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## Migrants in the job centre: Qualitative findings on migrants' experiences with public employment support services in Germany

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Hamburg Institute  
of International  
Economics

# Migrants in the Job Centre

## Qualitative findings on migrants' experiences with Public Employment Support Services in Germany

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**HWWI Research**

Paper 3-16

by the

HWWI Research Programme

Migration Research Group

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# Migrants in the Job Centre

## Qualitative findings on migrants' experiences with Public Employment Support Services in Germany<sup>1</sup>

Jan Schneider, Michael Fischer, Vesela Kovacheva

### Abstract

The inclusion of migrants into the labour market is considered a key issue in order to achieve better overall integration. However, compared to the German population, unemployment rates are around twice as high among foreigners. One important knob to improve access to the labour market lies in publicly funded counselling and services, a field which has undergone fundamental policy reforms in recent years.

In order to illuminate the realities of everyday-encounters between authoritative services and unemployed migrants, to identify possible shortcomings and draw some conclusions for policy development, this paper focuses on the subjective views and experiences of migrants related to the various employment services and agencies. On the basis of a qualitative interview sample, several patterns of experiences within public employment-related agencies are identified, including the perceived role of counsellors, courses and training measures, questions of diversity, discrimination and transparency as well as the overall outcome in terms of job referral and service evaluation.

While in some occasions successful cooperation between public employment support agencies and migrants searching for career opportunities can be discerned, in a number of cases the situation appears not very promising. Migrants often sense that local Job Centres or Employment Agencies do not respond to their needs and expectations in a satisfying manner. While in principle they seem to recognize diversity as a given challenge (with direct discrimination being a rather rare occurrence reported by migrants in the sample), there are a number of situations in which migrant clients feel disadvantaged and sense that their qualifications, competencies and career plans cannot be met or remain unrespected by the support system. Thus, building up trust appears to be one challenging endeavour on the services' side. Moreover, increasing transparency of procedures and improving the flow of information are considered to be important tasks in order to make employment-related counselling and service delivery more relevant to migrant job-seekers.

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## 1. Introduction

The inclusion of migrants into the labour market is considered a key issue in order to achieve better overall integration into a modern, work-oriented society. Increasing employment rates thus has been a major concern among German policy-makers and social scientists in the last couple of years. However, migrants are still encountering tremendous difficulties as regards the labour market integration. Among those without German citizenship (foreigners), unemployment rates are around twice as high as in the German population. This holds still true even if the three polity levels (national, federal state, and local authority) or geographic regions with differing economic performance and infrastructure are considered. While on the national level the overall unemployment rate for Germans ranged at 9% in 2007 (according to ILO-definition: 8%),<sup>2</sup> the one for non-Germans was at about 20% (cf. Damelang, Steinhardt & Stiller 2007: 20). People with migration background – including those migrants that actually have German citizenship or were born in Germany as offspring of immigrants<sup>3</sup> – are underprivileged as well. Among the 4.6 million unemployed in Germany 2005 (ILO definition), 29% had a migration background, although the share of people with a migration background within the overall population is only 18%.

As education and professional training must be considered decisive factors in terms of getting access to and moving upward in the labour market, it is of high explanatory value, that people with a migration background or foreign nationality in Germany have on average significantly lower levels of education and training than the indigenous German population. According to the 2007 report of the Federal Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration on the situation of foreigners in Germany and the microcensus of the Federal Statistical Office (cf. Integrationsbeauftragte 2007), among those with migration background in employment 36% are without proper training qualification whatsoever (native population without migration background: 11%), while only 14% have a college or university degree (18%). This goes along with employment in jobs which on average require less qualifications, are less prestigious and payed much lower. For people with migration background from particular countries of origin, the share of un-

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<sup>2</sup> The definition of unemployment, and therefore the number of registered unemployed, as applied by the German Labour Administration follows the German Social Code (SGB). It differs slightly from the internationally comparable standard set by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). According to the SGB, a person is recorded as a registered unemployed, if he or she seeks employment of at least 15 hours per week and is filed as such with an Employment Agency or a local administrative institution. Else, in the ILO-definition, which follows the international Labour Force Concept, the volume of the sought-for employment time is not relevant. Here, the status of being unemployed applies to any person between 15 and 74, that is not working for remuneration, self-employment or family work for at least one hour in a one-week-period, but has actively sought work over the four weeks preceding the point in time. Thus, the slightly lower unemployment rates by ILO result particularly from the fact that even people doing very limited payed-for work (e.g., one or two hours per week) are not counted as unemployed.

<sup>3</sup> For definition and discussion of the statistical concept of “migration background” cf. Fischer (2008).

qualified within the working population is even more striking. 60% of those with a Turkish migration background – Turks being by far the largest migrant group – have no formal qualification (Greek: 54%, Italian: 48%). Looking at the level of school education, no detailed data are yet available according to the pupils' migration background. If foreign nationality is considered, the higher the school education, the more disproportionate is the representation of non-Germans. Only 9.6% of the non-Germans pass their A-levels or qualify for college, university and polytechnic schools, as compared to 27% among Germans. 31.2% leave school with a certificate of secondary modern school education (*Realschule*; Germans: 42.6%). Most foreign school graduates (41.7%) achieve a very basic degree after nine years of schooling (*Hauptschule*; Germans: 23.2%) while 17.5% drop out of the school system without any formal graduation (Germans: 7.2%). Partly as a result of that, non-Germans are underrepresented in the systems of dual apprenticeship as well as the university system (cf. Integrationsbeauftragte 2007: 64ff.).

On the labour market, the employment situation of foreigners is in general more contingent upon economic cycles than the German. In periods of economic downturn, their employment rate drops disproportionately, while economic boost leads to a faster growth of employment among the foreign population, if compared to the German. Thus, the foreign labour force has the function of a cyclical shock absorber (cf. Integrationsbeauftragte 2007: 95f., 103ff.). Among those employed, a considerable share works in temporary and/or precarious jobs or has a secondary job (often so-called “Mini-Jobs”). Due to their limited chance to get into paid jobs foreign migrants (including those born in Germany as foreigners) tend to start businesses as their main source of income more often than Germans. Those from the “classic” countries of labour recruitment, above all Greeks, Italians, and Turks, are overrepresented in gastronomy and trade, while in general self-employed migrants are underrepresented in the handcraft sector. Interestingly, business-oriented, knowledge-intensive and freelance services are more frequently offered by self-employed migrants with German citizenship than by non-German migrants (foreigners). However, the vast majority of self-employed migrants run their business in the service sector (96%) and more than two thirds (70%) are so-called one-person-entrepreneurs (cf. Integrationsbeauftragte 2007: 88ff.).

### **Labour market inclusion as a key issue in integration policy**

In 2007, a governmental “National Integration Plan” has been drafted in order to strike new paths and open up better opportunities for the integration of migrants, leading to the establishment of an optimised, evaluated and comprehensive nationwide Integration Programme. Among those setting up the plan's means and goals have been actors from politics and society such as representatives of the Federal Government, the *Länder* (Federal States), local authorities, sci-

entific institutes, associations, religious groups as well as individual experts and migrant personalities. Besides fostering language competencies and access to education and training for youngsters, gender equality, and supporting integration in the spheres of sports, culture, media, science, civic participation and leisure activity, one of the plan's most important issues is improving the opportunities migrants have on the labour market.

The issue is multifold: A gamut of potentially decisive factors interplaying with poor labour market integration of migrants can be discerned, among others: the level of education and formal qualifications, language capabilities, familiarity with the institutional and work-related frameworks and practices, duration of stay, qualifications and their recognition, or employers' reluctance and discrimination. One important knob to improve access to the labour market on the policy side of the host country lies in publicly funded measures carried out by the labour administration. However, the continuously high unemployment rates among migrants suggest, that these efforts are still insufficient and that the full potential of the system to qualify and refer migrants to jobs might not yet be tapped.

In order to identify potential shortcomings and draw some conclusions for further policy development, this paper focuses on the subjective views and experiences of migrants related to the various public employment-oriented services. On the basis of qualitative interviews we seek to identify patterns of experiences within Employment Agencies and Job Centres, which include the perceived role of counsellors and case managers, questions of diversity and discrimination, transparency of procedures, compulsory or complementary courses and training measures, and the overall outcome in terms of job referral and evaluation of the service. Beyond that, the report may shed some light on the question, what role Public Employment Support Services (PESS) may play for migrants at all, compared to other job search strategies.

## **Sample and Method**

Within a broad explorative research project entitled 'Diversity, Integration and the Economy', 58 narrative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with migrants in the cities of Hamburg and Stuttgart. Interviews were conducted by members of the research group as semi-structured conversations, using a guiding set of 198 questions which covered various migration-related biographical data, experiences and attitudes. The interviewees were not chosen among particular ethnic groups as criteria like labour market status, migration status, involvement in regulatory frameworks and experiences within the public service system were more relevant. By not limiting the selection of interviewees to a few national or ethnic groups, it became possible to enhance the diversity within the sample and collect a broad range of perspectives in order to fit the explorative character of the study. The vast majority of interviewees (55) were foreign-born, 21 of whom

within Europe, seven in Africa, three in Northern and Latin America, and 27 in Asian countries (14 in Turkey). Three interviewees were born in Germany as second-generation migrants, while 20 had German citizenship at the time of the interview. More than half of the sample had an educational certificate enabling them to study at universities, colleges or polytechnic schools, eight had a university degree. Among the 58 interviewees, 32 were female and 26 were male. At time of the interview, the youngest interviewee was 25, the eldest 60 years old, whereas all age groups were represented relatively balanced.

An important share of the questions aimed at labour market integration or gainful employment and the role of the relevant public authorities – particularly the employment support services and their staff – within the regulatory framework that affects migrants in Germany. Among the 58 interviewees in the total sample, slightly more than one third (24) were employed at the time of the interview; almost one third each were either self-employed (17) or unemployed/job-seeking (17). Among the unemployed were two persons, that were still either students or within an apprenticeship at the time of the interview, but had been employed or at least part-time working before.

The full interview transcripts underwent content analysis using the computer program “MAXqda”. The textual data were categorised in part on the basis of prior theoretic assumptions (e.g., forms of capital and cultural diversity approaches), and in part through open coding. For the purpose of this paper, a subsample of 33 interviews was chosen in order to explore, describe and evaluate migrants' experiences with Job Centres and Employment Agencies. The special analysis comprised all those interviewees which reported having been in touch with the service system of public employment support in Germany at any point in time.<sup>4</sup>

The next section of the paper provides a brief overview of the institutional and service-oriented regulatory framework for job-seekers in Germany, the most important policy reforms this framework has recently undergone, and some possible implications as to the goal of improving labour market integration of migrants. Thus, it sets a starting point for taking a closer look at the experiences of migrant clients with institutions and counselling staff in Job Centres and Employment Agencies, on which neither reliable figures, nor a distinct body of literature exist so far. Our main empirical findings on migrant's experiences with Job Centres and Employment Agencies, derived from the interview sample, are presented in the third section. The last section of the paper draws some conclusions and may thus serve as point of departure for possible policy development.

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<sup>4</sup> For further details on the analysed interviews see appendix.



## 2. Public Employment Support Services and the altered regulatory framework in Germany

Until the end of 2004, public payments induced by unemployment were exclusively calculated on the basis of the previous wage, even if joblessness continued for several years. Unemployment benefits (*Arbeitslosengeld*) were paid as a replacement for the first 6 to 32 months (depending on previous occupations, duration of employment, and age). These benefits usually amounted to two thirds (67%) of the last net income for those who had children, and 60% for those without children. Unemployment assistance (*Arbeitslosenhilfe*) was paid without a time limit to all those who could not reintegrate into the labour market within the time frame of unemployment benefit payments. It amounted to 57% (53%) of the last net wage. Recipients of either sort of earnings-related public subsidies were served by the Federal Employment Office (later re-named Federal Employment Agency), which administered the insurance system and also provided for active labour market measures and job referrals.

Only those among the jobless and needy, who had not participated in the unemployment insurance system for a sufficient time period (or had not been employed at all), received means-tested social assistance (*Sozialhilfe*). Unlike the unemployment payments, social assistance payments were tax-based and administered by municipal authorities. The fact that also the long-time unemployed received their benefits from the unemployment funds with infinite duration put a great strain on the insurance system, which resulted in the frequent increase of contributions as well as a balancing out of the deficit through additional tax money. At the same time, despite a slight economic upturn at the end of the 1990s, which led to several new jobs, unemployment was still above 10% and rising.

### The broad lines of reform

Major changes took place as result of a reform movement beginning in 2001. This movement received strong impetus after a scandal that shook the Federal Employment Administration: Officials had sugarcoated their referral statistics and presented exaggerated success rates for the labour market integration of job-seekers. The following discussion was accompanied by harsh criticism as to the general performance of the system of public employment support in Germany: Employment agencies were considered as not operating efficiently, falling short of meeting the clients' needs and failing to push the unemployed into searching for a job. Furthermore, the system of active labour market measures was criticised for retaining participants out of the first labour market and thus having de facto disintegrating effects (cf. Jacobi & Kluve 2006). Soon after, in February 2002, an expert commission for modern services on the labour market ("Hartz-

Commission”) was set up by the federal government in order to draft suggestions for policy reform. In the aftermath of the commission's six-months-mandate, starting within a new legislative period, a series of “acts for modern labour market services” were introduced (cf. Buhr & Schmid 2007).

The broad lines of reform followed the commission's report. They included a redesign of the Federal Employment Administration and the introduction of new service measures, and aimed at activating recipients of unemployment benefits. The most drastic innovations were contained in the Fourth Act for Modern Services on the Labour Market, soon nicknamed “Hartz IV”.<sup>5</sup> It dramatically shortened the period in which contributory unemployment benefits can be received. Unemployment benefits are paid now for a maximum of one year (provided the person has worked in a job subject to social insurance contributions; with some exceptions for those older than 50). Furthermore, unemployment assistance and social assistance (the two former basic safety nets) were merged to a new means-tested “unemployment benefit II” (*Arbeitslosengeld II*). The maximum payments from this new tax-financed, flat-rate welfare assistance were fixed only slightly above the level of the former social assistance. This generally means, that a person on unemployment benefits unable to find a new job within a year will “slip” to unemployment benefit II, be obliged (with very limited disregards) to exhaust private fortune or property, and basically live at subsistence level, irrespective of his former income or position.

These far-reaching changes within the system of passive labour market measures suggested also distinct reform steps accompanying them on the side of active labour market policy, i.e. better activation strategies, more efficient training or job creation measures and, not least, the improvement of referral and placement services for job-seekers.<sup>6</sup> On an institutional level, new types of agencies evolved: The Federal Employment Agency and its regional branches remain responsible for all job-seekers receiving unemployment benefit I (short- and medium-term unemployment), while it was tried to transform the institution as such from a public authority to a more dynamic service provider with a cost-oriented organisational and managerial structure. More personnel was shifted to placement and counselling functions as to a better staff-client-ratio. Additionally, contractual arrangements with private service providers and a variety of tools and measures were introduced in order to improve placement, referral and sustainable reintegration (cf. Tergeist & Grubb 2006).

Those clients on unemployment benefit II are administered and served in divided responsibility between the Federal Employment Agency and the local au-

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<sup>5</sup> For detailed accounts and evaluations of the reform acts see e.g. Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales (2006); IZA, infas & DIW (2007); Konle-Seidl, Eichhorst & Grienberger-Zingerle (2007); Jacobi and Kluge (2006).

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the different active labour market measures and their effects see Bernhard et al. (2008).

thorities formerly dealing with social assistance. Several models evolved with regional differences, leading to an overly fragmented (and sometimes contested) delivery system and service infrastructure. In most areas, special consortia or joint associations (*Arbeitsgemeinschaften; ARGE*) were set up on a contractual basis, staffed and funded from both the Employment Administration and municipal budgets to manage the tasks uniformly. However, about 70 local authorities took the opportunity to “opt out” and set up, with additional subsidies from the Federal level, an all-inclusive administrative and service structure without the participation of the Federal Employment Agency. In a few municipalities the creation of joint associations has (yet) failed; thus, the two administrative layers continue to operate in separated responsibility and locations.

Whereas the Federal Employment Agency claims that reintegration of job-seeking clients works best in the few areas where it has retained exclusive responsibility for employment support services (cf. Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2008), substantial and sound evidence on this question does not yet exist. Moreover, it is highly disputed which model is proving more successful and whether this heterogeneity is useful at all. Furthermore, a recent ruling of the Federal Constitutional Court implies that parts of the current joint administrative structures are unconstitutional, and therefore the structures will need to be revised once again. Despite the distinct infrastructure, all three models basically share similar institutional traits and act according to the same legal framework. Thus, they set up publicly accessible Job Centres, in which job-seekers can register, search job-databases and get counselling as to placement, referral and other active labour market measures. Their main goal is inclusion or reintegration of clients in the first labour market on a case-by-case basis. In that respect, the scope of services provided for recipients of unemployment benefit II in Job Centres is much the same as that for job-seekers on unemployment benefit I within the insurance-based system of the Federal Employment Agency, which has regional offices in all areas as well – sometimes next door to the new Job Centres. An OECD report accurately states that the two organisational units are solely “separated by benefit entitlement, not based on clients’ service needs” (Tergeist & Grubb 2006: 16). Thus, within this paper, we shall term these various institutional bodies uniformly as *Public Employment Support Services (PESS)*. The expression *Job Centre* will be confined to denote the “new” service bodies set up after 2005 within the local consortia – even though the public stop-by centres run by the Federal Employment Agency in official parlance are sometimes termed “Jobcenters” as well. For distinctive purposes and when appropriate, however, we will refer to the latter as *Employment Agencies*.

## Employability and the Welfare-to-Work regime

In both areas, the reforms prominently introduced the principle of “rights and duties” (*Fördern und Fordern*; also referred to as “demanding and fostering” or “challenge and promotion”), in which both PESS and the individual job-seeker face mutual obligations. Thus, arguing that welfare recipients should take all their possible chances in order to get out of passive benefit reception and reintegrate into the labour market, it is incumbent upon the client to engage in any opportunities offered by the Job Centre. This may refer to community services and placements in which the worker is paid a so called “compensation for additional expenses” of 1 to 1.50 Euro per hour on top of unemployment benefit II (*Arbeitsgelegenheiten mit Mehraufwandsentschädigung*; also: *1-Euro-Job*). A job opportunity may not be turned down just because it does not correspond to the client's education, profession, former position or personal conception. Rejection of acceptable offers, including training and courses, may result in a cutback in standard transfer payments for several weeks or months; repeated violations of authoritative employment-related obligations could even lead to a complete withdrawal of monetary welfare benefits.<sup>7</sup> Thus, rather than exclusively aiming at referring clients to a regular job, a lot of activities by PESS, especially on the realm of Job Centres for the long-term unemployed, seek to improve the clients' employability in preparation for an eventual reintegration into the first labour market.

The concept of *employability* was introduced in 1997 by the European Commission as an explanation of labour market performance and as a main line of action aimed at the individual job-seeker. Employability by definition relates to a person's ability to successfully offer his or her workforce and enter the labour market on the basis of professional competences and personal decision-making, to maintain a job or, if necessary, to find new gainful employment without being confined to a particular position or employer (cf. Blancke, Roth & Schmid 2000). In the German legal framework the concept was anchored for the first time in 2002, stipulating an assessment of job-related abilities and occupation aptitudes through profiling, once a person is registered as unemployed (cf. Rudolph 2003). Since the enactment of the Fourth Act for Modern Services on the Labour market, employability is considered as a quasi-independent category of activation labour market policies and has been promoted as a major objective of employment promotion (cf. Fertig & Apel 2008). Accordingly, each individual registering with an Employment Agency as job-seeking is assessed and internally given one of four main profiles, determining the means and services considered apt for him or her. Clients with a “market profile” do not require action on the Employment Agency's side, as they are expected to find a position by themselves. Clients given a counselling profile of “demanding” have the appropriate qualifications to get a job in

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<sup>7</sup> Sanctions for recipients of insurance-based unemployment benefits I are less harsh, but they, too, need to be available to the Employment Agency's placement efforts and need to accept reasonable offers (cf. Konle-Seidl, Eichhorst & Grienberger-Zingerle 2007: 20ff.).

the open labour market, but are deemed not being active and motivated enough. The counselling profile of “fostering” refers to job-seekers with active and motivated clients, which are hindered by a lack of qualifications or other competencies. Clients with a “coaching” profile display multiple problem layers; it is not expected that chances of labour market integration can be significantly increased through “demanding” or “fostering”. Most of the municipal institutions providing services in the Job Centres for beneficiaries of unemployment benefit II apply similar profiling mechanisms (cf. IAB 2006a). Furthermore, both system tracks have introduced a binding integration agreement which features the goals, mutual obligations and possible sanctions and which is regarded as an instrument for improving the placement procedure (cf. Konle-Seidl, Eichhorst & Grienberger-Zingerle 2007: 27f.).

### **Migrants within PESS: Possible implications and lack of evidence**

So far, knowledge on the effects of PESS on the labour market integration of migrants is relatively scarce. As stated above, migrants display a much higher general unemployment rate than the native population. But as an additional burden, their representation among the long-term unemployed is overproportionate: In 2007, almost 80% of all unemployed migrants were in that category (meaning they were potential or de facto-recipients of the basic unemployment benefit II), while just slightly above 20% were administered and supported within the Federal Employment Agency's insurance system (unemployment benefit I). Among Germans, the ratio was much more favourable (65% vs. 35%). Accordingly, the representation of people with a migration background among recipients of unemployment benefit II ranges at 38% (around 2 million people). Roughly 1 million of them are not unemployed, but working in low paid occupations, which do not provide them with sufficient income and thus force them to make use of additional welfare benefits. It is on the basis of these figures that the Federal Government's Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration has called for “target-group-specific services and measures in order to improve qualification structure and chances on the labour market for migrants” (cf. Bundesregierung 2007: 117f.).

It might therefore be assumed, that for migrants particularly the consultative and placement opportunities offered by PESS could be important toeholds to improve employability and get out of long-term unemployment.

However, if compared to the German population, foreigners remain slightly underrepresented in active labour market programmes run by PESS – e.g. measures creating employment opportunities (mostly 1-Euro-Jobs), qualification

programmes, promotion of self-employment, external counselling and support with job-search, direct support of employment in the first labour market.<sup>8</sup>

Only recently endeavours have been made to quantify the impact of these active labour market measures on employability, which is particularly due to a lack of established empirical concepts (cf. Fertig & Apel 2008). An important indicator for measuring the efficiency of active labour market programmes is the so-called integration rate (*Eingliederungsquote*). It displays the proportion of people who have found a job on the first labour market in appropriate time (six months) after successful attainment of measures out of the total of people supported in such measures. In 2005 the general integration rate for people with migration background as published by the Federal Employment Agency was lower (28,8%) than for people without migration background (35%), confirming that migrants face more difficulties accessing the labour market even after participating in incentive, placement or training measures (Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2006: 25f.). The same trend is reflected in the figures on specific labour market measures such as job-related programmes or training schemes.<sup>9</sup>

Still it seems important that the role of PESS for migrants as a pathway to employment should not be underestimated.

For different reasons, migrants' job search and access strategies may differ from those of the mainstream population. As shown by annual studies of the job market and surveys among employers (cf. IAB 2006, 2007),<sup>10</sup> in general, pathways into employment have become increasingly diverse in recent times: direct contact to potential employers through initiative applications, "classic" applications on the basis of published job openings in newspapers or online-advertisements, contacts through private employment services or agencies, individual social networks, internships which lead over to permanent employment, and referrals through PESS.

For migrants, it can be hypothesised, PESS have a good potential to be significant and comparatively important gateways into employment: There is evidence, that people with no, or limited, German language utilization in their household

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<sup>8</sup> For statistical figures see Bundesagentur für Arbeit (2007) and the follow-up analyses on the labour market for foreigners, published quarterly.

<sup>9</sup> It is only the so called "measures creating employment opportunities" that seem to prove slightly more efficient for people with migration background than for people without migration background (integration rate of 21,4% vs. 20,4%) For a detailed analysis of the effects of 1-Euro-Job participation on labour market performance, which appear to be quite heterogenous across age, gender, region and former employment career and tend not to be particularly positive for the different migrant groups, see Hohmeyer & Wolff (2007).

<sup>10</sup> The survey is conducted on a yearly basis by the German Institute for Labour Market and Occupational Research (IAB), a research centre under the auspices of the Federal Employment Agency. In the section on pathways into employment firms and institutions are asked for the different means they used to fill their vacancies. In most cases, employers combine several methods to recruit personnel, e.g. placing an advertisement, asking other employees or notifying Employment Agencies of their vacancies.

tend to neither draw on printed job advertisements and internet postings as often as people that use German as the exclusive language in their household, nor put adverts in the paper themselves, nor write applications to employers to the same extent (cf. IAB 2006b). Thus, Employment Agencies and Job Centres might be of crucial importance as agents apt to compensate drawbacks resulting from migrants hesitating to apply such search strategies. This warrants special attention to the relationship between migrant job-seekers and these bodies or their staff, respectively.

Provided that PESS are a relevant gateway for unemployed migrants into jobs, it can be deemed essential for these agencies to ensure good service quality. This can be done on the basis of analysing the effects of certain labour market measures or changes in the client/counsellor ratio and measuring successful labour market integration of migrants on the macro-level. Additionally, it can be considered a fruitful approach to investigate and evaluate migrants' personal experiences in Job Centres and Employment Agencies by qualitative methods – as we intend to do in this paper –, particularly if ways to increase their affinity towards (and acceptance of) PESS are looked for.

On a general level, there has been few investigations into “customer satisfaction” with German PESS (cf. Luedtke 1998), and only recently – in part as a result of the labour market reform – more attention is paid to evaluating services and the level of public acceptance for the Federal Employment Agency (cf. infas 2004, 2005), the Job Centres on the municipal level (cf. Hessisches Sozialministerium 2005) and the overall relationship between citizens and administrative agencies (cf. Grunow & Strüngmann 2008). A recent study by the Institute for Labour Market and Occupational Research (IAB) focused on narrative accounts by counsellors and case-managers in Job centres and Employment Agencies. It was to check whether the reforms have provided them effective means and options, to analyse their personal understanding of their role as a counsellor, and to identify distinct strategies and best-practices in client-interaction (cf. IAB 2006a), thereby providing some insights into the treatment of clients.

However, very little evidence is available in which special reference is paid to migrants and their interaction with PESS. Somewhat alarming evidence stems from the EUMC's reports on migrants' experiences of racism and xenophobia. According to the 2006 study, on average, 13% of migrants in Germany feel discriminated against in public institutions: “Clearly above the average is bad treatment at employment agencies (20%), followed by bad treatment in social service institutions (16%). Perceived discrimination rates are significantly lower at health care institutions (8%) and at social insurance offices (6%).” (EUMC 2006: 35).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> However, the statistics allow no insight into what kind of treatment, factual circumstances and receptions lead to the results. EUMC orientated its survey on a questionnaire developed by a Swedish research group in which positively answered questions to “bad treatment” or “harassment” are equated with experienced discrimination.

For the city of Berlin, a recent qualitative survey on the basis of 77 interviews with migrant customers in Job Centres (cf. Stern, Wecking & Reinecke 2008) allows some first insights into migrants' experiences with PESS. While the diversity-oriented strategy of the Federal Employment Agency has not lead to discernible effects, yet in the Berlin Job Centres, about half of the interviewed migrants were satisfied with the provided services. The results further displayed some isolated incidents of discrimination and a lack of transparency and information regarding the migrant-specific service opportunities (Stern, Wecking & Reinecke 2008: 17-22). Unfortunately, the survey does not specify these problems much further and is not giving voice to the migrants' accounts within a qualitative analysis.

Against this background, the following section of this paper focuses on different personal experiences of migrant job-seekers related to satisfaction with procedures and with their outcome in PESS, treatment by counsellors and perceived incidences of discrimination, which may allow for drawing some conclusions relevant for policy development.



### 3. Exploring Migrants' Experiences with Public Employment Support Services: Empirical evidence from qualitative interviews

Among the 58 migrants in our sample slightly less than one third were registered unemployed at the time of the interview. Yet among the groups of people who had a job (either employed or self-employed) a significant number had been registered as unemployed at some earlier point in their career and therefore had experiences with the system of public employment support in Germany. Therefore, the reports of 33 interviewees – more than half of the total sample – were considered for the explorative account on migrants' experiences with PESS (cf. introduction and appendix).

#### 3.1. Getting referred – just one of several pathways to employment

Just like the overall population trying to get an initial job or struggling for re-employment, migrants do not only rely on PESS. Rather, a variety of other methods and strategies is also applied. Migrants may send speculative applications to potential employers, try to get a contract following apprenticeship, a practical placement or a summer job as student, reply to job advertisements, use the internet, or – for low skilled work – approach potential employers in person by visiting a series of businesses (e.g. restaurants) and asking for an opportunity to work. Moreover, social networks play an important role – often friends or family members refer migrants to potentially suitable jobs. The vast majority of those with unemployment experience – whether they were employed, self-employed or had been employed at an earlier stage at the time of the survey – found their bread-winning occupation through either of these channels.

Generally, a high level of activity and flexibility in orientation can be discerned by analysing the sample. For example, a machinist from Iran, who came to Germany as an asylum seeker in the 1980s and could neither work in this profession nor get adequate retraining, was broadly engaged in the labour market from the very beginning and did various low profile jobs. After losing one occupation and remaining unemployed for some time, he got offered a job as a low-paid cleaner through a friend:

“[At first] I declined. I said I am not a cleaner, it's a shame as I have spent so much time learning my profession. Then I thought it over for several hours and said, well, I am not in my home, I cannot expect anything, how long will it take until somebody offers me a job as machinist? [...] I called my friend and told him I would take the position as a cleaner.” (03)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Numbers in brackets denote interview numbers. For more information about the respective interviewees see the appendix.

A young woman from Poland with a double degree in German Philology and International Relations intensively looked for a job after she immigrated in 2006 and sent out about 130 application letters in just one year (cf. 28); a job-seeking woman from Nigeria, in order to improve her employability, underwent continuous education in computer-operating at her own expenses in a private institute (cf. 31). One Turkish-origin tradeswoman with a degree in business administration succeeded by turning herself to a private, for-profit personnel service in order to find a job (cf. 08). A 39-year old man from Congo who came to Germany in 1990 as asylum seeker and since then has been unemployed just for a few months says: "Since I live here in Germany, I have always found my jobs on my own." (13)

As a general observance, considering the self-employed in the sample, it is noticeable that very few had registered as unemployed some time in the past or got in touch with PESS for start-up subsidies or bridging-allowances, although most had to go through some initial hardships. Those who did file their case at the Employment Agency pro-actively pursued their goal of starting up a small business, considering unemployment a transitory period while preparing for self-employment. Thus they did not expect to get a job referral anyway (cf. 02, 05, 26, 29).

Amongst the migrants with periods of registered unemployment within our sample, it occasionally happened that referrals by public employment support agencies lead to placements in jobs that were experienced as adequate by the individuals. For example a Turkish economist was referred to a position in a bank (cf. 19) or a Ghanaian woman without formal qualification was referred to a vacancy in a nursing home (cf. 21). A young woman from the UK with a master's degree in languages and a consistent employment career, after being without job for just one month, was placed in an institute as a project assistant (cf. 04). However, those interviewees in the sample that looked back at just short periods of unemployment in their career tended not to get placement suggestions by Employment Agencies. Overall, job referrals that lead to stable contracts and satisfying working conditions are rarely found in the sample. Rather, migrants report not having been referred to jobs by the PESS, having been indicated potentially matching vacancies but not being hired by the employer, or having been referred to jobs for which they feel overqualified. For example, for a 39-year old German-Turkish woman with a degree in business administration and social economics, the Employment Agency repeatedly offered temporary jobs that she accepted – yet most of the time working below her qualifications, like in her current position doing secretary work in a publishing house: "I like it, it is fun, it's about interacting and organising, but it's not with a lot of responsibility [...] I am overqualified for this job. [...] it could be that I get unhappy [...] in the long run, you are just the secretary and not taken seriously." (06)

Employment support through direct placement into jobs that correspond to the migrants' wishes is a scarce experience amongst our interviewees.

### **3.2. Workfare jobs: Between helpful gateway and pressurising burden**

Quite a number of those migrants who were, or had been for some time, registered as unemployed report having been referred to jobs below their qualification by the Job Centre, including the so called 1-Euro-Jobs. As temporary workfare employment opportunities those jobs are hardly paid at all; a small "allowance for special expenditures", which often ranges at one Euro, is supplemented by the regular unemployment benefits (cf. section 2). For example, a Moldovan woman with a vocational qualification in education reports that while she is eager to find a position where she could realize her potentials, the Employment Agency expects her to do jobs like laundering, ironing clothes or cleaning (cf. 24). A woman from Chechnya with a degree in engineering reports having been offered kitchen help jobs and therefore abstained from requesting unemployment benefit II (cf. 14). Migrants with a certain vocational qualification naturally – and not unlike the overall population – do not experience it as a helpful labour market instrument if they are referred to basically unpaid jobs below their qualification.

As laid down in the employment-oriented reform acts, the refusal to accept the job in question may be sanctioned by a cutback in unemployment benefits. This might be particularly annoying, if ignorance or misconceptions occur: A recipient of unemployment benefit from Ghana, who came to Germany as an asylum seeker, was referred as a worker to a cleaning company. However, as he reports, he could not take up the job due to medical problems. According to his account, the Job Centre did not get notice of his disease and, consequently, curtailed his benefits (cf. 09). In a similar case, a 35-year old woman without any formal qualification born in Turkey reports having been pressured to accept workfare job offers by the Job Centre in spite of a medical condition that was attested by a physician. Thus she independently tried to find a subsidised training course in a direction that suited her personal wishes (cf. 17). A 52-year old woman from the Czech Republic reports she never received any offers when the Employment Agency was still responsible for her, while the first and only referral to a 1-Euro-Job she got from the Job Centre was endowed with an obligation to accept: "If you don't take this job opportunity we will curtail your unemployment benefits." (20) Overall, this policy of sanctioning is experienced as rather pressurising, leading to a sometimes radical breach with former career plans and self-perceptions. While some clients within the referral system give in to the authorities' suggestions and align themselves to a generally inferior working profile, others become active for their matter. It is because these people have maintained a distinct professional goal, which they aim to reach through appropriate continuous education (see below) or consistent interim positions, why an assignment to an unsuit-

able job through the Job Centre may provoke even further efforts to find something more close to that goal.

However, 1-Euro-Jobs are not always perceived purely negatively. If they are offered in sectors that correspond to the wishes of migrant job-seekers or fit within their career conception, they can be seen as a chance for gaining work experience or getting one's foot in the door. From this perspective, they are much better than no job at all. For example, a woman from Greece without a formal vocational qualification works part-time in elderly care for 1.50 Euro per hour, while having the opportunity to participate in trainings, and comes to the conclusion: "It's not bad." (10)<sup>13</sup> A Polish retail salesman complains that the PESS does not seem to try to find suitable jobs for him but always offers "wrong things" (32). However, he actively asked for a 1-Euro-Job that could provide relevant work experience and was referred to such a job by the Job Centre. He emphasizes that the placement was in line with his personal conceptions:

"This application for the 1-Euro-Job, it is my decision. Nobody forced me to do it. Of course, it depends on the individual. I don't just want to sit, I want to further develop myself, because I am young. I now have a family, I have to do something." (32)

A woman from Uzbekistan with a Ph.D. in Cultural Sciences was referred by the Job Centre to a non-profit agency that places unemployed people in subsidised jobs. At the time, she had been actively applying for a position in the library of a public art museum. However, she suspected that due to her foreign background her chances would be low against fellow competitors within a regular application procedure. Thus, it was on her own suggestion that the agency offered to the museum to take her into a subsidised 1-Euro-position, in order to test her. After this period, she was offered to work the same position with a regular salary, yet for limited working hours (cf. 23).

It can be reasoned from this brief account, that migrants – much like the overall population – experience authorities' power to impose sanctions upon their refusal to accept a job referral as a pressurising arrangement, potentially or effectively constraining them in their professional development. Thus, placements and recommendations which are seemingly arbitrary and which are enforced in a rather paternalistic way may undermine or seriously weaken the base of trust towards the labour administration as a public service institution. On the other hand, there are some examples in which low-profile placements in 1-Euro-Jobs seem to mark a promising interim step on the pathway to achieving gainful employment and full labour market integration. Thus, if suggested carefully and con-

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<sup>13</sup> However, despite the training and experience she was gaining, at the same time the Job Centre referred her to three vacancies in divergent fields of low-profile work (data processing and sales), for which she was obliged to apply for.

sidered in a respectful working alliance, they may even strengthen migrants' belief in the Job Centre being a committed and trustworthy service for them.

### 3.3. Improving employability: Courses, retraining and further education

A considerable number of migrants in the sample has been offered the opportunity to participate in courses or trainings of various kinds by PESS. The range of measures goes from language classes (German or English; cf. e.g. 16, 29, 15) to instructions on how to apply for jobs (cf. 20), to instructional courses on how to become self-employed (cf. 29), to comprehensive vocational further trainings or re-trainings (cf. 17; 29; 31). Opportunities for training or further education are widely appreciated by the migrants in the sample – as ways of gaining knowledge and qualification, but also as chances to become active again and get a glimpse of interesting professional options (cf. 32).

While it is sometimes indicated that case workers or counsellors at the Employment Agency pointed at the possibility of training courses for their clients, there is a larger number of cases where migrants report that they were actively seeking these opportunities – even to the point of “insisting” upon measures apt for them or their career plans. In this context, a woman from Russia whose qualifications as an architectural technician acquired in the Soviet Union had not been recognized in Germany, explains that she was – upon the suggestion of the Employment Agency – supposed to retrain for elderly care but “insisted that I get a retraining as an architectural draftswomen, *at least* as an architectural draftswomen, so I can stay in the job.” (29). Training as a architectural draftswomen (*Bauzeichnerin*) is neither equivalent to the qualified job of an architectural technician (*Bautechnikerin*), nor does it guarantee equal wages. However, it would have allowed her to be employed in an engineering or architectural office. Later, she actually found employment in the corresponding field. In another case, a then job-seeking woman from Turkey found a promising subsidised training opportunity through a newspaper advertisement. While her file at the Job Centre was still pending and she was occasionally offered workfare jobs that she could not accept due to health problems, she directly registered with the non-profit-provider of the course and passed three months of training. Some time later, the Job Centre mandated her to participate in the very training she had just passed: “But when I presented to them my certificates that I had just received, they were quite puzzled.” (17)

Thus, migrants' grasping the nettle can effectively second – or even anticipate – the public services' efforts to improve employability. The findings also indicate that the chances for further training are better for active and confident migrants who name and actively pursue their interests on the basis of certain knowledge of available opportunities. However, there are also cases in which retraining measures or further qualifications were not granted by PESS according to the mi-

grants' wishes. It becomes obvious that the far-reaching discretion on the counsellor's side may negatively affect the outcome, like in the narration of a Russian woman in her Fifties aiming to be re-trained as an accountant: "Well, that man was – how can I say – not joyfully [doing his job]. And thus he told me, 'I could allow you for re-training, but I don't do so.' What else can I say to that?" (24). The above mentioned machinist from Iran, aged 47 at the time of the interview, analyses this reluctance on the PESS' side as fatal for migrants not capable to find work on their own:

"The Employment Agency didn't give me the opportunity to further train myself or learn something new. [...] Thank God I was capable to try [and find work] myself. A lot of foreigners don't have this ability or the techniques, they are supposed to sit at home. And then the Employment Agency complains that you have not been working for ten years. What is one supposed to do? Give me a chance for further education – the whole development of society, new methods, a new system, everything is new. I cannot start something new with my old ideas and the old methods. I have to undergo further training." (03)

This example suggests that courses, retraining and further education measures might be of crucial importance particularly for those unemployed migrants who have undergone training in a less developed country or at a time when technical knowledge and standards in a profession were not equally sophisticated. Apparently, this applies as well to qualifications typically obtained in the former socialist systems, that are no more demanded for, such as the proverbial diplomas in milking or tractor operating.

Of interest as well are the cases of two highly qualified migrants, which were refused German language classes by the Employment Agency, arguing that their command of German language was sufficient for the labour market integration (cf. 14, 23). The migrants themselves, however, felt that their German was not good enough for the sort of jobs they were qualified for and wished to carry out. One of them, a journalist from Uzbekistan, says about her German language competences: "For a journalist, this is too little, I think. Of course, I don't have problems in everyday communication anymore, but for writing, it's too little." (23)

For unemployed migrants it will typically not be affordable to register for comprehensive qualification or training measures within for-profit services on the free market if these are not subsidised or paid for by the PESS. Only one interviewee from Nigeria chose this way. On top of her basic qualification as an administrative tradeswoman, she wanted to train as an operating systems manager at about age 40, but was refused a special grant for an appropriate course by the Employment Agency. Nonetheless, she registered for a course with a private learning institute and covered the tuition fees herself. After a training period of more than one year, she had to pay a final fee to undergo the exam, but again

was not successful in receiving an allowance by any PESS upon her renewed request (cf. 31).

### **3.4 The migrant client-to-counsellor relationship:**

#### **Satisfaction with interpersonal treatment**

A rather clear distinction can be drawn between migrants' experiences with the institutional framework (or the success of its measures for labour market integration, respectively) on the one hand, and the contentment with personal treatment and individual service quality on the other. The latter is contingent upon a gamut of factors, apparently on both sides of human encounters in Job Centres and Employment Agencies. Thus, not surprisingly, the migrants' experience with the staff of PESS within our interview sample is both that of being friendly and committed and unfriendly and not very committed.

Some migrants report positive treatment. Staff of PESS is described as "quite ok" (10), "very helpful" (09), "very friendly" (07) or even "super, super nice" (06) and "very, very nice" (21). These positive personal accounts in general can be differentiated from the fact that in some cases, migrants at the same time feel that the service agencies put a lot of pressure on the unemployed and report having been asked to do jobs that they were not fit for healthwise (cf. above). Other interviewees felt that the treatment in PESS is all in all not particularly friendly or service-oriented, but rather indifferent or anonymous: "Very impersonal, it begins at the counter, they don't look at you and so on. But of course, that's the same for Germans." (04) Few migrants even report very negative personal encounters with overt unfriendliness on the counsellor's side. Furthermore, some feel that they were wrongfully suspected of not actually wanting to work (cf. 27; 20) or that they are informed about their obligations in much detail, while not being informed about their rights (cf. 32). The latter accounts mostly stem from rather recent encounters with Job Centres after the labour market reforms. Narrations dating back to interpersonal experiences in Employment Agencies in the pre-reform era tend, on the contrary, to be more positive and emphasize the friendliness on the staff. However, they seem to go along with a more negative evaluation of the service output in terms of referrals to adequate jobs or other employment possibilities. This observation might yield further research into the question, whether migrants associate the recent reform of the PESS system with improvement in terms of job referral output, at the cost of an increasingly rough and impersonal climate, and unfriendly staff.

However, migrants in the sample do not typically experience their treatment at PESS as personally discriminating or assume that discrimination may be a reason for the oftentimes unsatisfying outcome. In one case a woman from Chechnya had to wait for about one hour after the appointed time and had the feeling that people in the office were laughing and chatting while making her wait.

Moreover, she reports not having been greeted. When she presented her certificates of vocational qualification, it was made clear to her in a rather unambiguous way that her chances of succeeding the competition against job-seeking Germans with similar qualifications were low:

“Finally, she told me straightforwardly: ‘You know, there are so many Germans who are just as highly qualified as you. And they also don’t have jobs.’ How could I further speak about the topic with her? I was told very clearly, that I should stay calm and be very happy with the job that I can get at all.” (14)

In other cases, migrants experience legal discrimination as a result of the regulatory framework for work permits that is simply applied by PESS. Thus, a refugee from Iran reports that he found himself several jobs but did not get the permission to work, as he was still in an applicant status for asylum:

“They have to check, the Employment Agency, first the Germans, then EU-nationals, then [...] the asylum seeker. I found 6, 7, 8 jobs, and every time I went there, [...] they said no. I got a refusal every time.” (18).

In yet other cases, age discrimination was experienced, for example when a 60-year-old Jewish immigrant from Kazakhstan was refused the possibility to participate in a vocational training programme and suspected that most employers she got referred to by the Employment Agency did not accept her and preferred younger people (cf. 22). A 52-year old woman without formal qualification, who had arrived from former Czechoslovakia to Germany as early as 1985, was asked as to whether she did not want PESS to send her to retraining or apprenticeship after she had lost her job in 2002, and answered: “Training at age 53? Does that do any good? They won’t pay for that!” (20). In another case, a then 38-year old machinist from Iran (cf. above), after losing his job, sought for further education in order to improve employability:

“I went to the Employment Agency to register as unemployed. I wanted to do advanced training. [...] but] they said we cannot give you training. I said, why can’t you give me training? They said, well, because you’re 38; when you do re-training for two years, you’re 40 – with 40 you have no chance finding a job on the labour market.” (03)

However, all in all, neither overt nor covert discrimination (especially due to race or ethnicity) is a regular issue in the accounts derived from our interview sample. Moreover, perceived hardships or disadvantages are not named in terms of discrimination by migrants.

One point that is seen as problematic by several respondents is the fact that their contact persons in PESS are ever-changing, or that one counsellor is only rarely following through in the coaching process. Even though the recent reform aimed at improving consistency and a stable working alliance between client and



the responsible counsellor, there are several accounts indicating this as an issue in the Job Centres run by the joint consortia administering unemployment benefit II and associated services (cf. 09, 31, 32). For example, a young job-seeking Pole says that “when you sign in, you always get a new [contact person] and somehow trust is gone – or any documents.” (32) A Nigerian tradeswoman, too, complains that the contact persons change: “That is the worst thing. [...] Then I have to start from the beginning, who I am, what I have done, why I call, and so on.” (31).

Furthermore, unsatisfying outcomes of the contact with the employment services are sometimes explained with a lack of commitment or competence. “The staff doesn’t really want to help”, says a Greek software developer (25). An English secretary complains that she has received wrong information and was classified in the wrong job sector – “that was pretty frustrating” (04). A young woman from Afghanistan qualified in Germany as media assistant, looking back at the time she had registered as job-seeking with the Employment Agency, states: “I am not at all happy with it. They have listened to me, listened to my goal, looked at my certificates, but in the end, what I wanted, they could not really help me. So I helped myself. Today, I don’t go to the Job Centre anymore, when it comes to those things; they are incompetent.” (12) It may be considered unfortunate, that even young and well educated migrants display a large degree of scepticism or even sound portion of irony, when it comes to evaluating individual counselling services – like a 36-year old woman of Turkish origin with a degree in business administration, in retrospect on her first and only serious encounter with the Employment Agency in the 1990s:

“My first contact person [...] wanted to feed my profile, my data into their internal system, but somehow it didn't work – they were about to move, a bit chaotic, and then she said, well, it's not all that important anyways, we rather won't be able to refer you [to a job]. You're an academic and we rather don't do anything for academics, I don't have to put in your data completely.” (08)

Ever since then she has avoided PESS and turned to a private, for-profit personnel service in order to get referred to vacancies.

Furthermore, some migrants have gained the impression, that various members of the staff at PESS may handle the same cases differently. A Turkish secretary who was offered a software training course says that, when talking to the other job-seekers on the course, it turned out that

“a case was handled very differently by different case workers. There were people who say, ok, I have to, I have to dictate, I have to make so many applications each week. There are no ifs and buts. There were some who really had to beg to be able to do this course. There were others, ‘yes, here is the whole catalogue of further training possibilities, [...] make your choice.’ So, they are not all the same.” (06, cf. also 13)

The above cited Turkish woman with a diploma in business administration also determines considerable discretionary power for the case workers:

“If you live here, you know through acquaintances and friends who have done it, they say, hmm, the case workers, they have more possibilities now. You should be on the same wavelength with the case worker, don't ask for too much and don't annoy them, then it works.” (08)

One example of a beneficial outcome through good relations between the client and the contact person in the PESS is reported by a young female professional from the UK, who had registered for the Employment Agency's temporary employment scheme and was repeatedly offered temporary jobs.

“They called me, had my data, and a nice female staff member from the Employment Agency apparently, in the back of her head, reminded herself of me, when they internally asked themselves, who can it be [that we can refer to a particular vacancy]?” (04)

It becomes apparent from the analysis, that the interpersonal relationship between the migrant client and the responsible staff is crucial. Particularly, the counselor's competencies and the way he or she encounters a job-seeking migrant can have a significant effect on retention in service and the level of trustworthiness experienced by the migrant client. While this should hold true for the general population, it can be deemed even more important for migrants as a group with a higher potential for vulnerability and factual disadvantages on the labour market.

This leads us to the question whether PESS are perceived as not only respecting difference, but, moreover, actively considering diversity in their referral and placement services and thus acting culturally sensitive.

### **3.5. Diversity-orientation and multicultural organisational competencies**

From the analysis of our interviews there is not much evidence of PESS seeking to actively look out for, and make use of special or divergent qualifications of migrants. Quite to the contrary, there are some complaints about the narrow and inflexible categories that are used to classify job seekers and about case workers' ignorance of certain language, cultural or professional competencies that migrants may have. For example, a social scientist from Cameroon with a degree in pedagogics reports that there was no such category in the form used to collect information about qualifications. The closest available category was “teacher” (cf. 11). In other cases, the query of data on vacancies can produce fatal errors and lead to potentially adequate jobs slipping through the client's fingers. An English secretary and assistant in scientific projects recalls:

„They have a very limited search engine at the Employment Agency and the [entered] key words have to correspond with the original key words. And if you don't enter it exactly that way, when you have a typo, or when the words have not been stored, then it doesn't work out. For example when you enter 'university education', but the respective job advertisement doesn't contain this word, you won't find the job opening, although it may be perfect for you, that's unbelievable. I have experienced that these people, sitting in front of their computers and think, o.k., I'll have to enter all this stuff into the computer, are focused on the machine and actually ignore the person that's sitting there.“ (04)

While this could be a problem that any job-seeker is facing to some degree, it might be particularly relevant for migrants with limited command over the language and restricted vocabulary. Correspondingly, data entry masks operated by the case workers in the services do not seem to allow for the correct registration of foreign or mixed educational backgrounds and impose a very limited perspective on the staff:

“She kept asking me why I did not have the 'Abitur'. She didn't understand that I went to University in Germany with my master's degree from England. They simply are totally fixated on their PC data entry mask, and you have to fit in there at all costs. Otherwise they are not up to it and you find nothing.” (04)

This might apply even more so to migrants with very peculiar and rare qualifications, like in the case of an Iranian refugee who was an expert in Persian dance performances – he was told by the Job Centre that there was no job in this field, but then could get regular engagements at a theatre company through private connections and castings (cf. 18). Several migrants in the sample report that they did not get what they expected in terms of a competent and case-oriented employment support service. Oftentimes, there seems to neither be a detailed enquiry into what exactly a person has done, nor what realistically can be achieved in his or her professional career. Clients' special competences (e.g., languages) and conceptions resulting from their migrant background apparently are barely accounted for (cf. 04, 12, 20, 22, 23). Some migrant job-seekers suspect that staff in PESS mostly does things anyone could do by himself/herself:

“You come in, introduce yourself, you briefly talk about the competences you have or which things you can do well, which subjects you are good at. And then they look up in their PC, on the internet, which jobs there are available – I could do that from home as well, I don't need anyone looking things up for me. It's being printed out, handed over – done!” (12)

This superficial treatment may be attributed to a sometimes enormous case-load for an individual counsellor in Job Centres or Employment Agencies. However, it points to an absence of sound case-work, diversity-orientation and multi-

cultural organisational competencies. A Polish respondent feels that on top of that, there are also significant barriers of language and mentality between migrant clients and Job Centre staff that could be overcome by employing more persons with migration background:

“Maybe more educated ethnic German resettlers or foreigners that were born here should work at the Federal Employment Agency. For Turkish people a Turkish person, for Polish a Polish, that would be much, much better, I think. Yes, that would work much better, because then the barrier is gone, regarding mentality. [...] You feel totally different [...] if he knows the language a little, would be an advantage. Certainly, because then you find out more of course, because the people don’t understand everything and cannot say everything with [...] German words.” (32)

Failure of acknowledging the individual case and career preferences then may lead to useless job referrals:

“They just respond to what you have done [in the past]. It is never recorded what you are doing now, whether you are somewhere amidst professional reorientation, they just send it out: This is where he has worked already, thus, yes, that's what most likely he wants to do again, and that's what we do.” (32)

### 3.6. Overall evaluation of services

Migrants’ accounts as to their experiences with PESS leave considerable margin for policy development in several distinct respects. As a referral into suiting and satisfying jobs rarely occurs in the sample, it comes as no surprise that the work of the Job Centre or Employment Agency is often not seen as being or having been very helpful overall. Migrants say that “you don’t get real help” or good consultancy at PESS (33), that the services overall did not help them finding a job (cf. 14), that there was no helpful advice (cf. 18), that they never received job proposals (cf. 16; 28), that they never actually got a job through the PESS (cf. 31) and always had to find work on their own (cf. 13) that the procedures are complicated and time consuming but without any outcome (cf. 31), or that the staff at the employment service is friendly and committed, but still could not help (cf. 07, 09).

An electronic engineer from Uzbekistan tells that she went to the Employment Agency and asked for help in finding a suitable job.

“Then they said: ‘You look for a job and then you come to us and tell us, if you have found one.’ [...] I have to look myself and then, well, just give notice, whether I found something. There was no help from the Employment Agency and also now from the Job Centre. All I had, I made it myself: courses, internships, job. I had to be active myself.” (22)

While currently, a lot of Job Centres are about to set fixed standards as to how rapidly they would like to serve their clientele, there may still be a problem here. Several migrants in our sample report either long waiting periods until they had an interview, difficulties in reaching their contact person by telephone (cf. 02, 05, 27), or very complicated and exhausting procedures: “It was a fight. I really wished that I would never have to do anything with them anymore. Simply [...] the handling of any forms is a struggle already.” (19) In the past, particularly the situation for asylum-seekers applying for a work permit must have been devastating; a Chechnyan refugee reports she showed up for several weeks at the Employment Agency before even getting to draw a number, with staff being overstrained and unfriendly (cf. 14).

Two migrants in the sample feel that the PESS are particularly unhelpful for academics (cf. 06, 08). One of them says she was told by the staff of the Employment Agency that due to her academic background it was unlikely she was going to be referred to a job (cf. above).

There are positive exceptions to the general trend of seeing PESS as not very helpful, but within the sample they are isolated cases. They seem to be grouped particularly around the issue of the Employment Agency supporting the founders of new businesses (cf. 02). Overall, however, learning and getting used to the “fact” that finding a job is not to be expected at PESS can be experienced as an act of overcoming naivety, and of acculturation. In this context, an electrical engineer from Uzbekistan says about the time when she hoped to find a job through the Employment Agency: “I was naive enough to think, that someone would help me now [to find a job]” (22). An economist born in Turkey but educated in Germany says:

“I say it like that, as a normal citizen you rather have no hope, you just know that you can’t have anything from the Employment Agency. It’s like that. And if you go with the expectation, they can help me, then you are disappointed of course. I was not disappointed, I took it with humour. [...] As a stranger, I don’t know... I know families from Poland and Russia that are annoyed. They are new here, they want to do something and are so upset! [...] You just have to go there, that’s how it is. But it is difficult. It takes a long time until you get accustomed to a country and the culture and the society and take certain things with humour.” (08)

Some migrants explain the lack of outcome in structural terms. The staff wants to help, says a migrant from Ghana (cf. 09), but there simply are no jobs available. A woman from Uzbekistan had the chance to gain a more detailed insight into the work of the Job Centre when she found a temporary job in an organization coaching unemployed migrants. While having been a client of the Job Centre before, she now had the opportunity to visit the Job Centre professionally

and sit in on some counselling interviews that took place there. When she had been a normal client, she had felt “quite embittered” and thought “they don’t do a lot and they don’t help. [...] They don’t support [people], why don’t they do that?” (23) Observing the work of the staff at the Job Centre, however, changed her views: “Well, the persons in charge have up to 500 clients, that’s unimaginable, thus, it is impossible to find or look for suitable jobs for every one of those 500 people. You don’t have the time.” (23) Moreover, she feels that the staff lacks an overview over the labour market situation and therefore is not quite able to make helpful suggestions regarding career development.

Of course, migrants do not typically end up with that much of a professional insight in the system's structure and problems. Rather, while most migrants in touch with PESS seem to be clear about the general purpose of the exercise and know their very basic right and duties – particularly the newly introduced possible sanctions following the rejection of job offers –, they often do not seem to grasp the procedures and apprehend the system as such. This may lead to a certain degree of distrust and frustration, if certain coherences or basic facts have to be learned through repeated visits in Job Centres, or if a feeling of exclusion from information arises. Particularly, some migrants, despite sufficient language capabilities and experiences with complicated regulations within authorities, are not aware of the gamut of possible options that PESS potentially can provide. One woman with a Turkish background who grew up and studied in Germany suspects that the Employment Agency might intentionally withhold information on certain measures: “No, I wasn't always well informed on how to get access to these [training] courses anyway, until I addressed it [...] But some particular things they don't give out. Where are possibilities for getting subsidies? Are there allocations or not? Do I qualify or not? There are quite a few things that they probably don't shout from the rooftops deliberately, or else anyone will come and apply for it.” (06)

#### **4. Interpretative conclusions and starting points for policy development**

It was the goal of this paper to illustrate the variety of experiences migrants have within the system of public and publicly funded employment support services and, by qualitative means, give voice to their judgements on how the system works.

As these experiences are to a large degree the result of subjective views and individual preconditions located on the personal level of the migrant client, as well as on the counsellor's side, it was clear from the beginning that this account would neither be all-encompassing or representative, nor allow clear-cut analysis of causal mechanisms. The empirical evidence on experiences with PESS presented in the third section is drawn from a diverse sample of migrant interviewees in terms of age, education/qualification, residence status/citizenship and time period in which they had these experiences. Some date back to years before 2005, when the Federal Employment Agency was responsible for all unemployed, no matter for how long they remained in need. The larger part of experiences tracked for this paper is more current. They refer to the services provided in and after 2005 by the Employment Agencies primarily to those losing their jobs and remaining unemployed for up to one year (receiving *unemployment benefit I*), and by the Job Centres within the local consortia for all others (receiving *unemployment benefit II*; cf. Section 2). However, the tasks and issues within these different bureaucratic entities do not fundamentally differ and their work is perceived as practically equivalent by clients, and migrant's experiences with either or the other could be relevant for improving the services' quality and relevance to them as important client groups, we considered them collectively in this paper.

Thus, despite considerable heterogeneity, several patterns of experience could be observed in the third section of the paper. Taking these as a starting point, we can identify some issues, which are (or have already been) tackled by the recent labour market reforms, and others, which mark points of departure for further policy and service development.

##### **4.1. Acknowledging and utilising flexibility and mobility**

Yet limited in scope and not representative, the group of migrants interviewed within our study display a high level of activity and ambition when it comes to unemployment, job search and continuous education or training. Cases of resigned apathy combined with passive reception of welfare benefits and avoidance or even wilful undermining of Job Centres' placement services seem rare. Rather, most migrants appear to be endowed with an appropriate portion of flexibility regarding their employment within the German labour market. As expected from them by the authorities, they engage in multifold job search activities besides

public referral efforts and make up their mind on how to improve their employability through training or special courses. It could be hypothesized that this considerable level of mobility may be contributed to either personal or familial experience of migration and associated uncertainty of present occupation and future career, as well as to lower expectations or awareness of a still disadvantaged position of migrants on the labour market compared to the unemployed indigenous population in Germany.

At the same time, most migrants in our sample are far from being indifferent about the kind of their employment. Particularly those with a college degree or licensed qualification have a distinct image of where they would want to go ideally. While in isolated cases successful cooperation between PESS and migrants searching for career opportunities can be discerned – with job agencies acknowledging their clients' qualifications and wishes, and migrants being ready to enter into the formers' suggestions –, in a number of other occasions the situation appears not very promising. Migrants quite often sense that local Job Centres or Employment Agencies do not, or not in a satisfying manner, respond to their needs and expectations. Thus, at least within the welfare-to-work regime since 2005, to some degree the principle of “demanding” seems to outweigh the principle of “fostering” and may not sufficiently give consideration to the high level of activity and flexibility that migrants display in order to gain employment.

#### **4.2. Fostering the individualised approach: Insight and understanding**

Migrants in general are very well aware of the overall situation on the labour market and understand that they can by no means expect to be provided an adequate job by PESS. But, while being clear about the limited powers of the referral system as such, they do expect help and support in finding employment for themselves. Some individual cases show that comprehension (and therefore: collaboration) may increase when clients with migration background sense that their ideas, conceptions or personal peculiarities are respected by the individual counsellor or organisation coaching them, and when the limitations and possibilities of getting a job on the labour market are explained to them in a thorough and empathetic way.

From this it can be followed, that the current tendency of the support system – aiming at a more individualised approach by means of a stable and collaborative alliance between the migrant client and the case-worker or counsellor (cf. Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2005; IAB 2006a) – should be intensified. However, it must be safeguarded that the counselling interaction remains in a sound equilibrium, respects the clients' privacy and/or migration-related particularities and does not develop in a paternalistic way. Provided the serious sanction mechanisms introduced in the recent labour market regime, this will almost inevitably lead to a balancing act on the services' side and make building up trust a chal-



lenging endeavour. It could be thought of endowing clients with a lawful right to change their case-manager at least once, in case a conflictual or uncomfortable counseling relationship manifests and interpersonal problems do not disappear.

While this option should be considered in general terms and applying to all clients, Job Centres and local Employment Agencies, with special reference to better serve the migrant population, could also think about appointing on a case-by-case basis an external, specially trained mediating or *ombuds*-person in order to resolve such interpersonal conflicts, that are deemed a result of migration-related or “cultural” circumstances. Thus, a contribution could be made to build up trust and improve relevancy to the migrant population. This could be especially relevant in such areas, where foreign job-seekers or clients with migration background do not (yet) account for a very high percentage of the job-seeking clientele and therefore, organisational development and staff training have not been consciously directed towards cross-cultural communication or multicultural competencies.

#### **4.3. The need for transparency and information**

Intertwined with the point mentioned before is the necessity to increase the transparency of procedures and to improve the flow of service-related information. Starting from the simple notion that acceptance and cooperation – and therefore: outcome – should always be better when conditions and options are openly discussed, some of the interviews display an experienced lack of transparency on the migrants' side, which may eventually have detrimental effects on trustfulness. Certainly, the reasons for glimpses of mistrust may be multifold and even result from some migrants' past experiences of living in a authoritarian state; the consequences for service development, however, must be the same and involve instruction and education on rights and duties, avoiding any sense on the migrant client's side that important information could deliberately be withheld from him or her.

#### **4.4. Considering diversity and avoidance of discrimination**

PESS are not per se “diversity-blind”. Although a true dedication to diversity and multicultural competencies within service institutions could not be discerned in the sample, in general, most counsellors are aware of their clients having diverse migration backgrounds. Employment Agencies and Job Centres as institutions appear in principle to recognize diversity as a given challenge. Thus, it seems that direct discrimination is experienced rather seldom by migrants. However, there are situations in which migrants feel disadvantaged and sense that their qualifications, competencies and career plans cannot be met by the employment support system.

PESS try to work as efficient organisations with certain standards and categories in which clients are classified internally. Basically there are four main categories of employability that determine the scope of active labour market measures (cf. section 2). It is upon the responsible case worker, after an interview and subjective interpretation, to decide which category the client might belong to. It may be useful to yield specific care before lumping migrants into such categories, as they tend to display a high level of activity and flexibility. Furthermore, they may differ from the “mainstream-client” through particular assets (such as language or culturally specific competencies), that are not easily determined in an initial interview or evaluation, and that may outweigh certain disadvantages (such as age, poor formal education, limited proficiency of German) automatically leading to prediction of low employability. As human resources development through case-specific training of staff has been identified as a key to improving general service quality on the level of individual coaching in PESS (cf. IAB 2006a; Bundesanstalt für Arbeit 2007), it can be deemed even more important against the backdrop of a culturally diverse clientele.

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## Appendix: List of Interviewees

| Interview number <sup>14</sup> | Gender | Age  | Citizenship      | Country of birth           | Experience <sup>15</sup> |
|--------------------------------|--------|------|------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 01                             | f      | 31   | Greek            | Germany                    | n.a.                     |
| 02                             | m      | 29   | Serbian          | Former Yugoslavia (Kosovo) | a                        |
| 03                             | m      | 47   | Iranian          | Iran                       | b                        |
| 04                             | f      | 30   | British & German | England                    | a                        |
| 05                             | m      | 45   | Turkish & German | Turkey                     | b                        |
| 06                             | f      | 39   | German           | Turkey                     | b/a                      |
| 07                             | m      | 45   | Romanian         | Romania                    | b                        |
| 08                             | f      | 36   | German           | Turkey                     | b/a                      |
| 09                             | m      | 52   | Ghanaian         | Ghana                      | a                        |
| 10                             | f      | 56   | Greek            | Greece                     | a                        |
| 11                             | m      | 38   | Cameroonian      | Cameroon                   | n.a.                     |
| 12                             | f      | 25   | Afghan           | Afghanistan                | b                        |
| 13                             | m      | 39   | Congolese        | Congo                      | b                        |
| 14                             | f      | 39   | Chechnyan        | Chechnyan                  | b/a                      |
| 15                             | m      | 47   | Eritrean         | Eritrea                    | b/a                      |
| 16                             | f      | 29   | Ukrainian        | Ukraine                    | b/a                      |
| 17                             | f      | 35   | German           | Turkey                     | S                        |
| 18                             | m      | n.a. | Iranian          | Iran                       | b/a                      |
| 19                             | f      | 37   | Turkish          | Turkey                     | b                        |
| 20                             | f      | 52   | Czech            | Czech Republic             | a                        |
| 21                             | f      | 34   | Ghanaian         | n.a.                       | b                        |
| 22                             | f      | 60   | Kazakh           | Kazakhstan                 | b/a                      |
| 23                             | f      | 36   | Uzbek            | Uzbekistan                 | a                        |
| 24                             | f      | 52   | Moldovan         | Russia                     | b/a                      |
| 25                             | f      | 39   | Greek            | Greece                     | a                        |
| 26                             | f      | 41   | German & Afghan  | Afghanistan                | a                        |

<sup>14</sup> Narrative, semi-structured interviews with 58 migrants were conducted within the Study Group 'Diversity, Integration and the Economy'. 33 interviews featured experiences with PESS and were analysed for this paper (see also introduction)

<sup>15</sup> This column indicates the point in time when migrants encountered PESS: before or after the 2005 legislative reform of labour market policy. Abbreviations: b = before 2005; a = after 2005; b/a = before 2005 and after 2005; n.a. = information not available.

|    |   |        |              |              |      |
|----|---|--------|--------------|--------------|------|
| 27 | f | 43     | Belorussian  | Belarus      | a    |
| 28 | f | 27     | Polish       | Poland       | a    |
| 29 | f | 38     | German       | Russia       | b/a  |
| 30 | m | 38     | Burkina Faso | Burkina Faso | n.a. |
| 31 | f | ca. 42 | German       | Nigeria      | b/a  |
| 32 | m | 30     | German       | Poland       | b/a  |
| 33 | f | 47     | German       | Afghanistan  | b    |

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