilateral forums employers advocate for clear, transparent and efficient national immigration policies that enable the timely movement of workers to where they are most needed.⁷

Governments worldwide face a complex dilemma: they must weigh the economic advantages and social benefits of labour migration against the potential brain drain effects in countries of origin and political resistance to immigration expressed by some segments of the electorate in the destination countries. This involves carefully balancing concerns that migrant workers may undercut wages and job opportunities for native workers with the private sector's need for a clear, well-implemented labour migration policy that promotes labour mobility and attracts foreign talent. As a result, policymakers are increasingly aware of the complex and sensitive political, human rights, economic and social concerns raised by labour migration, along with an array of legal and regulatory challenges.

Despite these complexities, labour migration has emerged as a significant topic of economic and social development globally and nationally over the past decade. Managed well, labour migration is increasingly seen as an effective means to alleviate poverty and unemployment in countries of origin and as a vehicle to spur economic growth and innovation in destination countries. Global policy frameworks such as the Global Compact for Migration encourage governments to create regulatory environments that ensure safe and orderly migration processes.⁸ At national level, governments are revising national legislation and support structures to better facilitate the inflow of migrant workers and to enable employers to recruit them.

The countries examined in this study—Colombia and Germany—both stand out for their progressive and strategic approaches to immigration policy, which explicitly link labour mobility to national development objectives. Colombia, for its part, is a country that grapples with complex mixed-migration flows. In the face of a 50-year internal armed conflict, more than five million people continue to be internally

⁵ IOM (2024). World Migration Report 2024 Reveals Latest Global Trends and Challenges in Human Mobility. Accessed online: <https://www.iom.int/news/world-migration-report-2024-reveals-latest-global-trends-and-challenges-human-mobility>

⁶ World Bank (2023). World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies. Accessed online: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2023>

⁷ IOE (2018). IOE Position Paper on labour migration. Accessed online: <https://www.ioe-emp.org/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=135034&token=ea736c36b21aab3ee1ee4fa5847991ba8082ff8>

⁸ The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM), adopted by the majority of UN Member States in December 2018, serves as a non-binding cooperative framework to guide countries in managing migration effectively and humanely. It outlines 23 objectives addressing key aspects such as data-driven policies, addressing root causes, enhancing pathways for regular migration, promoting fair recruitment, reducing vulnerabilities, combating smuggling and trafficking, managing borders, among others. The GCM emphasizes international collaboration, human rights, and a comprehensive approach to migration management for the benefit of migrants and host communities. See IOM (2024). Global Compact for Migration. Online: <https://www.iom.int/global-compact-migration>

displaced.⁹ Moreover, the protracted socio-economic and political crisis in Venezuela has driven some three million Venezuelan migrants to Colombia in the past decade.¹⁰ Colombia has also become a transit point for migrants from all over the world aiming to reach Central America via the Darien Gap. To address these challenges, the Colombian government has implemented innovative and progressive policies to meet the needs of the diverse migrant groups, providing them with access to essential services and economic opportunities. The focus of this study however zooms in on the role of Colombia as a country of origin for migrants. Economic pressures, such as widespread informal employment¹¹ and inequality,¹² push Colombian citizens, particularly youths, to seek better economic opportunities and social mobility abroad, and the government is actively facilitating their endeavours.

Meanwhile advanced economies, facing domestic skills shortages, are increasingly turning to countries like Colombia as potential sources of skilled workers. One of these is the Federal Republic of Germany. After having long denied being an “immigration country,”¹³ Germany has emerged as the second-largest migrant-receiving Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) country.¹⁴ Over the past 15 years, Germany has carefully introduced immigration policy and legislation that constitute some of the most versatile and open towards foreign nationals willing to take up skilled labour. The need to respond to domestic structural transformations such as digitalization, demographic change and decarbonization, combined with an interest to expand its development cooperation portfolio, has seen Germany positioning labour migration as a “triple win” that benefits countries of origin, host countries and migrants alike.¹⁵

The TEAM project, the subject of this study, sits right at the heart of these developments. It offers a rich case to explore and document the intricacies of labour migration policies for the institutions that set them in motion, for the employers that seek to recruit foreign talent, and for the migrants who aspire to finding new opportunities for themselves and their families.

The TEAM project

The TEAM project is a Colombian-German collaboration focused on promoting safe and fair labour migration by facilitating the mobility of Colombian skilled workers to Germany in selected occupations. To achieve this, the project guides and accompanies Colombian job seekers and German employers, aiming to minimize challenges in recruiting qualified migrant workers and ensuring the involvement of relevant institutions in the immigration process.

The project was initiated by the Federal Employment Agency (*Bundesagentur für Arbeit, BA*) and is aligned with two key strategic frameworks. In 2020, the BA conducted a diagnostic study to identify focus countries for the recruitment of skilled foreign workers based on four criteria: a high level of education, a sizable population of working age, significant underemployment among educated young adults, and positive demographic trends suggesting a sustainable labour pool.¹⁶ This led to the identification of 31 countries, including Colombia, as suitable for recruitment efforts. The diagnostic study was updated in 2024, reaffirming Colombia’s status. Additionally, in 2023, the BA developed a sector strategy for recruiting foreign skilled workers focusing on three strategic pillars:¹⁷

(1) *Demographic change*: Increased demand for specialists, especially in healthcare, coupled with a shrinking domestic labour supply due to aging;

⁹ IDMC (2024). Country Profile: Colombia. Accessed online: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/colombia/>

¹⁰ UNHCR (2024). Country Operations: Colombia. Online: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/operations/colombia>

¹¹ In 2023, the percentage of informal employment in Colombia stood at 55.9 percent of the total employed population. See Statista (2024). Informal employment as percentage of total employment in Colombia from 2010 to 2023. Online: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1039930/informal-employment-share-colombia/>

¹² Between 2010 and 2022, Colombia’s data on the degree of inequality in wealth distribution based on the Gini coefficient reached 51.5. That year, the country was deemed as one of the most unequal countries in Latin America. See Statista (2024). Income distribution inequality based on Gini coefficient in Colombia between 2000 and 2022. Online:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/982878/income-distribution-gini-coefficient-colombia/>

¹³ BR24 (2010). Deutsche Ausländer Politik: Abwehren und begrenzen. Accessed online: https://www.br.de/nachricht/migration_bavern_auslaenderpolitik100.html

¹⁴ OECD (2023). International Migration Outlook 2023. Accessed online: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/b0f40584-en/1/3/1/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/b0f40584-en&_csp_={32aa69b63450530407ffa5853cb88a4&itemID=oeed&itemContentType=book

¹⁵ The Federal Government (unknown). Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration: Contribution by the Federal Republic of Germany. Accessed online:

<https://migrationnetwork.un.org/system/files/docs/Germany%20-%20Voluntary%20GCM%20Review.pdf>

¹⁶ Bundesagentur für Arbeit (2024). Länderpotenzialanalyse der BA. Internal document.

¹⁷ Bundesagentur für Arbeit (2024). Branchenstrategie der Bundesagentur für Arbeit (BA) für die Anwerbung ausländischer Fachkräfte in EU- und Drittstaaten. Internal document.

- (2) *Decarbonization*: Germany's commitment to zero emissions necessitates a substantial workforce in various sectors to support this transformation; and
- (3) *Digitalization*: Emphasis on IT specialists, addressing the public sector's competitive disadvantages in recruitment compared to private companies and supporting digital infrastructure expansion, such as the government's gigabit strategy.

These pillars guide the BA's selection of occupational profiles for recruitment initiatives, of which the TEAM project is one.¹⁸

The BA and the SPE signed a Letter of Intent for the project in March 2020, as well as a cooperation and placement agreement. The project is expected to run for a total of five years. As of June 2024, the TEAM project has progressed through six phases (1.0, 2.0, 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3, with 4.0 just commencing) and more than 418 Colombians have been admitted to the project, of which 84 took up employment in Germany (of these two returned to Colombia and one is on extended sick leave at the time of writing this report), 269 are in the process of learning German and finalizing their documentation and 65 have exited the project.¹⁹ (see annex 1 for a detailed overview of each cohorts' status). Ten German companies have participated in the project so far. The project aims to complete the contracting of job seekers in Germany within a 22-month timeframe.²⁰ Job seekers participating in the TEAM project enjoy several benefits, including complimentary German classes and a monthly stipend of approximately EUR 350-450 to enable them to leave their jobs and dedicate themselves solely to language learning for a period of six to nine months. Additionally, the costs associated with the recognition of their qualifications in Germany are covered. Participants are moreover provided with guidance on administrative procedures, relocation to Germany and advice on living and working there, among other aspects. The details of the support offered varies from one employer to the next.

While both institutional partners bear the cost of their own administrative processes to fulfil their obligations,²¹ the TEAM project is unique in that the cost of migration is (almost) entirely covered by the participating employers. The latter cover expenses such as the cost of language training and living stipend, homologation, travel costs and training in Germany; these range between EUR 10,000 to EUR 18,000 excluding employers' staff time to participate in the project.²² This employer-based funding modality represents an opportunity for the sustainability of the project, as it is largely independent from the availability of public funding.

Box 1: The TEAM Project: An Unacknowledged Pilot Initiative?

The TEAM project, initiated in March 2020 with a Letter of Intent between the BA and SPE, has unfolded over several phases. By early 2024, it had launched six cohorts involving 480 Colombian migrant workers, with more than 80 currently employed in Germany and 10 participating employers. However, despite being the first such initiative between Germany and Colombia that includes multiple occupations and is employer-funded, the TEAM project was not formally designated to be a pilot project. The absence of a properly defined implementation strategy and a clear results measurement framework to benchmark success against specific criteria is illustrative in this regard. Instead, a trial-and-error approach is discernible, with activities under the TEAM project often starting off with a one-size-fits-all strategy that is then subsequently adjusted to specific project phases, occupations, types of migrants and types of employers. Several of the challenges highlighted by this report can be attributed, at least partly, to the pursuit of this strategy. While the project has evolved over time, this was mostly due to *ad hoc*, reactive processes and the ingenuity of specific actors.

¹⁸ Key informant interview #46, conducted in June 2024.

¹⁹ Unidad del Servicio de Empleo (unknown). Resumen Ejecutivo Proyecto TEAM. Internal document

²⁰ Bundesagentur für Arbeit y Unidad del Servicio de Empleo (unknown). Ficha Proyecto TEAM. Internal document.

²¹ Bundesagentur für Arbeit y Unidad del Servicio de Empleo (2022). Absichtserklärung zwischen der Vereinigung Nationale Arbeitsverwaltung, Kolumbien und der Bundesagentur für Arbeit. Internal document.

²² Note, it is not possible to estimate the average cost per participant. (1) The financial obligations borne by each employer in the recruitment of a participant under the TEAM project exhibit considerable variability. Some employers face lower costs, for example, due to their ability to access subsidised language classes. Conversely, other employers face higher costs, either because their selected participants require additional time to pass language exams or because they invest in additional support services, such as providing accommodation in Bogotá to enable participants to take part in the German language classes in person. (2) The majority of employers either lacked a comprehensive understanding of the costs they had assumed or asserted that their cost calculations were confidential information.

The TEAM project engages the entire labour migration ecosystem in the country of origin and in the country of destination. Each actor plays a distinct role and collaborates with other stakeholders to ensure that migration is managed effectively, humanely, and in a way that benefits both migrants and employers. However, there are important actors who are not yet systematically involved in the TEAM project and whose participation could strengthen the impact and sustainability of the project. In Colombia, this applies in particular to the consulates, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and national pension funds. In Germany, this concerns the different (labour) migration support services at state level.

The strategic direction of the TEAM project in Germany is managed from the BA headquarters in Nuremberg. They play a pivotal role in the selection of occupations and identification of participating institutions, such as homologation centres, and in the assignment and coordination of roles and responsibilities. In parallel, the BA's Central Foreign and Professional Placement Office (*Zentrale Auslands- und Fachvermittlung*, BA-ZAV) in Bonn is in charge of the implementation of the project on the German side. This includes recruiting employers and providing them with information on the project and comprehensive advice on the employment of Colombian workers. Moreover, the BA-ZAV accompanies the selection of the candidates by translating some of the job interviews and coordinating between employers and the Colombian institutions. In terms of participant management, the BA-ZAV collates information on life and work in Germany for job seekers' preparation while still in Colombia, as well as key information on support services in Germany. Given the BA's mandate to support job placement, it is important to note that their involvement in the project ends with the successful recruitment of the Colombian candidates.²³ Officially, no post-arrival support is provided by the BA-ZAV once the Colombian migrant workers arrive in Germany, as it is expected that the employer will from that moment onwards act as the main point of contact, and that the participants will be sufficiently autonomous. In practice this is not always the case, however, and cognizant of the lack of post-arrival support, the BA-ZAV does at times provide *ad hoc*, reactive support measures to individual migrants even after arrival. A key actor that could potentially fill the gap in post-arrival support are the Colombian consulates. Currently, however, consulates seem to be unaware of the TEAM project and do not participate in it.

On the Colombian side, the SPE is responsible for the strategic management and implementation of the project. It approves the transnational service providers in Colombia that partner with the TEAM project and adapts the vacancies provided by the BA to the Colombian context where necessary, before distributing them among the approved transnational service providers. The SPE also creates informational material on each call to market the project and plays a coordinating role between the transnational service providers and the BA in the selection process. Finally, the SPE is tasked with coordinating the interview process in Bogota.

A growing network of public and private service providers implements the project in Colombia:

- *Transnational employment agencies (TEAs)* are responsible for marketing the project to potential candidates at the local level through print and social media, providing fundamental information on the TEAM project to interested job seekers, reviewing CVs and creating long lists according to the selection criteria, as well as relaying information on interview invitations and final selection back to the candidates.
- *The German-Colombian Chamber of Commerce* in Bogota (*Außenhandelskammer*, AHK) supports the TEAM project with information services regarding recognition of degrees and necessary documents. This element is funded through the ProRecognition project, which is financed by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (*Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung*, BMBF). Moreover, employers can hire the AHK for additional services such as document management, organization of health checks, and German classes.
- *The Goethe Institute and several private German language schools* in Bogota provide the TEAM participants with online and in-person language training. Employers choose their preferred language course provider for each cohort. However, participants must take their language proficiency exams at the

²³ Key informant interview #46 conducted in May 2024.

Goethe Institute, the competent authority for German language certification required for visa and residence permit applications.

In Germany, the entities in charge of homologation are manifold and depend on the reference occupation chosen and the federal state where the company is located. They include federal chambers of agriculture (*Landwirtschaftskammer*, LWK), crafts (*Handwerkskammer*, HWK), and industry and trade (*Industrie- und Handelskammer*, IHK).

German employers play a key role in the TEAM project throughout all phases. During the recruitment phase, employers receive a shortlist of applicants, curated by the TEAs based on the job descriptions, via the SPE. Employers then participate in the interview process, either in person or remotely, to select candidates that best meet their criteria. In the first cohort 30 participants were selected out of 277 and in the second cohort 80 out of 184. Once chosen, employers support their future employees throughout the entire preparation and recognition procedure, including any adaptive measures to homologate their qualifications. They moreover cover the vast majority of the costs of migration for all candidates. Once in Germany, the employer is the main point of contact and provider of support for the participants.

The BA and the SPE collaboratively select occupations by analysing labour demand in Germany and current labour oversupply in Colombia, as well as through a preliminary assessment of educational degree compatibilities.²⁴ There is however an increasing realization within the SPE that future iterations of the labour oversupply analysis need to include labour market projections.²⁵ This is to ensure that Colombia is not proactively outsourcing skilled workers, such as professional nurses and doctors, who will be needed in 10 to 15 years as Colombia's population ages.²⁶

Box 2: Recruiting Landscape Gardeners in Colombia: A sobering experience for employers and migrants

Germany's decarbonization efforts include expanding vegetation and green spaces to absorb carbon dioxide emissions and lower temperatures, especially in urban areas. As a result, recruiting skilled landscape gardeners from abroad has become a strategic priority for the BA.²⁷ Following the signing of the Letter of Intent in March 2020, the BA actively pursued the recruitment of prospective landscape gardeners from Colombia.²⁸

An initial assessment by the BA determined that Colombian professionals with the qualification "Agricultural Production Technologist" possessed roughly 70% of the necessary skills for the German occupation "Landscape Gardener." Based on this conclusion, the Gardening and Landscaping Association (*Garten und Landschaftsbau*, GaLaBau) and several of its members, consisting of small enterprises, decided to participate in the TEAM project, anticipating a subsequent adaptation period in Germany of nine to twelve months for these workers. However, industry experts later found that when the Colombian and German curricula were directly compared, the actual equivalence of the qualification was 15% at best.²⁹ This discrepancy largely stems from the unique nature of the German "*Landschaftsgärtner*" profession, which integrates skills from maintenance gardening, stonemasonry, and other crafts-related trades, and is specific to the cultural and professional context of Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

The decision to recruit prospective landscape gardeners from Colombia, despite or without sufficient awareness of this misalignment, proved to be consequential, bearing serious ramifications for Colombian migrant workers and their German employers, as this study documents.

²⁴ Bundesagentur für Arbeit und Unidad del Servicio de Empleo (2022). Absichtserklärung zwischen der Verinigung Nationale Arbeitsverwaltung, Kolumbien und der Bundesagentur für Arbeit. Internal document.

²⁵ Key informant interview #49 conducted in June 2024

²⁶ A large wave is moving through Colombia's population age structure as the large cohorts born when high fertility was the norm advance through their life cycle and move from youth to adulthood to old age. The size of the working age groups will peak in 2033 for ages 20-39 and in 2056 for ages 40-59. See ECLAC (2013). Colombia's Ageing Future: Turning Points and Policy Options. A Look Towards 2040 and Beyond. Accessed online: <https://repositorio.cepal.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/57c508af-280d-4702-8ac9-78f08897ffe7/content>

²⁷ Key informant interview #46 conducted in June 2024

²⁸ Key informant interview #44 conducted in June 2024

²⁹ Key informant interview #11 conducted in May 2024

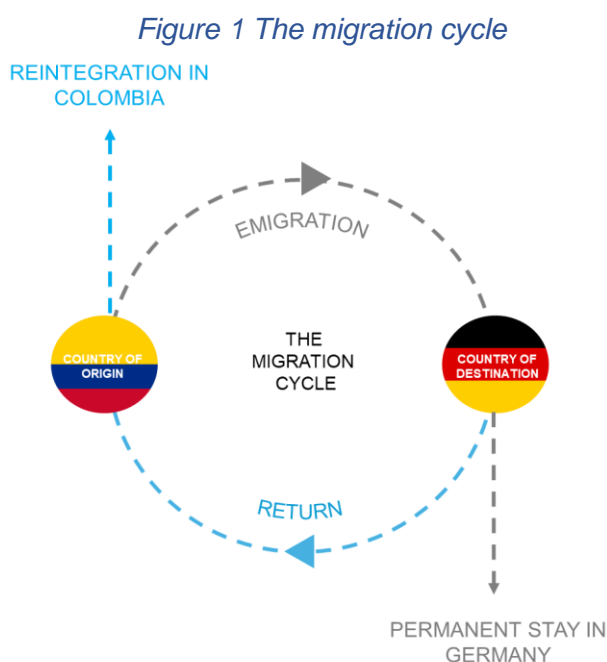
As of June 2024, eight occupations have gradually been introduced to the TEAM project out of which only three have so far been recruited for:

- 12/2021: Industrial electrical technologist (recruited), Telecommunications technologist (not yet recruited), Agricultural production technologist (recruited during TEAM 1.0, since then discontinued).
- 12/2021: Licensed early childhood educator, Licensed preschool educator (both not yet recruited).³⁰
- 06/2022: Mechatronic systems automation technologist, Metal carpentry technician (both not yet recruited), Professional nurse (recruited).³¹

German employers interested in hiring Colombians from any of the above professions recruit on a rolling basis. Once sufficient employers are on board to reach a minimum of approximately 30 vacancies, a new project phase is launched.³² The BA's employers service is meant to proactively propose the project to employers searching for workers in these professions. While this does happen in practice, the BA also reaches out to potentially promising enterprises on an *ad hoc* basis.³³ As the participant numbers show, the interest is highest in recruiting nurses and electricians. Other occupations, notably the kindergarten teachers, are significantly less sought-after given the limited financial and human resources in the sector that would be necessary for participation.³⁴ The recruitment of landscape gardeners has been paused since the first TEAM cohort in 2021, due to the poor equivalence of the Colombian qualification with the German reference qualification (see Box 2 above).

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this study is structured around the four key phases of the migration cycle which is also applicable to the TEAM project:



Source: IOM (2024), adapted by authors

³⁰ Bundesagentur für Arbeit und Unidad del Servicio de Empleo (2023). Änderung zur Anlage 2 der Vermittlungsabsprache. Internal document.

³¹ Bundesagentur für Arbeit und Unidad del Servicio de Empleo (2022). Anexo 1 a la Carta de intención: Programa „Specialized!“. Internal document.

³² Key informant interview #9 conducted in May 2024

³³ Key informant interview #44 conducted in May 2024

³⁴ Key informant interview #44 conducted in May 2024

Emigration from Colombia: This phase involves the recruitment, training, and preparation of Colombian migrant workers. Initially, companies develop job descriptions, which the SPE shares with TEAs. These agencies disseminate the openings, filter applications based on key criteria and forward a long list of candidates to the companies. The most suitable candidates are shortlisted, interviewed (either in-person or online) and selected. Successful candidates undergo a preparatory phase including six to nine months of German language classes as well as workshops on life and work in Germany. They are also assisted with visa applications and degree homologation by the German-Colombian Chamber of Commerce (*Außenhandelskammer*, AHK). The homologation process is a complex and highly individualised process that depends on the qualifications of the participants, their work experience and the location of their future employers. As part of the homologation process, participants are often provided with a Deficiency Notice (Defizitbescheid). A Deficiency Notice in the German labour immigration system is a critical document that is issued when a foreign professional's qualifications do not fully meet the German standards required for regulated professions such as health, engineering or technical trades. The notice identifies the specific areas in which the applicant's skills or knowledge are insufficient and outlines the necessary steps - such as additional training, examinations or practical experience - to achieve full recognition. This process is crucial for integration because it ensures that foreign professionals meet German professional standards, thus maintaining quality and safety in the regulated fields. It also provides a clear pathway for skilled migrants to fill qualification gaps, facilitating their entry into the German labour market and supporting their long-term professional integration and social inclusion in Germany.

Key research themes to be explored under this phase include:

- The motivation of participants, employers and TEAs to participate in the project;
- The experiences of participants, employers and TEAs throughout the selection and recruitment process;
- Critical bottlenecks and challenges that surfaced during the language learning and preparation phase;
- Critical legal requirements for visa issuance and skills recognition; and
- The ways in which critical information is shared between the actors of the TEAM project

Arrival and Integration: Upon arrival in Germany, Colombian migrants generally move into employer-organized housing (typically consisting of an apartment shared with other participants from the same cohort) and, with employer support, complete essential paperwork like registration with the municipality and bank account setup. The level of onboarding varies by employer, potentially including further language and specialized training. Migrants also begin the homologation process as per their deficit notice, which may involve additional training and examinations.

Key research themes to be explored under this phase include:

- Orientation and integration support provided by the employers;
- Employment conditions, including working hours, tasks at work and workplace integration;
- Integration into Germany society, including support networks and living conditions;
- The income and financial situation of participants; and
- The expectations of participants and employers versus the reality.

Permanent Stay in Germany: Migrants need to secure a residence permit, contingent upon having at least A2 level German proficiency, a recognized degree, and a work contract. Family reunification is a key aspect for those with families in Colombia, depending on obtaining a residence permit and fulfilling other requirements such as sufficient living space. Migrants also prepare for family needs like kindergarten and employment opportunities for partners.

Key research themes to be explored under this phase include:

- Participants' expectations for permanence in Germany;
- The issuance of residence permits; and
- Plans for family reunification

Return to Colombia: This phase involves the reintegration of migrants who decide to return to Colombia after working in Germany, focusing on their transition back into their home country.

Key research themes to be explored under this phase include:

- Participants' reasons for returning to Colombia;
- Re-integration into the Colombian labour market and available support services; and
- Participants' plans for permanence and/or remigration.

This phased approach allows the study to chronologically analyse and present the migration experience as lived by Colombian migrant workers and their German employers. Throughout these phases, various service providers and stakeholders interact with the migrants and employers, with some interactions being phase-specific and others extending across multiple phases. Given that the TEAM project is a relatively recent initiative, it is worth noting that the majority of available data pertains to phases 1 and 2. As of June 2024, no Colombian migrant worker has so far met the conditions required to pursue permanent residency³⁵ and only two have returned to Colombia.

Research strategy

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach involving a convergent parallel design: semi-structured key informant interviews, non-representative perception surveys and extensive desk research were undertaken simultaneously but analysed separately (see below). Subsequently, key findings were compared and validated to triangulate information across all data sets. Although focus group discussions were initially part of the study design, they were ultimately excluded due to the comprehensive insights gained from the key informant interviews, as well as in view of logistical constraints and lower-than-expected participant turnout. Throughout the entire data collection phase, strict standards were developed and followed to adhere to the data privacy policies of the SPE, BA, and World Bank.

Desk reviews

At the onset of the study, the World Bank and SPE provided the consultants with key project documentation. This included 21 documents and an online presentation detailing the organizational structure of the SPE and the scope and outcomes of the TEAM project. This material was summarized to establish a preliminary understanding of the TEAM project, including the roles and responsibilities of its principal actors. Additionally, 44 online resources and internal documents in German, English and Spanish were examined to conduct a contextual analysis of the TEAM project as well as labour migration trends and policies in Colombia and Germany.

Perception surveys

Perception surveys, employing non-probability sampling, were conducted to capture the views of Colombian migrant workers and their employers. The surveys targeted Colombian migrant workers (including those in preparatory stages in Colombia, those who have opted out of the TEAM project and those who are currently working in Germany) along with their German employers. The surveys were implemented in KoboToolbox and featured a series of perception statements, to which respondents could respond using Likert scales. The migrant workers survey was administered in Spanish and the employers survey in German.

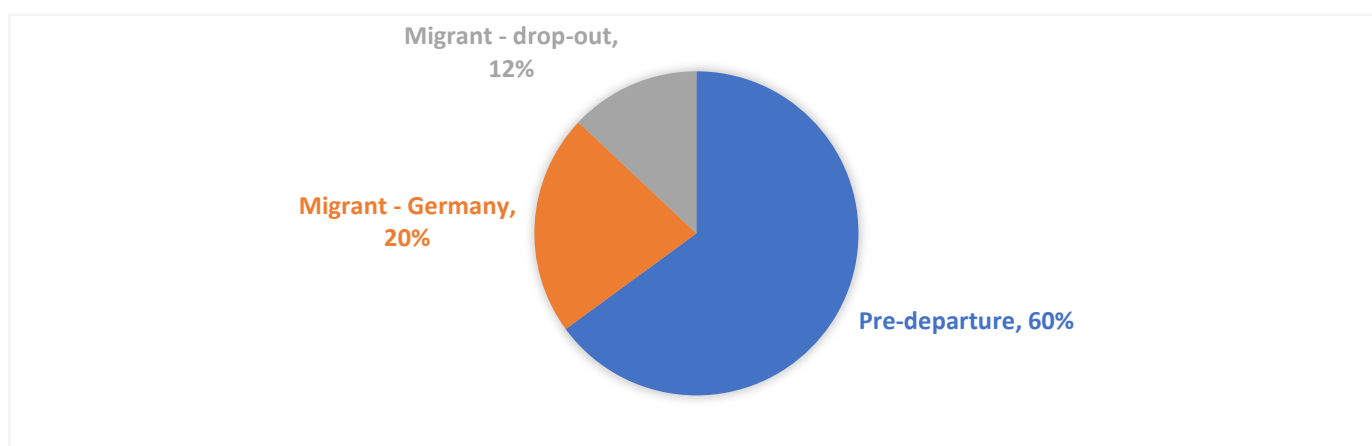
³⁵ While the conditions for obtaining permanent residence are heavily individualized and have been subject to legislative reform since the TEAM project has started, the general requirements are (1) to have held a residence title for three years for employment as a skilled worker (with vocational training or an academic education), hold a job, have paid compulsory pension insurance contributions for 36 months and have sufficient knowledge of the German language. See: Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (2024). Settling in Germany: Open-ended residence titles. Accessed online: <https://www.bamf.de/EN/Themen/MigrationAufenthaltsZuwandererDrittstaaten/MigratNeK/Niederlassen/niederlassen-node.html>

The primary aim of these surveys was to capture stakeholder views as they are currently experienced or have been experienced and are interpreted today.

Identification of respondents and dissemination. The migrant survey was distributed to 480 migrant workers who had participated in the TEAM project as of May 2024, as per the SPE’s database. The SPE disseminated the survey link via a mass email inviting migrant workers to participate. Similarly, the employer survey was shared with the eight employers who had agreed to participate in the study, with the consultants handling the individual dissemination to each employer. Throughout all communications related to these surveys, respondents were assured that their participation was entirely anonymous and voluntary, and that it would not affect their involvement in the TEAM exercise either positively or negatively.

Data collection and visualization. Data was collected continuously throughout May and June 2024. The migrant survey received responses from 84 individuals, with 50 currently in the pre-departure phase, 17 employed in Germany and 10 who had abandoned the TEAM project.³⁶ The employer survey garnered responses from six individuals, all of whom were either currently employing or had recently employed Colombian migrant workers from the TEAM project. The collected data from both surveys were then processed and visualized in an interactive dashboard in Spanish using Microsoft PowerBI.

Figure 2: Distribution of survey respondents by status



Data analysis. The consultants utilized the dashboard as a primary tool for identifying overarching trends in perceptions, enabling them to triangulate these trends with findings from key informant interviews and the desk review. Although there was a delay in distributing the migrant survey, the study’s research design allowed for the survey to be administered and the results analysed in parallel to the key informant interviews. In a series of iterative feedback loops,³⁷ also involving regular group analyses by the research team, the consultants were able to adapt and refine interview questions dynamically as new survey data became available. This approach allowed them to incorporate emerging trends and insights from the survey responses, ensuring that the interviews were aligned with the most up-to-date research themes and findings.

Semi structured interviews

Between April and June 2024, a total of 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely, involving 59 individuals. All interviews were carried out via Zoom in the preferred languages of the interviewees—Spanish or German—and typically lasted around one hour. Each interview was assigned a

³⁶ The category ‘migrant drop-out’ includes both participants who left the project during the preparation phase and those who left during their employment in Germany.

³⁷ Throughout the data collection phase, the research team regularly produced summaries and data extracts in DeDoose to identify emerging trends, which were then collectively analysed to improve the interview questions and codes.

unique identifier to maintain anonymity and prevent any association between stakeholder identities and the study's findings.

Identification of key informants. The key informants for this study were selected with assistance from the SPE, BA-ZAV and the World Bank, including:

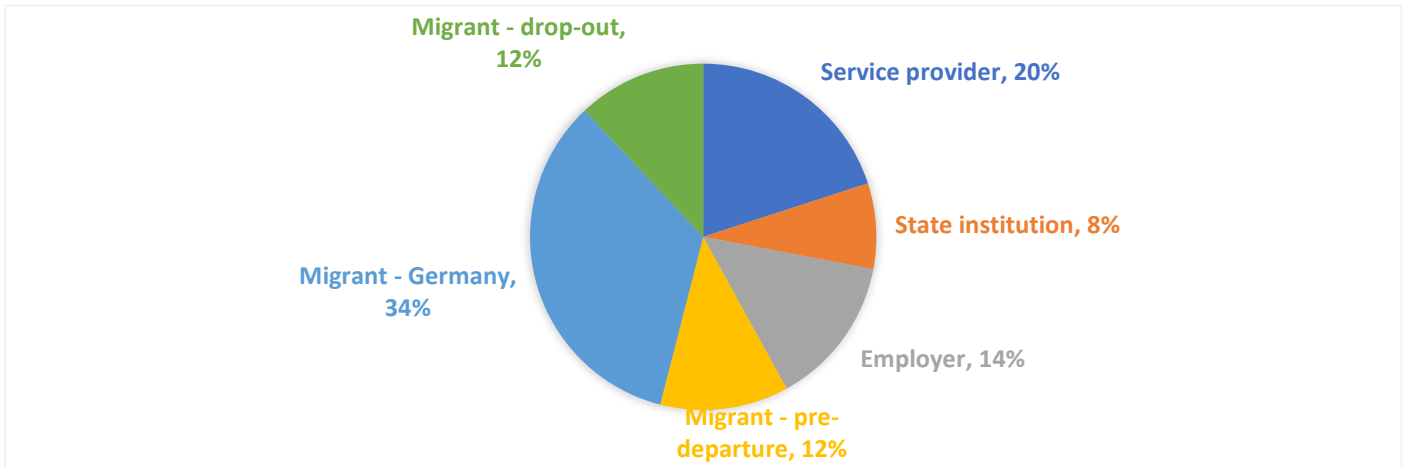
- State institutions in both Colombia and Germany, involved in the implementation of the TEAM project. This included the SPE in Colombia and the BA-ZAV in Germany, along with staff from the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs based in Germany.
- Colombian migrant workers who have participated in the TEAM project since 2021. To comply with data privacy policies, the SPE sent out a mass email to these workers, asking them to register online to confirm their consent to be contacted by the consultants. Out of those contacted, 138 gave their consent, with 71 currently taking German language classes in Colombia, 38 working in Germany and 29 who had abandoned the project, including two who had returned to Colombia.
- German employers: the BA-ZAV approached nine German employers for participation in the study; three of which had already employed Colombian migrant workers, while the remaining six were expecting to receive workers within the next 10 months.
- Service providers in both Colombia and Germany that support the participants and their employers throughout various stages of the TEAM project. This group included nine Colombian TEAs, a German language school that offers classes to the participants, and four Chambers of Commerce, Crafts, Industry and Agriculture (one in Colombia and three in Germany), which assist employers with crucial administrative tasks such as visa applications and homologation.

Additionally, due to the limited number of employers currently employing Colombian migrant workers in Germany, the consultants independently contacted two employers who were not previously identified by the BA-ZAV of whom one declined to participate in the study and the other did not reply.

Selection of key informants. From the pool of potential participants, the research team invited 86 key informants to participate in semi-structured interviews. Applying a purposive sampling strategy, these individuals were chosen based on their roles within the project and their gender. Out of those invited, 59 agreed to participate of which 31 were women and 28 men, resulting in a response rate of 68% (refer to Figure 2 for a detailed overview).³⁸

³⁸ The category 'migrant drop-out' includes both participants who left the project during the preparation phase and those who left during their employment in Germany.

Figure 3: Distribution of key informant interviews by type



Source: Authors' own elaboration

It is important to note that the project's initial focus on occupations such as garden and landscaping, as well as electricians, which are predominantly male-dominated professions in Colombia, has resulted in a negligible number of Colombian women working in these roles in Germany as of June 2024. However, the number of female participants is set to increase due to the inclusion of nurses as one of the project's priority occupations.

Transcribing and analysing semi-structured interviews. At the onset of each interview, key informants were informed about the scope and purpose of the interviews and asked for their consent to record the interview, to which all agreed. These recordings were then temporarily stored by the consultants. AI-assisted software, "Happyscribe," was used to transcribe the interviews, ensuring accurate capture of the conversations. During transcription, each interview was proofread and anonymized by the interviewer to protect the identity of the informants.

All interview transcripts, in the original Spanish or German, were uploaded to the qualitative data analysis software "Dedoose" and systematically coded and analysed. The conceptual framework outlined above was taken as reference while allowing sub-themes and categories to gradually emerge from the data. Key data segments used for illustrative purposes throughout this report were extracted from these transcripts and translated into English using the automated translation software "DeepL." All translations were cross-checked and validated by the authors in order to ensure the authenticity and integrity of the citations.

Part 2: The evolution of labour migration policy in Colombia and Germany

The fact that the TEAM project came to fruition is not solely due to the efforts of the BA and the SPE but above all a result of significant policy reforms and shifts in cultural, political, and societal trends that encouraged initiatives like TEAM. In both Germany and Colombia, the evolution towards these changes has been complex as detailed in this upcoming section.

Box 3: Migration between Colombia and Germany beyond the TEAM project

Colombia and Germany have progressively strengthened their relationship over the past decades, underscored by growing collaboration in various domains, including business, academia and migration. Germany is Colombia's fifth-largest trading partner, with a trade volume of more than EUR 5 billion in 2022, and its largest within the EU. The German-Colombian Chamber of Industry and Commerce boasts a membership base of over 300 entities actively fostering bilateral business ties. Academic relations between the two countries are close, as demonstrated by some 3,700 Colombians studying at German universities, as well as by nearly 280 higher education cooperation projects, by researcher exchanges and by cooperation in the sphere of scholarship programmes.³⁹

Notwithstanding the growing collaboration between both countries, Colombians constitute a relatively small share of migrants in Germany. Their numbers have been steadily rising, however: while fewer than 1,000 Colombians lived in Germany in 1960, this number had grown to approximately 13,000 by 2014 and to nearly 21,000 in 2020, according to the Central Register of Foreign Nationals (*Ausländerzentralregister*, AZR). This accounts for only 0.2 per cent of foreigners in Germany, with the majority originating from other non-EU countries, such as Turkey, Ukraine and Syria. Colombians in Germany have a relatively young average age of 34.6 years (compared to the overall average of 38 years), and a comparatively short average length of stay of 8.4 years (compared to the overall average of 15.6 years). Apart from a 2015 study on the Colombian diaspora in Germany by GIZ, little is known about the experiences and challenges as well as the motivation of Colombian workers in Germany.⁴⁰

The country of origin: Labour migration trends and policy in Colombia

Colombia's migration context

Migration in Colombia is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. For much of its history, Colombia has been a migrant-sending country, in particular between the 1980s and 2000s during the height of Colombia's internal armed conflict, which displaced more than 5.7 million people.⁴¹ Since 2015 and as a result of the social, political and economic crisis in neighbouring Venezuela, Colombia has emerged as a country of destination receiving more than three million immigrants from Venezuela by 2024.⁴² Simultaneously, Colombia became a country of transition for international migrants from countries such as Haiti, Ecuador and others as far away as China, who use Colombia as a gateway into Central and North America by following the irregular and notoriously perilous migration corridor through the Darien Gap that connects Colombia with Panama.⁴³ Whilst these migration influxes and movements within Colombia have received much media coverage and attention from humanitarian and development organizations, a lesser-noticed phenomenon is the increase in migration outflows of Colombians through regular channels. Colombia has one of the highest emigration rates in South America. By 2020, approximately 6% of the Colombian population, had left their homelands to search for better (economic) opportunities for themselves and their families.⁴⁴ Approximately 30.3% of this group migrated to Venezuela, 27% to the United States, 14% to Spain, 6.7% to Ecuador and 5.7% to Chile.⁴⁵

From the perspective of the Colombian government, labour emigration of Colombian nationals is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, labour emigration provides employment opportunities for Colombia's youths and alleviates pressure on a domestic labour market characterized by high informality and low wages.⁴⁶ Colombian labour migrants have also become an important source of household income and

³⁹ Federal Foreign Office (2023). Germany and Colombia: Bilateral relations. Accessed online: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/laenderinformationen/kolumbien-node/colombia/229494>

⁴⁰ Grewe, Mareike (2015). Die kolumbianische Diaspora in Deutschland: Transnationales Handeln und herkunftsbezogenes Engagement. Beiträge zur Entwicklung Kolumbiens. GIZ. Accessed online: https://diaspora2030.de/fileadmin/files/Service/Publicationen/Studien_zu_Diaspora-Aktivitaeten_in_Deutschland/giz-2015-de-diasporastudie-kolumbien.pdf

⁴¹ Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (2021). Basta ya! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad. Accessed online:

<https://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/micrositios/informeGeneral/estadisticas.html>

⁴² UNHCR (2024). Global Focus. UNHCR Operations Worldwide: Colombia. Accessed online: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/operations/colombia>

⁴³ The New Humanitarian (2024). The Darién Gap migration crisis in six graphs, and one map. Accessed online: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/maps-and-graphics/2024/01/15/darien-gap-migration-crisis-six-graphs-and-one-map>

⁴⁴ Banco Mundial (2024). Colombia: Diagnóstico del Sistema de Emigración Laboral. Documento interno

⁴⁵ Banco Mundial (2024). Colombia: Diagnóstico del Sistema de Emigración Laboral. Documento interno

⁴⁶ L. Zamudio (2021). Unemployment Repercussions on the Colombian Productive Structure. Accessed online: <https://www.redalyc.org/journal/4795/479569240001/html/>

foreign reserve. According to recent figures from Banco de la República, Colombians working abroad sent a total of USD 929.39 million to their families in April 2024. This figure represents an increase of 26.15% compared to the same month last year, consolidating April as the month with the highest receipt of remittances in the country's history.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Colombian policymakers are concerned about the exploitative and precarious working conditions their citizens may encounter abroad. Additionally, there is apprehension regarding the potential brain drain effect, which involves highly educated and skilled Colombians moving overseas, thereby contributing to the economic development of other countries instead of their own.

The 2000s: The origins of Colombia's migration policy

Historically, migration was not a priority for the Colombian government and was primarily viewed through a security lens. Migration management was handled reactively by the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, supported by the former Administrative Department of Security (*Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, DAS*), which was responsible for monitoring border entries and exits, as well as the registering, documenting and surveillance of foreign nationals on Colombian territory.

In the early 2000s, Colombia began to develop a more comprehensive migration policy, driven by two main factors. The first was a significant increase in Colombian emigrants, which demanded more structured governmental action beyond the limited capacities of the Consular Service. This scenario highlighted the urgent need for policies to manage population outflow and address its economic implications. The second factor was a strategic decision to link migration directly to economic growth. This development model required policies that facilitated the entry and retention of foreign investment, multinational corporations, and highly skilled professionals. Additionally, it aimed to forge connections with Colombian expatriates to leverage their knowledge, professional skills and capital for the nation's economic development.⁴⁸ However, these measures soon proved inadequate, leading to the need for a more integrated policy approach.

In 2009, Conpes Document 3603 introduced the foundations for a coherent migration policy framework. The document focused on four main objectives: First, it aimed to defend, protect and guarantee the rights of both immigrants and emigrants. Second, it sought to enhance mechanisms for transferring skills back to Colombia from expatriates with high social capital, while also expanding training opportunities for Colombians abroad and foreigners in Colombia. Third, it emphasized the need to provide adequate and effective state services to Colombians abroad and to foreigners residing in Colombia, tailored to the evolving dynamics of migration. Finally, it committed to developing standardized approaches to migration that align with international standards. To meet these objectives, the Conpes Document proposed a comprehensive action plan that called for revisions to existing institutional and regulatory frameworks. However, since the Conpes Document is non-binding, the implementation of this action plan has been inconsistent. Some state entities have been more proactive than others in adopting the proposed changes, leading to a patchwork of implementation across different sectors.

2010s to 2020s: The construction of Colombia's migration policy

A significant milestone in Colombia's migration policy was the establishment of Migración Colombia in 2011. This new agency abolished the DAS's mandate to manage migration and signalled a stronger emphasis on human rights. Being adequately resourced and staffed, Migración Colombia quickly became instrumental in developing a modern and transparent migration system.

During the following years, the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs implemented several initiatives to support the Colombian diaspora and strengthen migration management. One notable programme, Colombia Unites Us, (*Colombia Nos Une*) was expanded to support returnees, particularly those looking to re-enter the workforce and engage in productive activities. Another significant initiative, Colombians Abroad (*Colombianos en el Exterior*), implemented by the state-owned pension company Colpensiones, allows

⁴⁷ El Colombiano (2024). Los colombianos en el exterior cada vez envían más dinero a Colombia, en abril fueron 930 millones de dólares. Accessed online: <https://www.elcolombiano.com/hogocios/remesas-colombia-record-historico-abril-2024-DF24569974>

⁴⁸ B. Mojica (unknown). In transit: migration policy in Colombia. Accessed online: https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/6155/1/08.%20ALT_Ch4_Sanchez%20Moica.pdf

Colombians living abroad to make pension contributions.⁴⁹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also launched a campaign to encourage the use of remittances for purchasing homes in Colombia, featuring mobile exhibitions at various consulates. The Ministry of Education, alongside the National Training Service (*Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje*, SENA), developed systems for recognizing foreign qualifications to facilitate the integration of returning professionals and foreign workers. Meanwhile, the Labour Migration Policy Management Group of the Ministry of Labour, in cooperation with the Public Employment Service and private sector companies, enhanced labour migration policies. This included tracking employment offers for immigrants in Colombia and Colombians abroad and promoting fair treatment mechanisms for Colombian migrant workers in line with labour policies and trade agreements. For instance, awareness-raising materials were disseminated to Colombians in Spain, Chile, the United States, Peru and Mexico, providing information on their rights and opportunities for returning to work in Colombia.

In parallel with these domestic initiatives, Colombia signed several bilateral treaties to manage orderly labour migration with Ecuador (2000), Spain (2001), Canada (2016) and Germany (2021).⁵⁰ Moreover, Colombia is an associate member of MERCOSUR, a regional integration process promoting human mobility and a member of the Andean Community of Nations, which facilitates labour migration in the region.

2020s onwards: A stress test for the Colombian migration system

In 2015, Venezuela's severe social, political and economic crisis triggered a mass exodus of Venezuelans to Colombia and other nearby countries. By 2024, Colombia had become home to over three million Venezuelan migrants and served as a major transit hub for thousands heading toward Central America. To manage this significant influx, the Colombian government implemented several innovative measures to regulate immigration flows. A pivotal moment came in 2021 with the introduction of Temporary Protected Status for Venezuelan Migrants, allowing them to legally live and work in Colombia for up to ten years. That same year, Colombia enacted the Integral Migratory Law, which established principles, definitions and inter-institutional frameworks for coordinating migration policies. This law aimed at economically integrating both Venezuelan migrants and returning Colombians. Building on these efforts, the Conpes Document 4100 was released in 2022, and set out a ten-year strategic plan to facilitate the integration of Venezuelan migrants through ensuring access to public services and the labour market, promote social and cultural integration, and strengthen the capabilities of immigration policy institutions.

The country of destination: The evolution of labour migration policy in Germany

1950s to 1970s: Recruitment of guest workers

During the post-war economic boom, Germany faced a labour shortage and began recruiting “guest workers.” Starting with Italy in 1955, agreements were later signed with Greece, Spain, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia, Yugoslavia and Korea. These workers filled unskilled, physically demanding, and poorly compensated jobs that local workers avoided. Between the late 1950s and early 1970s, about 14 million foreign workers came to Germany. The recruitment ended abruptly in 1973 due to the global oil crisis and its impact on employment. Additionally, many migrant workers, initially seen as temporary, chose to settle permanently and pursue family unification, contrasting with the public's and government's preference not to become a country of immigration.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Colpensiones (2024). Colombianos en el Exterior. Accessed online: <https://www.colpensiones.gov.co/exterior/>

⁵⁰ ILO (2020). Agreement between Ecuador and Colombia on Permanent Immigration Status. Accessed online: <https://www.ilo.org/resource/agreement-between-ecuador-and-colombia-permanent-immigration-status> and ILO (2021). Agreement between Spain and Colombia on management and regulation of workers migratory flows. Accessed online: <https://www.ilo.org/resource/agreement-between-spain-and-colombia-management-and-regulation-workers> and Government of Canada (2016). Canada-Colombia Agreement on Labour Cooperation. Accessed online: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/labour-relations/international/agreements/colombia.html>

⁵¹ J. Goddar (2023). Wie Deutschland ein Einwanderungsland wurde. Accessed online: <https://www.das-parlament.de/inland/innenpolitik/wie-deutschland-ein-einwanderungsland-wurde>

1970s to 2000s: Recruitment Ban with few exemptions

The 1973 Recruitment Ban marked the end of mass migration of foreign workers to Germany, with few exceptions made over the next three decades. In the late 1980s, labour shortages in agriculture and hospitality led to a partial rollback. After the Eastern Bloc collapsed, Germany used bilateral agreements to employ Central and Eastern European nationals as seasonal, contract, guest and cross-border workers. The 1990 Aliens Act and the 1998 Ordinance on Exemptions from the Recruitment Ban provided restrictive legal frameworks for foreign entry and employment.⁵²

2000s to 2020s: Immigration of academics and other highly skilled workers

At the turn of the millennium, German migration policy underwent significant changes to promote the immigration of highly skilled workers. On 1 January 2000 Germany updated its nationality law, moving away from the traditional “jus sanguinis” principle.⁵³ That same year, the Federal Government introduced the “Ordinance on Work Permits for Highly Qualified Foreign Professionals in Information and Communications Technology” and launched the “Immediate Action Program to Meet the Demand for IT Specialists.” This Ordinance, known as the German Green Card, marked a policy shift whereby qualifications, rather than country of origin, became the primary selection criterion for the first time.⁵⁴ In 2004, further modernization occurred with the adoption of an Immigration Bill, superseding the 1990 Aliens Act. This led to the 2005 Residence Act, which regulated the entry, residence, economic activity and integration of foreigners. The act facilitated the immigration of highly-qualified workers, including top-tier researchers, well-compensated specialists, managers and entrepreneurs. It also allowed international students to remain in Germany for up to a year after graduation to seek employment. However, the general recruitment ban remained, permitting skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled workers to enter only under specific bilateral or international agreements.⁵⁵

2020: Inclusion of skilled workers under the Skilled Labour Immigration Act

In March 2020, Germany took a decisive step towards liberalizing its labour migration policy with the adoption of the Skilled Labour Migration Act. This Act effectively ended the ethos of the 1973 recruitment ban by equating the legal status of skilled workers with technical vocational education and training (TVET) to those with academic qualifications. Under this Act, any skilled worker from abroad with a relevant job offer and a recognized equivalent qualification could obtain a work visa. Employment is approved by the Federal Employment Agency without prioritizing German or EU citizens, or specific shortage occupations. The Act also enhanced training and adaptive qualification opportunities for foreign nationals whose qualifications did not meet German standards.⁵⁶

However, the progressive nature of the Act proved challenging to implement. Ironically, Germany's highly-regarded vocational training system became a major obstacle. The dual apprenticeship approach, supported by state-certified qualifications, is effective in creating decent work opportunities, particularly for young people. However, it sets a high bar for recognizing the qualifications of migrant workers from countries with less sophisticated TVET systems, where training can be informal or overly theoretical with few practical components. The German TVET system is highly decentralized, with over 330 recognized training occupations regulated by either federal or state law. Most professions in Germany are “non-regulated,” however, meaning standards for curricula, required skills, certification and practice are set by professional chamber organizations, e.g. for commerce, crafts or agriculture. These chambers and their regional units assess the equivalence of foreign qualifications and determine the scope of any adaptation measures if full equivalence is denied. Consequently, there are more than 1,500 bodies considered

⁵² J. Schneider (2023). Labor migration schemes, pilot partnerships and skills mobility initiatives in Germany. Accessed online:

<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/1b03278725f9fff007a3b91dc9301135-0050062023/original/230331-Schneider-Background-Paper-FINAL.pdf>

⁵³ Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat (2024). Staatsangehörigkeitsrecht. Accessed online:

<https://www.bmi.bund.de/DE/themen/verfassung/staatsangehoerigkeit/staatsangehoerigkeitsrecht/staatsangehoerigkeitsrecht-node.html>

⁵⁴ J. Schneider (2023). Labor migration schemes, pilot partnerships and skills mobility initiatives in Germany. Accessed online:

<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/1b03278725f9fff007a3b91dc9301135-0050062023/original/230331-Schneider-Background-Paper-FINAL.pdf>

⁵⁵ J. Schneider (2023). Labor migration schemes, pilot partnerships and skills mobility initiatives in Germany. Accessed online:

<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/1b03278725f9fff007a3b91dc9301135-0050062023/original/230331-Schneider-Background-Paper-FINAL.pdf>

⁵⁶ Bundesgesetzblatt (2019). Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz vom 15. August 2019. Accessed online:

https://www.bgbl.de/xaver/bgbl/start.xav?startbk=Bundesanzeiger_BGBl&start=/*%5b@attr_id=%27bgbl119s1307.pdf%27%5d#_bgbl_%2F%2F*%5B%40attr_id%3D%27bgbl119s1307.pdf%27%5D_1717769619391

competent to certify skills in Germany, requiring each migrant to identify the responsible body for their occupation and location of potential employment.

Further complicating matters, the recognition procedure must usually be completed before moving to Germany as a requirement for obtaining a work visa. This is a bureaucratic, costly and time-consuming process that is difficult to navigate without knowledge of the system, language proficiency or professional support. As a result, the impact of the Skilled Labour Migration Act on the inflow of skilled migrants has lagged behind expectations. Many migrant workers with TVET qualifications who managed to move to Germany (typically with government programme support), received only partial recognition of their qualifications and were obliged by virtue of a “deficit notice” to undertake specific adaptive measures to qualify for homologation within a maximum of 24 months.⁵⁷

2024: The new Skilled Labour Migration Act and the introduction of a points-based immigration system

To address the challenges limiting the impact of the 2020 Skilled Labour Migration Act, Germany’s newly-elected multi-party government decided in 2022 to take further measures to ease the labour immigration of foreign workers. As of March 2024, initiating a recognition procedure or having a notice of partial equivalence before entry into Germany is no longer required for skilled migrant workers in regulated professions. Instead, visa issuance is contingent upon the migrant and the employer's commitment to apply for recognition post-entry and actively pursue the process. Essential prerequisites include a work contract, a vocational qualification requiring at least two years of training or a university degree (both recognized by the country of training), and German language proficiency at level A2. The residence permit is generally granted for one year and can be extended for up to three years.

Additionally, immigration pathways for foreign workers with significant practical experience have been expanded to include all non-regulated professions across all sectors. Requirements include a recognized professional or university degree and at least two years of relevant work experience. Formal recognition of the qualification in Germany is not mandatory. To prevent wage dumping,⁵⁸ the employment offer in Germany must guarantee a minimum annual gross salary of EUR 40,770.00 (2024), with adjustments if the employer is bound by collective bargaining agreements. Special exemptions apply for IT professionals.⁵⁹

Most noteworthy, the Federal Government has introduced a brand new pathway for foreign jobseekers—the “Opportunity Card,” akin to the Canadian point-based system. The Opportunity Card can be obtained by non-EU nationals who demonstrate full equivalence of their foreign qualifications and thus qualify as “skilled workers,” without additional requirements. Others must provide evidence of a foreign university degree, a minimum two-year vocational qualification or a qualification certified abroad by the German Chamber of Commerce. Minimal German (A1) or English (B2) language skills are also required. Points are awarded based on criteria such as recognition of qualifications in Germany, language skills, work experience, age, connection to Germany, and potential contributions of accompanying spouses or partners. A minimum of six points is required to obtain the Opportunity Card. The Opportunity Card is granted for up to one year if the applicant can secure their livelihood for that period. It allows for trial employment or part-time work of up to 20 hours per week.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (2023). Entwicklung der Fachkräftemigration und Auswirkungen des beschleunigten Fachkräfteverfahrens: Begleitforschung zum Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz. Accessed online: <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Forschung/Forschungsberichte/fb45-feg.html?nn=282388>

⁵⁸ Wage dumping refers to the practice of paying workers significantly lower wages than the standard rates for a particular job or industry, often by exploiting legal loopholes, hiring migrant or temporary workers on less favourable terms or circumventing local labour laws. This practice undermines fair competition by allowing employers to reduce labour costs at the expense of workers' rights and wages, leading to unfair labour practices, depressed wage levels in the market and potential social tensions.

⁵⁹ For IT professionals the minimum salary and work experience requirements are the same, however holding a professional or university degree and language proficiency are no longer visa requirements. See Make it in Germany (2024). Das neue Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz auf einen Blick. Accessed online: <https://www.make-it-in-germany.com/de/visum-aufenthalt/fachkraefteeinwanderungsgesetz>

⁶⁰ Make it in Germany (2024). Das neue Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz auf einen Blick. Accessed online: <https://www.make-it-in-germany.com/de/visum-aufenthalt/fachkraefteeinwanderungsgesetz>

Pilot initiatives to promote Germany as a destination country

Over the past 70 years, Germany embarked on a long and at times bumpy journey from treating migrant workers as temporary “guests” to developing one of the most progressive immigration systems in the world. Labour migration has become a policy priority that can attain both: German domestic and foreign policy objectives. As stated in Germany’s 2022 contribution to the review of the Global Compact for Migration, “The aim of German development cooperation is for labour migration and mobility to benefit countries of origin, host countries and migrants alike (a ‘triple win’).”⁶¹ While work remains to be done in effectively implementing and harmonizing labour migration policy at federal and institutional level, Germany has launched over the past decade a number of projects and initiatives to promote itself as an attractive destination country for international migrants and to support German employers in recruiting talent from abroad. Some of the most prominent initiatives include:

- [“www.make-it-in-germany.com”](https://www.make-it-in-germany.com) is the German government’s portal for skilled workers from around the world. Launched in 2012 and available in multiple languages, the portal has become the Federal Government’s key information conduit for all issues surrounding migration to Germany. The aim of the portal is to encourage and inspire qualified professionals from around the world to come and work in Germany by presenting a culture of welcome across government, civil society, public administration and companies.⁶²
- [“Welcome Centres”](#) have been established across all 16 federal states to support migrant workers and their families with a wide range of services upon arrival in Germany. Some Welcome Centres have additional target groups such as students and trainees from abroad. They also provide German companies with information on recruitment abroad, recognizing foreign professional qualifications, integrating skilled migrant workers and establishing a welcoming culture at company level.⁶³
- The [“Integration through Qualification”](#) (IQ) programme aims to enhance the sustainable integration of international migrants with foreign professional qualifications into the German labour market. IQ is funded by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the European Union via the European Social Fund’s “Plus” programme (ESF+) in two funding rounds—2023 to 2025 and 2026 to 2028—and is administered by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees. In the 2023 to 2025 funding round, a funding volume of EUR 210 million is available for around 270 sub-projects nationwide. Partners in the implementation are the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, and the Federal Employment Agency.⁶⁴
- Finally, a [plethora of skills and mobility pilot initiatives](#) have been initiated over the past decade to leverage labour migration policy reforms and to actively recruit skilled labour from abroad. These include (1) state-led initiatives at the federal level, often in cooperation with the BA-ZAV and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ), (2) initiatives of regional or sectoral stakeholders such as chambers of commerce, crafts associations and educational institutions, or by faith-based welfare organizations (particularly in the area of health, nursing and elderly care), sometimes with support of the Federal Employment Agency and (3) philanthropic and non-profit projects.⁶⁵

The TEAM project is one of such state-led initiatives and in many ways embodies the spirit and rationale of the 2020 Skilled Labour Migration Act. Moreover, throughout its various cohorts, the TEAM project has witnessed and been directly affected by the last round of policy reforms of the new 2024 Skilled

⁶¹ The Federal Government (unknown). Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration: IMRF Contribution by the Federal Republic of Germany. Accessed online: <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/system/files/docs/Germany%20-%20Voluntary%20GCM%20Review.pdf>

⁶² Make it in Germany (2024). About us: Make it in Germany. Accessed online: <https://www.make-it-in-germany.com/en/service/glossary/glossar/do/show/welcome-center>

⁶³ Make it in Germany (2024). Glossary: Welcome Centers. Accessed online: <https://www.make-it-in-germany.com/en/service/glossary/glossar/do/show/welcome-center>

⁶⁴ IQ Netzwerk (unknown). Förderprogramm IQ – Integration durch Qualifizierung. Accessed online: https://www.netzwerk-iq.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/Downloads/IQ_Publikationen/Flyer/IQ_Flyer_Web_2024.pdf

⁶⁵ J. Schneider (2023). Labor migration schemes, pilot partnerships and skills mobility initiatives in Germany. Accessed online: <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/1b03278725f9ff007a3b91dc9301135-0050062023/original/230331-Schneider-Background-Paper-FINAL.pdf>

Labour Immigration Act. As such, the TEAM project provides an interesting case study that tangibly illustrates how labour migration policy at the national level trickles down into bilateral labour mobility agreements and ends up impacting the lives of workers, recruitment models of employers, and the mandates of public institutions in both Germany and countries of origin.

Part 3: Empirical findings

Emigration from Colombia

Recruitment

Pre-selection of applicants

The pre-selection process is a tightly controlled operation that typically lasts four weeks. In each project cohort, the process begins with German employers creating job descriptions and sending them to the SPE. The SPE then forwards these descriptions to the TEAs, who handle the advertisement of the vacancies and organize promotional and awareness events for approximately one week. During the following three weeks, the TEAs filter all applications against key requirements such as qualification and work experience as well as personal traits. Initially, a long list of applicants is created to undergo an in-depth screening, including a psychological examination to explore the applicant’s motivation and readiness to work in Germany. Finally, the TEAs collect all required documentation from the applicants, including educational and employment certificates and criminal records, and submit a shortlist of applicants to the SPE that does a final screening. All shortlisted candidates are then being prepared for their interviews in Bogota.

What might appear as a straightforward process on paper requires in practice a long chain of commands to ensure that the process is done accurately and timely. Some TEAs report that they collaborate with other partner agencies in Colombia to disseminate the job advertisements through their respective newsletters and online job portal.

Figure 4 Online advertisement for the TEAM project and screen shot of YouTube live event



Source: Agencia de Empleo CAFAM (2024) and ONU Colombia (2024)

Another key strategy is dissemination through social media as well as traditional advertising in print media. As one representative explained: *“We do Facebook Live events, we create some graphic pieces that allow*

*mobilization through our corporate Facebook channels [...]. And additionally, everything that has to do with WhatsApp statuses and so on, we also create a lot of traditional advertising.*⁶⁶ In March 2023, for example, the employment agency Compensar, in collaboration with the United Nations in Colombia, co-organized a YouTube live event for a question-and-answer session. The event featured German employers recruiting nurses and representatives from the BA-ZAV. It enabled potential applicants to attend an information session about homologation requirements and ask questions in the live chat.⁶⁷ Given that the majority of applicants to the TEAM project are already economically active, these virtual information sessions usually take place throughout the week at 7am or 7pm to accommodate the applicants' work schedules. The sessions provide applicants with an opportunity to ask critical questions—as one representative remarked, most of these questions are not in relation to the actual job that they apply for, but rather to the overall conditions, such as salary level and taxation, family reunification, climate in Germany, acquisition of the German language, among others. TEAs are aware that they cannot answer all questions exhaustively, but report going to great lengths with each individual applicant to examine whether their motivation and personal situation are indeed conducive to participating in the project: *“Because we know that the person who migrates leaves behind a group of people from his or her household. [...] So, how much is the minimum amount that they have to have to support their household? [...] Secondly, [...] we do validate that they are in adequate health conditions to be able to migrate, because if the person is undergoing treatment, to give you an example, for cancer or some very specific issue, we recommend that they get well before applying, because changing where you live can have a very strong impact on your health. We then conduct an individual interview with each candidate, where we evaluate their competencies and their emotional stability to ensure that they are able to face such a big change in their life [...].”*⁶⁸

Overall, the TEA's target is to shortlist three candidates per open position. Hence, if an agency is tasked by the SPE to recruit for 30 positions, the agency needs to shortlist 90 individuals—to arrive at this number, about 500 applications need to be scanned and evaluated. The employment agencies note strong interest to apply, and reaching the required number is usually not a problem. Interested candidates typically apply online through the web portal of the respective TEAs. A TEA representative explained that the majority of applicants comes from major cities in Colombia such as Bogota and surrounding areas in the Cundinamarca department, Medellin, Barranquilla, Cali and Bucaramanga, while about 20% come from secondary cities and rural areas.⁶⁹ Given the gendered nature of the occupations that the TEAM project recruits for, the gender composition of the different TEAM cohorts varies starkly. While mostly men were recruited under the cohorts TEAM 1.0 (2021) and 2.0 (2022) as industrial electrical technologists, telecommunications technologists and agricultural production technologists, TEAM 3.1, 3.2 and 4.1 (2023) primarily recruited women as professional nurses. As the number of TEAs that recruit for the TEAM project has steadily increased, a difficulty in the shortlisting process has recently emerged: some applicants may apply through more than one TEA to the same position to increase their chances. As one informant explained: *“there is evidence, and in fact the SPE has stated it, of duplication, [...] between providers, that people applied to the technologist at Compensar, to the technologist at Comfama, to the technologist at AP, from the same company. So this is a bottleneck, the duplication of applications.”*⁷⁰ Since there is no established mechanism to check for double applications during the pre-selection process, the overall number of applicants may actually turn out to be lower once all applications have been centrally reviewed and verified by the SPE.

Once the TEAs submit the shortlist of applicants, the SPE further evaluates the candidates and selects those who are invited to the interview. This, however, tends to be a very tightly-timed operation. TEAs reported that, on some occasions, they only received confirmation of the selected participants 24 hours in advance of the interview. This hardly gives applicants enough time to prepare adequately. For applicants outside Bogota, this is especially troubling as they must cover their own travel costs. Last-minute flights to Bogota are expensive and applicants often cannot take time off work on short notice. In addition, this creates stress for the staff of the TEAs. One representative explained that he was calling an applicant at 8pm to announce that the interview was scheduled the following day at 10am. This puts the TEAs in uncomfortable

⁶⁶ Key informant interview #2 conducted in May 2024.

⁶⁷ The recording of the YouTube live event can be watched at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSRRdNBorg>

⁶⁸ Key informant interview #2 conducted in May 2024.

⁶⁹ Key informant interview #2 conducted in May 2024.

⁷⁰ Key informant interview #47 conducted in May 2024.

situations, where they were unfairly blamed by applicants for being “disorganized.” *“So we are literally receiving confirmation of who has been approved at eight o’clock at night and the next day people have to present themselves. We know that there are people from various cities who travel and are waiting. So, it’s eight o’clock at night. I have my staff calling, confirming whether you were selected, whether you were not selected, sending them emails. And sometimes this communication is not well perceived by the applicants because they assume that this disorganization is on our part, on the side the service provider.”*⁷¹

Finally, a risk of the application process is that there are applicants who seek to join the TEAM project with false intentions. For example, applicants may be part of other labour mobility schemes in parallel and not be fully committed to joining the TEAM project, and/or simply seek to obtain an additional stipend. On another occasion, applicants who had previously dropped out of the TEAM project re-applied without genuine intentions to migrate but rather with the aim of receiving the language stipend again. So far, such incidents have only happened in limited numbers. However, they point to the need to conduct careful due diligence of each candidate to specifically check whether candidates are involved in other labour mobility schemes or have already participated in a previous TEAM cohort—an extra level of effort which, according to representatives of the TEAs, is not yet done systematically.⁷²

The interview process

Interviews for the TEAM project are organized in Bogota, requiring participants to attend in person. The only exception was TEAM 1.0, when interviews were held online due to mobility restrictions during the pandemic. The interview process is centrally organized by the SPE—an enormous endeavour, considering that the SPE operates the TEAM project on a modest budget with only one designated full-time staff member. The fact that the applicants are willing to mobilize the financial resources to travel to Bogota is a strong testament to their motivation and willingness to participate in the TEAM project. As one informant explained: *“People definitely see an opportunity to migrate [...] and they even invest in the process. [...] the interviews are in Bogota. And people have to buy tickets in less than a week. And the closer the date, the more expensive they are. But people [...] decide to pay for their tickets, to go to Bogota just to have an interview. Not to be told yes, not to be told no, because it’s not something fixed, but just for an interview.”*⁷³ The interview process typically starts with an information event, sometimes with the presence of German employers, to provide applicants with additional information about the employment opportunity in Germany. Some employers travel to Bogota to conduct interviews in person, others do interviews remotely. While some employers have staff members who speak Spanish, others rely on translation services provided by the BA.

Employers’ perceptions of the interview process differ across cohorts and particularly those from the earlier TEAM cohorts, criticized the interview process for being organized at the last minute and lacking sufficient flexibility. One employer lamented to have received the dossiers of their applicants only 24 hours in advance of the interview process, providing insufficient time to prepare: *“It was actually all very last-minute. Normally you prepare for a job interview in advance so that you have a few details and are able to influence the process. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case. [...] I’m not sure whether it was 24 hours or a bit longer, but it was very short notice. And then you were a bit anxious the whole time beforehand. I actually want to prepare myself, but I can’t. Then also everything was in Spanish, and we’re all just Germans.”*⁷⁴ Another employer highlighted that the overall interview process was well organized but advocated for more flexibility, in particular to accommodate the requests of the employers: *“What I missed a bit was that they actually addressed the concerns of the companies. I can remember that the first discussions were, I think, job interviews lasting a maximum of 20 minutes or 30 minutes, which was definitely too short for an electrician, who doesn’t earn a bad wage in Germany and where you also want to get a bit of a feel for the person, whether they would fit into the team. I remember that there was a big discussion about whether it should be 45 minutes or not, which had to be agreed with Colombia. Apart from that, the recruitment process was very well organized. The participants were all online at the specified times. As a company, we were well briefed*

⁷¹ Key informant interview #2 conducted in May 2024.

⁷² Key informant interview #1 conducted in May 2024.

⁷³ Key informant interview #3 conducted in May 2024.

⁷⁴ Key informant interview #9 conducted in May 2024.

on what we needed, how to prepare the presentations, what we should pay attention to so that we don't overwhelm them."⁷⁵ Another employer reported a last-minute change in the shortlist of applicants that they had received from the SPE and that they were prepared to interview. This not only created disappointments on the side of the employer, but also on the side of the applicants who had not received the cancellation of their interview in time. *"For this project, [...] there is only this one vocational qualification that is allowed to go to Germany. And obviously this was not properly checked beforehand. And these proposed candidates, which we had already received, were withdrawn at very short notice on the same day because they obviously didn't fit. [...] Of course, they had already received the access link to the interview and they dialled in and were then of course [...] very disappointed that they were not allowed to have an interview with us. And of course we were disappointed too, because we would have liked to have interviewed them. But yes, the vocational qualification just didn't fit."*⁷⁶

Despite these situations, employers are cognizant that the TEAM project is implemented with modest resources and at times affected by administrative bottlenecks: *"I know all the people in Colombia, I know why it went wrong, there were several reasons that triggered the chains, [...] it's like when the car in front brakes and then everyone behind hits the brakes [...] Starting with the fact that Colombia is not in a good position right now. In Colombia, there is only one specialist who deals with these agreements with Germany, [...] And this specialist is only responsible for this half of the time, but looks after all the projects in the care sector and in the electrical industry, all the companies. So that is far too little [...]. Then, [...], new employees arrived at the BA-ZAV, who of course had to be trained first, who had no idea whatsoever, [...]. So there were a lot of things that simply didn't work out."*⁷⁷

Some of these bottlenecks seem to have improved over time, implying a learning curve among the SPE and BA-ZAV but also among those employers who have participated in the TEAM project more than once, and can thus pass on experiences to newcomers. An employer who joined the TEAM project recently reported that *"everything went so smoothly, you really have to say that. [...] We were involved in advance, received the participating documents very early on and already knew the process and were also supported. [...] Whenever we had questions, the BA-ZAV colleagues were there, they provided a lot of support [...]. But I would also advise to be actively involved. So I scheduled meetings with the BA-ZAV, with the AHK, with the Goethe Institute, so that all the relevant stakeholders could come together and I also requested on site that we really look at what the milestones are, where we want to go, does everyone know when we want to go where, what is the task of each individual in the project step, so that everyone is fully aware of it."*⁷⁸

While the overall organization of the interview process is primarily the responsibility of the institutional partners, the SPE and the BA, the employers play a crucial role in guaranteeing its success. The most extreme example of an unsuccessful interview process was arguably in 2023, when an employer withdrew on the interview day from the TEAM project, despite having confirmed interest and commitment to the BA several times beforehand. As a result of this last-minute withdrawal, 15 applicants were left stranded, some of whom were fortunately recruited by other employers.⁷⁹ However, this incident illustrates the inherent reputational risks of the TEAM project. As one informant pointed out *"That caused real damage. Firstly, the applicants have spread a negative image. So they passed it on. We first had to smooth things out. That also caused a loss of trust in us. These are all secondary effects that are really unfavourable. But these are the challenges that we are struggling with."*⁸⁰ Since there is no legally binding commitment to recruit, the SPE and BA are dependent on the goodwill of the employers to fulfil the commitments they have made.

Most importantly, the employers are tasked with leading the interviews and need to ensure that in a relatively short time—45 minutes—both employers and applicants feel that they have received sufficient information to make an informed decision. Based on the sector of occupation, the corporate

⁷⁵ Key informant interview #12, conducted in May 2024.

⁷⁶ Key informant interview #09, conducted in May 2024.

⁷⁷ Key informant interview #16, conducted in June 2024.

⁷⁸ Key informant interview #43, conducted in June 2024.

⁷⁹ Key informant interview #09, conducted in May 2024.

⁸⁰ Key informant interview #44, conducted in June 2024.

culture and arguably also experience in recruiting skilled workers from abroad, employers examine the competencies and overall “fit” of applicants in different ways. Most employers ask actively for know-how and previous work experiences that are comparable to working in Germany.

Employers in the medical sector specifically ask for knowledge of certain brands of equipment that nurses are required to operate in Germany: *“We have visited hospitals in third countries⁸¹ time and again in recent years and have found that these brands are also well known. I’ve just mentioned Braun, Fresenius and Dräger and whatnot as examples. Many colleagues from abroad are familiar with them, but of course not in the latest product models. But it doesn’t matter. If you then ask in the interview, for example, what kind of equipment do you use? Do you know Braun? Yes, Braun, of course, I know them and so on. Then that’s not only an important indicator for us, because you asked what we’re looking for, but I think it’s also important for the candidates to know, oh, look, they have that too. So that also has another positive effect, that they simply see, oh yes, not everything is so completely different.”⁸²* Employers in the medical sector are equally keen to explore the work experience that the applicants hold, focusing on both the kind of medical structure in which the applicants have worked thus far, and on the specific skill that they have developed. Being cognizant of the vast differences between the Colombian and German medical systems, employers demonstrate a tactful ability to contextualize and evaluate the responses of the applicants. *“If someone has only worked in a [small rural] health centre, then that may be an exclusion criterion for some. Not for us at first, because we say that if you work there, you really have to know what you’re doing. [...] we often talk about triage in the emergency department. [...] that you develop an eye for who is the priority case and whose turn it is next. Yes, unfortunately this patient has to wait another half a day. But he’s in a good position, nothing will happen for the time being. So you have to have a good eye and learn to assess situations well, to make good patient observations, which is a core skill in nursing.”⁸³* At the same time, however, employers in the medical sector stress the importance of being able to adapt to a new working environment: in particular those applicants who have worked in smaller establishments must be prepared to work in a larger German hospital.

Employers who recruit electricians reported to use images and visual aids during the interview. Some of them, in particular smaller companies, also stressed the importance of looking for a shared value system to understand whether an applicant would “fit” well into the company family. Starting with the basics, such as the difference between current and voltage, employers asked applicants to share and explain images from their current jobs. This proved to be an effective measure to discern who meets the technical requirement. *“So every craftsman has pictures of the work. That’s just the way it is. [...] And so we were also able to overcome the language barrier a bit, because we could see, because we didn’t know the vocabulary. If they didn’t have any pictures, we gave them some and wanted to know what they were looking at. And that’s when you realize very quickly whether someone has a clue or not, because they start talking straight away. I see this and that, right? And then you realize, they didn’t really know, [...] they simply followed their boss who said plug it in there, but they didn’t know why it was plugged in and so on. And we were able to single them out very quickly.”⁸⁴* In addition, employers stressed the importance of identifying applicants who are truly motivated to migrate to Germany and to stay long-term.

A final, and arguably less tangible criterion was applicants’ suitability of character. *“That was also very, very important to us, that the motivation is the right one and not just that we want to earn money and go back at some point or are completely naive and say that everything is great in Germany. That’s simply not the case. And then the third thing was character. You can understand a lot from gestures and facial expressions. [...] which character is sitting in front of you. And if that fitted in with our corporate culture and our values, which we all somehow have and represent here, then, if these three components fitted, we recruited them.”⁸⁵*

⁸¹ In this context, “third countries” refer to countries that are not members of the European Union. This term is used to distinguish non-EU countries from EU member states. For example, the United States, Canada, and Turkey are considered third countries in relation to the EU. This distinction is important for various policies and regulations concerning migration, visas, and other international agreements.

⁸² Key informant interview #09 conducted in May 2024.

⁸³ Key informant interview #09 conducted in May 2024.

⁸⁴ Key informant interview #16 conducted in June 2024.

⁸⁵ Key informant interview #16 conducted in June 2024.

Employers generally expressed high satisfaction levels with the knowledge and qualifications of the applicants, while highlighting that the prospective adaptive measures in Germany would need to focus primarily on the standards of the German Institute for Standardisation (*Deutsches Institut für Normung, DIN*): “So if you imagine now, our technical managers of course also conducted many interviews in Germany, and they were so impressed by what the gentlemen [the Colombian applicants] said, what they can do, what they have done. Yes, of course, what they don’t have are simply the German standards, the DIN standards. What kind of circuits do we have? What kind of voltages do we work with here? But occupational safety is also very similar. [...] I think the deficit attestation would only indicate that we need to focus on the standards.”⁸⁶

The case of the landscape gardeners represents an important diversion from the aforementioned employer’s experiences in many ways. First, the interviews were conducted during the height of the pandemic when travel restrictions were still in place and therefore exclusively online. Second, the employers in the GaLaBau sector consist of small enterprises which, given their limited capacities, delegated the preparation phase of the TEAM project to the auspices of the GaLaBau association. As a result, the employers did not take part themselves in the interview process but were represented through the GaLaBau association and the BA-ZAV. In hindsight, this constellation did not turn out to be effective and was further complicated by the misalignment between the applicant’s qualifications as agricultural production technologists and the German reference occupation “*Landschaftsgärtner*” (see Box 2 above). As one informant explained: “Especially when it comes to professions that are unclear to what extent there is a match, you need someone who conducts these interviews and who also knows the professional practice. If an employer asks, [...] have you ever built a road before? Then the employer means to say, “Have you ever built a road according to DIN standards, like here in Germany, with different layers in the structure and perhaps different materials in the surface layer? But the interpreter then translates this simply into ‘road construction’ and the applicant—who wants to sell himself well, which is only human—then simply says, yes, I’ve done this before. And yes, this can be the case, but for him it might mean that he has tipped gravel into a ditch to close it so that you can drive over it with a machine. That is also a form of road construction. However, only the yes is communicated. And the employer hears, yes, there is someone who can do this, who can handle all the machines, who can handle all the equipment, who has experience in this area.”⁸⁷ As a result, the interviews with the landscape gardeners were concluded without realizing the significant differences between the skills and experience that the employers were anticipating and those that the applicants were offering. In hindsight, the interviews could have been an important inflection point to correct the misalignment inherent in the design of the first TEAM cohort, but this did not occur.

Overall employers expressed a great deal of respect and appreciation for applicants and empathized with the life-changing decision that they are prepared to undertake—and to the extent possible, employers seek to support and accommodate the applicants’ personal circumstances. One employer, for example, realized during the interview that the applicant had a wife who was also shortlisted in the same cohort, and instantly decided to recruit both to ensure that the pair could migrate together to Germany.

For the applicants, the interview is naturally a moment of both stress and excitement. Interestingly, when asking the Colombian migrant workers who are currently working in Germany, the moment of the interview appears to be less important in retrospect, with few giving a detailed account of their experience. For some applicants, the TEAs have played a critical supporting role in preparation for and during the interview process. Some TEAs support the applicants remotely e.g. over WhatsApp, others travel to Bogota to accompany the applicants in person. As one applicant recounts: “Even when we went to the interview in Bogota she [the TEA staff] was there encouraging us. It was really helpful that she was there to support us.”⁸⁸

The interview in Bogota is above all a chance to meet their potential, future employers and to gain a first-hand impression of the TEAM project and its many actors. Those applicants who were recruited generally hold good memories of the interview “On that day we were at the interview, it was very cool to talk

⁸⁶ Key informant interview #09 conducted in May 2024.

⁸⁷ Key informant interview #11 conducted in May 2024.

⁸⁸ Key informant interview #36 conducted in May 2024.

to them, they cleared up our doubts”⁸⁹ and refer to it as a decisive moment when their participation in the TEAM project suddenly felt very real and tangible. “So, ready, we did it. And it was very, very, very cool when we were there [in Bogota], because you were like, oh, my gosh, could it be yes? You were already on the list, your name was on there, and then, wow, super cool, but then you start, I mean, you start, you get a bit of things in your head, because you say well, and then the project will become real, and I need to resign, organize, restructure my life.”⁹⁰

Other applicants who were not recruited have mixed feelings about the interview process, with some expressing doubts that they may have been excluded due to their civil status, number of children, or age. As one informant remarked: “And then when they ask her that question, she gives the correct information that she does have a daughter and then she noticed everyone’s face like.... [...] And she says I think I didn’t pass, because they didn’t like it, [...]. And in the end she didn’t pass, effectively. So, one says: I don’t know if that’s a criterion, [...] and I don’t think that they’re going to tell us that kind of thing either, because it’s delicate. To say: I don’t want this person, because they have this marital status or because they have or don’t have children, well, it’s better not to say anything. Yes, it looks like they are being discriminated against.”⁹¹ While there are many applicants who have been recruited and who do have children, age does indeed appear to be a criterion for exclusion. As one employer explained “We took one person out of the programme who didn’t have a match, so to speak, and couldn’t even start the language course, simply because of their age. If I remember correctly, the person was 61, and that’s simply a social issue. You can’t let someone enter the country if they effectively have only five years left until retirement, because you can’t earn enough money in that time to be able to realistically provide a pension and so on.”⁹²

The confusion about the exact reasons for rejection can be partly explained by the lack of a structured feedback process that not only upsets the applicants, but also the employers and TEAs. Throughout the cohorts, feedback, in particular to those applicants who were not recruited, appears to have been given *ad hoc* and inconsistently. One employer, for example, highlighted that they were able to provide feedback directly to applicants when they participated for the first time in the TEAM project, but not in the following year. “The first time, we provided feedback the way we are used to [...] we separate those who get a rejection from those who get an acceptance, so that they are not in the same group, otherwise some are happy and others are sad, that’s not good. but we were also able to communicate the result ourselves and were then actually able to explain why it might not be a fit or what was still missing.”⁹³ However in the following year, the same employer had to communicate the feedback through the TEA “we had to tell the prestadores and that was not satisfying. I would have liked to be there. [...]. But this way I don’t know what is being communicated.”⁹⁴ This however is not standard practice and some of the TEAs lament that they are largely unaware as to why some of their shortlisted applicants did not pass the interviews and advocate for a more structured feedback mechanism to improve their filtering. “Many times people don’t pass, so we don’t know if they are looking for people with more experience, [...] I think it is very important that we can have accurate feedback because people do not pass the selection processes.”⁹⁵

Once all interviews have been completed, the employers and the applicants sign a stipend contract. This contract stipulates the amount of the training subsidy and the required German language proficiency level that the applicants must achieve within a given time frame. While this contract is not-legally binding and does not oblige the applicant to complete the language course, nor the employer to hire the applicant, it nevertheless provides an important recognition that both, employers and applicants, are committed to join the project together.

Designing the stipend contract is one of the first administrative hurdles that the employers have to pass during the ensuing preparation phase and reveals to many that their involvement and contributions are far greater than anticipated. Given that there is no official guidance from the TEAM

⁸⁹ Key informant interview #36 conducted in May 2024.

⁹⁰ Key informant interview #36 conducted in May 2024.

⁹¹ Key informant interview #33 conducted in May 2024.

⁹² Key informant interview #11 conducted in May 2024.

⁹³ Key informant interview #8 conducted in May 2024.

⁹⁴ Key informant interview #8 conducted in May 2024.

⁹⁵ Key informant interview #5 conducted in May 2024.

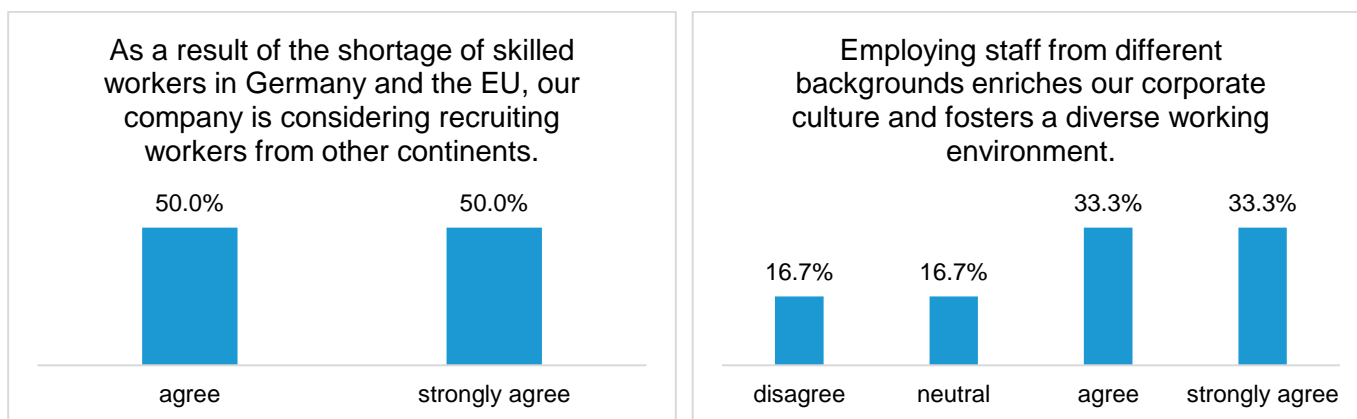
project on the contract drafting, many employers report resorting to the AHK for support. In addition, during the last cohorts, a group of three employers has started to coordinate and formed a small working group to share experiences and alleviate some of the administrative burden. One employer described: *“Where it became a little more difficult was later on when it came to drawing up the contract. That's when the AHK came into play and we had to actively ask for help on what the stipend contract should look like, because of course we didn't know all the regulations in Colombia. I think it was absolutely positive, especially in our group, that we were only three companies that had found each other internally very quickly. In other words, we always had internal coordination rounds in between, just from the company's point of view, and then approached all candidates with a uniform direction, because we said that there is actually nothing worse than one company doing it this way and another company doing it that way. That would tend to unsettle the participants in the group as a whole.”*⁹⁶

Motivation of employers to recruit in Colombia

Employers participate primarily in the TEAM project to mitigate a lack of domestic skilled workers, in particular in future occupations relevant for decarbonization and care work. As evidenced by the employers' perceptions survey, 100% of employers “totally agree” or “agree” that skills shortages are the main motivation for recruiting abroad (see Figure 5). Many employers recruit skilled workers from abroad for the first time and they thus perceive their participation in the TEAM project as a pilot initiative. As one employer explained: *“The market for electronics engineers is simply no longer there. We simply don't get any applicants and even if there is someone, the competition is so fierce that we simply don't get any, or it's very difficult. [...] And unfortunately, we have a lot of vacancies in this area and have been looking more and more into the subject. And in the end, we decided that this must be the way to help us somehow in the future.”*⁹⁷ Others, in particular in the health sector, are already acquainted with recruiting abroad and stress the importance of having an international workforce to cater for international clients. *“We have always been operating internationally here and this ultimately also reflects the structure of our patients who come to us. Many patients come to us from a migrant background or from International Organizations.”*⁹⁸ They pride themselves in being an inclusive employer, outspoken against discrimination and xenophobia. *“And right at the top of our mission statement is the fact that we do not tolerate discrimination.”*⁹⁹ This motivation is reinforced by the survey results, where two-thirds either totally agree or agree that migrant workers enrich corporate culture and foster inclusive work places (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Employers' motivation to recruit participants of the TEAM project.

(6 out of 6 respondents answered these questions)



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Costs appeared less of a motivation: employers invest equally in educating German apprentices. The prospect of investing in Colombians workers who have at least already partially the required skills, and “only”

⁹⁶ Key informant interview #9 conducted in May 2024.

⁹⁷ Key informant interview #9 conducted in May 2024.

⁹⁸ Key informant interview #8 conducted in May 2024.

⁹⁹ Key informant interview #8 conducted in May 2024.

need to learn German and integrate, therefore does not appear to be a deterrent. One employer argued that *“you have to spend quite a bit of money to get a skilled worker from Colombia. [...] But I also have to say that if I train a worker in Germany, it also costs money. And I also have to say that if I hire someone through a head hunter, that also costs money.”*¹⁰⁰

Motivation of transnational employment agencies to facilitate the recruitment

Since the first cohort of the TEAM project in 2021, when only the SENA participated as the TEA, the project has expanded to include nine agencies across the country.¹⁰¹ The TEA are largely public-funded institutions that are mandated to promote the employment of Colombian citizens, in particular those who are “vulnerable,” i.e. with a low educational background, victims of the armed conflict, and/or part of a specific ethnic group.

A primary motivation for Colombian employment agencies to participate in the TEAM project is to gain initial exposure to international recruitment markets. Over the past three years, several agencies have been tasked with facilitating Colombian labor mobility abroad. Since building networks with foreign employers or intermediaries takes time, the TEAM project offers these agencies a valuable opportunity to establish connections and position themselves as effective TEAs. However, some TEAs expressed careful scepticism about the TEAM project’s recruitment strategy, in particular with regards to the increase in TEAs and the repeated recruiting of the same occupations: *“I think it is more of a matter of looking for diversification in the profiles, which would help everyone a lot, it would refresh us, it would improve our corporate image, because people like to apply, but they say: always the same vacancies, always the same vacancies. That generates a bad perception as if transnational employment agencies only recruit electricians and nurses.”*¹⁰²

Motivation of migrants to participate in recruitment process

The primary motivations for Colombian professionals to participate in the TEAM project and to migrate to Germany are diverse, but generally revolve around seeking better opportunities. Many interviewees expressed a desire to learn and grow professionally, believing that Germany offers access to advanced knowledge and techniques in their respective fields. This was particularly evident among healthcare professionals, who see the potential to acquire skills and expertise that may not be readily available in Colombia.

Another significant motivating factor is the pursuit of a higher quality of life, both for the migrants themselves and their families. Interviewees mentioned the appeal of better salaries, job security and a more stable and secure living environment in Germany. Some participants also highlighted the importance of providing better opportunities for their children, such as access to quality education and the possibility of a brighter future. One participant responded, *“Because I want to improve my quality of life, as I said, for my family. I know that in Germany it is 100% better than here in Colombia and especially in Cartagena, because of the insecurity, because of the salary payments, so that’s what I want to do.”*¹⁰³

These findings are consistent with the online survey, where respondents indicated their highest agreement with the idea of living and working in Germany (85.3 % either completely agreed or agreed) and increasing their income (81.4 % either completely agreed or agreed) as being motivators for their participation in the TEAM project (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Participants’ motivation to join the TEAM project.

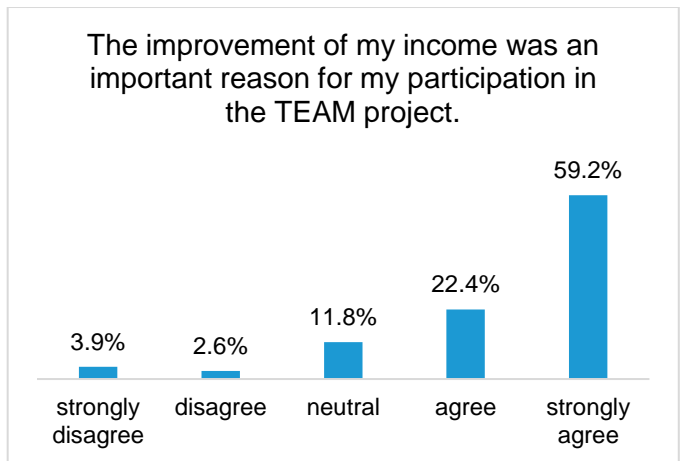
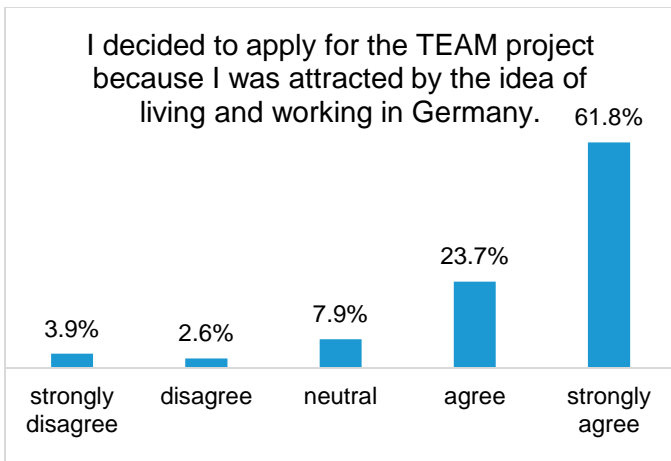
(77 out of 84 respondents answered these questions)

¹⁰⁰ Key informant interview #16 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁰¹ These are APE Sena, APE de Cundinamarca, Agencia de COMPENSA, Agencia CEAL, CAFAM, Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia, COMFAMA, COMFENALCO, APE Sena VALLE.

¹⁰² Key informant interview #2 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁰³ Key informant interview #33 conducted in May 2024.



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Additionally, the legal and safe nature of the migration process through the TEAM project was seen as a significant advantage, giving participants peace of mind and a sense of security in their decision to relocate. One participant said, *"we are going to go to work in what we studied, because going to work in something you don't like, you didn't study, totally different, is going to be unpleasant for you, because you only realize that over there."*¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, some interviewees, particularly those in the healthcare sector, mentioned the desire to contribute to the German workforce and society, as they were aware of the need for skilled professionals in the country. This suggests a sense of purpose and a desire to make a positive impact in their new environment. It is also worth noting that the motivation to migrate seems to be consistent across both male and female participants, with no significant differences observed based on gender. However, those in the healthcare sector, such as nurses, appear to have a slightly stronger emphasis on professional development and learning opportunities compared to those in other occupations.

Training and preparation

Shortly after recruitment, the training preparation phase begins, requiring significant efforts from, and bearing significant risks for, participants and employers. From the perspective of the participants, this is a tense moment as many decide to quit their jobs and focus solely on German language learning, uncertain whether they will actually be successful and able to take up employment in Germany. For participants with family responsibilities this is an especially difficult decision to take and creates a tremendous pressure to perform well during the language course: *"and if I don't pass the exam, then what? I go and knock on the door of my company again? I didn't pass the exam, can you hire me again? So, there were colleagues with families and it was like the economic situation of the family was at stake. That was [...] the topic that came up the most in our conversations when we got together. And there was always that fear, that uncertainty, what if you didn't pass the exam."*¹⁰⁵ From the perspective of the employer, this is arguably the riskiest phase of the project. The employers are starting to invest significant financial resources into each of their participants. Every time a participant misses an exam, or worse, abandons the project, the employers are accumulating extra costs. *"Ultimately, anyone can leave at any time, because we're not bound by any kind of contract, it's really goodwill. So if someone no longer feels like emigrating, then that's it. Everything you have invested as a company is then gone. We are aware of that."*¹⁰⁶

Employers are devising at their own initiative innovative communication strategies and tools to motivate participants to complete the language course. Simultaneously, the employer must take charge of a wide range of administrative formalities to ensure that the participants can legally enter Germany, often with support from the AHK. Overall, employers report to be surprised by the amount of work that the TEAM project requires from them during the preparation phase: *"I have to be honest and admit that we didn't realize*

¹⁰⁴ Key informant interview #39 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Key informant interview #29 conducted in June 2024.

¹⁰⁶ Key informant interview #9 conducted in June 2024.

how much effort was involved. It always sounded easier and it always sounded like there would be more help. And now, step by step, we keep realizing that it's all down to us in the end."¹⁰⁷

Throughout the evolution of the TEAM project, the institutional partners are increasingly recognizing this challenge and are looking for ways to better support the employers. As one informant admitted: *"So the biggest challenge that I have seen is that the employers had very superficial information about what to expect. And that plays a major role in expectation management. In practice, this meant that there were a lot of detailed questions and individual concerns, and this caused a lot of frustration."*¹⁰⁸ Although this challenge has been identified, it is not easy to undertake the required course corrections at the institutional level, in particular when those would fall outside pre-defined institutional mandates. *"I think it comes down to our structures. If you don't think holistically, when I do projects like this and I know that they go beyond the area of responsibility of one department, then I actually have to think about the downstream or upstream departments as well and at least try to find some solutions there. And in my opinion, this has not been done."*

In the absence of institutional solutions, the employers have decided to support each other through an informal peer-to-peer exchange. During cohort 3.3, three employers decided to form a small working group: *"We have regular meetings, sometimes just us as employers. But then there are also regular meetings with the employers and with the BA-ZAV. And depending on who is currently working on which topic, there are of course also meetings with the other partners, i.e. the [language] school, the technical college [in Germany], the AHK in Colombia."*¹⁰⁹ The employers' working group is also sharing its experiences with newcomers who joined cohort 4.1 of the project. This employer-to-employer exchange has been highlighted for its distinct advantage in information-sharing compared to interactions with institutional partners: *"When we started the project, we naturally asked who else had done this before [...] and now we have an exchange with these companies. [...] the exchange is super valuable [...] to get practical information. Of course, we already receive information from the BA-ZAV and the Federal Employment Agency, but it's a different story from the employers' perspective. In this respect, this exchange was or continues to be very relevant and helpful for us."*¹¹⁰ These positive experiences highlight the value of employer-to-employer exchanges and could be formalised, for example, through a buddy system.

Language course

The employers have the liberty to choose the language school for the language and cultural training according to their budget and preference. To date, several private language schools¹¹¹ and the Goethe Institute have been contracted by the employers. As of 2024, the AHK is also providing an in-house German language course. However, only non-profit providers can offer publicly-funded courses such as the Goethe Institute's "Fit for the Labour Market" (*Fit für den Arbeitsmarkt*, FIMA) course free of charge. While such offers are financially attractive for employers, they are tied to strict requirements applying to all participants, independently of their background. As a result, medical physicians in the *Specialized!* programme¹¹² receive the same language course as electricians, gardeners and nurses who are part of the TEAM project, although their support needs are far inferior to those of the TEAM participants, given their academic background. In addition to the academic profile, personal circumstances such as internet access, possession of a computer to participate in online classes and care responsibilities place some participants at a greater disadvantage to follow the standardized courses.¹¹³ One female participant explained: *"I have three children in Colombia. My three children were there, that is, the A2 class schedule clashed with the children's schedules. So, I had to get them ready, prepare food, and then the homework."*¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁷ Key informant interview #9 conducted in June 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Key informant interview #44 conducted in June 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Key informant interview #9 conducted in June 2024.

¹¹⁰ Key informant interview #43 conducted in June 2024.

¹¹¹ One of these language schools is Berlitz. In addition, there are two other language schools of which the participants were unable to recall the names.

¹¹² Specialized! is another labour mobility initiative by the BA which recruits medical physicians from Colombia and Mexico. See Bundesagentur für Arbeit (2024). Specialized!. Accessed online: <https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/vor-ort/zav/projects-programs/health-and-care/specialized>

¹¹³ Key informant interview #48 conducted in June 2024.

¹¹⁴ Key informant interview #13 conducted in May 2024.

Due to the low language exam pass rates of some TEAM cohorts,¹¹⁵ the challenges of providing standardized courses are increasingly noted by the SPE and the BA. Addressing this issue is not straightforward, however, and poses a puzzling question. On the one hand, the SPE is mandated to ensure that all applicants, regardless of their socio-economic status, have equal access to the TEAM project and its services. On the other, it is a widely known fact that learning abilities and preferences are heavily influenced by socio-economic status and that tailor-made measures are often needed to correct such inequalities. As a result, discussions are under way in mid-2024 to introduce a language learning diagnostic at the beginning of new cohorts. As one informant explained, it is however imperative that the results of the diagnostic are only used to develop customized learning offers and must not jeopardize participants' involvement in the project.

Given that participants in a cohort are typically dispersed throughout Colombia, German languages classes for A1 and A2 are typically taught online.¹¹⁶ Yet the exams take place at the Goethe Institute in Bogota to ensure official standardized certification, and participants are required to attend in person. Employers state a clear preference for the language classes to be provided in person as well, at least for those participants who already live in Bogota. However, hybrid-language classes are difficult to provide, and would place those who can only join online at a distinct disadvantage. To circumvent these complexities, the employers group has decided to jointly rent accommodation in Bogota to enable their participants to attend the B1 German classes in person and to socialize. *“Now we've managed to find an in-person solution. We have rented a house for the participants in Bogota, where they can all live together, study and get to know each other a bit. But that was organized by the employers themselves.”¹¹⁷*

The frequency and intensity of the language course is extremely demanding for the participants. With daily lessons amounting to six hours over seven to nine months, there is little room for catching up once participants fall behind. In practice this means that participants who fall ill, have an accident or face other emergencies beyond their control are very likely to fail the language exams, or worse of dropping out of the TEAM project altogether. Employers appear to be unaware of this situation, or—given their own financial interests in keeping language courses as short as possible—view the pressure under which participants must learn German as a necessary, albeit difficult, precondition to qualify for employment in Germany.

Faced with high exam failure rates—in some cohorts 75% of participants did not pass the A1 German exam at the first attempt—employers tend to question the quality of language instruction rather than the overall set-up of the language course. Yet there appears to be some truth to the fact that some language schools perform better than others. One employer, who had participated in more than one cohort of the TEAM project, provided a comparison: *“[Language school A] is a for-profit organization and doesn't get any public funding. That's why we had to switch to [Language school B]. But I have to say that I'm very dissatisfied with [Language school B], [...] only four out of 26 people passed, which is significantly worse. We... Well, in brief comparison, at [Language school A] 44% passed the first exam. [...] I'm disappointed and that's where we are right now. Really, nothing is happening at the moment. They're cancelling appointments, other exam dates, without checking with us as the employer.”¹¹⁸*

Language schools are aware off and dissatisfied with low exam passing rates, but argue that the employers hold “unrealistic expectations” and place a lot of time pressure on the schools and the students: *“It was a language course that we sold to a company, as with any company. And then later we realized how complex the project is and how the pace is so difficult that people can reach B1 level in six or seven months. I think that's practically only possible in Holland because the language is very close. German is difficult for Spanish speakers. And the challenge is this pace. These people, as if they were extremely linguistically gifted, are expected to learn a totally foreign language in six or seven months. That's totally unrealistic.”¹¹⁹* As a result, the German teachers increasingly dislike their jobs and students, being confronted

¹¹⁵ Given the TEAM project's lack of a unified monitoring system, reliable information of language exam pass rates is unavailable. However anecdotal evidence, recorded during key informant interviews with employers, suggests that exam failure rates have been as high as 85%.

¹¹⁶ The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages organises language proficiency in six levels, A1 to C2, which can be regrouped into three broad levels: Basic User (A1, A2), Independent User (B1, B2) and Proficient User (C1, C2). See: Council of Europe (2024). Global scale - Table 1 (CEFR 3.3): Common Reference levels. Online: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-1-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-global-scale>

¹¹⁷ Key informant interview #12 conducted in May 2024.

¹¹⁸ Key informant interview #16 conducted in June 2024.

¹¹⁹ Key informant interview #48 conducted in June 2024.

with on average 30 new words per day, quickly resent the German language. As a short-term mitigation measure, one language class provider reported to have dropped the technical vocabulary relevant for the participants' occupations to ease the curriculum. Such actions are of course not only detrimental to the participants' learning experience, but they illustrate the complexity of the situation since they are not in the interest of the employer. Finally, it is worth noting that the language course providers appear to be under significant financial pressure and are therefore inclined to agree to employers' requests, despite deeming them unrealistic. One informant stressed that competition for German teachers in Colombia is fierce and that by now, the few native-German teachers in the country are almost contracted exclusively by top-tier educational institutions such as Universidad de los Andes or Universidad Externado de Colombia, which can pay competitive rates. As a consequence, smaller language schools need to secure contracts with employers to stay in business and to keep their German teachers on the payroll.

The participants in the TEAM project expressed diverse opinions regarding the quality and learning experience of the German language course. Most found the course to be challenging but rewarding, appreciating the opportunity to dedicate themselves fully to language learning. Some participants highlighted the benefits of virtual classes, such as the convenience and cost-effectiveness of not having to commute. However, others felt that in-person classes would have been more effective and engaging, allowing for better interaction with instructors and peers. It is worth emphasizing that all participants recognized the need to devote significant time and effort to acquire working knowledge of the language. Yet only a minority, those with prior language learning experience or a special interest in the German language, felt that the pace was appropriate and allowed for steady progress. Most found the workload to be highly demanding, especially those participants without experience of learning foreign languages, and those who have to balance the language course with other responsibilities such as family and work. One participant shared, *"Well, fast, yes, it's very fast. For someone who has never done anything similar, that's too fast, I told him. I never learned anything like that."* To address this, participants suggested offering additional support, such as tutoring sessions or supplementary materials, to help them keep up with the course requirements. In addition, participants felt that it would be more beneficial to be taught by Colombian teachers during the A1 and A2 levels, because native Spanish speakers would better understand their learning needs and provide clearer explanations in Spanish. Some participants found that German instructors, particularly in the early stages, struggled to communicate effectively and adapt to the learners' pace. One participant mentioned, *"The truth is that I didn't like the classes very much, because they were with two Germans [teachers] and obviously they are at their own pace. It's very different to learn with a Colombian [teacher] who knows what it was like to undergo this and maybe what tips to give and all that to learn better."*¹²⁰

Another significant challenge was the group dynamics and varying skill levels among participants. Some learners progressed faster than others, leading to conflicts and frustration within the group. As one participant expressed it, *"I think we all have the capacity to learn, but we weren't, it was like with that... What do you call that? Segregation that you have to have in the groups to manage. Let's say, this group learns faster, this group learns half-heartedly, this group is lagging behind. And so that pitted us against each other. There was that group that was ahead, that said: No, we can't take it anymore."*¹²¹ Participants emphasized the need for more individualized attention and the option to be split into groups based on their learning pace to ensure a more effective and harmonious learning environment. These observations are echoed by a key stakeholder of the TEAM project, who argued that *"the groups are simply too large and the courses are not adapted to the skilled workers. In most cases, we're not talking about academics here, but about technicians who don't even speak English and don't even know their own grammar. In other words, there are major problems in introducing someone to another language and then their own language and grammar. And then you need very intensive support to keep people on the ball."*¹²²

The language proficiency exams posed a significant challenge for many participants, with some expressing concerns about the level of difficulty and the pressure to pass. One participant mentioned, *"People say, you contact other people and they say: No, B1 is hard, it's very hard, I don't know what. Well,*

¹²⁰ Key informant interview #39 conducted in May 2024.

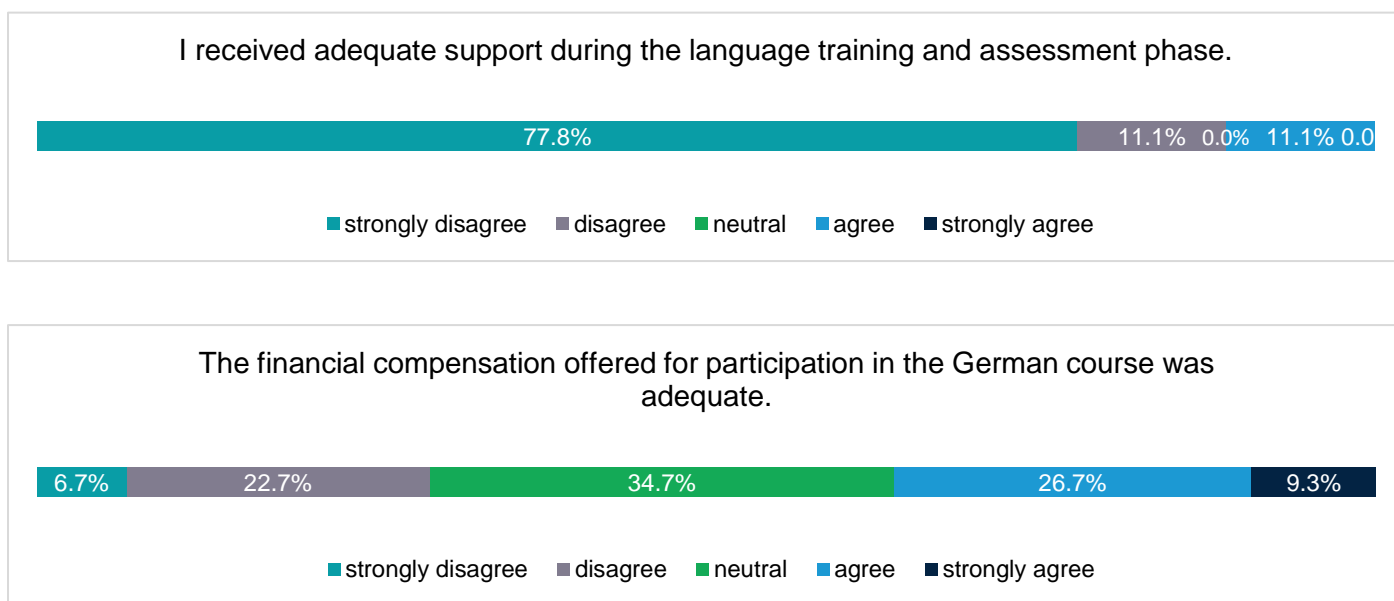
¹²¹ Key informant interview #31 conducted in May 2024.

¹²² Key informant interview #45 conducted in May 2024.

it's hard to pass it the first time.”¹²³ The high stakes associated with the exam, such as the possibility of being removed from the programme if they failed twice, added to the participants' stress levels. Some suggested more transparent communication regarding the exam requirements and providing additional resources to help them prepare adequately. The challenges of the language courses are also reflected in the online survey. A staggering 88.9% of respondents either “completely disagreed” or “disagreed” with the statement that they had received adequate support with language learning (see Figure 7). Satisfaction with the stipend was higher, albeit not as high as for other support aspects, with 29.8% strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with the statement that the financial support was adequate.

Figure 7: Participants' satisfaction levels with German language course

(76 out of 84 respondents answered these questions)



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Despite the challenges, many participants expressed satisfaction with the language course and the overall learning experience. They appreciated the professionalism and expertise of the instructors, the quality of the learning materials, and the opportunities for peer interaction and support. As one participant shared, “*But no, the truth is that I’m going to try to do my best not to work, because the truth is that one ends up being here from nine o’clock until three o’clock, in class, tired, because sometimes there is a lot of information. Sometimes you rest for half an hour and then you go on, because you have to do your homework, you have to meet up with your colleagues.*”

Receiving support and encouragement throughout the language course has been cited as a critical success factor by a language course provider and by participants. In particular during the last cohorts, employers have started to forge close cooperation with the language schools, some even scheduling weekly meetings to track participants' progress and to react swiftly in case a participant enters into difficulty. Company size arguably determines—at least to a certain extent—an employer's capacity to accompany the language learning process. While employers in the GaLaBau sector were too small to effectively engage in the project, other employers, especially when recruiting foreign workers from several countries, may on the other hand be too large to keep track of all their recruits and their individual learning needs. There seems to be a sweet spot, however, comprised of medium-sized employers with sufficient resources available and a strong interest in getting a foothold into recruiting from abroad, who are thus able to closely follow the participants. One employer even started to send struggling participants additional exercises to support their learning acquisition: “*we have chat groups for individual groups, because we have people who are a bit stronger in the language and others who are a bit weaker, so that we can work on them a bit more intensively*”

¹²³ Key informant interview #36 conducted in May 2024.

and send in tasks that they can use to practise.”¹²⁴ It is worth noting that the same employer representative also started learning Spanish herself to be able to communicate with her new colleagues. Arguably, such a shared language learning experience not only creates greater empathy, but also illustrates that the TEAM project can be a cross-cultural learning experience that compels both, participants and employers, to step out of their comfort zone and learn something new.

Another actor that appears to be largely ignored by the language schools and employers, but is poised to play an important supportive role, are the TEAs. The TEAs have a keen interest in following the applicants that they have recruited to (1) increase their own understanding of the TEAM project to be better prepared to recruit future cohorts, and (2) to obtain testimonials of “success stories” that they can share with prospective applicants. No formal communication channels between the TEAs and the language schools appear to exist, however, and so far the TEAs are trying to stay in contact with the participants on their own initiative. One TEA representative described: “*We follow up with them [the participants] from the moment they are selected until the moment they take the exam. So, almost once a month we are calling them either via WhatsApp or via mail. Hi, how’s it going? How are you doing with your language training, are you doing well, are you still active in the project? Okay. The next month. Hi, how are you doing? Are you still active in the project? Because we know that some people drop out. And the language school is literally not obliged to inform us, because then it becomes only a matter between the school and the company in Germany. So we find out through our own proactive self-management with the candidates [...] and there we are effectively motivating them, reaffirming their decision to continue their training and acquire the language skills. But it would be great to have direct communication with the school.*”¹²⁵

The language stipend is crucial for participants' commitment to their studies, but its adequacy in covering basic needs and living expenses is a widely debated issue, as it is uniformly allocated regardless of individual circumstances. In practice, this meant that participants without family responsibilities and those who are living in secondary cities with lower living costs were likely to receive the same income as before, or sometimes even a little more. This was in particular the case for the participants who were recruited as garden landscape workers, who in Colombia typically work in the agriculture sector that is characterized by lower wages and irregular pay.¹²⁶ For other participants, the monthly stipend was too low to cover their ongoing expenses. The average salary for electricians, as reported by them, is COP 2,000,000, while nurses may have salaries as high as COP 4,000,000. To complicate matters further, the EUR-COP exchange rate is subject to strong fluctuations—for example, between January and June 2023 the Colombian peso lost 20 per cent of its value vis-à-vis the Euro.¹²⁷ The actual income participants can access with the EUR 350-450 stipend can therefore vary starkly, and when comparing it to the previous income levels of some participants, may represent less than 50% of their previous earnings.

Many participants are unable to adjust their consumption patterns as drastically, and as a result, abandon the project or decide to continue working while they take German language classes. One participant shared, “*It wasn’t enough to survive, that’s why many of them quit or had jobs. There were some that I saw who were working and they didn’t leave their jobs because they couldn’t make ends meet.*”¹²⁸ Those participants who decided to continue working reported a lower ability to focus on their language class, and frequently did not pass exams at the first attempt. This in turn has real cost implications for the employers who continued paying the stipends to participants who had to repeat exams. Participants and TEAs recommended conducting a more comprehensive assessment of the cost of living in different regions and the salaries earned by different professions, adjusting the stipend accordingly, and having a flat rate in COP to ensure that learners could focus on their studies without financial strain. Finally, during a recent cohort, employers started to introduce an incentive-based payment mechanism, whereby the language stipend increases upon completion of the A1, A2 and B1 exams. While it is, at the point of writing this study, too early to make any comparative analysis, the different approaches to encourage participants to complete the

¹²⁴ Key informant interview #9 conducted in May 2024.

¹²⁵ Key informant interview #2 conducted in May 2024.

¹²⁶ Key informant interview #13 conducted in May 2024.

¹²⁷ Exchange Rates UK (2024). Euro to Colombian Peso Spot Exchange Rates for 2023. Accessed online: <https://www.exchangerates.org.uk/EUR-COP-spot-exchange-rates-history-2023.html>

¹²⁸ Key informant interview #32 conducted in May 2024.

language course, be it through financial or non-financial means, remain a topic that is worth further investigation.

Traveling to Bogota to take language exams posed various challenges for some participants. Depending on the employer, some participants reported to have paid transportation and related costs out of the stipend they received. *“For example, this month we had travel expenses to Bogota for the exam, so you had to take 500,000 pesos out of the same subsidy where you have to pay for rent, food, or those little things. So, that money was not, I mean, this time when we travelled they didn't give it to us, but it came from the same subsidy. So, it's very little.”*¹²⁹ These participants suggested exploring alternative testing arrangements, such as online exams, regional testing centres, or covering the travel expenses, to reduce the burden of travel and make the process more accessible. Other participants stated with a great sense of gratitude that all costs related to the exams were covered by their employer: *“When we travelled to Bogota, they paid for all our tickets, accommodation, food. Well, all the per diems were paid for by them. So, that was one of the things that helped us a lot and we were very grateful for that, [...] Everything was paid by the company, everything was financed by them.”*¹³⁰ Yet there seems to be an increased awareness among the project partners that the costs to be borne by participants should be the same and that equal treatment, regardless of occupation or employer, is a more conducive approach. One employer explained: *“We said to ourselves as employers, [...] we want to treat our participants equally, not just those in our company, but also those in the other companies. [...] we take the same approach and really talk it over with each other and are very binding. You have to imagine that they are all on a language course together anyway. And if one says I'm getting a stipend of 300 euros and the other says we're getting 500, that's not so nice. And that's why we try to keep it all the same. Ultimately, when you're in Germany, that changes of course, because we can't offer the same salary levels.”*¹³¹

Orientation and guidance

The TEAM project offers support and guidance through various entities, including TEAs, employers, language schools, and the AHK, but the level and quality of this support can vary based on the entity and individual participant experiences. TEAs play a crucial role in the initial stages of the project, offering guidance and assistance to participants. They helped with the application process and provided information about the project job requirements. One participant highlighted the support received from a TEA, stating, *“Yes, the whole process is very good. From the beginning you were very well received: Come here, who are you, what's your name? Your CV, we check it there.”*¹³² In addition, some TEAs provide applicants with video testimonials of TEAM participants who are already working in Germany: *“We do have some testimonial videos of people who have travelled. [...] we do present them at the meetings. [...] some are quite interesting and we tell them success stories of people who have travelled.”*¹³³

Once the participants start the languages course, they receive guidance and support on life and work in Germany from their prospective employers, the AHK, and through the language schools. Some of the employers organize regular meetings, usually every two weeks, employing a mix of structured information sessions and workshops, as well as more informal events to get to know each other. These meetings cover a wide range of topics, including the relocation process, living conditions in Germany, loneliness, stress management, and mental health-related themes. One participant mentioned, *“Every week we have a meeting with them. Right now, I was just in a meeting with them from 9 to 10 in the morning, always with the psychologist, with the secretary, directly with the boss, they tell us things from there, with the psychologist, little things like how learning another language is not easy, it is complex. We even had meditation classes. Yes, it was very good.”*¹³⁴ In addition, WhatsApp groups have become a popular medium that employers use to help participants develop a realistic idea of work and life in Germany: *“We have a WhatsApp group and we post everything that happens in the company there very diligently. Even in winter, when it's snowing and*

¹²⁹ Key informant interview #36 conducted in May 2024.

¹³⁰ Key informant interview #13 conducted in May 2024.

¹³¹ Key informant interview #9 conducted in May 2024.

¹³² Key informant interview #39 conducted in May 2024.

¹³³ Key informant interview #6 conducted in May 2024.

¹³⁴ Key informant interview #39 conducted in May 2024.

grey, we also post when it's raining and the weather here in Germany is shitty again in winter. But we also post things like the May meadow [...] then we explain, for example, why people wear traditional costumes, dirndls, lederhosen, [...] just funny things like that, where they are simply taken along and see a bit like that, what is coming to them in Germany and really bluntly, where we say hey today is crappy rain again, for a fortnight we have seen nothing but the grey sky, it sucks for us too.”¹³⁵ Another employer reported to actively identify housing preferences and leisure time opportunities with the participants during the orientation phase: “we have regular exchanges [...] either in a group or individually [...] so that we can prepare ourselves better, for example when it comes to looking for accommodation, so that we know, okay, he prefers the countryside, he has these and those interests, let's have a look, is there a football club or something.”¹³⁶ Overall participants appreciate such early interactions with their prospective employers as an opportunity to start building trust and to feel confident that they will be well-received in Germany. One informant explained: “For Colombians, it is also very important to have the feeling that you are being picked up, that you are not alone [...] There's also a certain amount of risk involved. [...] And it's important for them to know that when they arrive in Germany, this contact person will be there for me.”¹³⁷

Most employers contract the AHK to support the participants with the translation and submission of documents, the skills recognition process, and the visa application. Across different cohorts, both participants and employers report high levels of satisfaction with the services that the AHK offers. One participant commented, “They guided us in everything, how we had to online classes, they explained to us the stipend that we were going to have, all the expenses that were going to be covered by the employer. They were very efficient in that sense. All the paperwork. Documents, everything. All of it. Documents for the visa, for the translation, for the curriculum vitae, the visa, they also took us there. And they were very aware, very attentive, because sometimes, for example, if a colleague didn't connect on Zoom, they would call him, to ask what was going on, what problem he was having, what they could help him with. They encouraged him to continue with the project and that also counts. Very attentive.”¹³⁸

Finally, participants receive general information about life in Germany through language schools; however, this information risks inadvertently conveying inaccurate or misleading details. While integrating language learning with destination country information is an effective teaching method, such information is typically generic and not tailored to the specific region or type of employment the participants will encounter. In one instance, a generic session about the cost of living in Germany ended up doing more harm than good, as one employer shared: “Just last week, we had the problem that the [Language school] passed on information that made the participants very anxious. [...] They talked about rental prices. And rents in Germany can vary enormously. And that gave the participants the impression that, oh God, we can't actually survive in Germany because they won't pay us enough money. [...] That was rather unfortunate. It led to big question marks for all the participants. [...] A meeting was then convened with the participants the following day. Thank God we also had someone with us who speaks Spanish, so that everything could be put into perspective. That was the last thing I thought, you don't really need that just before finishing the A2 course.”¹³⁹

In addition to receiving guidance through the project partners, some participants recalled that they browsed the web extensively to obtain information about their prospective employer and the area where they would be living.

Documentation for skills recognition and visa

The experiences of participants in preparing and obtaining the required documentation for skills recognition and visa acquisition have varied significantly for several reasons. Firstly, the TEAM project encountered significant changes in German labour immigration policies over its implementation period (see section “2024: The new Skilled Labour Migration Act and the introduction of a points-based immigration

¹³⁵ Key informant interview #16 conducted in May 2024.

¹³⁶ Key informant interview #9 conducted in May 2024.

¹³⁷ Key informant interview #45 conducted in June 2024.

¹³⁸ Key informant interview #13 conducted in May 2024.

¹³⁹ Key informant interview #12 conducted in May 2024.

system” above). Consequently, regulations that applied to earlier cohorts did not necessarily apply to subsequent ones. Secondly, each applicant brings unique educational qualifications and work experience. Even when applicants hold similar credentials, these may be homologated to different German reference occupations. Thirdly, depending on the Federal State in which their prospective employer operates, different entities oversee the skills recognition process, applying varying criteria. Due to this diversity, there is no single representative case to illustrate the process. As one key stakeholder confirmed, *“the recognition procedure, which is what makes it so complicated, is an individual procedure in Germany, in which individual professional experience is also taken into account in addition to professional training.”* Moreover *“the practice is also very different. We received a completely different assessment from another chamber of agriculture in another Federal State regarding the applicability of Colombian gardening qualifications. They said, no, the deficits are significantly greater than the Chamber of Agriculture from what [the Federal State X] had told us. So there are very different assessments, because very different standards are applied in some cases.”*¹⁴⁰ As a result, there are currently over 80 Colombian migrants who are employed in Germany through the TEAM project, each having undergone a distinct skills recognition journey.

The exact timing of launching the skills recognition and visa issuance process poses employers and the AHK with a critical dilemma. Ideally, documentation for skills recognition and visa issuance should be prepared concurrently with the language course and promptly submitted. However, at the beginning of the language course, it remains uncertain which participants will achieve the required language proficiency and when. Postponing documentation preparation prolongs the skills recognition process and delays visa acquisition. This not only increases costs for employers but also raises the likelihood of participant dropouts as the process extends. To time and manage this delicate process effectively, the AHK decided to set-up a one-stop-shop under which employers can purchase a range of complementary services to accompany their participants during the skills recognition process: *“What we have realized is that it is incredibly difficult in this whole process, which is very tightly scheduled and involves a lot of money and time. The longer the recruitment process takes, the greater the likelihood that the specialist will leave. This is a big issue for nurses in particular, because a higher level of German is also required. And we have seen the problem that in document management, when can I start the visa application process? And actually I have to start it when the course starts, but I don't know who will pass the exam. And then we realized that communication is extremely difficult and time-consuming when several partners are working together on a project. That's why we then said, 'If we have everything from a single source, we can see where the specialist stands every week in terms of language acquisition, then we can synchronize it precisely and plan it meticulously,' so to speak, and don't lose any time or produce any sunk costs.”*¹⁴¹

The documentation required to migrate to Germany as part of the TEAM project includes educational diplomas, academic transcripts, work certificates, passports and, albeit not mandatory, health attestations and criminal background checks. The documentation is usually prepared in two stages. At the point of application, participants need to submit with support from the TEAs educational diplomas, academic transcripts, work certificates and passports. Some participants found the process straightforward, as they had already gathered many of the required documents for previous migration attempts or personal records. One participant mentioned, *“No, it was simple, really. The [TEA] collected everything and passed it on to them. As I sent everything in full, I didn't have any problems. It was all my work certificates, which I had already saved well.”*¹⁴² However, other participants experienced challenges due to a lack of clear guidance from the TEAs about the specific requirements for certain documents. One participant highlighted this issue, stating, *“There were problems in communication, because the documents they needed for the homologation process were not included in the information they had given us to bring documents, because if you bring the document from here with a certification, it saves the process of apostilling and legalizing the documents from here.”*¹⁴³

Once an applicant has been recruited, the employer contracts the AHK to assist each participant in preparing their final dossier. Some of the documentation, which may seem straightforward to German

¹⁴⁰ Key informant interview #46 conducted in June 2024.

¹⁴¹ Key informant interview #45 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁴² Key informant interview #35 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁴³ Key informant interview #31 conducted in May 2024.

authorities, can turn out to be challenging to obtain: *“In Colombia, you normally don't receive qualified work references, they always have to request them again from the employer. This is essential for the support for recognition and with the passport it's a similar story, candidates for the most part, especially the Technologos, who have not yet made a single trip abroad and there it is first necessary to think about the passport.”*¹⁴⁴

Another distinction between Colombian and German administrative procedures pertains to marriage. In Colombia, a couple automatically enters into a civil union after cohabiting for more than two years under the Union Libre regime. However, there is no equivalent provision in Germany. Therefore, if a migrant worker intends to qualify for family reunification later on, it is advisable to officially marry before migrating. This consideration ideally should be clarified during the application phase to provide applicants with sufficient time, should they choose to marry: *“And you have to communicate that in advance, to say, if you want your partner to come with you, think about what you want to do next. Would you like to get married beforehand or perhaps end it and then take a completely new step in Germany?”*¹⁴⁵ Moreover in occupations that require manual labour, a health attestation is recommended: *“We have also recruited landscape gardeners and some of them are a bit older. And if he has a back problem later on, it's of no benefit to the company nor to the specialist.”*¹⁴⁶ Criminal background checks are also encouraged to protect the security of the destination country, in particular when recruiting in countries with a legacy of armed violence and organized crime such as Colombia.

Once all documentation has been prepared, the employer and AHK have to decide, based on each individual dossier, which labour mobility pathway to choose. The first pathway is the *Gleichwertigkeitsprüfung* (equivalence assessment). This process evaluates whether a foreign qualification is equivalent to a German qualification. It examines whether the knowledge and skills acquired through the foreign qualification match those required for a specific German professional qualification. *Gleichwertigkeitsprüfung* is typically used when the foreign qualification is deemed comparable to a specific German qualification based on similar educational content, level and learning outcomes. The advantage is that if the qualification is found to be equivalent, the participant may receive recognition without further testing or training. The disadvantage is that this process is costly and time-intensive. Moreover, if the qualification is not found to be equivalent (or only partially), the participant receives a “deficit notice” and must undergo an adaptive measure (additional training or examinations) in Germany. The second pathway is the *Kenntnisprüfung* (proficiency exam). In this process, the equivalence assessment is skipped and the participant is obliged to undergo an adaptive measure or proficiency exam in Germany. The advantage is that this process is cheaper and quicker. The disadvantage is that it will take the participant longer to have their skills recognized.

¹⁴⁴ Key informant interview #45 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁴⁵ Key informant interview #45 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁴⁶ Key informant interview #45 conducted in May 2024.

Box 4: Choosing the German Reference Occupation – A Strategic Choice?

When the first cohort of Colombian industrial electrical technologists arrived in Germany under the TEAM project, their experiences with the homologation process varied significantly. Those recruited by Employer A were promptly granted homologation and could start working immediately. In contrast, those recruited by Employer B faced a longer process that required additional technical training.

The difference arose from the specific reference occupations chosen by each employer. Employer A selected “industrial electrician,” a two-year apprenticeship programme in Germany, for which the Colombian qualifications were fully recognized, facilitating a streamlined homologation process.

In contrast, Employer B opted for “electricians for infrastructure and building systems,” which corresponds to a more extensive three-and-a-half-year apprenticeship in Germany. As a result, the Colombian qualifications were only partially recognized, necessitating further technical training (adaptive measure) to meet German standards.

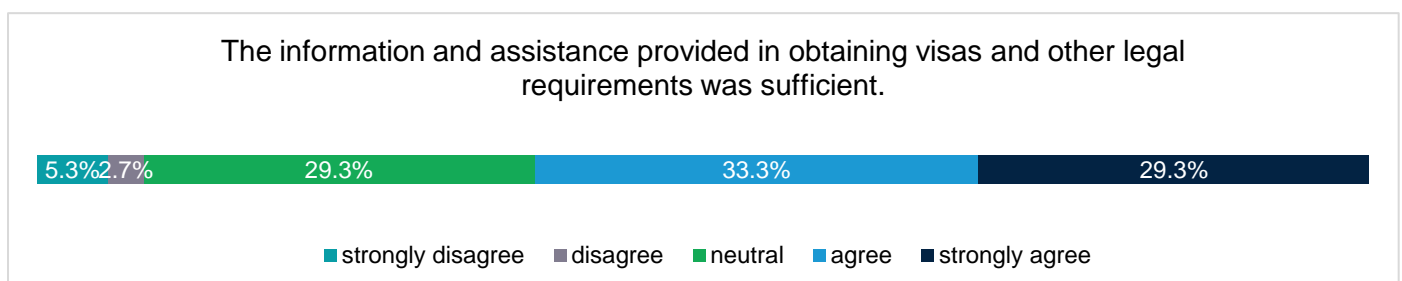
This situation underscores the importance of employers’ choice in determining the ease and speed of the homologation process. By carefully selecting the exact reference occupation that closely matches the Colombian qualifications, employers can significantly influence the recognition process and the readiness of migrant workers for employment in Germany.

The visa issuance is closely related to the outcomes of the skills recognition process and contingent upon German language proficiency. While the participants are not familiar with the intricate details of the visa process, they are aware of the main “milestones” they need to achieve to qualify for a visa. For example, participants were aware that obtaining the visa was contingent upon reaching a certain level of German language proficiency (usually B1) and submitting the required documentation. One participant commented, “They told us what documentation was going to be required, they have already asked us for a series of documents, so obviously we now have to certify our A2 level in order for them to give us the work visa. We are allowed to go and work there, yes, but the visa is delayed, depending on how long it takes us to pass the documentation.”¹⁴⁷ However, the lack of detailed information about the visa process in the early stages of the project left some participants uncertain about the timeline and specific requirements for obtaining their work visas.

Participants’ satisfaction levels with the administrative support and orientations are generally high. A clear majority (63.5%) “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the support with administrative processes was sufficient. Similarly, 62.1% strongly agreed or agreed that they felt well prepared for life and work in Germany (see Figure 8).

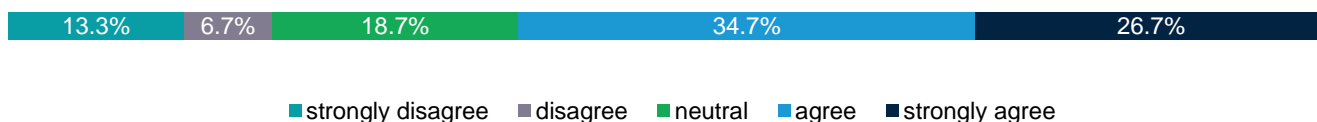
Figure 8: Participants’ satisfaction levels with the guidance and information received

(76 out of 84 respondents answered these questions)



¹⁴⁷ Key informant interview #37 conducted in May 2024.

I felt prepared and well informed about the living and working conditions in Germany before my departure.



Source: Authors' own elaboration

The employers' satisfaction with the pre-migration phase is mixed. While the level of satisfaction with the collaboration with the Colombian and German employment agencies is high (66.7% agree), half of the employers (50%) completely disagree or disagree with the statement that legal and administrative proceedings are clear (see Figure 9).

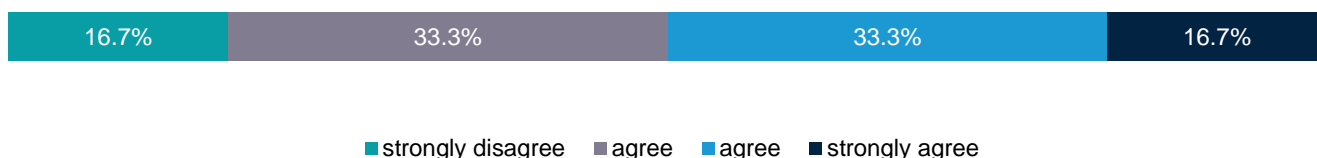
Figure 9: Employers' satisfaction levels with the guidance and information received

(6 out of 6 respondents answered these questions)

We are experiencing clear and smooth cooperation with the Colombian employment agencies and the Federal Employment Agency.



Legal and administrative procedures for the recruitment of Colombian migrant workers are clear and simple.



Source: Authors' own elaboration

This low score is most likely a result of the bureaucratic procedures employers needed to navigate in Germany to complete the skills recognition and visa processes. Due to Germany's federal structure and the plethora of actors entrusted with skills recognition abilities (see section "2020: Inclusion of skilled workers under the Skilled Labour Immigration Act" above), the exact criteria for completing the processes vary from state to state. One informant explained: "But when you get into the depths of the German bureaucratic jungle, it gets really, really exciting [...] because we really have such a fragmented landscape, so to speak, with each federal state having its own offices. Which is also important, especially because we have the regulated professions of nurses and preschool teachers, where it really depends from region to region who the competent authority is in this context. And you have to check the different requirements in each federal state. And finally there is always the question of experience [of the applicant], and whether it is better to aim for a Gleichwertigkeitsprüfung or Kenntnisprüfung."¹⁴⁸ There is some flexibility, however, and employers with several branch offices across the country have learnt over time in which state recognition processes are faster, and where they are slower.

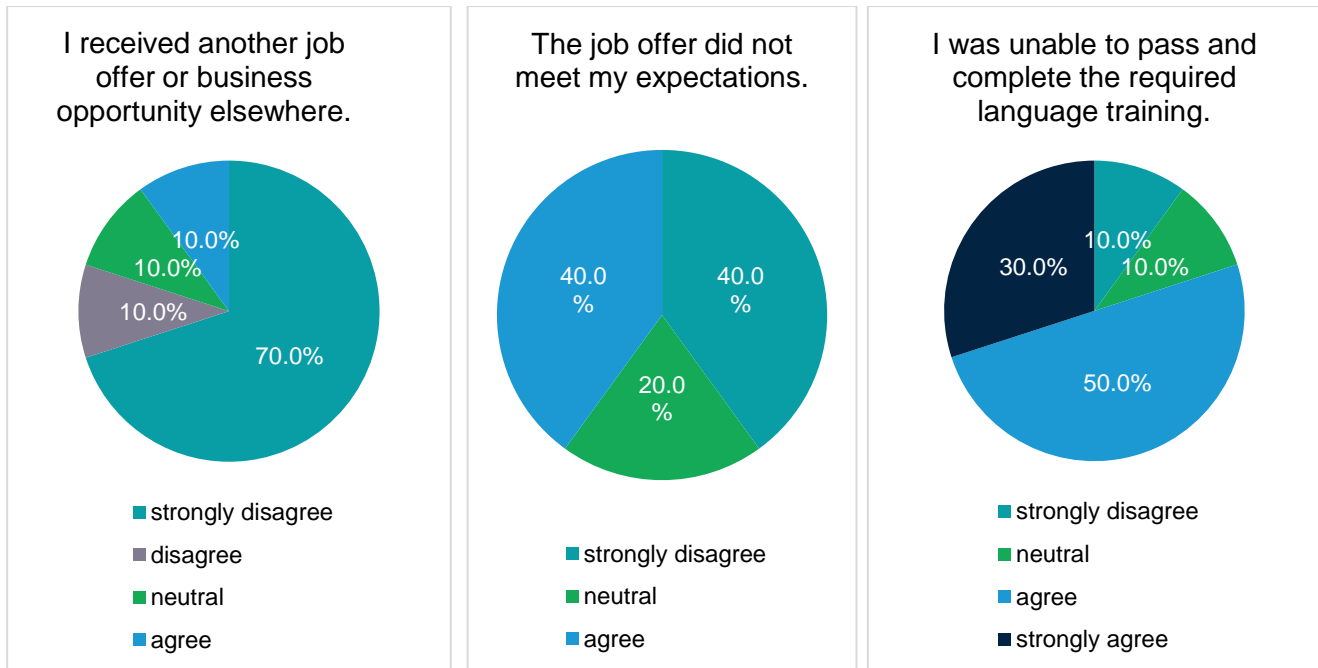
¹⁴⁸ Key informant interview #45 conducted in May 2024.

Drop-out and dismissal

The TEAM project saw a number of participants exit the programme during the preparation phase due to various reasons, including financial strain, lack of clear communication and personal circumstances. The survey revealed that having received another job offer (88.9% strongly agreed or agreed), dissatisfaction with the job offer (88.8% strongly agreed or agreed), and not being able to complete the language course (77.8% strongly agreed or agreed) were the main reasons (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Participants' reasons for leaving the TEAM project

(10 out of 10 respondents answered these questions)



Source: Authors' own elaboration

One of the primary factors contributing to participants' decision to leave the project, according to the interviews conducted, was the inadequate language stipend. Many participants found it challenging to cover their living expenses and support their families with the provided stipend, which was often significantly lower than their regular salaries.

Another issue that led to participants dropping out was the lack of clear communication and misinformation from the project partners. Some participants experienced confusion and frustration due to inconsistent or delayed information about their selection status and the next steps in the process. One nurse shared her experience of being told she was not selected, only to receive a call weeks later asking why she wasn't attending the language course: "So, at 11 o'clock at night the person from SENA says to me: No, you didn't pass, you weren't admitted. And I said: OK, well, that's it. Nothing happened. Well, thank you. But next time... I mean, let me know early, because you're uncertain. [...] About 15 days later, they called me to ask why I hadn't gone to classes."¹⁴⁹

The burden of having to travel to Bogota for interviews and exams also contributed to some participants' decision to drop out. The cost and logistical challenges associated with these trips, often on short notice and without reimbursement, placed an additional strain on participants. One participant shared their experience: "That was another thing too, I got permission to go to Bogota. They didn't give me many days, obviously, I think they only gave me one. My interview was at about 11 o'clock in the morning. I had a flight at four o'clock, I think, in the afternoon, but they gave me an interview at two o'clock in the afternoon. I

¹⁴⁹ Key informant interview #33 conducted in May 2024.

missed the plane and I was like, 'Please, can you check my documents soon? Because I'm going to miss the plane.' I left at half past three, I think. In the end, I missed the plane."¹⁵⁰

Several participants have been dismissed from the project—primarily due to failure to meet language proficiency requirements, but in at least one instance, due to pregnancy. The decision to dismiss a participant is generally taken by the German employers, who then inform the SPE and language school about their decision. One participant explained that she discovered just before commencing the German language class that she was pregnant. She then proactively informed her future German employer about her pregnancy who, without further consultation, decided to dismiss her from the project. Despite this gross violation of her rights, the participant did not receive any further report from the SPE or other actors of the TEAM project.¹⁵¹

The decision to dismiss participants who failed to meet language proficiency requirements is often made abruptly by the employer and, at times, without clear communication. One participant shared their experience: *"In February, the first exam took place, but I didn't take it because I had a motorbike accident and they told me at the institute, at the Goethe, to register and that they would reschedule the exam for me. But in that reassignment it ended up on the 15th of March, something like that. And I didn't manage to take the exam because by the 5th they decided that I wasn't going to continue in the programme."*¹⁵² The lack of clarity surrounding the criteria for dismissal and the manner in which it was communicated to participants was a significant issue. Some participants felt that the decision to dismiss them was made arbitrarily and without proper consideration of their circumstances. One participant recounted their experience of being dismissed in front of their peers: *"That moment, it's the moment when not even the company told me, [the language school] told me. I was in class and they literally took me out, just like that, and they told me in front of the group and everyone, No, you are no longer continuing in the process, they told me like that."*¹⁵³

The financial consequences of being dismissed from the project are significant. Some participants were left without payment for their last month of participation, as the decision to dismiss them was made before the stipend payment date. This sudden loss of financial support left many participants in a precarious situation, especially those who had decided to terminate their employment in Colombia to take language classes. As one participant mentioned, *"They called me on 5 March, their interpreter from Mexico called me. And he told me that I hadn't taken the official exam, which I had to take for the visa process because I had an accident. So, he said to me: No, it's because you haven't taken the exam, you didn't show up for the classes at that time and the teachers said that I'm not at the right level, so, no, I'm no longer in the programme. And then they were going to send me an email, but I never got an email. And from then on I stopped attending, because of the pressure from my classmates who were pushing for the classes to carry on."*¹⁵⁴

The lack of clear communication and respect in the dismissal process left many participants feeling frustrated and demotivated. Some felt that their efforts and commitment to the project were not properly acknowledged or valued. As one participant expressed, *"What I was very, very surprised about was the lack of communication that [the language school] had told me that you were not continuing with us, which was a very ugly way of getting rid of me. And the company wasn't clear with me that they weren't going to continue with me either. It was not the way to tell me. It's not the way to tell a person."*¹⁵⁵ To this day, some of the expelled participants express resentment towards the TEAM project—so much so that they outrightly refused to take part in the data collection of this study. In several instances the researchers received strongly-worded responses to their interview requests from dismissed participants. While the ways in which expelled participants cope with failure is primarily an individual matter, these responses highlight a more systemic issue in the design of the TEAM project. For many participants, the admission to the German language course essentially represents a big gamble: either they pass the exams and receive a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity to improve the life of themselves and their families in Germany, or they fail the exams and are left worse off than before in Colombia without any further support from the project.

¹⁵⁰ Key informant interview #38 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁵¹ Key informant interview #34 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁵² Key informant interview #31 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁵³ Key informant interview #40 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁵⁴ Key informant interview #31 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁵⁵ Key informant interview #40 conducted in May 2024.

Arrival and integration in Germany

Arrival in Germany

The arrival in Germany is a moment of excitement, joy, and a feeling of victory for many of the participants. Participants generally arrive in Germany as a group, although cohorts can be split if needed. This usually happens when some participants fail to pass the language exam and are granted additional time to reach the required language proficiency.

Post-arrival support is at the discretion of each employer, and many go to great lengths to facilitate the participants' first arrival and settling in. One employer organized onboarding weekends at a hotel for all arrivals before distributing them to their cities and accommodating them in small hotels while searching for more permanent housing.¹⁵⁶ Others immediately formed flat shares in furnished apartments, filled their fridge and showed them around.¹⁵⁷ One participant described his arrival as follows: *“The employer did everything, [...]. We received a lot of things from them, in fact when we arrived our boss picked us up at the flats, she gave us an advance of €200 so that we could go shopping the next day to buy some groceries and then, in fact, they gave us another advance on our account to pay some of the rent and things like that. The company was actually very attentive to us, very attentive.”*¹⁵⁸

Once the first wave of excitement subsides, many of the Colombian migrants are overwhelmed and lonely. As many participants shared, experiencing their first German winter was particularly difficult: *“I opened the window and I saw that everything was very lonely, very quiet, very dark. And that’s when I felt that emotional blow, so to speak, it was the first emotional blow I felt when I arrived here, because there was also something that had a big influence and that was that we arrived in winter. We were not used to winter in Germany. We were used to seeing the sun, to seeing people laughing, greeting each other a lot in the street, it’s like it’s a different kind, a different energy than in Latin America.”*¹⁵⁹

One of the key hurdles upon arrival is the lack of basic language skills, which prevents most participants from interacting with their environment and make them highly dependent on their employers for support. Particularly at the beginning, the migrants face a variety of administrative and personal challenges. They need to register with the city, open bank accounts, phone and internet contracts, join healthcare plans and learn how to navigate the new environment by public transport. In addition, the vast majority of participants have never left Colombia before, let alone migrated to another country. As a result, they rely on the employer for most processes. One participant described how he and his flatmates all had their online banking system blocked within a matter of days because the system of security measures differed from the one they were used to in Colombia. Given their limited German skills, they had no choice but to contact the Human Resources person in their company, who became increasingly irritated with the additional work generated.¹⁶⁰

Employers have adopted various approaches to provide necessary support, with their effectiveness seeming to be linked to company size. Particularly the microenterprises in the landscaping and gardening sector face challenges in allocating the necessary resources to accompany their Colombian workers. This is why the supporting role of their federal association GaLaBau is crucial to take some of the administrative burden off their shoulders. The advantage of the smaller companies, though, is that they are more easily aware of the current needs of their Colombian workers, and can act on those.¹⁶¹ The larger companies, by contrast, often have experience with recruiting foreign workers and can draw on a dedicated human resource department to accompany the participants: *“We simply want people to be well equipped, to feel that they are in good hands and that they know that they can come here if they have any problems. Our office floor, I think it’s the best-known office floor in the whole hospital, because we always have consultation hours once a week for, I’ll say, minor to medium-sized problems. Then there’s something wrong with their shift rota or they don’t*

¹⁵⁶ Key informant interview #41 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁵⁷ Key informant interview #16 conducted in June 2024.

¹⁵⁸ Key informant interview #13 conducted in June 2024.

¹⁵⁹ Key informant interview #29 conducted in June 2024.

¹⁶⁰ Key informant interview #17 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁶¹ Key informant interview #46 conducted in May 2024.

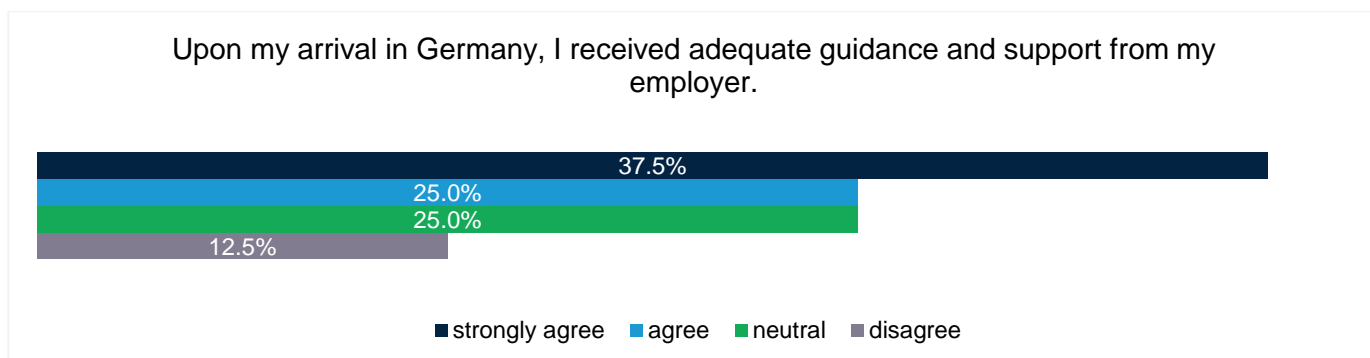
understand the pay slips or things like that.”¹⁶² One employer even chose to hire an external service provider to follow up with each participant’s process when they realized that they could not keep up with the workload.¹⁶³ On the downside, the larger companies usually have more complex structures in which it is more difficult to pass on information, leaving the Colombians wondering where to turn for help.¹⁶⁴

When employers do not provide the necessary support or fail to anticipate potential issues, severe consequences can arise for the Colombian workers. There have been cases of migrants with expired visas while waiting for the company to provide documentation for the authorities.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, those Colombians staying in hotels initially report that without a permanent address, they cannot register with the municipality. As a result, they remain without a bank account and even fall into a different tax category, leaving them with a lower net salary.¹⁶⁶

Even when employers are dedicated and attentive, red tape in German administrations and understaffed migration authorities can significantly slow down the integration process: *“Bureaucracy is definitely a big nuisance, well what do I mean by nuisance... The nuisance is more on our side [the employer’s side]. For the Colombians it’s more a lack of comprehension: ‘I don’t understand that. What’s going on there?’ We try to explain it. And sometimes we still get questioning faces. ‘I don’t understand why that is.’ Yes, these are issues where we at least try to explain processes and say yeah, that’s just the way it is.”*¹⁶⁷ These bottlenecks are serious pain points for employers and can quickly create unforeseen workloads that are difficult to shoulder. Likewise, they add tension and uncertainty to the participants’ integration process, which is in itself already a stressful situation. Despite these issues, the participants appreciate their employers’ efforts, as the survey results indicate: 62.5% of respondents strongly agree or agree that they received adequate support from their employer once in Germany (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Participants’ perceptions of received support from employer upon arrival

(8 out of 84 respondents answered this question)



Source: Authors’ own elaboration

Another, albeit limited, source of post-arrival support remains BA-ZAV, while Colombian consulates are not currently involved in the project and appear to have no or limited knowledge of it.. In theory, the mandate of the BA-ZAV ends once participants arrive in Germany. In practice, however, the BA-ZAV continues to receive *ad hoc* requests from participants and employers to which it still responds within its limited capacities: *“Many problems surface after entry, many questions arise, e.g. about recognition, language acquisition, visas, family reunification, project cancellations. And these questions come back to the BA-ZAV because there is no contact person. At the moment, the BA-ZAV is actually providing follow-up support that it shouldn’t be doing.”*¹⁶⁸ Some informants are cognizant of this gap in follow-up support and are contemplating options to strengthen the post-arrival services that the TEAM project could offer the participants: *“The BA-ZAV is a public institution, and mandates play a huge role there. And I think we have more of a problem in that the BA-ZAV has clearly defined tasks [...]. But the projects go beyond these tasks.*

¹⁶² Key informant interview #9 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁶³ Key informant interview #41 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁶⁴ Key informant interview #46 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁶⁵ Key informant interview #27 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁶⁶ Key informant interview #42 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁶⁷ Key informant interview #41 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁶⁸ Key informant interview #44 conducted in June 2024.

So they exceed the scope and should actually involve other units of the Federal Employment Agency or other actors [...]. This can also be done privately, as the BA-ZAV often does, by commissioning third parties through a call for tenders, which are then financed by the Federal Employment Agency. As an alternative solution, you could also say that there has to be a structure, but in the end it doesn't matter what it looks like. And if it is a privately financed relocation service that supports the company until recognition, financed by the employer, but then of course the product becomes more expensive, then costs also play a role. But I think it's more a question of mandates and that the individual organizations, naturally only ever have their glasses on and thereby restrict what is within their sphere of influence.”¹⁶⁹ Other informants express a clear expectation that participants become autonomous sooner rather than later to be able to deal with their employers on their own—or, in case of difficulties, with assistance from one of the many structures in Germany dedicated to supporting labour migrants and workers in general, including but not limited to the IQ network, the Welcome Centres and the local employment agencies. One key informant argued that a participant “always has the option of contacting the relevant employment agency at any time, even after entering the country, to say: ‘I entered the country via the [TEAM] project, I’m still going through the recognition procedure, and I’m stuck here somewhere.’ So the question is who is responsible, is it a duty to seek advice or a duty to provide advice at this point? And at this point it is a duty to seek advice, because [the BA-ZAV’s] mandate also ends to some extent at this point.”¹⁷⁰

While such public support structures are certainly available, this does not necessarily mean that the participants are able to access them. To start with, participants are unlikely to be aware of their labour and immigration rights, given that they have not received any rights awareness measures as part of the TEAM project and can therefore also not claim them. In addition, the concept of labour rights is likely to be somewhat abstract for a Colombian immigrant, coming from a country where more than half of all employment continues to be informal.¹⁷¹ Secondly, the limited knowledge of the German language remains a major hurdle—participants are unlikely to simply pick up the phone and call one of the support centres and, moreover, the hotline and email services of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees and BA are already operating at capacity and unlikely to provide timely advice.¹⁷² Finally, participants are also unlikely to travel physically to the next support centre given their unfamiliarity with city names and inability to understand public announcements. In addition, many participants live in rural areas, and considering their long work hours, travelling physically to the next bigger town is likely only possible on the weekend when most support centres are closed. Ultimately, there is a real risk that participants fall through the cracks and are unable to receive the advice and support they need in a timely manner (see Box 5 and Box 6 and the section on “return” below). As of June 2024, the number of TEAM participants who have or are facing serious difficulties is fortunately in the lower single digits. However, this is arguably not the result of the accessibility of Germany’s support networks, but rather due to a good portion of luck and the relatively small number of TEAM participants who have migrated to Germany so far.

When participants are in need of advice, they are more likely to turn to informal networks. A first and obvious option are their fellow TEAM participants, particularly those who have arrived during a previous project phase and are aware of the German regulations and the possible pitfalls of the project. This, however, has its limitations in cities where only two or three Colombians are based, or where the previous arrivals do not wish to support the newcomers. Others refer to institutions such as the Red Cross or their local church community, which can be valuable sources of moral and practical support or try to seek information on the Internet (see Box 4). Another possible source of information that currently remains unexplored is the ‘Colombia Nos Une’ initiative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹⁶⁹ Key informant interview #44 conducted in June 2024.

¹⁷⁰ Key informant interview #46 conducted in June 2024.

¹⁷¹ Statista (2024). Informal employment as a percentage of total employment in Colombia from 2010 to 2023. Accessed online: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1039930/informal-employment-share-colombia/>

¹⁷² In June 2024, when browsing the service section of www.make-it-in-germany.com the following notification is displayed: “Unfortunately, the hotline, operated by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees and the Federal Employment Agency, is often occupied due to the great interest in our topics. Written enquiries to the hotline cannot be processed promptly at the moment either.”

Work in Germany

Participants' experience in starting work in Germany is highly heterogeneous and depends largely on the reference occupation, previous work experience, language proficiency and corporate culture of the employer. Nevertheless, some common themes and elements emerge across experiences.

Integration

Language barriers are often named as the single most important hurdle standing in the way of a successful integration in the workplace. The participants' lack of technical vocabulary and ability to understand instructions frustrates themselves as well as their employers and co-workers. Employers with a diverse workforce appear to be more patient and supportive. A gardener described that: *"my colleagues have been very understanding, they have been very helpful language-wise. It's complex because I... Even though I'm 14 months here and I study every day [...] I'm not able to hold a five-minute conversation. It's still difficult for me. I don't know what's wrong with me [...]. I told him [the supervisor]: I'm sorry for my language, but he said: Easy. Take it easy. Here is your partner Ahmad—he is African—so he told to me: Ahmad only started to talk after four years. Don't worry. We know that our language is not easy, don't worry."*¹⁷³ However, this level of patience seems to be rather the exception.

Many participants feel that their supervisors and coworkers are unable to empathize with them due to a lack of previous sensitization and unrealistic expectations. The language difficulties and differences in technical standards between Colombia and Germany regularly cause clashes at the beginning. As a result, many participants report experiences of conflict and even humiliation in the initial weeks, leading to frustration on both sides. *"Every time, when they asked us something and we don't know how they do it here, they would asked us in German: 'Bist du Elektriker?' [Are you an electrician?] So, for us, that was a bit humiliating, because they kind of doubted that we were actually electricians. And what they didn't understand was that although we are electricians, in Colombia electricity is developed differently and our sector is the industrial sector."*¹⁷⁴

Moreover, the rough tone on German construction sites is a cultural shock for many participants who are used to more polite instructions and indirect forms of criticism. One landscape gardener pondered that *"there is something with the language. And it's kind of silly... I understand that now, but at the beginning it was very difficult for me. And it's the German way of saying things. I mean, Germans are very hard for us Colombians. You ask something normal and they have a way of answering that in my case I read as: I'm causing him stress by asking him that. [...] I still find it a bit difficult, [...] in Colombia we say everything very softly, everything is like trying to minimise the impact. [...] And here it doesn't matter. I mean, here sometimes they say things very strongly, it's normal, but for me they are strong. And sometimes I can't help but feel angry, [...]. It's something with the language, with the culture, I don't know, I don't know, but yes, I feel it."*¹⁷⁵ Despite these difficulties, participants are mindful that some employers have had up to now only limited exposure to migrant workers, and are thus also "learning" how to work alongside colleagues from abroad with limited language skills.

In light of these communication challenges, integration in the workplace remains a moving target. On the one hand, participants report that they feel more integrated the longer they are in Germany and improve their language proficiency. For example, some join company events such as barbeque parties and appreciate their co-workers for training them on the job. Other participants would appreciate a more pro-active effort from their co-workers to use opportunities to socialize: *"They [the co-workers] are with themselves and sometimes they don't like it when someone invades their space. But that depends on the company, they could do more to integrate during the break. In Germany they take breaks, but their break is to smoke a cigarette or drink water and continue working. [...] They talk, but you stay here because you say: Well.... But*

¹⁷³ Key informant interview #42 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁷⁴ Key informant interview #29 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁷⁵ Key informant interview #14 conducted in May 2024.

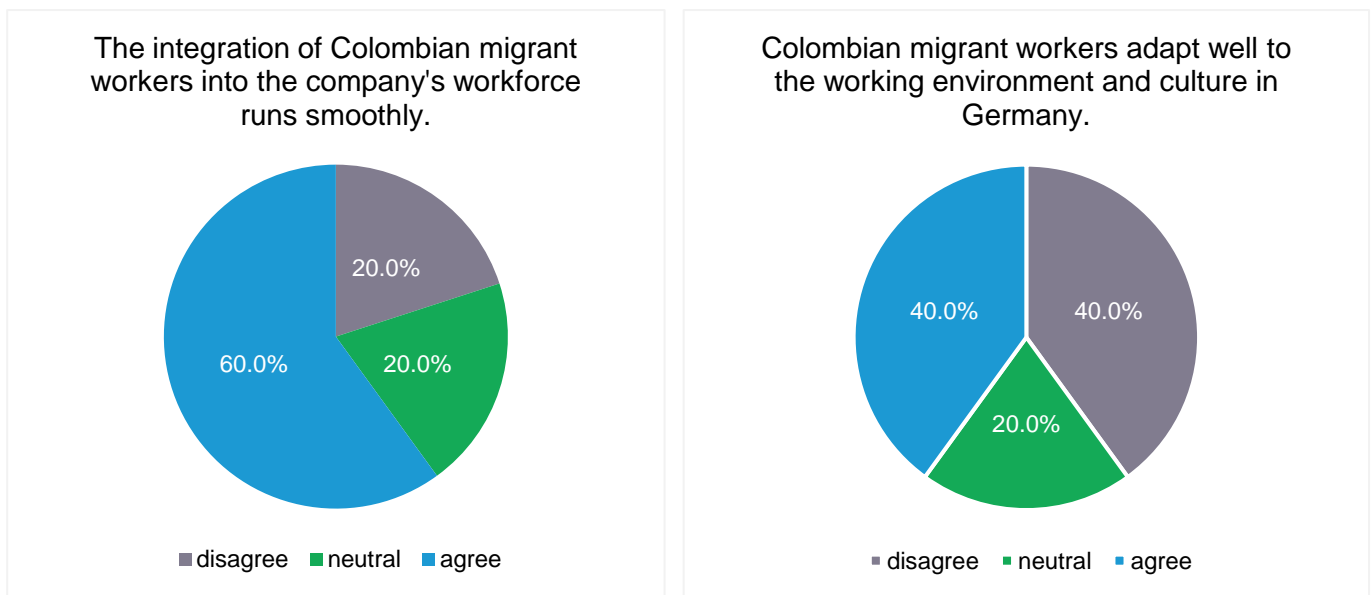
they're not telling me to come over. And so I stay in that corner, because they're talking among themselves."¹⁷⁶

The presence of other migrant workers in the company can be a double-edged sword. Some participants report that their employer introduced them intentionally to other migrants to facilitate an exchange of experiences and help them integrate: *"I think that the employers were always very willing to help us and they put us in touch with colleagues who had gone through the same situation as us, colleagues who were migrants, to be with us, to show us how the work was done."*¹⁷⁷ Other participants felt fellow migrant workers who had come on their own initiative to Germany, or even as a refugee, demonstrated signs of envy and grudge and therefore decided to minimize their interactions with them. As one participant recounted: *"In some cases, we work with other people who are also foreigners, but who have not had, perhaps, the same benefits as we have had here. So, sometimes there are these comments like, 'Oh, they pay for your school, they pay for your German course, oh, yes,' [...] So, it's like those comparisons that are always made. That is what we sometimes have to face. In the end, we Colombians have said no, let's not talk about our project, or anything like that, [...] So, we've become very secretive."*¹⁷⁸

Despite these hurdles, participants often describe friendly relations with their coworkers and supervisors and are generally grateful to be part of the project. Their employers too are mostly positive about their integration into the workforce, with 80% completely agreeing or agreeing that the integration works flawlessly, and 60% completely agreeing or agreeing that the Colombian workers adapt well to the work environment (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Employers' perceptions of participants' capacity to integrate

(5 out of 6 respondents answered this question)



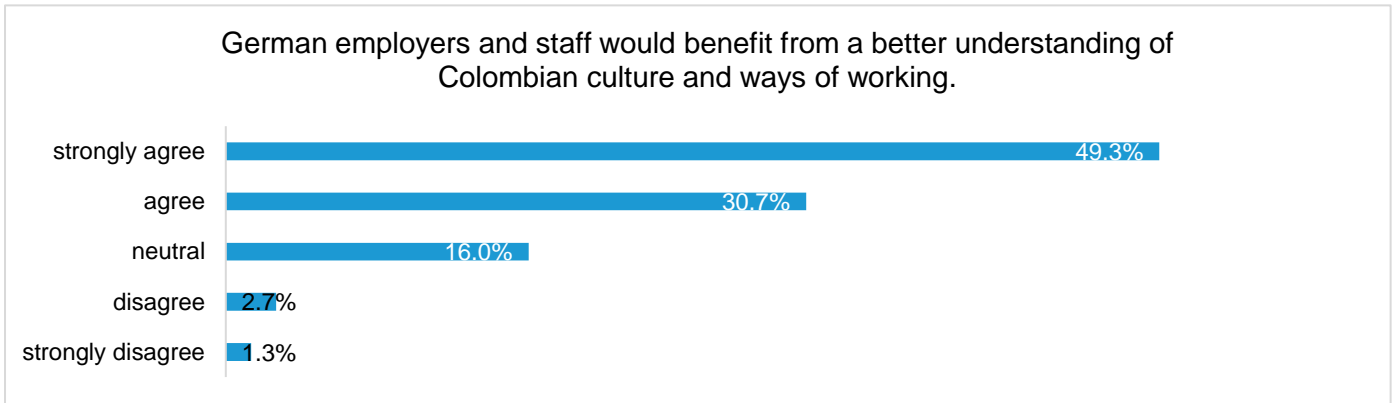
Source: Authors' own elaboration

Given the issues outlined, it is unsurprising that both TEAM participants and employers agree that the project's preparation for integrating Colombian migrants and understanding their work culture is currently inadequate. Among the employers (left), 79.7% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that this aspect should be strengthened, while 83.7% of Colombian workers strongly agreed with this suggestion (see Figure 13). It seems that such an element could facilitate the integration for all parties involved.

¹⁷⁶ Key informant interview #42 conducted in June 2024.
¹⁷⁷ Key informant interview #14 conducted in June 2024.
¹⁷⁸ Key informant interview #29 conducted in June 2024.

Figure 13: Participants' perceptions of employers' readiness to receive migrant workers

(76 out of 84 respondents answered this question)



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Readiness and performance

The migrants' ability to perform the assigned tasks hinges (aside from their language skills) on the degree of equivalence of the job performed in Colombia with that in Germany. Out of the three reference occupations for which the participants have so far been recruited (as of June 2024), the industrial electricians have fared the best, followed by the electricians for infrastructure and building systems and lastly the landscape gardeners, which underscores the criticality of carefully choosing the reference occupation during recruitment.

Participants who have been recruited as industrial electricians work essentially in the same occupation as in Colombia and perform well. These participants report to feel well-prepared to fulfil their tasks and receive extremely positive feedback from their employer and clients.

The performance of the participants who were recruited as "electricians for infrastructure and building systems" is mixed. While some are able to work independently and have homologated their qualification, others still require more training. From an employer's perspective, the sunk costs of integrating these participants into the workplace is significant and the "return-on-investment" has yet to materialize. One employer explained that *"the workload for the colleagues on site, training the Colombians, taking them with them and so on, is so great due to the points mentioned, language, specialist technical know-how and driving licence, that they perceive it as a burden.[...] In other words, the effect of them becoming a support has not yet materialized. Even after almost two years, even after the point that some of them have already been recognized and are now fully integrated. But the feedback we get is for construction sites and the specialized terminology they bring with them is not yet sufficient. It seems to be taking a little longer than expected."*¹⁷⁹ These pervasive communication challenges illustrate that integration is a long-term effort and cannot simply be equated with having completed the homologation process.

The performance and readiness of the participants recruited as landscape gardeners is the most negative. Shortly after arrival, both participants and employers realized quickly that the tasks assigned were mostly new to the participants, resulting in a steep learning curve, lower efficiency, less independent work and conflicts with coworkers who were unwilling to accept these limitations. As one employer in the GaLaBau explained, *"the recognition procedure is still ongoing [after three years], but it is actually in terms of content a complete apprenticeship, also in terms of the time corridor."*¹⁸⁰ For the GaLaBau employers, this creates high costs for limited return and—importantly—may also give rise to tensions at the workplace vis-à-vis other workers: *"we are also legally bound—and now I'm taking the entrepreneurial perspective again—to guarantee a collectively agreed wage for people who do not have the necessary skills that would be appropriate for this collectively agreed wage. And this harbours an explosive force for every company involved, because it has*

¹⁷⁹ Key informant interview #41 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁸⁰ Key informant interview #11 conducted in June 2024.

something to do with internal communication. Because if you break it down, if I now have a colleague here in the company who has been here for many years, who perhaps has no training but works as a semi-skilled worker, then someone comes along who, on balance, can't actually do anything in the field and doesn't even speak the language, and they might even earn more."¹⁸¹

Reflecting upon these complexities, one employer argued that the narrative with which the TEAM project was marketed to the employers was too reductionist, highlighting mostly the economic argument of recruiting abroad at the expense of underlining the effort that is needed to bring this process to fruition: *"What we [the employers] have received from the BA is ultimately just a purely economic analysis, where someone sees what it [a migrant worker] costs me, do I want to take part, yes or no? The factor that is certainly not taken into account is simply the work involved in successfully integrating these people into the company. Because it involves much more than just employing the person."*

These findings reveal that the TEAM project meets employers' expectations to varying degrees, with some influencing factors beyond its control and others within its reach. There is widespread enthusiasm regarding the work ethic, attitude and motivation of the Colombian workers to integrate and perform. However, many employers express their surprise at the level of dependency of their new employees on them to settle into their lives in Germany. This is compounded by the level of bureaucracy, inconsistency between Federal States and legal changes during the implementation with the New Skilled Labour Migration Act, contributing to the complexity of processes. While some employers report recurring to support services that they know from other sources or previous initiatives, particularly the micro enterprises in the gardening and landscaping sector are overwhelmed and claim that this was not what the project had promised.¹⁸² This stands in stark contrast with the BA's position that it is feasible and foreseeable for any employer to handle some bureaucratic processes related to homologation and residency. One employer explained that indeed, many supporting services are available, but it is challenging to find out about them: *"I really say that Germany is not in a bad position when it comes to the whole subject [of labour migration]. And in the meantime, I even feel that there is a lack of overview of who is doing what."*¹⁸³ While it may be beyond the BA's mandate to provide such supporting services, compiling the services available or establishing connections to the institutions in charge could be feasible.

Working conditions

The low equivalence between the participants' Colombian qualification and reference occupation has also real consequences for their current working conditions. The type of tasks assigned to the landscape gardeners and the electricians for infrastructure and building systems, as part of their new jobs, is significantly more physically demanding than what they were used to. This commonly led to an initial shock, although most reported adapting quickly. One electrician describes: *"(...) I had no idea that it was going to be this hard as well. It would have been nice if they had clarified that because many of us had perhaps come from administrative positions, having worked as process leaders. I, for example, I don't know, my roomie also came from being in high positions where you didn't have to spend all day with a hammer hitting a wall and that kind of thing. That was perhaps the shock here, but yes, in reality there are things that do contribute. Every day you learn something new and over time things got better and better with our colleagues."*¹⁸⁴ These issues indicate that proper analysis of the differences in occupational profiles and transparent communication of these early on in the process is important for realistic expectations among migrants and their employers. Many employers who are currently preparing Colombians for their emigration have taken up this aspect and are now sharing pictures and testimonies beforehand.

Apart from the tasks at work, working hours are also demanding for the participants. Many start their work early and with long commuting times, particularly in rural areas, some leave their homes as early as 4am. A typical working day then lasts from 7am to 4pm. In addition, some participants have German language

¹⁸¹ Key informant interview #11 conducted in June 2024.

¹⁸² Key informant interview #11 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁸³ Key informant interview #16 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁸⁴ Key informant interview #28 conducted in May 2024.

classes three evenings a week from 6pm to 8:30pm. While the landscape gardeners struggle to get accustomed to working long hours outside during the harsh German winter, the electricians in residential settings need some time to get used to breaking walls, being coated in construction dust, and a female electrician reported that toilets are not always available for her on construction sites.

Nevertheless, there is a great appreciation of the respect of working hours and free time as well as sick and leave days. This respect of worker rights is a great improvement of working conditions for many participants, particularly those who were not working in large companies in Colombia: *“Well, I really like the balance that the company allows.... I don’t know if that happens in all companies here in Germany, and it’s the balance between work and the social life that one can have. Here there is a disconnection, when work is over, there is a total disconnection from work, until the next day when you have to go back to work. Secondly, the issue of rest, for example, the issue of holidays here, unlike in Colombia, in Colombia there are 15 days of holidays, here there are many more days of holidays. Here, there is a lot of respect for holidays.”*¹⁸⁵

Out of the nine employers that are part of the TEAM project, one case of a landscape garden company stands out for its negative conduct and lack of effort to adequately integrate and accompany the participants. The company had recruited three participants during the first cohort of the TEAM project, however as of early 2024 all of them had left. One participant had left the company and found a new German employer with support of the BA-ZAV, one participant had abandoned the project after experiencing a series of safety hazards at work and returned to Colombia, and one participant was on extended sick leave due to a work accident. As one of the participants explained: *“None of the three of our colleagues are there in the company, the three of us who arrived, because things happened, I mean, I’m not saying that I felt mistreated there or anything like that, but there were things that we didn’t feel good about, and the three colleagues, one has already left for Colombia, another resigned from the company and is on disability leave and is in a legal problem with the company, because he had an accident with his eye and the company said that he was playing the victim. And they didn’t recognize the accident he had had. So he’s still here, but he hasn’t solved the problem with the company and he’s still in a legal dispute. And I simply decided to change companies.”*¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Key informant interview #29 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁸⁶ Key informant interview #42 conducted in May 2024.

Box 5: What happens when TEAM participants fall through the cracks: A consequential accident at work

Miguel¹⁸⁷ joined the TEAM project to become a landscape gardener in October 2022. After working for several months with a small landscaping company in Germany, he was involved in an accident in January 2023. While clearing vegetation along a pedestrian walkway, Miguel was struck in the face by a spiky mulberry branch dislodged by a colleague's leaf blower. Lacking basic safety equipment, a spike entered Miguel's eyeball.

Miguel asked his co-workers to call an ambulance, but they advised him to wait in the crew's van. After two hours, they dropped him off at a bus stop, suggesting he see his general practitioner. Doubting their judgment, Miguel went to an emergency care unit at a nearby hospital. After visiting multiple hospitals and specialists, he received a month's sick leave and antibiotics.

Returning to work, Miguel continued his long days: waking at 5 am, working from 7 am to 4 pm, and attending German language classes online from 6 to 8:30 pm three days a week. However, his eye did not fully recover, and Miguel resorted to take pain killers daily to continue to perform at work for the next 10 months. Despite consulting his general practitioners several times, he received no further treatment and his employer did not check on his recovery. By December 2023, his condition had worsened considerably and Miguel could no longer follow his language classes due to severe headaches and eye pain. His eye became frequently red, swollen and irritated.

Frustrated, Miguel researched German labour law online and learned that basic first aid protocols had not been followed during his accident nor had his employer fulfilled his obligation to report the accident to the *Unfallkasse* (the company's accident insurance provider), a necessary step for receiving medical treatment. Taking matters into his own hands, Miguel contacted the insurance company himself. As a result, his employer finally filed the accident report in January 2024 – one year after the accident had actually occurred. With an accident number, Miguel saw an ophthalmologist and discovered he had mydriasis and neuritis in the eye's optic nerve from the accident.

At the same time, Miguel's personal and professional situation took another turn for the worse. When his wife in Colombia developed a serious medical condition, he pondered whether to return, but was concerned to not be able to resolve his eye problems in Colombia. Eventually his employer presented him with a *fait accompli* and fired him in January 2024. The other two Colombians at the company with whom he was sharing an apartment had already left—one was fired, the other returned to Colombia after having experienced several workplace hazards. A few days afterwards his landlord—the company owner's son—suddenly terminated his lease giving him two months' notice to vacate. Adding to his troubles, high energy bills were deducted from his salary, leaving him unable to afford a new apartment. Miguel, who had been sending most of his income to his family, ran out of cash and suddenly needed financial support from his family, who sold personal belongings to help him.

Facing the prospect of becoming homeless, Miguel turned to Chat GPT and Google to find help. He discovered the *Sozialdienst* (Social Service) for social housing assistance and a local soup kitchen for food. Eventually, he was allocated a small flat on the city's outskirts, shared with a stranger. Seeking justice, Miguel further leveraged Chat GPT and online translation services to contact the *Arbeitskammer* (Chamber of labour), which took his case to the *Arbeitsgericht* (labour court). In April 2024, the court ruled his dismissal unlawful and ordered his reemployment. Although the employer offered EUR 1,800 for his return flight to Colombia, Miguel refused and decided to stay in Germany until he received proper medical treatment. As of writing this report, Miguel continues to live in social housing, awaiting the outcomes of his eye examinations and remaining on extended sick leave.

¹⁸⁷ Name changed to protect the participants' identity.

Income

Their income is a sensitive topic for the Colombian migrants, with salaries being one of the top motivators for their move to Germany. The general agreement with their employers is that they earn an initial salary as stated in the vacancy, and can expect a salary increase once their title is recognized in Germany. While most of them are aware that they could potentially earn more with other employers, many recognize that they are still learning and that their employer has supported them significantly throughout the process, both financially and administratively. However, a common issue is that they were not aware of the high tax and social security deductions in Germany, in addition to other deductions such as for transportation to their workplace. Moreover, many are not prepared for additional high costs that can arise suddenly, such as the payment for electricity use surpassing their monthly estimate. Those with dependents in Colombia who have to finance two households from their entry-level salaries commonly describe their financial situation as enough to cover their needs, but not the improvement they had expected when joining the project. This is especially true for those who had well-paying jobs in Colombia, such as in the oil and gas industry.

A clear communication of the net income to be expected as well as realistic living expenses before participants sign up for the project could prevent such disappointments. One participant explained that *“at the beginning they gave us a salary and told us how much we were going to earn, they never told us that so many taxes are paid here, that this was the country of taxes (...). But you come here and everything is taken by the state. No, that was the first thing they gave me (...) they gave us a table at the beginning of the process, before starting with the study and everything, they gave us some tables of an example of how much is the average life and how much you could be free and really that was a lie, because everyone has their own expenses, everyone has their own expenses. But they didn't tell us about those taxes, no, no, no, no, it's a lot of tax (...) When I got here and compared them, I got annoyed. Man, the same thing they're doing in Colombia!”*¹⁸⁸

Life in Germany

The sustainability of a migration process depends not only on the success in the workplace but also on the creation of a satisfactory private life in the new country, the ease of which depends on a number of factors. Overall, this is an aspect largely outside the remit of the TEAM project, which focuses primarily on the administrative, professional and financial aspects of labour migration.

Integration into German society and having German friends is rather uncommon among the TEAM participants, with the language barrier cited as the most common reason for this, followed by the more closed attitude of Germans compared to Colombians. Most remain among themselves and spend much of their time with their Colombian coworkers and flatmates. One of the participants shared: *“my life is very quiet, I have a guitar here, a charango, a flute, so on the weekends, that's what I do, I play guitar, I play songs, I play the charango, I go jogging, I go cycling, I go to [name of German city] with my friends here, we go to a Latin American shop.”*¹⁸⁹ Nevertheless, some participants, particularly those in the larger cities, report creating friendships outside this circle through sports, church and other leisure activities. One participant affirmed: *“In my village I already have a community. I like football very much. So I've already integrated with the football team. I'm already with them, I play my sport, I'm an evangelical, yes, a Christian. I'm already integrated with the Christian Church, with that community. It's been great, it's been great. In other words, the welcome has been very affectionate and loving.”*¹⁹⁰

Constructing a social life appears more difficult for participants who live in rural areas. Particularly the participants in rural Bavaria struggle not only with the strong local dialect but also with a rather conservative and less diverse population. In addition, the limited transportation services and activities available locally restrict the participants in their creation of social circles. This is illustrated by a young electrician who stated,

¹⁸⁸ Key informant interview #26 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁸⁹ Key informant interview #42 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁹⁰ Key informant interview #42 conducted in May 2024.

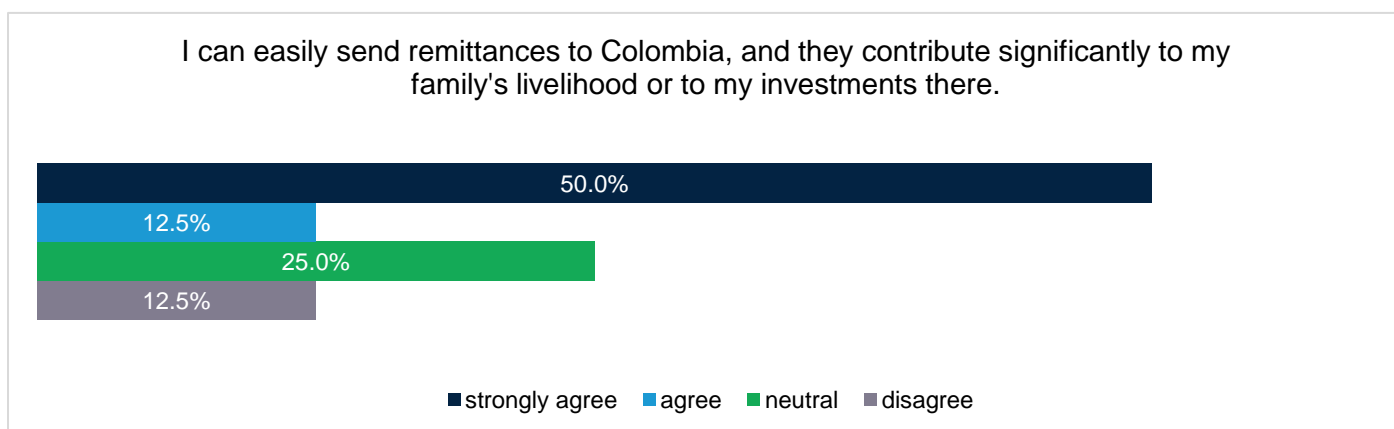
*“I do want to look for a basketball team, but since it’s a small town, I couldn’t find one. That’s one of the difficulties, I’d like to live more in a city than in a small town, but we’ll see about that later.”*¹⁹¹ Yet, it is also important to note that many TEAM participants have been in Germany for only half a year at the writing of this report, which is not much time for integration into a completely different culture.

Participants’ experiences with xenophobia vary, with some expressing positive surprise at Germany’s multi-ethnic society and feeling welcomed. Such positive experiences seem to stand at odds with what the participants were prepared for in Colombia. One afro-descendant participant explained: *“I was very afraid of being rejected because of my skin tone, because there are many myths that Germans are very cold, that they.... Everything that we were told in Colombia. So, that’s what I was going with. And we saw a part, a module on culture, where they said that they were very apathetic. But the reality is a different story. [...] Germany is already a multicultural country. You get on a train and [...] you can hear up to three and four different languages. You can hear Arabic, you can hear Turkish, you can hear Spanish, you can hear German—amazing! So, Germany, the cultural diversification is enormous. [...] No, no, no, no. For me it has all been positive. For me it’s all been positive, a blessing.”*¹⁹²

Yet other participants have faced harassment, a phenomenon that appears to be worse in rural areas. One electrician in a small town reported that a bus driver refused to transport him and his Colombian colleagues, forcing them to walk home several kilometres through the snow.¹⁹³ Others report being yelled at from driving cars, being followed through shops by employees or hearing discriminatory jokes relating to drug trafficking. Nevertheless, nobody reported feeling unsafe in Germany. On the contrary, safety is one of the major advantages for the Colombians compared to their home country. The financial situation of the TEAM participant is closely linked to their housing and their responsibilities in their home countries. The employers make great efforts to provide furnished housing, usually in shared flats to reduce the living cost as much as possible. While this is a pragmatic approach to save on housing costs, living with strangers is not always easy for these adults, many of whom had previously only lived with their families. Some would have preferred to have a greater say in where they are placed and who they share their living space with. The positive result of these living arrangements is that all migrants interviewed reported being able to send money to Colombia regularly. The most common reason is to cover the living expenses of spouse and children, next to supporting other family members and clearing student or other debt. This is also supported by the survey data which reveals that 62.5% of the respondents can easily send remittances to Colombia.

Figure 14: Participants’ ability to send remittances

(8 out of 84 respondents answered this question)



Source: Authors’ own elaboration

The migrants’ level of comfort is also affected by the German climate. Coming from a tropical country, none of them have experienced the darkness and cold of winter before. Those who arrived in November

¹⁹¹ Key informant interview #17 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁹² Key informant interview #42 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁹³ Key informant interview #19 conducted in May 2024.

2023 report that their first months were quite challenging emotionally, coping with homesickness and winter simultaneously. This is especially true for those with spouses and children who stayed behind in Colombia (also see section “Family reunification”). One of the gardeners reported that, in hindsight, he was dressed inappropriately for work during his first winter, making him suffer through the long hours outside more than necessary.¹⁹⁴ While it is difficult to prepare emotionally for the months of darkness, sufficient information on practical and warm clothing for the German climate could be provided quite easily.

Permanent stay in Germany

Issuance of residence permit

Obtaining and renewing residence permits for Colombian migrants is challenging for both the migrants and the companies, especially for microenterprises in the landscaping and gardening sector, which often lack the experience and resources to support the residency process. Even with the support of their federal association, the requirements varied not only with the legislative change, but also with the local authority in charge. For instance, one office required a B1 certificate, when the immigration law only stipulates an A2 level. One participant describes her experience in having to find out the process by herself: *“Perhaps, with me, as it is the first time, they [the employer] are also learning. (...) Right now in April, my visa was running out. So I knew that it was issued by the Landkreis, (...) [but] I didn’t know which Landkreis I belonged to (...) So I went to the boss and said: ‘Well, then my visa is going to run out, how do we do it?’ (...) So he said: ‘No, no, we have to find out, because you find out and I’ll find out.’ And I go around checking. So, in the church where I go, there is a girl who works with immigration. She’s the one who gave me the direction.”*¹⁹⁵

The larger employers with more experience and a dedicated HR department generally have more experience and capacity to guide the Colombian migrants through the process with the local authority. Nevertheless, some of the larger companies also struggled to keep up with the varying demands, leading to Colombians asking their peers for advice. In one case, the hiring of an external service provider was met with great gratitude by the TEAM participants, as they felt that their needs were promptly met.

Homologation

The recognition of the participants’ qualification in Germany is one of the stated objectives of the TEAM project and a basic requirement for staying in Germany permanently. The project stipulates that the Colombian migrants enter Germany on a visa under § 16d of the German immigration law (*Aufenthaltsgesetz*), which requires them to validate their degree within 24 months, prolongable to 36 months. If they fail to do so within this time frame, the basis for their permanent stay in Germany is void. Under the TEAM project, the employer is in charge of the homologation process by choosing the German reference occupation, organizing any additional training required, and absorbing the cost of the latter if funding from the BA cannot be obtained.¹⁹⁶ The migrants go through the training requested from them but generally have little understanding of the process and reasons behind certain steps.

As of June 2024, the participants’ homologation status is mixed, and to a large extent determined by the reference occupation their respective employers have chosen. Originally, migrants and companies had received the information that the homologation process should take approximately one year. In practice, these times have varied significantly. The most dramatic case are the landscape gardeners. As of June 2024, only four participants out of 25 were able to homologate his qualification. The others are now—after almost

¹⁹⁴ Key informant interview #14 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁹⁵ Key informant interview #42 conducted in May 2024.

¹⁹⁶ The BA can fund additional training under certain circumstances either fully or partially. However, employers need to apply for this on time.

three years—about to start the homologation process, hopefully just in time before their visa ends. The case of the participants who were recruited as electricians for infrastructure and building systems is slightly more promising, with six out of 44 having already homologated their qualifications, and more being scheduled to follow in 2024. The industrial electricians stand out as a success story, since their Colombian qualification was so close to the German reference occupation, all 54 participants had their titles recognized even before entering Germany. While this was fortunate for their candidates, it caused envy and confusion with their peers from the same cohort who had been hired by another company.

Family reunification

Reunification with spouses and children is one of the most salient issues of the migration process for all Colombian migrants who have families. As a result, for many TEAM participants the ultimate long-term success of the recruitment will hinge on this aspect. During the first project phase, TEAM staff had communicated that family reunification would be possible nine to twelve months after arrival in Germany.¹⁹⁷ So far, however, none of the interviewed participants from the first cohort had brought their families, not even the electricians for infrastructure and building systems, whose homologation process went more smoothly than that of the gardeners. With the delay of the homologation process for gardeners, family reunification will more likely take about 36 months.¹⁹⁸

While there is a general understanding that leaving the family behind temporarily is a necessary sacrifice to start a new life in Germany, the lack of clarity on the steps and timeline are a cause for major frustration among many TEAM participants. One participant vividly described his disappointment: *"Put a requirement: 'Do you want to spend two years in one country alone? Yes/no.' That was really missing a lot, because a lot of us here have families and they are our driving force, the driving force for me is my family. I came here because of them, because well, we are going to contribute better to them. The quality of life is better, the issue of security, if you think about them. But security, for whom? For me in those years? And my family, my daughter back there alone in Colombia? So that is very complicated. We have also talked to colleagues who are in the same situation. It was a big mistake, both theirs and ours, because yes, we didn't set ourselves the task of, well, investigating. I really only went by what (...) they told us in Colombia."*¹⁹⁹

The challenge in predicting the timeline for family reunification lies in its dependence on various prior steps and the cooperation of the local migration authority officer. One important factor of unpredictability is that migrants require an indefinite work contract. This, in turn, is conditional on the homologation. Some companies also require their employees to obtain the German driver's licence before they offer an indefinite work contract, adding not only a layer of complexity to the process but also a financial burden for the participants.

¹⁹⁷ Key informant interview #11 conducted in April 2024.

¹⁹⁸ Key informant interview #11 conducted in April 2024.

¹⁹⁹ Key informant interview #26 conducted in May 2024.

Box 6: Delayed family reunification jeopardizing the stay in Germany

Fredy and Luisa²⁰⁰ are a married couple from Norte de Santander who both possess the degree of Agriculture Production Technologists. They applied for the TEAM project together and were hired by the same company as landscape gardeners. Since they could not bring their three children with them to Germany on the D-16 visa, they left them in the care of a grandmother, promising her that they would bring their children to Germany within the first year.

Due to the delays in their homologation, they are still working on the recognition of their degree after 18 months. In the meantime, the grandmother's health condition has deteriorated and she is urgently asking Fredy and Luisa to take the children back into their care. Since it could still take months or even years until they fulfil the requirements for family reunification, the couple are now considering that at least one of them may have to drop out of the project to return to Colombia.

Plans for the Future

Aspirations for the future vary in line with the migrants' personal circumstances. While some of the more recent arrivals still consider it too early to make any long-term plans, others are more certain of what they intend to do. All want to complete the homologation of their title, obtain a permanent work contract, and bring their families to Germany if they have one, before making any changes to their situation. There is a wide range of plans regarding the duration of their stay in Germany, ranging from a few years to earn enough money to buy a house or start a business, to several decades or even indefinitely. One participant shared: *"To get a house in Colombia is impossible, unless you are rich. Here in Germany, I can build a house in five years. So imagine how much further you can go on the road to owning a house in Colombia. That would be a very big dream for me and to be able to fulfil it. That is one of the opportunities that Germany gives me, which Colombia would never have given me."*²⁰¹

Participants with families are planning to bring their spouse and children to Germany: *"To one day I want to be able to bring my children here, to make my home here, [...], to be able to help the boss. I know that he needs employees and we are available for that."*²⁰² One participant even went as far as giving his child a German name to facilitate his integration.²⁰³ Interestingly, there is rarely any mention of facilitating the integration and job uptake for their spouses. Some participants did, however, express the long-term goal of becoming fluent in German.

Some participants, who hold or are nearing completion of university degrees from Colombia, consider either completing their studies or having their degrees recognized in Germany for their professional development. Others would like to access the German education system and pursue a university degree in the future. However, they all acknowledge that to pursue academic roles or study for a German degree, they will need to invest additional time and effort into improving their German language skills. While many are grateful to their employer and plan to remain with them for the foreseeable future, others are considering applying at better-paying companies once their titles are recognized and their families are in Germany.

Despite their different plans for their future, virtually all TEAM participants agree that if they have to return to Colombia for any reason, the experience as part of the project will benefit them even there. Next to the uncommon language skills, they mention the new technical skills acquired as well as knowing another country and its way of working. Even those migrants who report having made fairly negative experiences do not regret their participation due to the learning process they have gone through.²⁰⁴ This is supported by the survey results, where an impressive 87.9% of respondents indicated that they strongly

²⁰⁰ Names changed to protect the participants' identity.

²⁰¹ Key informant interview #14 conducted in May 2024.

²⁰² Key informant interview #13 conducted in May 2024.

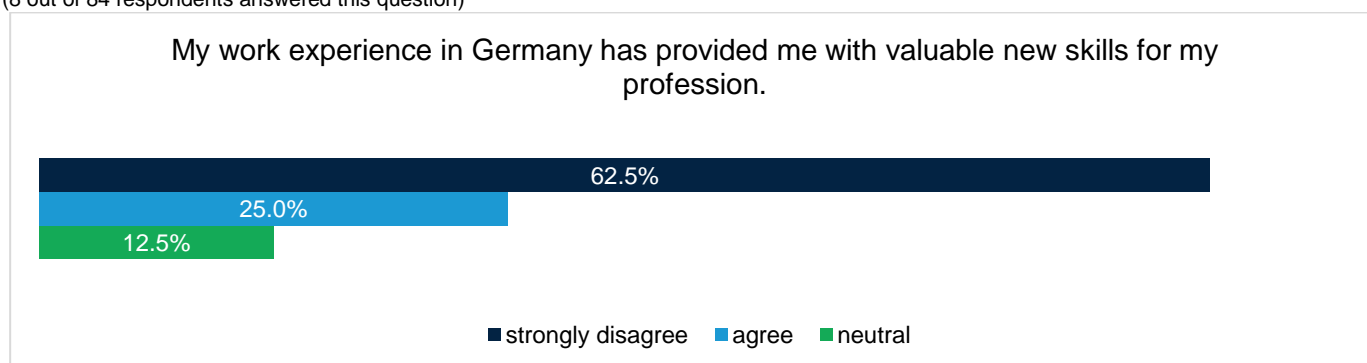
²⁰³ Key informant interview #24 conducted in May 2024.

²⁰⁴ Key informant interview #19 conducted in May 2024.

agreed or agreed with the statement that they had acquired new competencies through the experience (see Figure 15).

Figure 15: Participants' appreciation of competencies gained in Germany

(8 out of 84 respondents answered this question)



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Return to Colombia

It is important to note that, despite efforts to engage the two participants who have returned to Colombia in this study, only one agreed to be interviewed. The other did not respond to the interview request. As the project is still in its early stages, it is possible that more participants may return to Colombia in the future.

Motivation for return

The motivation for migrants to return to Colombia varies depending on individual experiences and circumstances. In the case of the interviewee, Carolina,²⁰⁵ her decision to return was influenced by a combination of factors, including health issues, lack of support from her employer, and a sense of abandonment. During her time in Germany, Carolina faced several challenges that made her experience difficult and ultimately led to her resign.

One of the primary reasons for Carolina's return was her deteriorating health. In addition to stomach problems that had arisen upon her arrival in Germany, she suffered from an ear infection she contracted while working. Carolina mentioned, "Over there, I had a hearing loss of 20%. And then they did another test and it came out at 5%. And I had problems with my hearing because I get very dizzy and sometimes I feel the ringing in my ears. But that was the cold I had there and they had to make a decision to remove the liquid because I had it there and it didn't come out."²⁰⁶ She noted that her employer, [Employer x] required her to work even in adverse weather conditions, such as heavy rain, which likely contributed to her falling ill. In contrast, she observed that workers from another company were allowed to rest during such conditions, highlighting the disparity in treatment between the two employers.

Moreover, Carolina experienced a lack of clarity and support from her employer regarding her living situation and work location. Upon arriving in Germany, she was moved around to different hotels and cities, which caused her discomfort and inconvenience. The lack of commodities such as a kitchen in some of those accommodations added to her dissatisfaction with the living arrangements. When she was finally placed in Berlin, she found the city to be expensive, and her residence was far from her workplace, requiring her to walk long distances. Carolina expressed her frustration, saying, "And then they ended up sending us to Berlin, to a more expensive city, where it was a bit more difficult to get housing as well. And they managed to get it, but it was all in bits and pieces, like that. And just because you were there, there, there, there, there, there, there, like bothering [the employer]."²⁰⁷ Carolina felt unsupported by her employer during her time in

²⁰⁵ Name changed to protect the participant's identity

²⁰⁶ Key informant interview #32 conducted in May 2024

²⁰⁷ Key informant interview #32 conducted in May 2024

Germany: *"But it was quite difficult, because more than anything else, one felt very abandoned there. You didn't know who to contact, who could help you, who could motivate you in the process, nothing. There was never any motivation, not even from the company, not even from the German-Colombian Chamber of Commerce, not even from anywhere."*²⁰⁸ The lack of communication, guidance, and motivation from her employer and other stakeholders left Carolina feeling isolated and abandoned, which contributed to her decision to resign and return to Colombia.

Financial difficulties also played a significant role in Carolina's decision to return. The high cost of living in Berlin, coupled with the rent being significantly higher than initially promised, even when sharing an apartment with a colleague, put a strain on her finances. *"They had told us that it cost EUR 400, approximately, where to live, but each one individually. And they put me to live with another girl, with another colleague who was an electrician. So, there wasn't a very good communication between us, because she was very messy."*²⁰⁹ The inability to save money and the constant struggle to make ends meet led Carolina to question the benefits of staying in Germany compared to returning to Colombia and being with her child.

Furthermore, Carolina witnessed the stark contrast in support provided by other employers to their Colombian workers. While her colleagues at [employer y] received better assistance and understanding from their employer, Carolina felt unsupported and undervalued by [employer x]. She expressed her disappointment, stating, *"So there was also another thing there that I said: 'Well, if only I had been sent to another [employer]!' There would have been help. And it would have motivated me too, but nothing. And always then, I don't know. And our company, I feel that they didn't pay attention to us."*²¹⁰ Given the opportunity, Carolina would have considered changing employers within Germany, believing that it could have prevented her from dropping out and returning to Colombia prematurely.

Lastly, the lack of concern and support from her employer and other stakeholders when Carolina resigned further reinforced her decision to return. She felt that nobody, including the company, the TEA, or the AHK, genuinely inquired about her reasons for leaving or offered any assistance. Carolina mentioned, *"And they didn't tell me anything, I mean, nothing more, not even: Look, come on, let's talk or motivate you, nothing, just like that: Ah, well, it's better [for you to return]. And so I felt it was better for me, really."*²¹¹ This lack of care and understanding left Carolina feeling like a burden to the company, as if they were relieved by her departure.

Life after returning

Upon returning to Colombia, Carolina encountered several challenges in readjusting to life, with finding employment being one of the primary difficulties she faced. Carolina expressed her frustration, saying, *"Well, on the one hand, I feel a bit sad, discouraged, because I can leave. At least I feel a bit frustrated, I say. I'm always like if I had, if I had, if I had, if it would have been different this way, maybe I would be there and take advantage of the opportunity. But then I came back, but I've been here to this day without work, because the situation is quite complex here in terms of work, of getting a job, because of the little experience they [Colombian employers] ask for."*²¹² The challenges in the job market, combined with the skills and experiences gained abroad not being fully recognized, made it difficult for Carolina to secure employment upon her return. This situation led to feelings of frustration and disappointment, as she felt that her time in Germany could have been better utilized if the circumstances had been different.

Moreover, Carolina's return to Colombia was marked by a sense of emotional turmoil. She expressed feeling sad and discouraged, wondering what could have been if her experience in Germany had been more positive. The readjustment period was not only about finding employment but also about processing the emotional impact of her time abroad and the abrupt end to her stay in Germany. Despite the challenges,

²⁰⁸ Key informant interview #32 conducted in May 2024.

²⁰⁹ Key informant interview #32 conducted in May 2024.

²¹⁰ Key informant interview #32 conducted in May 2024.

²¹¹ Key informant interview #32 conducted in May 2024.

²¹² Key informant interview #32 conducted in May 2024.

Carolina tried to maintain a positive outlook and learn from her experiences. She acknowledged the importance of the skills and knowledge she gained while in Germany, particularly in terms of language acquisition. However, the process of reintegrating into Colombian society and navigating the job market proved to be a significant hurdle in her post-return life.

Aspiration to apply again

Despite the difficulties Carolina faced during her time in Germany and upon returning to Colombia, she expressed a desire to apply for similar opportunities in the future. Her aspiration to apply again stems from her belief in the potential for personal and professional growth that such experiences can provide. Carolina shared her perspective, stating, *“Yes, I look every day to see if there are any, but no. Because I’ve had the experience and suddenly I have developed a different mentality and I’ve learnt. I learnt a lot of things there, that’s why I would like to continue learning the language to be able to aspire to something better too, because you the more you know, the better you can manage.”*²¹³ Her desire to continue learning the language and leverage the skills and knowledge gained abroad highlights her determination to make the most of future opportunities.

Carolina recognizes that her difficulties are largely due to the employer who selected her and the city where she was located. During the interview, Carolina suggested that if she had been chosen by a different employer, her circumstances could have been more favourable, potentially allowing her to stay in Germany longer and bring her child with her. However, it is essential to acknowledge that Carolina’s aspiration to apply again is tempered by the realities of the German job market and the availability of suitable opportunities. While she actively seeks out new possibilities, the lack of agricultural positions similar to the one she had in Germany may limit her options.

As more participants potentially return to Colombia in the future, it will be crucial to provide them with the necessary support and resources to facilitate their reintegration into Colombian society. This includes offering guidance on navigating the job market, recognizing the skills and experiences gained abroad, and providing emotional support to help returnees process their experiences and adjust to life back home. By addressing these needs, the programme can help create a more positive return experience for participants like Carolina and encourage them to pursue future opportunities with greater confidence and preparedness.

Conclusion

The TEAM project provides an illustrative example of the intricacies of labour mobility initiatives. Although it is too early to draw any definite conclusions, a few insights already speak to the success of the project. The fact that the TEAM project is one of the few existing employer-funded labour mobility schemes, combined with the high number of applicants each year in Colombia, demonstrates a strong match between demand and supply, thus increasing the likelihood of sustainability.

In addition, the TEAM project has established a solid reputation by now, with participants constantly highlighting the legal and safe nature of the migration process as one of the distinctive advantages of the project. Apart from a few saddening stories, the majority of TEAM participants in Germany are content with their decision and plan to remain in Germany for the foreseeable future. Likewise, most employers (with the exception of the landscape gardener firms) recognize, or are beginning to acknowledge, a return on investment. The long-term success of the project, however, remains to be seen, especially now that the first cohorts of professional nurses are arriving in Germany.

²¹³ Key informant interview #32 conducted in May 2024.

At the same time, this study has documented a series of critical barriers at the project and systems level. At the project level, many barriers are the result of a one-size-fits all approach, whereby project activities are implemented in a generic, standardized fashion—sometimes with the rationale of creating equitable conditions for everyone. Perhaps counterintuitively, however, more customization of specific activities would actually be needed to create more equitable conditions and to increase the chances that all participants—and employers—can benefit from the project. When such project-level barriers compound with systemic barriers, the risks of creating a real negative impact in the lives of participants and employers increases dramatically.

Project-level barriers

Administrative complexity for (small) employers. All employers that have participated in the project thus far state that they were surprised by the amount of work that the TEAM project required from them. A common observation was that the current “marketing” of the TEAM project was too reductionist, primarily highlighting the economic benefits of recruiting abroad while downplaying the significant effort required to bring this process to fruition. This is in particular troubling for small employers. The TEAM cohort 1.0 is a case in point. The GaLaBau Association engaged in the project to enable several smaller employers from the landscape gardening sector to participate. While the GaLaBau Association was able to successfully act as the employers’ representative during the preparation phase, it quickly became obvious after the participants’ arrival that most small employers in the landscape gardening sector were utterly unprepared and did not have sufficient capacities to smoothly receive, accompany and integrate the participants in their companies. This challenge was further aggravated by the poor alignment between the participants’ qualifications and the German reference occupation. It is no coincidence that the few cases of neglect and accidents came primarily from these small employers. To attract small employers in future cohorts, the TEAM project should implement different support structures that provide extensive services and guidance tailored to individual employers.

The aspiration of accessibility versus reality. While the SPE’s mandate to make the TEAM project accessible to everyone is commendable, this results in a series of tangible difficulties: (1) Not all participants have the same ability to learn German, either due to different intellectual competencies or socio-economic conditions, such as having a reliable internet connection and personal computer to participate in online classes and being free of caretaking responsibilities to dedicate themselves fully to learning. (2) Not all participants can live off the same stipend. Participants in large urban centres with family responsibilities have higher living costs than those who live alone and/or in secondary cities or rural areas. (3) Not all age groups are relevant to the TEAM project. Landscape gardening, electricians and professional nursing are physically demanding jobs, and employers are looking for people who have the stamina and conditions to fulfil these jobs effectively for the foreseeable future. Additionally, admitting someone in their late 40s is an ethical decision, as this person will not be able to work sufficient years to have an adequate pension in Germany. Already today, the poverty risk among people above 65 years in Germany is one of the highest.²¹⁴ To make the TEAM project truly accessible for everyone, the SPE should implement more customization in the preparation phase and ensure clear communication of age-related restrictions.

Insufficient information on tax deductions and social security contributions. Coming from a country with a large informal sector, participants are often surprised by the difference between their gross and net earnings in Germany. Although TEAs and employers seek to provide participants with realistic expectations about their net earnings, the information is not fully understood or not sufficiently reinforced until they are in Germany and receive their first salaries. Providing participants with customized financial planning sessions, where future net salary projections are analysed against the cost of living in Germany and remittances sent to Colombia, would help them form a more realistic understanding of their future financial situation.

Lack of structured post-arrival support. When arriving in Germany, many TEAM participants report falling into an emotional low after the initial excitement. They face a wide range of administrative tasks, from opening

²¹⁴ Statista (2024). Altersarmut in Deutschland. Accessed online: <https://de.statista.com/themen/11967/altersarmut/>

a bank account to renewing their visa, which can easily seem overwhelming. During this process, participants rely entirely on the goodwill and capacity of their employers, as neither the SPE nor the BA-ZAV are institutionally responsible for post-arrival support. When the link between participants and employers is ineffective, or worse, breaks down, participants are left to manage on their own, as highlighted by the case of “Miguel” (see Box 5). More readily available assistance in Spanish is needed for newly-arrived TEAM participants to cope with the emotional toll of migration and to receive practical guidance concerning administrative matters and/or when faced with an emergency.

Absence of a monitoring and learning system. Would it not be for this study, the success and lessons learnt of the TEAM project would be largely unknown. Given the exploratory nature with which the project had been developed and implemented, neither the SPE nor the BA-ZAV have established an effective monitoring system of the TEAM project that allows to measure results, gain operative insights across cohorts and take informed decisions. For example, critical data such as exam failure rates or participants and employer satisfaction levels are not systematically captured. In addition, there is no effective mechanism to screen applicants at the onset of the recruitment phase to exclude double applications. The actors of the project, as well as future projects that might aspire to repeat TEAM in other contexts, would benefit immensely from a properly established monitoring and learning system.

Systemic barriers

Difficulty of the German language. Learning German is an ambitious endeavour. The TEAM participants are required to learn German in record time and are under considerable stress to perform, considering the stakes involved. The language courses, however, are standardized and fail to offer customized learning opportunities. Even when participants pass level C1 and start employment in Germany, most are still far from being able to speak German effectively at work or in private life. This creates real problems when interacting with colleagues or German authorities. While the TEAM project cannot drop the German language proficiency requirement, more can be done to facilitate the language learning process. This could include individual language learning diagnostics and more customized support. Employers might also need to rethink the current organization of language learning and explore ways to alleviate the pressure and pace of the current model.

Complexity of the German TVET system. The Skilled Immigration Act has not resolved the fundamental dilemma of German labour migration policy. Germany relies on high-level, state-certified qualifications, with its dual apprenticeship system widely praised internationally. However, the vocational training structures in Colombia and many other source countries for migrants are less developed. The contrast between Germany’s highly formalized VET system and the often informal or theory-based vocational training in other countries creates a significant barrier. This discrepancy, combined with the bureaucratic and time-consuming processes required to establish professional equivalence—*Gleichwertigkeitsprüfung* (equivalence assessment) or the *Kenntnisprüfung* (proficiency exam)—is a key bottleneck of the TEAM project. While it is beyond the scope of the TEAM project to alter Germany’s TVET system, strategies and best practices should be proactively identified, documented and shared with employers and other stakeholders involved in the TEAM project. Additionally, participants need to be fully informed about the complexities of the TVET system during the application stage.

Absence of a whole-of-government approach to labour migration. Despite labour migration featuring at the top of political agendas, Germany resembles a patchwork rug when it comes to the implementation of migration policies. On the whole, there is insufficient coordination of the structures of integration policy at the federal level, as well as between the Federal Government and the states. For example, skills recognition and residence requirements differ at state level and are difficult to grasp for employer and participants alike. Similarly, the Colombian labour migration ecosystem remains disconnected: Colombian consulates in Germany appear to be largely unaware of the TEAM project and do not currently play an active role in

supporting the participants during their arrival and integration in Germany. Additionally, there is not any systemic support offered to participants who return from Germany to Colombia. Finally, Colpensiones has so far not been included in the design of the project, e.g. to enable TEAM participants to transfer their social security contributions from Germany to Colombian through forging a bilateral agreement. To navigate this challenging environment, the TEAM project could more actively forge ties with welcome centres, the IQ network, and similar relevant initiatives to support employers in Germany. On the Colombian side, the SPE could involve the consulates system in Germany and Colpensiones more pro-actively in the post-arrival phase as well as identify options to support participants who return to Colombia. Finally, employer-to-employer exchange should be encouraged to share lessons learned and best practices.

Weak welcome culture. Despite becoming the world's second most popular destination for immigrants after the USA, Germany still lacks a true welcome culture that readily accepts, welcomes and integrates international migrants. The fact that one of the first official documents that the TEAM participants receive from German authorities is a "deficit note" (and not, for example, an improvement plan) illustrates a country and society that have not yet learned to embrace migration as a positive and enriching phenomenon. This is further underpinned by the TEAM participants' first interactions with their German colleagues, which is often perceived as "rough" or distant. Similarly, findings from this study show that employers also agree that more needs to be done at the company level to facilitate integration. Ultimately, the creation of a welcome culture is, of course, a political and societal task. The TEAM project can support this process by e.g. strengthening cooperation with employers and making intercultural communications training for German employees a mandatory requirement for participation in the project.

While there are some critical barriers in the labour migration process (e.g. the complex German TVET system) that the TEAM project can only mitigate, there are several tangible measures that could be undertaken by the project partners to strengthen the future TEAM cohorts.

Way forward

A series of recommendations have been identified and linked to possible institutional arrangements and the four phases of the migration cycle. Each recommendation details the responsible actor(s) and corresponding time frame.

Institutional arrangements

The TEAM project's institutional arrangements could benefit from a multi-pronged approach. **Firstly, strengthening SPE staff capacity would enhance its ability to anticipate and navigate the complexities of the programme.** For example, a deeper analysis of degree equivalency between Colombia and Germany, with clear communication regarding potential homologation timelines, is crucial for managing participant expectations.

Secondly, implementing a basic monitoring and evaluation system with adaptive management practices would provide valuable insights. Regular joint reviews of key indicators, satisfaction surveys and check-ins with employers and migrants post-migration allows for data-driven adjustments to the programme. Additionally, reviewing TEAs regularly, combined with targeted improvement plans for underperformers, can optimize partner effectiveness. Finally, establishing an anonymous grievance and complaint mechanism for both migrants and employers will foster a more transparent and accountable environment throughout all project phases.

Thirdly, broadening employer outreach through targeted communication strategies, such as guidelines, newsletters or fairs, would better engage current employers and attract a wider range of potential hiring partners. Clear communication regarding the time commitment and potential challenges involved will help to manage employers' expectations. Formalizing agreements with recruiting employers can reduce last-minute dropouts and strengthen the SPE's position. Providing employers with user-friendly

resources like checklists and cheat sheets for navigating the recruitment and migration process can increase efficiency and transparency.

IA1	Strengthen the staff capacities of the TEAM project by employing at least one more operational staff within the SPE
Key actors	SPE
Time frame	Medium (up to 24 months)

IA2	Revise the occupations enlisted in the TEAM project to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) undertake a deeper analysis of degree equivalency between Colombia and Germany and potential homologation timelines, (2) do a labour market projection of the Colombian professions to prevent a “brain drain” effect in the medium term, and (3) expand the scope of accepted Colombian degrees beyond those issued by SENA to offer a wider talent pool
Key actors	SPE, BA
Time frame	Short (up to 12 months)

IA3	Establish a monitoring and evaluation system with adaptive management practices encompassing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) regular joint reviews of key indicators, (2) performance metrics for service providers (TEAs and language schools), (3) satisfaction surveys with migrants pre and post-arrival, and (4) satisfaction survey with employers pre and post-arrival.
Key actors	SPE, BA
Time frame	Short (up to 12 months)

IA4	Establish an anonymous grievance and complaint mechanism for both migrants and employers
Key actors	SPE, BA – implemented by an independent third party
Time frame	Short (up to 12 months)

IA5	Strengthen employer outreach and engagement through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) newsletters and fairs to attract a wider range of potential hiring partners, (2) formalized agreements to avoid last-minute dropouts, (3) user-friendly resources like checklists, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and cheat sheets for navigating the recruitment and migration process, and (4) encouraging employer-to-employer networks.
Key actors	BA, AHK, employers

Time frame	Short (up to 12 months)
IA6	Identify a suitable mechanism to enable participants to access portable social security benefits through: (1) evaluating the feasibility and effectiveness of concluding a bi-lateral agreement between Colombia and Germany, drawing upon lessons learnt from similar agreements Colombia holds with Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Spain and Uruguay (2) evaluating other options at administrative level through Colpensiones.
Key actors	SPE, BA, Colpensiones
Time frame	Short (up to 12 months)

Migration

Several measures could strengthen the migration phase of the TEAM project. **First, ensuring potential candidates receive comprehensive pre-selection information is crucial.** This includes realistic timelines for family reunification, clear explanations of potential job profile differences and access to tools like gross-net tax calculators. Transparency around these factors can manage expectations and improve informed decision-making.

Secondly, streamlining the selection process can benefit both employers and candidates. Collaboration with TEAs and employers to establish clear timeframes for document review and interview scheduling will enhance efficiency. Offering virtual interview options and providing at least 10 days' notice for interview times will accommodate candidate needs. Additionally, allowing employers some flexibility in interview structures can cater to specific hiring requirements. Finally, establishing clear procedures for handling multiple applications, providing feedback to unsuccessful candidates and recording re-application eligibility will promote transparency and fairness.

Thirdly, the language learning component can be further tailored to individual needs. Introducing a diagnostic test after recruitment, but before course commencement, allows for targeted instruction based on individual proficiency. Offering a part-time language learning option caters to candidates with caregiving responsibilities or those requiring a less intensive pace. Furthermore, dedicating specific class time to job-specific vocabulary and practice equips participants with the necessary language skills for their future roles. In addition, employers could invest in German tutors or hire universities with a wider range of language learning offerings.

Fourthly, addressing financial considerations and drop-outs can improve programme retention and support. Encouraging employers to adjust language stipends based on individual circumstances, such as family size and location, ensures financial security. Introducing a flat rate in COP with adjustments for inflation simplifies budgeting. For drop-outs, providing follow-up support can facilitate their reapplication to future cohorts or reintegration into the Colombian labour market.

Finally, pre-departure preparation should encompass both employers and migrants. Cultural awareness training for employers, along with guidance on preparing direct supervisors and colleagues, fosters a more welcoming environment. Implementing a "buddy system" at the company level can further support new arrivals. Equipping migrants with knowledge of their workplace rights in Germany empowers them to navigate their new professional landscape effectively.

M1	Create an applicants' package with vital information about the TEAM project including realistic timelines for family reunification, clear explanations of potential job profile differences, portable social security benefits, and access to tools like gross-net tax calculators
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Key actors	SPE, BA, TEAs, Colpensiones
Time frame	Short (up to 12 months)

M2	<p>Create and implement SOPs for the selection and interview process including:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) timeframes for document review, (2) virtual interview options, (3) providing at least 10 days' notice for interview scheduling, (4) handling multiple applications, (5) providing feedback to unsuccessful candidates, and (6) recording re-application eligibility.
Key actors	SPE, BA, TEAs
Time frame	Short (up to 12 months)

M3	<p>Customize the language course through:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) introducing a diagnostic test after recruitment, but before course commencement, (2) offering individual and target support, (3) offering a part-time language learning option, (4) dedicating specific class time to job-specific vocabulary, and (5) provide participants with German tutors.
Key actors	Language schools, BA, employers
Time frame	Short (up to 12 months)

M4	<p>Customize the language stipends:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) based on family size, location, current salary levels, (2) introduce an inflation-adjusted individual flat rate in COP, and (3) introduce redundancy pays for participants who are dismissed by the employer.
Key actors	BA, SPE, employers
Time frame	Short (up to 12 months)

M5	<p>Strengthen pre-departure preparations for participants and employers through:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) developing a guidebook in Spanish with essential information about Germany, labour rights, and available points of contact, (2) developing mandatory awareness sessions for employers and their staff, (3) introducing "buddy systems" at the company level to integrate participants, and (4) connect participants with the Colombian diaspora in Germany.
Key actors	BA, SPE, employers, Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the embassy and consulates in Germany and Colombia Nos Une.
Time frame	Short (up to 12 months)

Arrival and integration in Germany

The TEAM project can strengthen support for participants and employer during the arrival and integration phase through several initiatives.

Firstly, compiling a comprehensive resource list of public services and civil society organizations at national and federal levels can guide employers and migrants in navigating paperwork, integration processes and even legal issues, potentially with support from Colombian consulates.

Secondly, establishing an online exchange platform for Colombian migrants from different cohorts and occupations would foster peer-to-peer support and knowledge sharing. This could be particularly valuable for navigating professional challenges and cultural adaptation.

Thirdly, creating a dedicated counsellor position within the BA-ZAV, the Colombian consulates or similar institutions would provide a vital support resource for migrants up to 18 months after arrival. Financing this position through a levy on employers could ensure long-term support for participants. Fourthly, involving Colombian migrants more directly in selecting their living arrangements, such as finding roommates, could promote a sense of agency and increase comfort levels upon arrival. Finally, ensuring seamless continuation of German language learning post-arrival is crucial for long-term success. This could involve collaborating with language schools or online platforms to facilitate ongoing language development.

AI1	Support employers and participants with administrative matters through a comprehensive resource list of relevant public services and civil society organizations at national and federal levels
Key actors	BA
Time frame	Short (up to 12 months)

AI2	Establish an online exchange platform for Colombian migrants from different cohorts and occupations, potentially with support from Colombian consulates
Key actors	SPE, BA, consulates
Time frame	Short (up to 12 months)

AI3	Create a dedicated counsellor position within the BA-ZAV or similar institutions to provide a vital support resource for participants up to 18 months after arrival
Key actors	BA
Time frame	Long (up to 36 months)

AI4	Ensure seamless continuation of German language learning post-arrival
Key actors	Employers, language schools
Time frame	Medium (up to 24 months)

Permanence

For participants seeking family reunification, the project could offer guidance and support throughout the process, easing the transition for families. Additionally, exploring options to facilitate

skills recognition for spouses and children of participants planning to move to Germany can bolster their employability and contribute to a smoother overall family integration.

P1	Provide participants seeking family reunification with legal advice and guidance
Key actors	Law advisory (public / private)
Time frame	Long (up to 36 months)

P2	Explore options to facilitate skills recognition for spouses and children of participants planning to move to Germany
Key actors	BA, AHK
Time frame	Long (up to 36 months)

Return

For those who choose to return to Colombia, the TEAM project can offer valuable reintegration support. Developing a programme that assists returning migrants in re-entering the Colombian labour market leverages their acquired skills and knowledge. This programme could include career counselling, job search assistance and recognition of their German experience, ensuring a successful reintegration and maximizing the overall impact of the project.

R1	Assist returning participants through: (1) career counselling, (2) job search assistance or entrepreneurship training, and (3) recognition of German qualifications.
Key actors	SPE, TEAs
Time frame	Short (up to 12 months)

Annex 1: Project cohort by status

The overview below provides an overview of the six cohorts of the TEAM project by status whereby:

- Vacancies refers to the number of vacancies that the employers were originally recruiting for
- Applicants refers to the number of applicants who participated in the interview process
- Selected refers to the number of participants who started the German languages classes
- Contracted refers to the number of participants who successfully concluded the German languages classes and started employment in Germany
- Homologated refers to the number of participants who had their qualifications recognized either immediately before taking up employment in Germany or once being employed in Germany
- Permanent residence refers to the number of participants who are employed in Germany and have obtained permanent residence.

Note, due to the lack of a centralized monitoring system, some of the information below is incomplete and/or unknown.

TEAM 1.0 (2021)

Occupations	Vacancies	Applicants	Selected	Contracted	Homologated	Permanent residence
Agricultural production technologist	10	unknown	25	25	5 (ongoing)	0
Industrial electrical technologist	20	unknown	44	44	unknown (ongoing)	0
Professional nurse	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	30	277	69	69	5	0

TEAM 2.0 (2022)

Occupations	Vacancies	Applicants	Selected	Contracted	Homologated	Permanent residence
Agricultural production technologist	0	0	0	0	0	0
Industrial electrical technologist	78	184	80	54	28 (ongoing)	0
Professional nurse	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	78	184	80	54	28	0

TEAM 3.1 (2023)

Occupations	Vacancies	Applicants	Selected	Contracted	Homologated	Permanent residence
Agricultural production technologist	0	0	0	0		
Industrial electrical technologist	0	0	0	0		
Professional nurse	112	372	112	ongoing		
Total	112	372	112	ongoing		

TEAM 3.2 (2023)

Occupations	Vacancies	Applicants	Selected	Contracted	Homologated	Permanent residence
Agricultural production technologist	0	0	0	0		
Industrial electrical technologist	0	0	0	0		
Professional nurse	70	300	83	ongoing		
Total	70	300	83	ongoing		

TEAM 3.3 (2023)

Occupations	Vacancies	Applicants	Selected	Contracted	Homologated	Permanent residence
Agricultural production technologist	0	0	0	0		
Industrial electrical technologist	69	324	74	ongoing		
Professional nurse	0	0	0	0		
Total	69	324	74	ongoing		

TEAM 4.1 (2024)

Occupations	Vacancies	Applicants	Selected	Contracted	Homologated	Permanent residence
Agricultural production technologist	0	0	0	0		
Industrial electrical technologist	10	78	unknown	ongoing		
Professional nurse	50	131	69	ongoing		
Total	60	209	69	ongoing		

Annex 2: Perception surveys

As part of this study, two non-representative perception surveys were conducted with TEAM project participants and employers. Each survey asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements using a Likert scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly Agree. The participant survey was conducted in Spanish and the employer survey in German.

Perception survey: Migrant workers

Objective: To assess the experiences and perceptions of Colombian migrant workers during their preparation and employment in Germany.

Introduction

Dear participant,

On behalf of the World Bank, the German Federal Employment Agency and the Colombian Public Employment Service, we cordially invite you to participate in an online survey. This survey is designed to collect information on the experiences of Colombian migrant workers in the framework of the project 'Skilled Colombian Workers for Germany' (TEAM).

Please note that your participation in this survey is completely voluntary and your identity will remain anonymous. Your answers will contribute to a study that seeks to understand the experiences of Colombian migrant workers, German employers and Colombian recruitment agencies involved in the TEAM project. The results of the study will be used to improve future iterations of the TEAM project and other similar labour exchange projects.

The estimated time to complete the survey is 15 minutes. For any questions about the scope and purpose of the survey and the study in general, please contact [contact details of the research team].

Starting the survey

To ensure that our questions are appropriately tailored to your specific participation in the TEAM project, please indicate the current status of your participation:

- I have decided to withdraw from the TEAM project during or after the training and preparation phase. [Selecting this option will activate sections A, B, C and F - questions 6 and 7].
- I am currently in Colombia, undergoing training and preparing for work in Germany. [Selecting this option will activate sections A, B and F - questions 6 and 7].
- I am currently working in Germany for a German company. [Selecting this option will activate sections A, B, D and F].
- I have returned to Colombia after working in Germany. [Selecting this option will activate sections A, B, D, E and F].

I identify myself as

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- I prefer not to say

Age

- <20
- 20-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- >60

Profession

- Nurse
- Industrial electronics
- etc.

TEAM project cohort

- TEAM 1.0 (2021)
- TEAM 2.0 (2022)
- TEAM 3.1 (2023)

- TEAM 3.2 (2023)
- TEAM 3.3 (2023)
- TEAM 3.3 (2023)
- TEAM 4.1 (2024)
- Not sure.

Please indicate the year in which you started studying German.

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements, where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly agree.

A) Motivation for participating in the TEAM project

I decided to participate in the TEAM project because:

1. there are scarce job opportunities in Colombia.
2. I wanted to gain international work experience.
3. I was looking for professional development and training opportunities.
4. I had family and/or personal reasons.
5. the TEAM project is a stepping stone to advance my professional goals.
6. I wanted to improve my income.
7. I was aware of the positive experiences of other people who had participated in the project.
8. I was attracted by the idea of living and working in Germany.

B) Before departure

1. The registration and application process on the job website was simple and easy to use.
2. I was well informed about the job opportunities available in Germany when I applied for the project.
3. I received adequate support during the language training and assessment phase.
4. The information and assistance provided for obtaining visas and other legal requirements was sufficient.
5. The financial compensation offered for participating in the German course was adequate.
6. I felt prepared and well-informed about living and working conditions in Germany before my departure.

C) Withdrawal decision

1. I was not able to pass and complete the required language training.
2. I was not able to obtain the necessary visa and other legal documents.
3. I received another job offer or business opportunity elsewhere.
4. Changes in my personal situation forced me to remain in Colombia.

5. The job offer did not meet my expectations.
6. The recruitment process was excessively long.
7. I was concerned about discrimination and difficulties in integrating in Germany.
8. Were there any other factors that motivated your decision to leave? (Yes / No) a. If yes, please specify.

D) During migration

1. Upon arrival in Germany, I received adequate guidance and support from my employer.
2. Upon my arrival in Germany, the Bundesagentur für Arbeit provided me with adequate guidance and support.
3. My actual responsibilities and working conditions were in line with my expectations and with the initial offer of the employer.
4. I feel welcomed and valued by my German colleagues.
5. My work experience in Germany has provided me with valuable new skills for my profession.
6. I have access to sufficient support networks during my stay in Germany.
7. The cost of living and personal expenses in Germany are manageable and in line with my expectations.
8. I face barriers related to language, culture or social norms that have had a negative impact on my work and life in Germany.
9. I can easily send remittances to Colombia, and these contribute significantly to my family's livelihood or my investments there.
10. The process of accreditation of my professional qualification was simple and understandable.

E) Returning to Colombia

1. I would have preferred to stay in Germany to continue my career.
2. I decided to return to Colombia for personal reasons.
3. I decided to return to Colombia for professional reasons.
4. The skills and experiences I gained in Germany have improved my job prospects and business opportunities in Colombia.
5. Based on my experience, I would recommend the TEAM project to other potential Colombian migrant workers.
6. My overall experience with the TEAM project has had a positive influence on my personal and professional life.

F) Suggestions for improvement

1. I believe that the TEAM project should be expanded and replicated in other countries.
2. The Colombian government should provide more support and resources to returning migrant workers.

3. More training on living and working in Germany would have helped me to integrate more quickly and effectively.
4. I would have benefited from continuous coaching and networking services during my stay in Germany.
5. I would have benefited from maintaining permanent contact with TEAM project staff and other Colombian migrant workers during my stay in Germany.
6. German employers and staff would benefit from learning more about Colombian culture and working styles.
7. Transnational employment agencies should offer more support during the training and recruitment phases.
8. Do you have any other recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the TEAM project? (Yes/No)
 - a. If yes, please explain.

Perception survey: Employers

Objective: *To assess the perceptions and experiences of German employers in the identification, recruitment and employment of Colombian migrant workers.*

Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the World Bank, the German Federal Employment Agency and the Colombian labour administration, we would like to invite you to participate in an online survey. The aim is to find out about the experiences of German employers in the framework of the project 'Skilled Colombian Workers for Germany' (TEAM).

Please note that participation in this survey is entirely voluntary and that your identity will remain anonymous. Your answers will be included in a study that will analyse the experiences of Colombian migrant workers, German employers and Colombian recruitment agencies in the framework of the TEAM project.

The estimated time to complete the survey is approximately 15 minutes. If you have any questions about the scope and purpose of the survey or the study as a whole, please contact [contact details of the research team].

Starting the survey

To ensure that our questions are tailored to your specific involvement in the TEAM project, please clarify the current status of your company's involvement:

- Our company currently employs and/or has previously employed Colombian migrant workers who are part of the TEAM project [*Selecting this response will activate the entire survey*].
- Our company plans to hire Colombian migrant workers through the TEAM project in the near future [*Selecting this response activates items A), B) and E) - questions 4 and 5*].

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements, where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree.

A) Motivation for participating in the TEAM project

1. Due to the shortage of skilled labour in Germany and the EU, our company is looking into the possibility of recruiting workers from other continents.
2. Employing people from different backgrounds enriches our corporate culture and fosters a diverse working environment.
3. Colombian migrant workers show a strong work ethic and a willingness to learn and develop in new work environments.
4. The cost of hiring migrant workers from Colombia is generally lower than hiring workers from Germany or other EU countries.
5. Our participation in the TEAM project is in line with our social responsibility strategy and contributes to strengthening the public perception of our company.
6. Are there any other factors that have motivated your company to participate in the TEAM project?
(Yes/No)
 - a. If yes, please describe.

B) Recruitment and selection process

1. When we started the TEAM project, we were given sufficient information to understand the recruitment and selection process, including all deadlines and regulations.
2. From the beginning of our participation in the TEAM project, we have been aware of the skills and abilities of Colombian migrant workers.
3. The process of identification and selection of Colombian migrant workers is well organised and efficient.
4. Colombian migrant workers generally meet the qualification and competence requirements for the respective positions.
5. We are experiencing clear and smooth cooperation with Colombian employment agencies and the Federal Employment Agency.
6. The legal and administrative procedures for the recruitment of Colombian labour migrants are clear and simple.

C) During employment

1. Colombian labour migrants adapt well to the working environment and culture in Germany.
2. Colombian migrant workers are open to training and quickly develop the skills needed for their tasks.
3. The productivity and quality of work of Colombian migrant workers meet the standards of our company.
4. Colombian migrant workers are fluent in German and have good communication skills.
5. The integration of Colombian migrant workers into the company's workforce is going smoothly.
6. Our company knows exactly how it can help Colombian migrant workers to have their professional qualifications recognised.

7. Cultural exchange with Colombian migrant workers offers our employees learning opportunities and broadens their perspectives.
8. We observe considerable professional development among Colombian labour migrants in the course of their employment.

D) General experience

1. Overall, the experience of employing Colombian labour migrants in the framework of the TEAM project has met our company's expectations.
2. The costs of recruiting Colombian labour migrants through the TEAM project are too high.
3. We are satisfied with the support provided by the TEAM project to manage and facilitate the employment of Colombian migrant workers.
4. We are likely to recruit more Colombian migrant workers in the future.
5. We would like to recruit more Colombian migrant workers in the future, but the current legal and administrative procedures are too complex and slow.

E) Suggestions for improvement

1. More training on living and working in Germany would help Colombian labour migrants to adapt better.
2. The process of accrediting the professional qualifications of Colombian migrant workers should be optimised.
3. Colombian labour migrants would benefit from continuous counselling and networking opportunities during their stay in Germany.
4. German employers and employees would benefit from a better understanding of Colombian culture and working methods.
5. Language requirements for the recruitment of Colombian labour migrants should be reduced.
6. More intensive cooperation between German companies, the Colombian authorities and the Federal Employment Agency would increase the effectiveness of the TEAM project.
7. Do you have any other recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the TEAM project? (Yes/No)
 1. Please explain your suggestions.

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