



This programme is jointly funded by the European Union and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development



September 2021

The Impacts of COVID-19 on a Labour Mobility Scheme

The Case of Migration between Tunisia and Germany in the Context of the THAMM Programme

Prepared as part of the Support Research for
the regional programme “Towards a Holistic
Approach to Labour Migration Governance and
Labour Mobility in North Africa” (THAMM)

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Implemented by

giz Deutsche Gesellschaft
für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH



Acknowledgements:

The authors would like to thank Dr. Lisa Andersson for her valuable research support and the THAMM team for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. We would also like to sincerely thank the employers involved in THAMM and representatives of the THAMM team for sharing their experiences with us as well as the migrants participating in the programme for taking the time to participate in the survey.

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THAMM

Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration
Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa





ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic put the world on hold and impacted economies and peoples' lives, including those on the move. The socio-economic challenges that the COVID-19 crisis has imposed on labour migration and governments are complex. It is in this context that this paper presents insights into the way that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected one specific labour mobility pilot project, Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa (THAMM), from the onset of the pandemic until the spring of 2021. Through this programme, 39 apprentices from Tunisia had been able to come to Germany during the pandemic up to the point when this paper was written, with numbers increasing since then. For this paper interviews with key stakeholders involved in the programme, including employers, programme staff and partners, and an online survey with migrant workers were conducted. The findings allow to understand the challenges that the different actors faced due to the global pandemic and how they worked, in many cases together, to solve them. This ranges from the issue of language training having to be moved online, to the participants not being able to travel at the time when it was planned, to issues faced once arriving in Germany. Placements in Germany were apprenticeships in the hotel and gastronomy sectors for the group under study, sectors which in themselves were heavily affected by regulations put in place to contain the virus. As such, employers and apprentices faced challenges with regards to the practical work, such as Kurzarbeit and vocational school taking place online or not happening at all, but also sought opportunities in this challenging time to, for example, by improving language skills and working on specific other skills of the THAMM participants. Overall, the research finds that when the pandemic situation had somewhat established itself, adjustments of the programme structures and institutions were introduced to ensure that the programme could be maintained under the changed conditions. In addition, the paper highlights the importance of integration support measures as a component of labour mobility schemes and to work closely with employers to identify gaps and/or where additional support is required to provide participants with the needed integration support from the onset.



ABSTRACT (FRENCH)

Au début de l'an 2020, la pandémie de COVID-19 a mis le monde en suspens et a eu un impact sur les économies et les personnes, y compris celles en mouvement. Les défis socio-économiques que la crise du COVID-19 a imposé à la migration des travailleurs et aux gouvernements sont complexes. Dans ce contexte, cet article présente un aperçu de la manière dont la pandémie de COVID-19 a affecté un projet pilote de migration des travailleurs, "Vers une approche holistique de la gouvernance de la migration des travailleurs en Afrique du Nord (THAMM)", depuis le début de la pandémie jusqu'au printemps 2021. Grâce à ce programme, 39 apprentis tunisiens avaient pu venir en Allemagne pendant la pandémie jusqu'au moment de la rédaction de cet article, et leur nombre a augmenté depuis. Ces apprentissages ont eu lieu dans les secteurs de l'hôtellerie et de la gastronomie, secteurs eux-mêmes fortement touchés par les réglementations mises en place pour contenir le virus.

Pour la recherche présente, des entretiens avec les principales parties prenantes impliquées dans le programme, y compris les employeurs, le personnel du programme et les partenaires, et une enquête en ligne auprès des travailleurs migrants, ont été menées. Les résultats permettent de comprendre les défis auxquels les différents acteurs ont été confrontés en raison de la pandémie mondiale et comment ils ont travaillé, dans de nombreux cas ensemble, pour les résoudre. Les participants citaient, entre autres, les problèmes de la formation linguistique en ligne, l'impossibilité pour les participants de voyager à l'heure prévue et des problèmes rencontrés une fois arrivés en Allemagne. Ainsi, les employeurs et les apprentis ont été confrontés à des défis en ce qui concerne le travail concret, tels que le Kurzarbeit et l'école professionnelle se déroulant en ligne ou n'ayant pas lieu du tout. Toutefois, ils ont également recherché des opportunités en cette période difficile, par exemple, en améliorant leurs compétences linguistiques et en travaillant sur d'autres compétences des participants THAMM.

De façon générale, la recherche révèle que lorsque la situation pandémique s'est quelque peu établie, l'ajustement du programme, des structures et des institutions a commencé à faire fonctionner le programme dans les nouvelles conditions. En outre, la recherche souligne l'importance des mesures de soutien à l'intégration en tant que composante des programmes de mobilité des travailleurs, et de collaborer attentivement avec les employeurs pour identifier les lacunes et/ou les cas où un soutien supplémentaire est nécessaire pour fournir aux participants le soutien à l'intégration dont ils ont besoin dès le début.



1. INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic put the world on hold and impacted economies across the globe and peoples' lives, including those on the move. Countries closed borders, introduced lockdowns and travel restrictions to curb the spread of the virus. These measures have in turn affected migrants, including those seeking international protection and international students, and unfolded major challenges for labour migrants, including those already living abroad and those wanting to travel overseas for work but unable due to stalled mobility (Lücke, 2020; Bisong, 2020).

Movement disruptions have impacted labour mobility and skills schemes and migrants and their families in different ways. For instance, in states with sectors and occupations (e.g., agricultural, domestic care, construction, health care and maintenance) that are reliant on migrant workers' skills contribution (COE-EDP, 2020; IOM, 2020), labour market demands were often hard to meet. Migrants were not able to come due to border closures, while others were not able to return when they had initially planned. In addition, remittances did decline, though not as much as initially estimated, and many people relying on this money to meet basic needs and to access services such as health and education were also adversely impacted by the impacts on labour migration (World Bank, 2020b). The socio-economic challenges that the COVID-19 crisis has imposed on labour migration and governments are unique, likely to gain further multi-layered complexity and with a high level of uncertainty on the impacts at macro, meso, and micro levels that can persist even after the virus itself no longer poses a threat (Baker et al., 2020).

This paper presents insights into the way that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected one specific labour mobility pilot project from the onset of the pandemic until the spring of 2021. The programme *Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa* (THAMM) has been initiated and is co-funded by the European Union (EU) and the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). It is jointly implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, International Labour Organization (ILO) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Belgian Development Agency (ENABEL). THAMM aims to support the development of labour migration governance in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia on the one hand. On the other hand, it will strengthen existing and create new regular migration and mobility channels from North Africa to Europe (European Commission, 2018). Specifically, a mobility scheme is first implemented with Germany, led by the GIZ, which developed the conceptual framework for this scheme. The target group of this scheme are individuals of working age in North African countries, who are seeking a job opportunity or who want to pursue an apprenticeship abroad, specifically in Germany. It is planned that several cohorts of skilled workers and trainees will move from Northern Africa to Germany over the period 2020 – 2022. The first of these cohorts was supposed to move in July 2020, but as will be discussed this did not work out in many cases due to COVID-19-related delays, while 39 apprentices have been able to come to Germany during the pandemic from the first group.¹

¹ In the time since the fieldwork for this paper was conducted a further 54 participants have travelled to Germany from groups 1 and 2 (as of 09/21).



Based on this, the present paper presents insights into how the different stakeholders involved in the implementation of this labour mobility scheme were affected by COVID-19 and how they coped with these effects. The paper focuses on the first cohort of THAMM participants, which moved from Tunisia to Germany in the fall of 2020 to start apprenticeships in the hotel and gastronomy sectors. To analyse this, a mixed methodological approach was used to reach the Tunisian migrants themselves, employers in Germany, as well as the THAMM programme team to ensure a comprehensive view. The fieldwork was mainly conducted between March and June 2021, with one complementary interview taking place in September 2021. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine employers and six people working on the implementation of THAMM. More specifically, these were three representatives of GIZ, two representatives of the German federal labour office *Bundesagentur für Arbeit* (BA) and a representative of the Tunisian employment agency *Agence Nationale pour l'Emploi et le Travail Indépendant* (ANETI). In addition, an interview was conducted with a representative of ENABEL to understand whether the findings of the other interviews were unique to THAMM or if similar experiences were made within the Pilot Project Addressing Labour Shortages Through Innovative Labour Migration Models' (PALIM).² Among the employers, five had already welcomed their trainee(s) at the time of the interview, while four were still waiting for their migrant apprentice to arrive or withdrew for the time being. Businesses differed in size, but are all active in the hotel and/or gastronomy (HoGa) sectors. To get insights from the migrants, an online survey was used, in which 13 out of the 39 Tunisian, that have moved to Germany within the framework of THAMM, participated. The main limitation of the present study is the relatively small sample size and that the voices of those potential migrants, that were not able to make the move because of the pandemic, are not directly included to avoid increasing their level of frustration by asking about the impacts of not being able to move (yet). Where possible, employers and other key stakeholders were asked about them to also develop a feeling for the effects on them.

The following section provides a review of the literature on the impacts of COVID-19 on labour mobility schemes, while the following three sections look at the effects on the programme itself, migrants and employers in turn. The paper concludes with a summary and discussion.

2. IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON LABOUR MIGRATION SCHEMES – A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature related to COVID-19 and migration has been dynamically evolving since the onset of the global pandemic. Yet, studies looking specifically at the effects on labour mobility schemes are quite limited, which is why the THAMM programme presents a unique opportunity to gather some insights on this specific type of managed migration.

² PALIM aimed at facilitating the cooperation between Belgium and Morocco in the management of regular migration by developing professional skills in ICT of young graduates in Morocco and offering a safe and lawful alternative to them to gain work experience in Belgium.



The literature does, however, document how the pandemic has highlighted the role that migrant workers play in many economies. A few weeks after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, several countries recognized the importance and irreplaceable contribution of temporary migration to fill seasonal work, particularly in agriculture (e.g., Europe, United States of America, Australasia) (Lücke, 2020; OECD, 2020a; IOM, 2020). In the light of border closures at the time, several countries introduced ad-hoc arrangements to maintain their economies afloat, including extensions of work permits in duration and/or scope and lifting of travel restrictions. In the case of EU countries, special measures targeted both seasonal workers already residing within the EU territory and those entering during the pandemic (European Migration Network, 2020b). Some countries announced measures targeting undocumented agriculture workers. For instance, Greece introduced the automatic extension of special work permits for six months and allowed the entry of non-EU nationals without visa requirements (e.g. Albania) (OECD, 2020a). Italy granted temporary status regularization to irregular migrants under the Decree-Law No. 34/2020, which created an employer's sponsorship scheme or the opportunity to apply for a six-month permit in the agriculture, personal care, and domestic work sectors following some conditions (Giovine, 2020); and arranged agreements with India to directly receive agricultural workers (European Migration Network, 2020b; OECD, 2020a). Austria introduced special agreements to enable agricultural national workers from Ukraine and Morocco to alleviate this sector (European Migration Network, 2020a), while countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Belgium, Austria, Ireland, and the United Kingdom chartered flights to bring in seasonal workers from Romania and other Eastern European countries (PICUM, 2020; ILO, 2020b). Other countries, such as Germany and France, also targeted refugees and asylum-seekers and allowed for the provision of temporary permits and contracts to perform critical harvesting and planting (ILO, 2020a).

Such exceptional arrangements were, however, not limited to the agricultural sector. Migrant workers are also disproportionately represented in the health care sector, and several governments have recognized them as essential to meet the critical demand for medical services during the pandemic (ILO, 2020c). Some of the actions taken by governments are facilitating access to employment through renewal of working authorization or recruitment, temporary/restricted licensure and fast-track recognition of foreign skills and knowledge (OECD, 2020b). Most OECD countries (e.g., Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg) have expedited the process for foreign qualifications' recognition of health professionals (ibid.). In countries such as Germany and Spain, the government introduced measures to facilitate the license or accreditation that foreign doctors and nurses needed to immediately practice medicine (ILO, 2020a; ILO, 2020c). Similarly, Chile, Peru, and Argentina sped up the recognition of Venezuelan migrants' diplomas to reinforce the health care personnel during the COVID-19 crisis (ILO, 2020c). Moreover, the French Government temporarily authorized non-EU qualified medical practitioners to continue their probationary period in hospitals to extend their duration permit and facilitated the conditions of foreign doctors that were not licensed to practice non-medical functions (e.g., care assistant, reception, and orientation) (European Migration Network, 2020a).

Overall, the pandemic has therefore highlighted the role that migrants have been playing in many countries' economies. In the light of labour market developments in many countries of destination, this role is likely to increase further and creating more opportunities for regular labour migration is therefore an issue that is becoming increasingly important. Programmes such as THAMM are leading in this regard, and it is therefore of interest to understand how the pandemic affected the programme and those participating in it.





3. EFFECTS ON THE THAMM PROGRAMME AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures implemented to control its spread have also had significant impacts on the THAMM pilot programme and its implementation. The pandemic hit at a time when the first cohort of participants were in the middle of preparing for their migration to Germany. The participants themselves were taking German language courses in Tunisia, while the THAMM team in Germany was actively matching them with their future employers.

The sectors in which the first participants were placed were hotels and gastronomy, which were directly affected by lockdowns and related measures, which either put operations to a full stop or made them quite limited. Many of the employers running hotels indicated that they were completely closed for several months during the lockdown in fall and winter, which coincided with the arrival of the THAMM participants in most cases. Others were still open to accommodate business travelers, but mostly staff was in *Kurzarbeit*³ during this period, which in some cases included the participants during the second lockdown as elaborated in the previous section. Similar challenges were discussed by the employers in the gastronomy sector. While some of these businesses were able to offer take-away food, this was difficult for those in more rural areas and, in most cases, this has also not been a consistent business model over time. An additional challenge brought up during the interviews is the fact that many employees switched to jobs in industry and employers are worried about them coming back as measures against the spread of the virus are being reduced. Nonetheless, the employers interviewed stressed that they found ways to keep their businesses going. This was possible due to savings as well as government aid, though this often was either not sufficient or took a lot of time to receive, which still meant having to lay off staff and/ or putting them in *Kurzarbeit*. It is anticipated by the BA that the demand for workers in these sectors will remain or even increase once the pandemic is over, making THAMM a relevant programme to understand how labour migration could contribute to meeting the labour demands in the future.

Looking at the first cohort of participants, the THAMM team had to react quickly when social distancing and lockdown rules were first introduced, as the preparation in terms of language and culture of the selected THAMM participants was ongoing at that time. Based on good cooperation with the language centers, this challenge was overcome quite well by moving to online classes. It took some time to complete this transition, but after about four weeks all participants were able to participate in the language classes online. Challenges in this regard were related both to technical aspects such as access to laptops and internet, but also the environment in which they needed to study with many living in shared flats. In general, it is known that learning a language online is much more challenging than in a normal classroom setting. Yet overall, the language training could still be completed successfully due to both sides, the participants, and the programme, being very eager to accomplish this.

In the case of Tunisia, the language providers Educaro and IIK introduced new concepts of teaching to the programme. Apart from the more intense use of a targeted online platform, more diversity was

³ *Kurzarbeit* (short-term work) is a governmental unemployment insurance system in Germany where employees in the private sector accept a reduction in working time and pay and the state substitutes part or all the difference in income (*Kurzarbeitergeld*).



brought into teaching approaches. For example, the online formats allowed experts from Germany, ranging from teachers to experts on intercultural matters from the Diaspora to come in as guest speakers. This involvement of the partner in Germany worked extremely well and was appreciated very much by the participants.

A second set of challenges arose when it came to the actual physical move from Tunisia to Germany. Conditions for emigration were extremely difficult at this time, causing movements to not go as planned as already mentioned in the introduction.⁴ At the originally planned time of departure, borders were still mostly closed, and it was hardly possible for the participants to move. Consulate offices were closed or operating with limited capacity, which made obtaining the necessary documents a much more complicated and lengthy process than usual.

At the same time, it became much more challenging to find open positions for the THAMM participants. The representatives from the BA noted that there was a significant reduction in open vacancies, particularly in March, April, and May 2020, when they were needed to match the THAMM trainees. This period was a time of crisis for many employers, especially in the hotel and gastronomy (HoGa) sector, which was the target sector for this cohort of migrants. During these months, companies switched from longer-term planning to medium-term or short-term planning regarding job offers. It was, however, also noted that the effects were not as negative for trainees as they were for skilled workers. Overall, this resulted in a much lower rate of matches between German employers and North African migrant apprentices than was originally anticipated.

The first trainees arrived about a month after they were initially supposed to, while others arrived more than half a year later. Another share of prospective participants was not able to start their traineeship in Germany at all, at the time when this research was conducted.⁵ While the initial aim for fall 2020 were 65 persons travelling to Germany, 39 have been achieved so far over the course of the last months, of which 3 terminated the apprenticeship. These delays are ongoing, especially as the pandemic situation keeps evolving and still impacts the planning of businesses, especially in the HoGa sector. There are currently 18 apprentices that have been matched and are preparing for their move, while one remains unmatched, and 19 participants ended up dropping out in Tunisia (13 of which did not manage to obtain the necessary language certificate).

Upon arrival in Germany, the THAMM team also continued to provide support that was specifically targeted to the ongoing pandemic. Concerns arose how the limited operations of the businesses and the kind of activities that the trainees were engaged in (see below), would impact them in terms of integration but also mental health (particularly in terms of motivation and/or frustration). To have regular check-in points, online sessions were organized to discuss specific topics or any concerns that the participants shared. This allowed the team and the participants to stay in touch.

Generally, COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of integration support measures as a component of labour mobility schemes. While this is acknowledged more generally, the pandemic has underlined the importance again to GIZ and other actors. Integration is important to enable the positive potential

⁴ This was also experienced within the PALIM pilot project, where the training in Morocco was completed but migration to Belgium was not possible at the time it was foreseen due to the border restrictions at the time. Some of these potential migrants ended up finding jobs in Morocco instead.

⁵ As mentioned above the number has increased significantly in the meantime.



impacts of migration for development and is often overlooked as it requires significant resources to be invested. In the HoGa sector, the experiences with the first cohort have shown that employers often only react when it is too late, because they generally have limited time available to engage in the integration support measures provided by THAMM. A challenge for the future is therefore to work closer with the employers to anticipate potential problems of this nature and to put in place measures to mitigate them.

It was also mentioned that the selection interviews for new participants have been organized online due to the pandemic.⁶ Due to restrictions that prevented movement between regions, the interviews were moved online and took place from the regional offices of ANETI. The online format posed some technical challenges related to internet connection and availability of equipment. Another challenge raised was that it is more impersonal to conduct interviews online compared to face-to-face, and that this could impact the recruitment. However, despite these challenges the impression of the online format was overall that it worked quite well and that it is more resource efficient, so that hybrid formats for this part of the process are a serious consideration among the THAMM team.

To conclude, while the world was shaken by COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, THAMM started to adapt from mid-2020, also regarding mobility projects. When the situation had established itself somewhat (with the realization that “we have to live with it longer now”), the adjustment of the programme, structures and institutions began to still make the THAMM labour mobility pilot work under the changed conditions. Considering THAMM is a pilot, this also means that it is hard to judge based on the experiences so far whether the design of the scheme is efficient and something to be developed in other contexts in the future. The THAMM team is therefore eager to have more cohorts move, hopefully under normal circumstances, to have more lessons learned to share that are general and not specific to the pandemic. In addition, it is too early at this stage to know which types of businesses will be affected by the pandemic in the long-term and to which extent. It is therefore clear that expectations in relation to the numbers of migrants and businesses that will be able to benefit from THAMM should be adjusted as the pandemic is not something that could have been accounted for during the design and planning of the labour mobility scheme. At the same time, the demand for labour will remain beyond the pandemic, so that programmes like THAMM will remain relevant. The interviews also revealed that the negative impacts of the pandemic on the labour market in Tunisia is expected to lead to more demand and applications from prospective participants in the future.

4. EFFECTS ON THE MIGRANTS

As explained in the introduction, the main source of information on the impacts that COVID-19 had on the THAMM participants is an online survey which was conducted with the target group in May and June of 2021. At this time, most participants had spent approximately nine months in Germany in their respective placements, predominantly in the hotel and gastronomy sector, where they had been

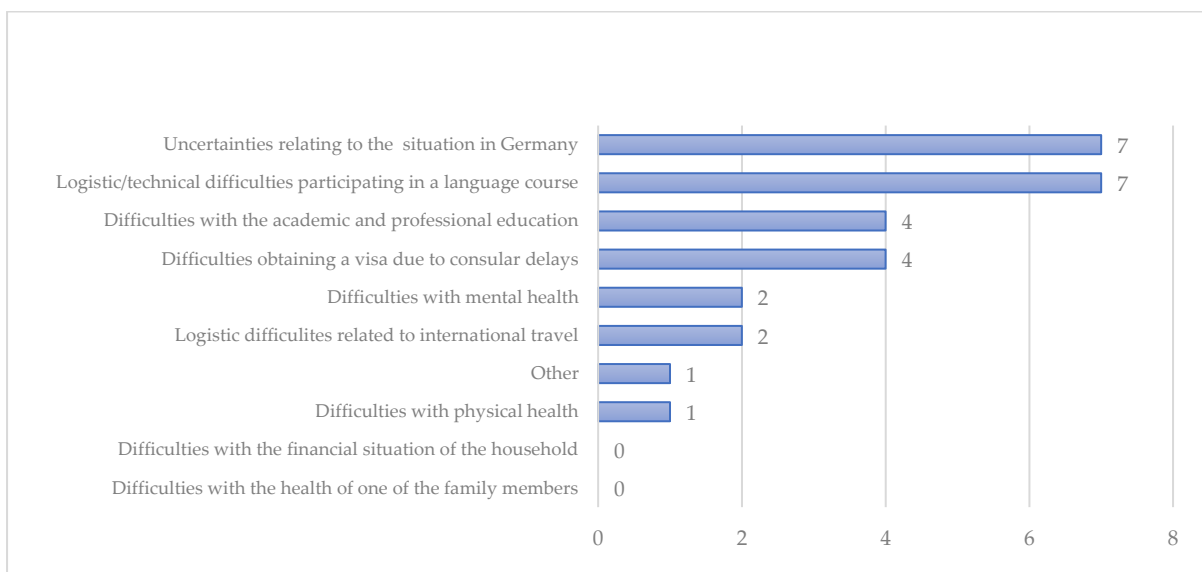
⁶ Within the PALIM pilot project, the recruitment process was also moved online in spring of 2020 with both Belgian and Moroccan employers.



trained as hotel specialists, chefs, and system gastronomes, though training was limited due to the ongoing lockdown throughout this time. All the surveyed participants were of Tunisian nationality with ages ranging between 23 and 28 years.

The data indicates that nine of the participants felt that COVID-19 had affected their participation in the THAMM programme before they travelled to Germany. As illustrated in Figure 1, the most prominent negative effects of COVID-19 amongst participants were difficulties participating in language courses in Tunisia, and/or being afraid of overall uncertainties connected to COVID-19 and their anticipated stay in Germany. Less common, but still relevant, were problems with obtaining visas due to consular delays and difficulties related to participants’ professional and academic education. Some participants also mentioned logistic difficulties related to international travel and (mental) health problems as a negative effect of COVID-19 pre-arrival.

Figure 1: Implications of COVID-19 on THAMM participants pre-arrival



These implications were also discussed by the THAMM programme staff that shared their observations on how the participants were affected by COVID-19 before coming to Germany. It was discussed that the sudden move of the language courses from in-person to online did likely impact the learning progress of the participants. While this has not been formally evaluated, it is evident in the results of the language examinations. But overall, the transition still went well, and the participants adjusted successfully. This was also confirmed by the employers, which, as discussed below, commented on the fact that some of the trainees’ German abilities were already quite good upon arrival.

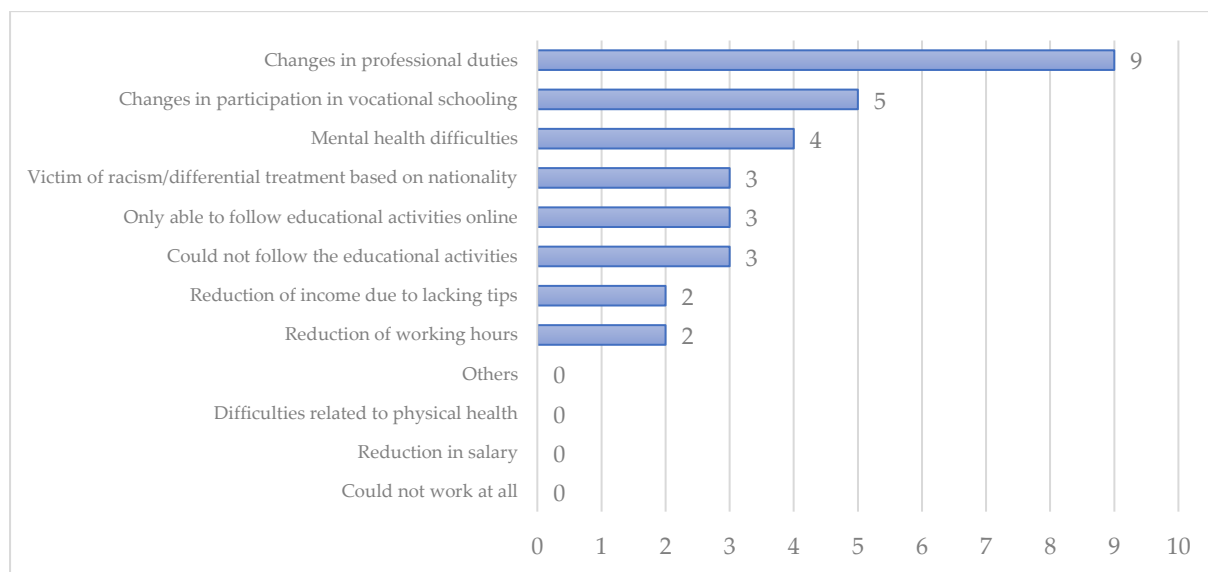
Looking at the time already spent in Germany, ten of the 13 participants reported having experienced problems related to COVID-19 *after* their arrival, as can be seen in Figure 2. To be more precise, nine of the 13 participants said they had experienced changes in their professional duties, five in their participation in vocational schooling and four participants indicated having suffered mental health difficulties. Being able to partake in educational activities only online was mentioned by three participants as a negative implication of COVID-19 and three participants reported they had not been able to follow educational activities at all.





Another two participants reported having experienced a reduction of working hours, but interestingly none of the participants had suffered a reduction in salary, merely a reduction of income related to the lack of tips, as reported by two participants. This is coherent with the qualitative data obtained from key stakeholders indicating that the salary of the apprentices was of fixed amount. During the second lockdown and in the event of business closure, and thus reduced working hours, it was possible to also put trainees into *Kurzarbeit* and in these cases their income was substituted partially by *Kurzarbeitergeld* for some of the participants. The participants could use the extra time to prepare for their mid-term examinations in some cases, as indicated by the employers.

Figure 2: Implications of COVID-19 on THAMM participants post arrival



The employers also discussed the effects on the participants from their perspective. The main issues that were raised are related to administrative procedures required to be completed by the migrants, integration activities and other practical issues. Lockdown measures led to the closure of immigration offices, which meant that participants in some cases were not able to pick up their residence permits in a timely manner. Provisional permits were issued to bridge this, but it still made the process much more complicated for the participants and their employers. Independent of COVID-19, it seems that participants and employers could use support in this regard as the participants often find it difficult to apply for a permit and, in some cases, they do not receive any support from the employers in this regard.

The changes in professional duties were also mentioned extensively by the employers and will be discussed in more detail in the following section. In terms of the implications for the trainees, the THAMM team members mentioned that this risks that the trainees will not learn everything necessary within the original timeframe of the apprenticeship and at this stage it has not been discussed whether the duration of the training will be extended as a consequence. This might therefore have significant impacts on the trainees, which can, however, not be determined at this stage.

Some of the participants also used the extra time they had during lockdown to participate in a B2 language course, in some cases online during lockdown times. This was supported by the employers in those cases to bridge some of the freed-up time. For other participants the courses were delayed, and they have not worked further on their German beyond speaking it since they have arrived in Germany six or seven months ago. Employers discussed that these language trainings are not



organized by THAMM, but are the responsibility of the employer, which makes it difficult for them especially when in remote locations, where access is a challenge.

When it comes to integration, a first point to note is that it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between any challenges in this regard and COVID-19 as there is no counterfactual to establish what issues might have also arisen under “normal” circumstances. Asked about their perceptions on the progress in terms of integration of the trainees, the views of the employers differed. Some indicated that the work in different areas of the businesses and joint activities, that were more regularly undertaken due to freed up time of employers, were beneficial in this regard. Others discussed the fact that less activities were possible that would facilitate integration due to the social distancing rules. For example, participating in local integration measures such as joining sports clubs or other local leisure offers was largely impossible. Local integration was additionally made difficult in cases where trainees were accommodated together in separate staff housing or where they participated in vocational schooling together. It was reported that one vocational school class counted 15 THAMM participants, which was felt counterproductive to their local integration and employers suggested that THAMM participants be accommodated individually in business and vocational school classes to improve integration and language skills. The fact the vocational schooling was predominantly offered online was perceived to further limit their exposure to the region, especially during the wintertime. It was also noted by the THAMM team that those trainees working in larger hotels, where staff comes from all over the world, have little opportunities to speak German at work. Common languages in those workplaces are English, French, and Arabic. In such a situation, the lack of contact with guests, where German would be required in more cases, is an additional challenge in terms of using the language. But the THAMM team acknowledges that this might also be a challenge outside of COVID-19 in bigger hotels, where many cultures mix among the staff. Integration might therefore be easier and more effective in smaller businesses as it often forces them to speak more German.

As already briefly mentioned in the previous sections, there were also increasing incidences of frustration due to the situation caused by the pandemic among the participants. This also relates to the participants’ feeling of missing home or even being homesick, with visits still being possible only to a limited extent. It was perceived that this increased the longer lockdowns lasted. However, it can also be noted that the levels of frustration are much higher among those participants that took part in the language training but have not been able to migrate to Germany yet.

As explained above, one of the main limitations of the present paper is that the voice of those prospective THAMM participants that have not been able to make the move to Germany is not included in this study. Nonetheless, it is clear to the THAMM team that especially those that did already have an employer, who then withdrew when movements were restricted, and lockdowns put in place, are very disappointed. It should, however, also be mentioned that even without COVID-19, THAMM does not guarantee any potential migrants that a placement will be secured. It was also noted that a significant share of these individuals remains motivated and hopeful that they will still be able to move and start their apprenticeship at some point, highlighting the important role and perspective that THAMM holds for these people. While there is no opportunity to support them financially, the THAMM team is staying in touch with this group and is providing opportunities for matching whenever these arise. Short update trainings are also being organised with the participants to maintain their motivation and language skills.

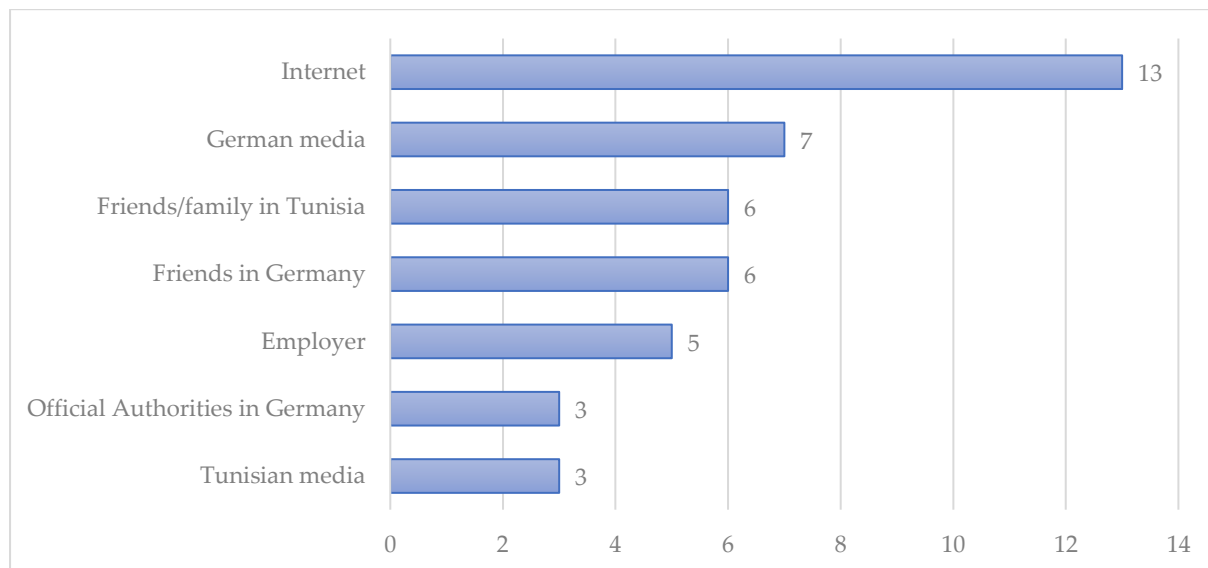
Turning back to the participants already in Germany, they were also asked about the ease of staying informed about COVID-19 related regulations and restrictions in Germany and their preferred source of information. Here, only four of the 13 participants stated they had experienced problems accessing





information due to the language barrier. All the participants reported that the internet represented their preferred source of information, followed by German media. Friends in Tunisia and Germany also played an important role in information provision with six out of 13 participants indicating this choice, followed by their employer and official German authorities. Finally, Tunisian media was indicated by three participants as an information source.

Figure 3: Information sources on COVID-19

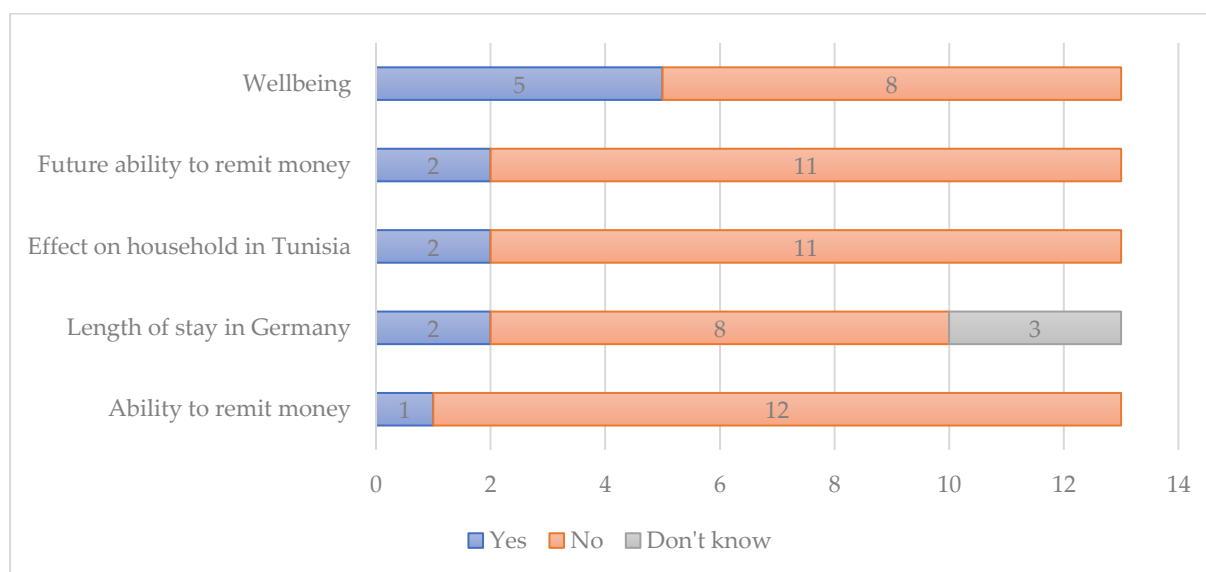


Participants were also asked about the impact of COVID-19 on different aspects of their stay in Germany and their family members in Tunisia (see [Figure 4](#)). Here, five of the participants indicated that COVID-19 had a negative effect on their overall wellbeing, but more than half of participants denied any negative implications in this regard. To this end, employers stated in interviews that the travel restrictions limited participants' ability to visit family in Tunisia and/or friends and family in Europe, which contributed to the feeling of being homesick. Additionally, and particularly considering the investment participants had already made, employers reported that they were worried about the future and whether they would be able to complete their apprenticeship. Additionally, as elaborated more in detail below, the lack of or limited integration activities on offer in times of lockdowns and social distancing prevented local integration to a certain extent and thus may have also contributed to a reduction in wellbeing.

With regards to participants' households in Tunisia, only two of the surveyed 13 participants indicated negative implications on their family due to COVID-19. To be more precise, they indicated that their families had encountered difficulties related to finances and travel restrictions. Given the importance of remittances to support family in Tunisia, participants were also asked if COVID-19 had limited their ability to send money to their families, but only one participant confirmed this. Being asked about future ability to remit money, only two of the 13 participants indicated that COVID-19 influenced future remittances. Interestingly, whilst one participant indicated not being able to send as much money as before, another one indicated being able to send more money than previously anticipated.



Figure 4: Other effects of COVID-19 on THAMM participants



5. EFFECTS ON THE EMPLOYERS

The most immediate effect for the employers with regards to participation in the THAMM programme was of course the fact that the migrants were not able to come at the time they were supposed to arrive and that they were already in a situation where they had to let go existing employees. This resulted in a situation where several employers withdrew their participation in THAMM or have not yet been matched with a participant. One employer discussed that the risk was too high of having a migrant coming in during this already challenging time and that this led to the decision to not participate, at least at this point.

Among those that are still participating, several of the respondents discussed that the trainees arrived late, with arrivals ranging between one and seven months later than originally anticipated. One employer of two participants discussed the positive impression that they left upon arrival in terms of their level of preparedness. They were very motivated, showed good demand of the German language and were prepared to work independently.

The employers also ensured to use the lockdown time to work on their businesses, such as deep cleaning or renovations. In some cases, this meant that THAMM participants were involved in tasks that have nothing to do with their actual apprenticeships, but it ensured that they had something to do. Whenever possible, however, employers still tried to instruct their trainees and to give them both practical and some theoretical lessons on the tasks relevant to their profile. Yet, they expressed that they found it difficult to fulfill the teaching assignment during the lockdown. Without guests, most learnings remained largely theoretical and practical application was in many cases only possible to a limited extent. In one case, the employer offered private cooking lessons to the trainees, but this was perceived to be very time-consuming. Others described that contact was more direct because there was more time for one-on-one, often motivational, chats with their trainees. In this regards, one employer mentioned that it seemed that the trainees found it nice that things were moving a bit slower in the beginning, because it also allowed them to keep improving their German language skills.





It also allowed them more time to study for intermediary examinations than they would have normally, which was useful in the beginning.

In one business, which includes hotel, gastronomy and retail branches, the trainees were working in different and changing areas. For example, a restaurant specialist was placed in the organic shop at the meat / cheese counter, which was still operating in contrast to the restaurant. In addition, this employer organized internal training opportunities, such as a winery tour, which were intended to keep the trainees motivated and to offer them different activities. Other employers organized similar activities, focusing on the trainees getting to know the local culture, including joint hikes, and getting to know the region. In addition, some of the employers supported their trainees in obtaining their driver's license.

Besides the challenges related to the lockdown measures discussed above, vocational schooling also was more challenging than it would normally be. One of the trainees, for example, had to be quarantined because there was a suspected case of COVID-19 in the vocational school, which of course then also impacted how that participant was able to contribute to the business. An additional challenge that arose due to the lockdown measures is the fact that the intercultural mediator is not allowed to visit the business in person and resolving conflicts digitally was described as too difficult by the employer.

Among those employers that did not end up participating in 2020, discussions around future participation highlighted that this is dependent on how the pandemic evolves for most of these businesses. Several interviewees explained that participating in THAMM is a big investment for employers. The businesses provide housing for the participants, and they need to support the trainees in other areas such as getting the residence permit and continuing language development. It was also noted that the higher salary of THAMM trainees⁷ compared to other trainees posed a specific challenge during these times. In addition, one employer mentioned that due to the location, transportation to the vocational school would have been too expensive as it would have had to be privately arranged. Overall, the costs for participating in THAMM were especially challenging with the restrictions in place during the pandemic, but if things "go back to normal", welcoming a THAMM participant is still something that these employers could see doing. More concretely, some of the employers mentioned that they see THAMM as a good opportunity to find trainees as they have not received applications from domestic candidates for the restaurant and hotel business.

At the same time, employers discussed other factors that play a role in terms of the preparedness to participate in THAMM. In the countryside, more support is needed in terms of expenses to attend the vocational schools, housing, and language training. Financial support for the businesses for these additional expenses would be highly valued and increase preparedness. In larger cities, the main issue is housing, which is usually quite expensive. It was noted that there is a risk that if the trainee drops out, the employer is left to pay the rent until they can get out of the contract. In this sense, support would also be appreciated here. Overall, it is therefore clear that participation in THAMM involves a

⁷ According to the Federal Ministry of the Interior's application instructions for the Skilled Workers' Immigration Act, the salary of trainees must be at least 929 EUR ([Anwendungshinweise des Bundesministeriums des Innern, für Bau und Heimat zum Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz \(BGBl. I 2019, S. 1307\)](#)). THAMM has even set a threshold of 955 EUR to be sure that there will be no short-term changes.



cost-benefit analysis that every employer must make respectively, both while the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing as well as afterwards.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper presents a case study of the THAMM labour mobility scheme placing Tunisian nationals in the German HoGa sector in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is evident from the data that impacts of COVID-19 on businesses, participants and the overall labour migration scheme are manifold. On a macroeconomic level, the German HoGa sector was hit hard by the pandemic with temporary closures of businesses or limited operation due to restrictions, however, employers stated they were able to mitigate the effects with government aid in form of *Kurzarbeitergeld* and in some cases were relying on savings to bridge the gap. Given the uncertainty caused by the pandemic and the impact of restrictions on business operations, key stakeholders presented evidence that many employers switched from long-term to short-/mid-term planning and/or had to let go employees. This led to a reduction in the demand for staff in the HoGa sector overall and thus open vacancies.

With regards to the THAMM programme, key stakeholders reported that the impact of COVID-19 resulted in some employers dropping out of the programme or withdrawing their participation temporarily which resulted in a reduced number of open vacancies to match participants to. In this context, employers stated that THAMM participation involved a cost-benefit analysis given the heightened time and financial investment related to vocational schooling, the comparatively higher salary of THAMM trainees, housing, and organization of language courses. During the pandemic and thus uncertain times, the investment was felt to be a risk by some of the employers.⁸ To this end, employers said that support with vocational schooling, housing and language courses could reduce some of the time and financial burden of employers, particularly so in rural areas where participation in educational activities usually also required private transport to be organized. Overall, however, employers stated that THAMM participation was a worthwhile consideration given the vast skillset and motivation of foreign candidates and the lack of domestic candidates and/or interest of domestic candidates to work in relatively rural locations. Additionally, some employers felt that THAMM participation represented a great opportunity for participants to gain a professional foothold in Germany.

In terms of practical implications of COVID-19 on the THAMM labour mobility scheme, interviews with key stakeholders showed that, while the world was shaken by COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, it started to adapt from mid-2020, also regarding mobility projects. When the situation had established itself somewhat, the adjustment of the programme, structures and institutions began to still make the programme work under the changed conditions.

⁸ Effects on the potential employers were also noted within the PALIM pilot project, where factors such as the uncertainty and it not being the right moment were mentioned. In general, employers seem much less open to hire talents from abroad, because it is an investment. This was then seen as a major challenge during the pandemic as the talent foreseen was relatively junior and to be employed at a relatively high salary, which made this an impossible investment at this time and led to contracts being frozen.



Given the restrictions on movement and social distancing, the selection process and the language courses were moved online. Moving the selection process online was initially connected to technical difficulties on the side of the BA and required adjustment of participants and interviewers to the new recruitment environment and process. In terms of the language courses, a partnership with a German language center was perceived to be beneficial both in terms of technical assistance and more diversity in teaching activities. Vocational schooling in Germany was also moved online in most cases, but as evidenced in the survey, where this was not the case trainees were unable to participate in educational activities, leading to delays in their professional education or them having to catch up on the material within a short time.

Closure of administrative offices or operation at limited capacity, such as consulates in Tunisia and immigration offices in Germany, caused delays in the arrival of participants and in obtaining residence permits in Germany. Overall, obtaining a residence permit was perceived as a task that requires more support from the THAMM team given the limited time availability of employers and lacking or limited knowledge of process on the side of trainees, which resulted in some cases in additional delays and trainees feeling overwhelmed.

Naturally, COVID-19 also had a pronounced effect on the apprenticeship placements. With the temporary closure of many businesses or limited operations, participants stated they experienced a reduction in working hours and a change in their professional duties. Because of government aid in form *Kurzarbeitergeld*, none of the participants suffered a reduction in salary, but given the lack or limited number of guests, they experienced a reduction in tips. However, there was close to no evidence that this influenced their ability to remit money to their households. Additionally, participants stated that they performed activities that do not necessarily form part of their professional education. It was also perceived as a challenge by employers to keep participants busy and to fulfil the teaching assignment.

However, the reduced workload also brought about positive impacts: Employers reported that they had more time to help participants with bureaucratic matters, additional educational (both in terms of their apprenticeship, additional exam preparation and language courses) and leisure activities, and some supported their trainees in obtaining their driver's license. This had a positive effect in terms of integration within the business, but social distancing rules also led to less activities outside this predefined frame. To counteract some of the frustration caused by limited operations the businesses and the kind of activities trainees were engaged in, THAMM organized regular online check-ins.

To this end, the data has highlighted the importance of integration support measures as a component of labour mobility schemes. As evidenced in the data, employers usually lack time to organize the different components, besides it also representing a financial investment for them. Therefore, it is essential to put in place mechanisms that anticipate potential problems and to work more closely with employers to identify gaps and/or where additional support is required to provide participants with the needed integration support from the onset.



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THAMM

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