

Cooperation of Public Employment Services, Private Service Providers, and Clients within Activation Policies in Germany

Findings and
Policy Recommendations

**MAKE
IT
WORK**

Quality Processes in the
Service-Triangle of
Active Labour Market Policy

GEWAK

The Ministry of Labour, Integration, Youth and Social Affairs of the State of Hessen (HMSI) has commissioned a consortium comprising the Gesellschaft für Wirtschaft, Arbeit und Kultur e. V., Frankfurt am Main (GEWAK), the Institute for Economics, Labour and Culture at Goethe University Frankfurt (IWAK) and Fulda University of Applied Sciences, Department of Social Work, to carry out the research and transfer project 'Make it Work. Quality Processes within the Service-Triangle of Active Labour Market Policies' on the function of cooperation between employment agencies/job centres, commissioned third parties (private providers of employment services) and clients as job seekers entitled to benefits under SGB II, to identify key problems and develop opportunities for improvement. This research was conducted in three sub-projects with each partner responsible for one of these. The main policy recommendations have been authored jointly. A summary version of the reports of the sub-projects and the joint policy-recommendations are published in Schulze-Böing et al. (2026).

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1. The ecosystem of employment services in Germany and its relational dimension

1.1. Networks and partnerships – new trajectories in labour market policy

With the transformation of the economy and the labour market, the demands placed on public employment services (PES) and its agencies have also changed. As early as in the 1990s, it became apparent that labour authorities, like social services and public authorities in general, needed to reorganize themselves if they were to meet the demands of a dynamic economy in a changing society with an increasingly diversified labour force, the risk of exclusion due to long-term unemployment, and, last but not least, rising expectations regarding the effectiveness and efficiency of public services (Weishaupt et al. 2022; Nunn 2015).

One response to this challenge was the introduction of new modes of governance based on the concept of "New Public Management" (NPM). In Germany, for example, this was followed by the so-called "Hartz laws" that aim at modernizing the system of PES. At the heart of these concepts was a new understanding of accountability and transparency through consistent performance measurement and controlling, as well as the execution of tasks by PES. To achieve greater efficiency, better management capabilities, and clearer allocation of responsibility, these concepts envisioned the introduction of competitive elements, a stronger separation of management and execution, and a critical reflection on the scope of services provided by public administration (Naschold 1996). The assumption was that many tasks could be performed better and more cost-effectively by contracted third parties than by the administration itself. As a result, private providers of employment services are assumed to fulfil a strategically central role in a newly structured labour authority. In this context, employment services have been "marketized" (Knuth 2018; Davern 2020; Peromingo 2025), although in Germany, compared internationally, a middle ground has been pursued between extensive privatization strategies like those in Australia and the UK and a focus on service provision by the employment agency itself. This also applies when considering not only the employment agency in the narrow sense, but also services for the activation and activating support of recipients of social assistance, such as those receiving basic income benefits for jobseekers under the German Social Code, Book II (SGB II) (Lødemel/Moreira 2023, pp. 96-117).

However, in the critical reflection and further development of the NPM model, labour market policy has adopted a broader perspective on the cooperative relationship between PES and private service providers, one that goes beyond mere "marketization." Given the increasing need for holistic forms of support for certain target groups facing multiple barriers to employment, it has become clear that employment authorities cannot rely solely on the logic of short-term contractual agreements typically associated with the competitive tendering of service contracts to third parties. Instead, they require, at least as a complement, long-term networks and partnerships in the relevant regions with social

service providers, social, youth, and public order agencies, and civil society organizations (Lindsay/McQuaid 2008; Davern 2020; Thibaut 2023; Perodomingo 2025). In the logic of so-called "post-NPM" approaches in public service theory, the term "ecosystems" for the delivery of employment services (or "service ecosystems") is also used in this context (Davern 2020, p. 15-18). These typically describe a territorially bound, long-term network of partnerships between actors with complementary service profiles (Rossi 2025). Ecosystems in this sense require not only professional standards and exchange relationships at the substantive level, but also a certain congruence of values and a shared understanding of the problem among different actors. This congruence cannot simply be assumed but must be developed and continually renewed. Stephen P. Osborne, one of the leading thinkers behind the NPM concept in the early 1990s, now speaks of a "Public Service Logic" that goes far beyond the NPM approach and considers models of inter-institutional and inter-organizational co-production and co-design of public services in networks, also including the recipients and ultimate beneficiaries of these services (Osborne et al. 2025). Alongside the substantive level, professional methodology, and quality, the quality of the relationships between employment agencies and local partners, as well as between providers of employment services and their clients, thus becomes a crucial success factor. Using the concepts of the "relational state" (Coole/Muir 2012) and "relational economics" (Wieland 2018) developed in political science and economics, this new logic of public services would allow us to speak of "relational" labour market and employment policies, which overcome the managerialist limitations of New Public Management (NPM) in the area of labour market policy by offering a broader concept. NPM approaches, with their strong emphasis on evidence-based management, monitoring, and controlling, have proven to be successful factors in German labour market policies. This is particularly relevant in the area of basic income support for job seekers under the German Social Code, Book II (SGB II). However, in the context of activation-oriented labour market policy, there appears to be a need to supplement this with a concept of the relational dimension of this policy field (Schulze-Böing 2013, p. 18). Dorembos and Froy (2010) in this context refer to the need to supplement the "vertical" logic of accountability, as it corresponds to New Public Management (NPM) but also to the classical "Weberian" model of bureaucracy, with a "horizontal" logic of accountability that addresses the local policy field and the partner organizations therein. This, in turn, requires new communication and dialogue formats tailored to the specific conditions of local and regional labour market policy.

1.2. Cooperation within the service triangle of active labour market policies

The present report will focus on a central part of the ecosystems for the delivery of employment services in Germany: the cooperation between Jobcenters, as part of the PES, and commissioned providers of employment services, and furthermore, the relationships of both to their common clients or, in the language of NPM, their customers.

The implementation of programmes in cooperation with private service providers is a key component of an active labour market policy (ALMP). Private providers, commissioned by the two types of public employment agencies in Germany ("Arbeitsagenturen", which deliver unemployment benefits and PES for persons unemployed, covered by the unemployment insurance and the Jobcenters, which deliver basic income benefits and PES for adults at working age and their families, covered by state funding), carry out a wide range of measures – retraining and qualification programmes, vocational guidance and training, coaching for target groups with special support needs, employment services, and much more. These providers include organizations in various legal forms with both non-profit and for-profit organizations.

In 2023, approximately €7.6 billion were spent on ALMP-measures implemented by third-party providers under the two main systems of benefits for persons out of work—the German Social Code, Book II and III (SGB II and SGB III), Book II regulating the benefits and services for needy persons out of work and their families, Book III regulating benefits and services for persons unemployed and jobseekers covered by the unemployment insurance system. This is in addition to funds from the European Social Fund, from which Germany receives approximately €940 million annually during the 2021-2027 programme period. Of this amount, around €317 million goes to federal programmes and €620 million to state programmes, primarily supporting the implementation of ALMP-measures.¹ Additional funds from state budgets and municipalities are added as national co-financing of the European funds.

The employment agencies of both legal systems (SGB II and SGB III) and the commissioned service providers maintain, by the very nature of their mandate, a close working relationship with the recipients of their respective statutory benefits. These working relationships each have their own distinct character, but they are part of an overarching service delivery process aimed at integrating the unemployed and putting job seekers into employment. The employment agency resp. the Jobcenter bears the legal responsibility for the overall service. However, service providers generally have a degree of freedom in interpreting their mandate and delivering their services. This is similar to other social services such as social welfare, disability services, or youth services, for which the term "triangle of implementing social law" ("sozialrechtliches Dreieck") has become established to describe the legal relationships (Bieritz-Harder 2022, pp. 199-200). Berzel and Mittermüller (2024, pp. 257-259) therefore speak of a "triangle of active labour market policies" ("arbeitsmarktpolitisches Dreieck") of Jobcenters, educational institutions and independent providers of employment services, and, last but not least, the clients and service beneficiaries, and which must be designed productively in practice, henceforward referred to as "service triangle".

This triangle represents an economically and legally regulated cooperative relationship, which Reis et al. (2016) describe as a "production network". However, it is also an arena for the articulation and negotiation of interests and normative attitudes.

¹The total for the entire period is almost 6.6 billion euros; <https://www.esf.de/portal/DE/ESF-Plus-2021-2027/inhalt.html>, accessed November 2, 2024

1.3. Relational economics and labour market policy

The complex problems faced by the target groups of activation-oriented labour market policies, according to the shared insight of the various approaches in this field, can only be addressed effectively through interdisciplinary and inter-organizational cooperation among the different public and private actors of this service-triangle. This cooperation brings together the knowledge, expertise, and resources of the various fields of expertise and experience within a region. Cooperation in the form of equal partnerships as well as contractual relationships can be seen as elements of such partnership structures, which complement each other but can also create a certain degree of tension. Partnerships between autonomous actors differ from contractual relationships: the former operate on the basis of trust, equality, and reciprocity, while the latter operate on the basis of a clear division of roles between client and contractor ("principal" and "agent," cf. Lane 1993, pp. 114-177 and 185-188; Sesselmeier/Blauermehl 1993, pp. 72-75). However, international experience shows that local cooperation relationships in the field of employment services always include both forms, albeit with different and often changing weightings over time (Lindsay/McQuaid 2008).

With regard to the implementation of ALMP, this opens up new perspectives for embedding the legally mandated contractual logic between employment agencies and employment service providers within a system of long-term, continuity- and reciprocity-based relationships in local and regional networks. However, the associated challenge of ensuring efficiency on the one hand and innovation and openness on the other should also be considered. Networks of long-term stable relationship also carry the risk of creating false incentives and compliance issues. Therefore, in the governance of the regional employment service ecosystem, a balance between competition and cooperation, between continuity and innovation, is a prerequisite for long-term productivity and impact. A well-founded and differentiated impact policy could thus be seen as a necessary, complementary element of local and regional partnerships (cf. Schulze-Böing 2025b). The governance of employment service ecosystems is therefore also about finding the optimal balance between competition and contract based service relationships on the one hand, and long-term, trust-based partnerships on the other. This requires a continuous re-adjusting of governance according to the situation of the regional labour market and its challenges. The framework for this regional adjustment process is provided by the relevant laws, such as the German Social Code, Book II (SGB II), and public procurement law, as well as the performance targets for the overall system, as defined, among other things, in the target agreements within the governance hierarchy of the Federal Employment Agency, the federal states, and the municipal authorities responsible for SGB II. These framework conditions define the scope for regional shaping options, both in the area employment services and in other regional policy areas (Bianchi et al. 2025).

1.4. Designing regional ecosystems for PES

Although the importance of local and regional partnerships is hardly disputed and they are repeatedly highlighted in various forms as key success factors for active labour market policies, there are hardly any design criteria or guidelines for shaping such ecosystems or for working in partnerships. This is largely left to the local and regional constellations of actors. Consequently, the situation in the regions is heterogeneous in this respect. On the one hand, this can be seen as an expression of a decentralized approach to shaping labour market policy. On the other hand, however, it could also be interpreted as a certain lack of strategic design in this area.

In this situation, a glance at recent developments in neighbouring France can be inspiring, a country often associated with centralist policy approaches. However, in recent years, France has clearly learned the importance of partnerships and a sensible division of labour in the implementation of labour market policies. It has made the conscious development and utilization of partnerships with various regional stakeholders a central task for implementation.

The Pôle Emploi, which emerged from the 2009 reform of the employment service, as well as the "France Travail" structure, a more integrated labour market policy created after a further reform in 2024, grasp the effective anchoring (ancrage) of the employment service in the regions as a key success factor, but also as a key task of those working there in managerial or operational roles. Regional bodies with comparatively extensive powers exist for this purpose, with regard to decisions on the implementation of labour market policies in the regions.

The principles of professionalism for employees of the employment service are described in the concept of France Travail as the ability to act competently on three levels:

1. working with the clients of the employment agency,
2. working with the "official" and legally or contractually affiliated partners of the employment agency,
3. working with partners in the "external" environment of labour market policies, such as social services, educational institutions, private companies, etc., whose resources can be accessed through an expanded partnership network ("connaître les offres de service des acteurs du territoire", Thibaut 2023, p. 245)

The service ecosystem is presented as a system of concentric circles, with public, semi-public, and non-profit actors providing complementary services to the employment agency in the vicinity. In the wider circle, however, there are private companies operating in the labour market without a direct public mandate, such as staffing agencies, recruiting consultants, and private employment agencies like the company "Indeed". Social media platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram are also considered part of the service ecosystem in France Travail's concept (Pôle Emploi 2017: 7; Thibaut 2023: 248), whereas the German Federal of Employment Agency still assumes that its own services and tools can cover all essential labour market needs (Schulze-Böing 2025, pp. 33-35). Interestingly, in

France, there seems to be a greater understanding than in Germany of the nature of employment policy as an open system with a pluralistic structure of actors.

However, functioning systems of regional partnerships also require a clear understanding of the roles that individual actors can play. Within the legal framework of the German Social Code, Book II (SGB II), Jobcenters, in the organizational models of "joint institutions" (gE) and job centers under municipal management (zkT resp. KJC), hold the position of the legally responsible authority for providing services under the law. The Jobcenter is bound by this legal framework when providing services. From this perspective, providers, as commissioned third parties, are the tools for the implementation of policies. The legislator envisioned a clear separation of spheres of responsibility. This is evident from the aforementioned provision in Section 18d, which grants representatives of the social partners and chambers a relatively strong advisory mandate, while explicitly excluding the third-party-providers of services. Furthermore, Jobcenters, like employment agencies, are bound by procurement law when commissioning third parties, with few exceptions; that is, measures must be put out to tender and awarded through competition among various bidders. From this perspective, there is something like a "supply chain" between Jobcenters and service providers, implying dependencies in both directions. Service providers rely on contracts from Jobcenters and the associated financial inflows. Conversely, Jobcenters depend on the existence of a qualified and functioning network of service providers, which cannot always be assumed, especially in rural areas.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the triangular relationship between Jobcenters, service providers, and clients represents one, albeit very relevant, segment of the network of relationships from which ALMP at the regional level is constituted. This network primarily includes regional employers, but also other authorities with areas of responsibility that can impact labour market opportunities (such as immigration authorities) or with complementary, i.e., adjacent and supplementary, fields of work, such as youth welfare offices and school authorities². Nevertheless, it makes sense to first concentrate on the triangle itself and analyse the dynamics of interrelationships and interactions taking place there in order to gain a better understanding of this central building block of the ALMP-system and to explore potentials for improvement and the enhancement of impact.

² For an examination of the cooperation between employment agencies and employers, see Bähr/Marquardsen 2019; for a consideration of the cooperative relationship between Jobcenters and the German Pension Insurance (and the handling of "cooperation frictions"), see Becker/Sackmann 2024.

2. Methodological approach

To get the most comprehensive picture of the service triangle, one that takes into account the complexity of relations and the differences in the perspectives of stakeholders, in several stages of research a variety of methodologies were applied. In addition to an analysis of statistical data on ALMP-measures under the German Social Code, Book II (SGB II) in Hesse, focus group interviews, participant observation, and document analysis were used. Furthermore, in the final project phase, interim results were presented in a total of eight "lunch lectures" and discussed and validated with the project's target audience.³

The following overview provides a summary of the applied research instruments.

Methods and data basis



figure1: Data basis and survey methodology, own illustration

Interviews of key actors

To display different perspectives on the process of programme implementation, a survey of the stakeholders involved was conducted. The semi-structured focus group interviews with managers and operational staff of Jobcenters and service providers were conducted online. Clients and participants in programmes were also interviewed using semi-structured group interviews. The development of the interview guidelines was based on the results of a standardized survey of the managing directors of Jobcenters and service providers (see Engler/Schulze-Böing 2024, pp. 23-27). Detailed transcripts of all interviews were prepared and reviewed by the members of the research team who participated in the respective interviews, following a "four-eyes principle". These interview transcripts form the data basis for a thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006).

³The "Lunch Lectures" were 90-minute online seminars held monthly on various topics and in collaboration with internal and external speakers. On average, nearly 50 people participated in each seminar.

In-depth analysis of processes

To gain a deeper understanding of the processes, participant observations at group events and meetings of individual service providers and Jobcenters were conducted. The focus here was particularly on observations of the take-in process and the handover procedures within the service chain of ALMP (Section 3.4).

An expert discussion with representatives of the Jobcenters regarding procurement and grant programmes served to classify and evaluate the organizational and substantive design of the programme management. This was followed by a document analysis of current, in which the interaction requirements formulated in the service descriptions were examined (Section 3.5).

Structural data and context information

Parallel to the data collection, a statistical analysis of secondary data on active labour market promotion within the legal framework of the German Social Code, Book II (SGB II) was conducted (Section 3.1 and Engler/Schulze-Böing 2024, pp. 3-16). Furthermore, the annual reports of labour market integration of the 16 Jobcenters under municipal management (zKT) in Hesse were analysed to obtain information on individual Jobcenters and Jobcenter districts, as well as on the implementation of ALMP-measures (Section 3.6).

3. Quality processes within the service triangle of active labour market policies

3.1. The market for ALMP-services – developments and structures

Trends in the active labour market

The market for ALMP-measures has developed differently in the two legal frameworks of Social Code II (SGB II) and Social Code III (SGB III) since 2019. While there was still a slight increase in expenses nationwide under SGB III, spendings under SGB II stagnated. Adjusted for inflation by over 19 percent since 2020, this indicates a significant reduction of funding in real terms.⁴

According to data provided by the Federal Agency for Employment (hereafter BA for “Bundesagentur für Arbeit”), the average number of participants in training programmes across both legal systems (SGB II and SGB III) fell from nearly two million between 2006 and 2009 to around 650,000 in 2024.⁵ The reduction in funding of programmes is significantly greater than the decline in unemployment during this period. The activation rate (“Aktivierungsquote”), which expresses the ratio of individuals in programmes to the total number of unemployed in one respective legal framework, fell from 24 percent in 2010 to 16.9 percent in 2024. It is noteworthy that activation rates under the German Social Code, Book III (SGB III), that is the system of the unemployment insurance, are almost consistently much higher than under the German Social Code, Book II (SGB II), where, due to the considerably higher proportion of long-term unemployed and people with particular barriers to employment, one would rather expect a greater need for support. In 2024, the activation rate under SGB III was 21.5 percent, while under SGB II it was only 14.1 percent, with a clear downward trend.

Furthermore, there clearly are functional problems within the funding system. For example, the budget for integration allocated to all Jobcenters in Germany was only utilized to about 90 percent in 2023 (Engler/Schulze-Böing 2024: 10). However, in 2024, the utilization rates in Germany, including in the state of Hesse, increased somewhat.

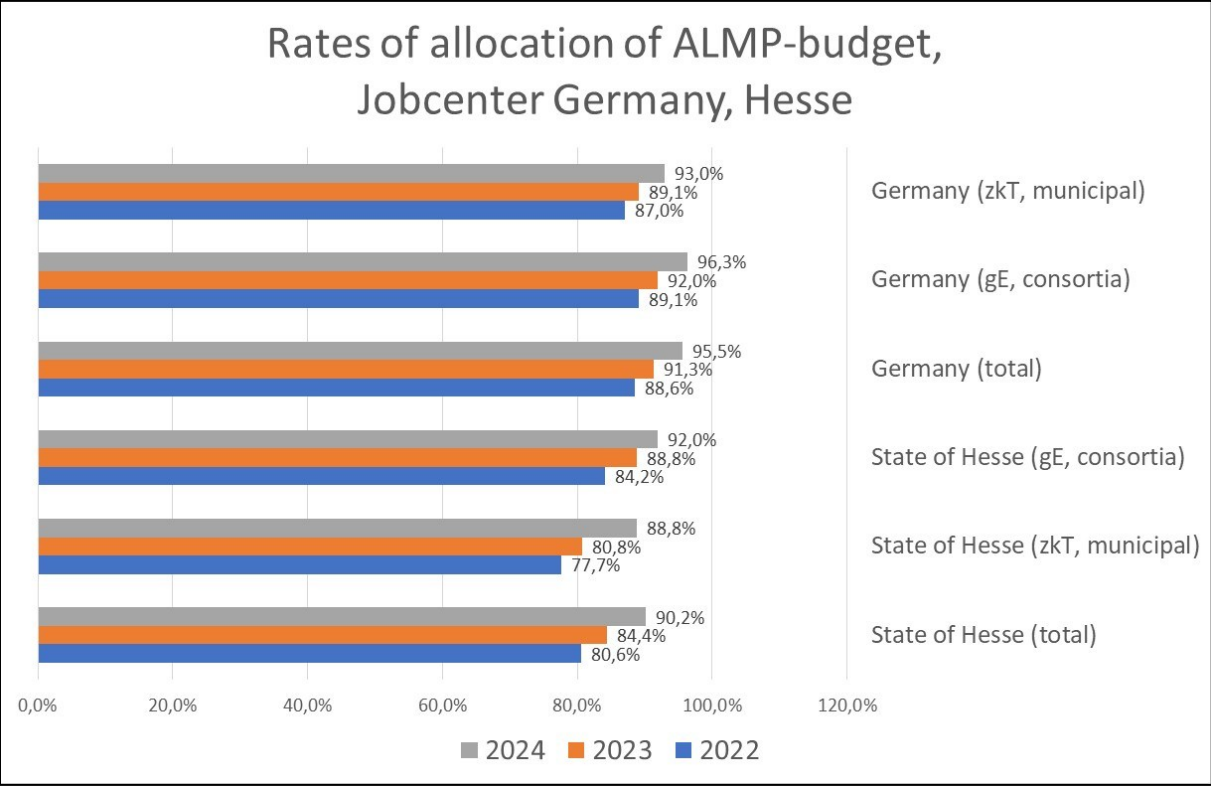
Across Hesse, a good 92 percent of the funds were actually spent in 2024, although there was noticeable variation within the group of Jobcenters.⁶ In this area as well, Hesse shows figures which are significantly lower than for Germany as a whole. Interestingly this holds true for both organizational

⁴Source for the following data: Statistics of the Federal Agency for Employment (“Arbeitsmarktstatistik”).

⁵Source: Statistics of the Federal Agency for Employment (Förderstatistik); for more detailed breakdowns of the cited data, see Engler/Schulze-Böing (2024, pp. 5-7) and Schulze-Böing (2025a).

⁶ Calculated on the basis of the data of the statistical product 1873 of the BA statistics “Arbeitsmarktpolitische Instrumente SGB II - Ausgaben und Teilnehmende”.

models of the Jobcenters. This is a problematic finding insofar as this underutilization can be seen both as lost funding potential and as a narrowing of the market for employment services in the triangular constellation outlined above. The already limited financial resources for services are thereby further reduced, which, given the intense budget competition at all political levels, will likely be difficult to justify.

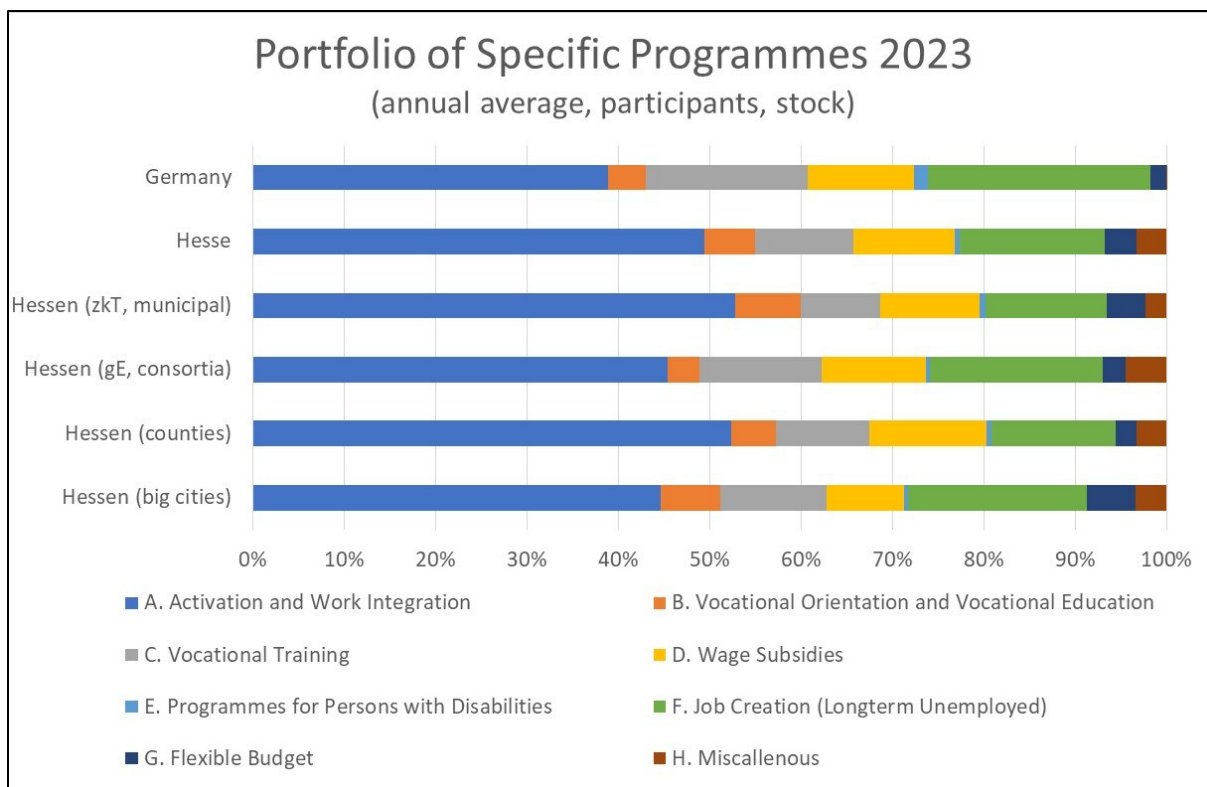


Structures and effects of ALMP-measures in the German Social Code, Book II (SGB II)

The average number of participants in ALMP-measures under SGB II in 2024 was approximately 329,311 in Germany.⁷ In Hesse, the number was 21,356.

These measures are distributed very unevenly across the different types of programmes. Programmes for activation and work integration (“Aktivierung und berufliche Integration”), which includes a number of other specific measures in addition to the placement budget, occupies the largest space in Hesse's (virtual) overall portfolio and carries even more weight here than at the federal level. The smaller share of vocational training in Hesse is striking – in both organizational models of the Jobcenters (gE and zkT). Measures for job creation are being given less weight, too.

⁷Source: Statistics of the Federal Agency of Employment: “Arbeitsmarktpolitische Instrumente SGB II - Ausgaben und Teilnehmende”, product 1873.



The portfolios of ALMP-measures offered by the individual Jobcenters differ from one another both in scope and in their structure.⁸ The various categories of programmes have very different proportions within the respective portfolios of the different Jobcenters. For example, the programme category "activation and work integration" accounts for almost 80 percent of all programmes purchased by the Jobcenter. In the Waldeck-Frankenberg district, however, it is only around 25 percent. Conversely, measures for job creation account for over 30 percent of the portfolio in the Waldeck-Frankenberg district, but only just under four percent in the Main-Taunus district. In the Odenwald district, 31 percent of all participants are in vocational training programmes, while in the Hersfeld-Rothenburg district, the figure is only 2.6 percent, to name just a few extremes.

⁸ In an international context, German labour market policy is characterized by a pronounced discretionary decision-making logic (Weishaupt 2014, pp. 12-15; Lauringson/Lüske 2021, p. 11). Decisions regarding the type and scope of purchased ALMP-measures are made locally by the employment agencies and Jobcenters. The overall ALMP-strategies can therefore differ significantly, even more so at Jobenters than at employment agencies.

3.2. Cooperation between Jobcenter and Service Provider

Self-images and role perceptions in the service triangle

How do our interviewees define their roles and positions in the service-triangle? The group interviews we conducted as part of our project with managers and operational staff of Jobcenters and providers reveal different perspectives and understandings of roles held by the participants.

Managers and operational staff of the Jobcenters

In the positioning of Jobcenters and their employees within the servicetriangle, tensions and dilemmas are evident in their relationship with jobseekers, inherent in the nature of the specific services offered by the basic income support system. On the one hand, there is the dilemma between support and control, a characteristic of social work since its inception (Böhnisch/Lösch 1979, Bähr 2023, pp. 168-169). Further on there is a certain dilemma specific to the SGB II system of an approach putting emphasis on social inclusion and a holistic view of social work on the one hand and another approach giving clear priority to the effective and fast placement of clients in the general labour market.

The managers of Jobcenters interviewed clearly recognize that a Jobcenter, as a "social welfare agency," is responsible not only for providing employment services in the narrow sense, but also for offering "practical support for individuals" (JCL16).⁹ Others, however, also see the shortcomings of an "inclusion first" approach and emphasize what they consider the continuing primary task of job placement. They are critical of what they see as the strong adherence of operational counsellors and case managers to social work-attitude and advocate a stronger "sales orientation" that pushes for quick results, whether in the form of assigning someone to a programme (activation) or, even better, placing them in a job on the general labour market. "You have to be able to sell a refrigerator to an Eskimo" (JCL01), one managing director succinctly expresses his expectations of the counsellors, meaning that they should not get bogged down in providing social support to clients, but rather get people into work or offer them a perspective for integration through appropriate ALMP-measures. Unfilled programme slots and disappointing integration rates seemed to be caused, among others, by an exaggerated social work-attitude of many counsellors.

The task of managers and supervisors is to ensure an optimal mode of service delivery that balances the poles of participation and placement orientation, as well as partnership-based cooperation and the enforcement of obligations—a mode that is both suitable for the regional setting of the Jobcenter and its target groups, and for the prevailing labour market situation. Leadership is thus understood as principle- and rule-based, but also situational and flexible.

Jobcenter counselling staff recognize the challenge of finding a good balance between partnership and adherence to regulations. More so than management, however, they emphasize their desire to

⁹Explanation of the abbreviations used in the citations: JCop = Jobcenter operational staff; JCM = Jobcenter middle management; JCL = Jobcenter management; Top = operational staff of service providers; TL = managers of service providers; TN = clients/participants in ALMP-measures; H = field observation.

be seen primarily as supporters and "authentic" contacts who deserve the trust of their clients. They strive for "mutual cooperation" (JCOp07), want to "engage in dialogue with clients on equal terms" (JCOp02), and be perceived as "partners" of their clients (JCOp15).

Regarding their relationship with service providers, the vast majority of managers describe themselves as "customers", purchasing specific services from providers, who nevertheless retain ultimate responsibility for what happens to clients within the programmes purchased. As one team leader at a Jobcenter explains, their communication with service providers is "collaborative" in principle, but "tough" when "things aren't right" (JCM01). The managing director of another Jobcenter states: "Competition is competition". Service providers could not be "coddled" (JCL03).

Operational counsellors tend to view the service providers more as partners, offering a service that complements their own work. Within the framework of the commissioned programmes, these providers have significantly more time per client because they operate with considerably lower case-loads. It was noted critically that at the Jobcenter, counsellors would not be able to sufficiently advise and prepare their clients for these programmes because their organization provides them with inconsistent and often unsuitable information about the programmes they have commissioned to private providers. One counsellor, who previously worked at a private insurance company before joining the Jobcenter, reported that in her previous organisation, employees received intensive training when a new product was launched, enabling them to effectively explain its benefits to clients and sell it. She sorely misses this kind of training at the Jobcenter. It seems to be crucial to comprehensively prepare and empower Counsellors, especially as intermediaries between job seekers and support programmes, because: "If you want to ignite passion in others, you must first be on fire yourself." (JCOp22)

Managers and operational staff of service providers

The private providers of social and employment services commissioned by Jobcenters exhibit a certain diversity in terms of legal form, status (for profit or charity), organizational history, and their integration into larger networks of associations, corporate groups, or social communities. Correspondingly there is a broad variety within the spectrum of organizational "identities" and the understandings of managers and staff regarding their professional and social mission, their position within the governance structures of ALMP, and their relationship to the Jobcenter as the commissioning body. However, what they all share in the field of work under the German Social Code, Book II (SGB II), is the legal framework for their services according to Section 2 of the German Social Code, Book III (SGB III) and Sections 16 et seq. of SGB II, their adherence to the procedures of the German Procurement Ordinance for Services (VOL), and, not least, the respective budget framework for integration services at the Jobcenters, which is subject to fluctuations that can cause considerable uncertainties for business-planning. Often, providers are heavily reliant on refinancing from these budgets and have little recourse in the ALMP-sector when contracts are lost due to losing a tender or general budget-cuts. When implementing programmes, providers depend on effective collaboration with Jobcenters, from the selection and allocation of participants through support during the programme to its completion

and, if necessary, follow-up care. At the same time, these programmes are usually very specific services where the circumstances of each case play a significant role. Establishing a functioning working relationship between teachers, coaches, or counsellors and the participants in a ALMP-measure is a crucial prerequisite for the programme's success.

As far as we can tell from our interview material, there are three types of basic attitudes or self-images articulated by managers of the providers¹⁰:

- Professional and political autonomy

One initial self-image we would summarize under the term "professional and political autonomy." This is particularly prevalent among organizations with a long history, dating back to before the Hartz reforms and the implementation of the German Social Code, Book II (SGB II) in 2005, when local employment initiatives and locally developed programmes for specific target groups, still had a significant influence. During this period, it were often NGOs that developed programmes, which then were implemented with funding from municipalities and state authorities. These organizations frequently played an initiating role and, in many places, held a strong position within the political networks of local communities. Even in the different environment altered by the procurement regime of the SGB II, representatives of these organizations, in this self-image, claim a certain (professional) political mandate beyond the role of a service provider fulfilling predefined needs. In this respect, they see themselves as being on more equal footing with the Jobcenters. "We are not your service provider!" (TL05), as one managing director pointedly stated. Problems are seen here primarily in the "commodification" (TL05) of the relationship between the commissioning authority and the service provider. This "marketization" (Knuth 2018) of labour market policy is seen as a risk to the quality and social integration capacity of employment services.

- Collaborative professionalism

We would describe a second self-image as following an understanding of "collaborative expertise".¹¹ In contrast to the first position, the second concept of cooperation places the professionalism of casework at the centre of their own capacity for action. Collaboration, in this sense, is a vital component of a professional delivery of employment and other social services. It makes a difference whether one sees oneself as "professionals in the same case" or whether, instead, the "client-contractor perspective" prevails (TL12), explains the head of a municipal adult education provider. With the phrase "professionals in the same case," she provides a pointed self-description that outlines a typical ideal of the relationship between Jobcenters and providers, one that extends beyond mere service provision and focuses on concrete casework as the core of the collaboration. Instead of emphasizing their role

¹⁰The following is a generalized version of the terminology presented in detail in Schulze-Böing/Engler (2025, p. 162).

¹¹"Collaboration" here in the sense of Beinhoeker (2025, p. 180): "Collaboration can then be thought of as a subset of cooperation that occurs when agents align behaviors in mutually beneficial ways, but where the structure of the game is not given and static; instead, the players themselves are inventing, co-creating, and evolving the structure of the game over time."

as independent, society-shaping actors in the field of social policy, this approach is characterized by a focus on individual, i.e., individual-related and problem-solving strategies. "We [providers and Jobcenters] all have a common goal: supporting people on their way into employment and a self-determined life" (TL12).

- Loyal service providers

A third perspective on the role of service providers can be captured by the formula "loyal service provider." This self-conception is shared by the majority of the service provider managers we interviewed. Here, the market-driven logic of procurement in the field of ALMP is not questioned. A position of conscious distance from rule-bound, politically controlled administration is adopted, and this is precisely where the opportunity to achieve positive effects is seen. "Our quality lies in our entrepreneurial approach" (TL16), states, for example, the regional manager of a service provider specialized in job placement for young adults. She describes her organization's work as: "providing tailored support to the target group". The opposing viewpoint to the first self-image is also formulated quite confidently by a managing director: "We are service providers" (TL16). The unique qualities of this role lie in the significantly greater flexibility, the creativity in fulfilling the task—for example, placing even hard-to-place individuals in jobs—and the strong commitment of the staff, who are well aware that their jobs are only secure if the company can successfully compete in the market. A problem in the relationship with PES-authorities, whether Jobcenters or employment agencies, is that the dedication stemming from this understanding is often not recognized, loyalty is often perceived as a one-way street, and providers are quickly abandoned when competitors offer cheaper deals or budgets are cut. "We've jumped the gun so often," as the managing director quoted above put it. However, this exceptional commitment "is usually not truly appreciated". One could also say that there is an imbalanced relationship between the providers and the Jobcenters, which might be regarded in this view as ungrateful clients with high expectations but little loyalty and willingness to pay a fair price for good services.

Collaboration in practice

How do the parties involved perceive the interaction within the service triangle? What constitutes good cooperation, and which issues are relevant to the stakeholders?

Factors that facilitate or hinder cooperation

The overview tables show the factors that facilitate or hinder cooperation in the service triangle, firstly in the mutual perspectives of Jobcenters and providers (Table 1) and secondly in relation to cooperation with clients or participants in employment promotion measures (Table 2).

	Enabling vs. inhibiting factors		Statement
Jobcenter staff and managers on cooperation with service providers	Personal contact	High employee turnover at the organization, impersonal communication	"Personal contact cannot be replaced by 20 emails."
	Shared social/public-interest ethos	Unfair competitors in the enforcement business	No "quantity over quality"
	Knowledge of ALMP-measures and the range of measures offered	No sales orientation among employees, inadequate training of consulting specialists regarding the ALMP-measures	"Those who want to ignite others must first be on fire themselves."
	Social space orientation	Generalized problem definition at the desk	"We then look on site to see what's there."
Provider staff and managers for cooperation with Jobcenters	Willingness of Jobcenter employees to impose sanctions	Conflict avoidance of Jobcenter employees	"We need concrete support"
	JC-MA's knowledge of programmes	Lack of knowledge regarding programmes, employee turnover at Jobcenter	"Bring consultants into the programme!"
	More intensive case management, needs assessments and target group orientation of the JC	Lack of knowledge on the part of the Jobcenter regarding participants	"I believe many Jobcenters don't know their customers and don't understand their needs."
	Partnership-based cooperation, regular strategic exchange, transparency of goals	Competition and marketing pressure	"Learning to work with the carriers on an equal footing."

Table 1: Enabling and inhibiting factors for cooperation from the perspective of Jobcenters (JC) and service providers

	Enabling vs. inhibiting factors		Statement
Jobcenter staff and managers on cooperation with clients	Good advice and customer service.	Formal and subjective communication barriers	"To speak in the language of the customer".
	Customer willing to cooperate	Refusal to cooperate	The possibility of reducing benefits is important as a "gesture of threat".
	Outreach counselling	Clients not accessible	Getting to know better the specific problematic situations
	Personal contact and approachability of the Counsellors	Contact restrictions (during the pandemic), working from home, hotline instead of direct dial	"There is a significant difference" between remote consultation and personal contact, as it was observed during the pandemic.
Staff and management of service providers on cooperation with clients	Special efforts to reach participants (marketing and acquisition, home visits, follow-up phone calls)	Declined participation, lack of reliability among participants	"How can we reach people?"
	Good match of referrals by Jobcenters	Non-specific allocation of participants by Jobcenters (not matching the requirements of the programme)	"The participants then go home again" if they have not been prepared by JC-counsellor, who they have often never met before.

Table 2: Factors that enable and hinder an appropriate cooperation with clients or programme participants, from the perspective of Jobcenters (JC) and service providers.

Interim conclusion: Process chain and problem definition

In the light of the problem descriptions provided by our interviewees, the triangular relationship of Jobcenters, service providers, and clients/participants in programmes takes shape. This service triangle can also be described as a functional working relationship. The process of programme implementation can be perceived as a chain of interrelated actions (see Figure 2). Based on the inhibiting and enabling factors of cooperation identified by both service providers and Jobcenters, the following critical points and optimization opportunities can be identified within the PES-authority that is commissioning a programme:

1.) Planning of Programmes

- Provision of knowledge on the foreseen programmes to the counselling- and front-line staff of Jobcenters (which is more than simply information about a programme but comprehensive knowledge of the objectives, content, implementation-concepts and the ability to

communicate the expected effects in a manner fitted to the target group in terms of requirements of participation but also in terms of an explanation of future benefits)

- Sufficient and at the same time precisely tailored controls
- 2.) Handover/intake at the service provider
 - Preparation and preliminary information for participants
 - Transparency of objectives
 - Precise and flexible use of ALMP-instruments (e.g., through community-based approaches)
 - 3.) Implementation of the programme
 - Support during the programme by counsellors from the Jobcenter
 - Mutual accessibility and structured communication among operational staff of Jobcenter and provider
 - 4.) Service to leavers (after programme completion or early drop-out)
 - Enabling a seamless transition, in which results and experiences, that also consider the perspectives of the beneficiaries, can “flow back” from the service provider to the Jobcenters and have an impact both on the further service delivery in a particular case and on the design and improvement of general service practices and interorganizational cooperation.

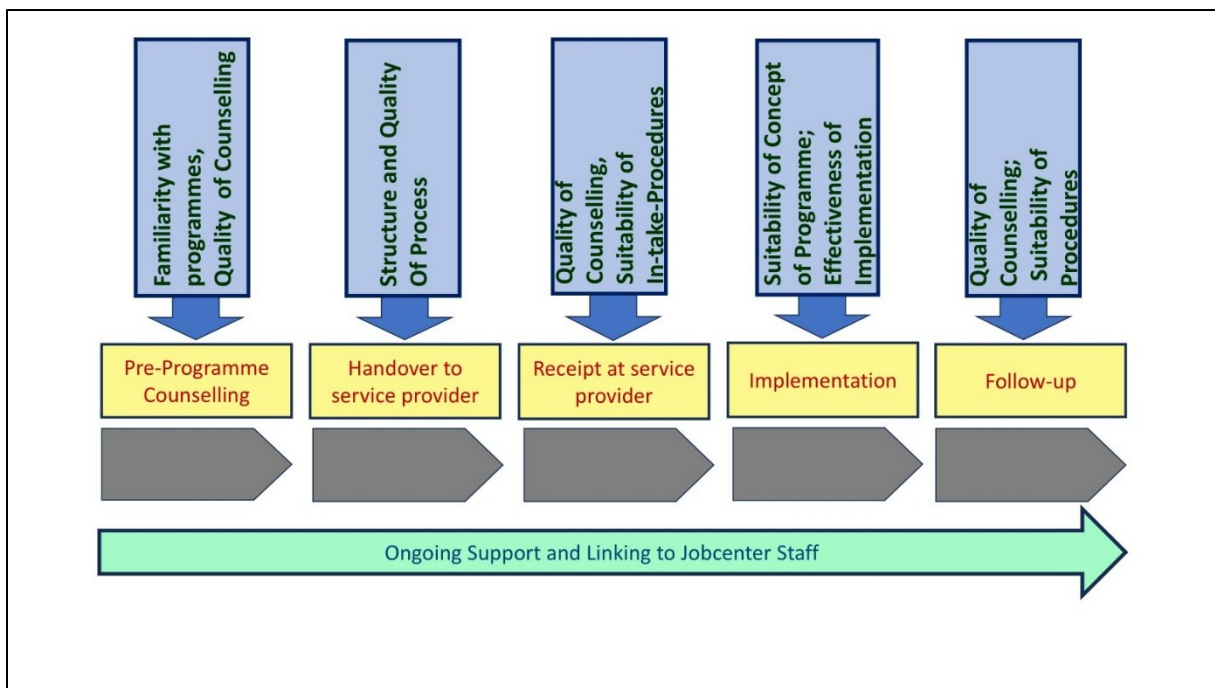


Figure 2: Service chain, design by the authors

3.3. Jobcenters and service providers in the perception of benefit recipients

In addition to the interviews that had been conducted with employees and managers of service providers and Jobcenters, employable benefit recipients had also be interviewed in a qualitative focus group setting.¹² These interviews again took place in order to survey the interaction and communication within the service triangle and to identify current problems and expectations from the perspective of the parties involved and the individual actors.

Interviews with participants in programmes

The sampling of the interviews followed a pragmatic-exploratory approach. The interview groups were composed of participants of various ALMP-measures and programmes and were conducted in cooperation with the organizations responsible for implementing the measures.

Unlike the interviews with the employees of Jobcenters and private service providers, which were designed as expert interviews (see Meuser/Nagel 1990) and focused on factual and procedural knowledge, the interviews with programme participants were primarily intended to elicit personal experiences and to discuss events within the context of the currently attended programme (and possibly others), including the referral process.

The individual interview groups differed considerably in their composition, which was due to the respective type of measure and the respective focus of work of the providers.

Perception of the Jobcenter

In the group interviews, participants discuss their experiences with the Jobcenter, their contact with Jobcenter counsellors, and the role they attribute to the Jobcenter in the realisation and implementation of the programmes they are currently attending. The question: "Why are you participating in the programme is often answered very simply, with a reference to the Jobcenter's assignment: "I was just sent here" (TN 14) can be considered a typical response in this context. Participation in the programme is described rather as a consequence of an official directive and does not appear to be the result of effective counselling. In this way, participants frequently report that they were insufficiently informed about the programme's content and objectives before starting the programme and that, in their opinion, Jobcenter counsellors themselves possess insufficient knowledge about the programmes offered. Communication with the Jobcenter is generally associated rather with control than with support, as exemplified by the comment: "Always letters – all control" (TN 21), from a father who participates in a vocational training programme specifically designed for people with a immi-

¹² In cooperation with eight organizations, between July 2024 and May 2025 a total of 12 focus group interviews with a duration of 1-2 hours were conducted across seven different Jobcenter-districts. In these between three and twelve persons (an average of seven) participated. The total number of 84 persons had been interviewed, comprising 48 women and 36 men.

grant background. Here, the Jobcenter appears as a passive administrative body and less than an advisory or proactive force. Other participants highlight positive experiences with Jobcenter contacts, reporting on dedicated and well-informed counsellors. However, as the participants usually add immediately, these experiences are not the norm. They simply "got lucky" with their current contact person at the Jobcenter (TN11). Furthermore, some participants provide examples of successful initiatives in communicating with the Jobcenter. The Jobcenter's adoption of their own suggestions is described as an example of successful communication, and a counsellor who is open to arguments and persuasion can be considered a good counsellor from the perspective of benefit recipients.

Perception of the service provider and the programme

In interviews with participants, the relationship with the respective service provider is consistently rated more positively than the relationship with the Jobcenter. Critical comments sometimes relate to the content of a programme, which is then described as not being a good fit (e.g., undemanding, no differentiation according to qualification level). Insufficient or ineffective language support is also mentioned in some interviews. In rural areas, complaints arise about difficult transport connections or logistical problems with the provision of online services. The support in dealing with personal problems and the more holistic counselling that participants receive from the service provider are mentioned positively. Furthermore, the programme's structural and stabilizing nature is emphasized. Regardless of the evaluation of the programme content, participants consistently acknowledge positive effects of their participation, such as improved self-organization, structuring of daily life, well-being, and sense of self-efficacy. Participants state, that taking part in the programme would be better "than just sitting at home" (TN16). They primarily participate to, for example, "not become lazy" (TN23) or "not be alone" (TN78). The empathetic assistance provided by the programme's staff is frequently emphasized. These staff members are often described as approachable, friendly, and supportive. The flexibility of the providers and their willingness to accommodate individual needs and utilize available resources are also highlighted, as is the often appropriate and targeted support. For example, one young adult speaks powerfully about getting a "last chance" through the programme: "to do something with your life and not rot on the streets" (TN57).

Polarity of roles of Jobcenter and provider

Participants in ALMP-measures often perceive their interaction with the Jobcenter as distant or standardized, and the counselling as formalized, impersonal, and lacking in focus on their individual needs. Interestingly, this is rarely criticized. It seems that participants view this type of contact with the Jobcenter as inevitable and perhaps even appropriate for a government agency. In contrast, the relationship with the service provider is often described as approachable, supportive, and providing stabilizing structure and guidance, and these providers are associated with a needs-based, holistic counselling. Criticism of the programmes tends to focus on content or teaching methods, not on the attitude of the staff. At the same time, only a few of our interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the Jobcenter's communication, instead, the strengths of the service provider are praised. Unlike the Job-

center, which merely "sends" people to the programme, the service providers are seen as approachable and highly effective in providing advice. In summary, there is a differentiated perception of the Jobcenter and the service providers as two distinct institutions that, ideally, complement each other within a support system.

Interaction within the service triangle of ALMP

From the participants' perspective, interaction between the Jobcenter and the service provider is minimal. Professional exchange is rare, and when it does occur, it's usually only when problems arise. However, the interviews reveal that some participation in programmes came about through referrals from service provider staff, for example, after the Jobcenter had assigned a programme (with the same provider) that the participant had decided not to continue after the initial sessions. The communication between the Jobcenter and the service provider is often described by the interviewed participants as uncoordinated, reactive, and incomplete. In their accounts, the Jobcenter and the service provider appear as two separate worlds, communicating only sporadically and then through the benefit recipients they are supporting.

3.4. Observations during group information sessions and activities

A crucial point in the collaboration within the service triangle of ALMP is the case transfer between Jobcenters and training providers, as well as the onboarding process for new participants in a programme. When Jobcenters refer benefit recipients or providers of ALMP-measures take on new participants, the service triangle essentially "comes into action". It's here, where we can gain insights into the practical implementation of this collaboration. For this reason, field visits were conducted at various service providers and Jobcenters, employing participant observation during group sessions. The primary focus was on collecting qualitative data on the interactions of the stakeholders at this critical interface for a joint management of the service process. This allowed for a broader understanding of the perspectives gained through interviews and provided insights into the practical application of various ALMP-instruments.

From Jobcenter to service provider

For the field visits, mainly introductory group sessions on newly launched ALMP-measures were selected – so-called information or presentation events. In this format, participants, referred to the programme, receive basic information on its content and objectives, on rules of conduct etc., based on

which they can make a decision on registering or not. Often, this is also the place, where participants and staff of the provider meet for the first time.¹³

The focus of the observations was on the specific design of the transitions between the counselling processes at the Jobcenter and the programme, as well as on the specific relations among the members of the service triangle, established during such a meeting. Therefore, the procedures of arrival and welcoming of participants, the form of invitation, and other formal aspects of this type of meeting were also accounted for in detail.

The observation protocol, created according to a standardized format for each observation, includes categories such as event type, procedure, number of participants, information conveyed, spatial setting, and whether and how staff of the commissioning Jobcenter is present at the event. There was also room for remarks on any other observation regarded as relevant for the understanding of the procedure. The visit most often also gave room for informal exchanges with participants during breaks or after the official meeting, providing relevant additional information on the client's perception of the setting and the process. These were also covered in the record.

Handover modes in the take-in process

Based on observations at the information sessions, two fundamental transition modes can be distinguished, according to which the meetings are conducted. In the linear transition, participants receive a written invitation to a meeting with the service provider. Ideally, they have already been informed about the programme and have made a choice for participation prior to this. However, it is up to the staff of the service provider to persuade the client of the benefits of his participation and make the choice of the client binding. Accordingly, formal enrolment in the programme occurs upon attendance at the event. The decisive factor in whether a client, who had been "sent" (H1) by the Jobcenter is going to participate in the programme on the basis of choice is, as a rule, their acceptance of the prior invitation: Participants who attend the meeting also enrol in the programme, with few exceptions. Correspondingly, the providers put emphasis on the shaping of the invitation procedure, in which they participate to varying degrees.¹⁴ In these cases, according to our observations, the information event only partially serves to promote a measure to the clients, but largely functions as a planning instrument for the later implementation: Only after the preliminary information event it can be estimated who and how many of the participants referred by the Jobcenter actually need to be scheduled for the programme.

¹³A total of nine field visits (H1-H9) were conducted at various organizations and Jobcenters in Hesse between October 2024 and March 2025. We participated in five information sessions (H1-H5) at different organizations and in training session at three different programmes. Additionally, we participated in a group information session (H7) offered by a Jobcenter, where the invited benefit recipients received information about a specific employer and its current job vacancies.

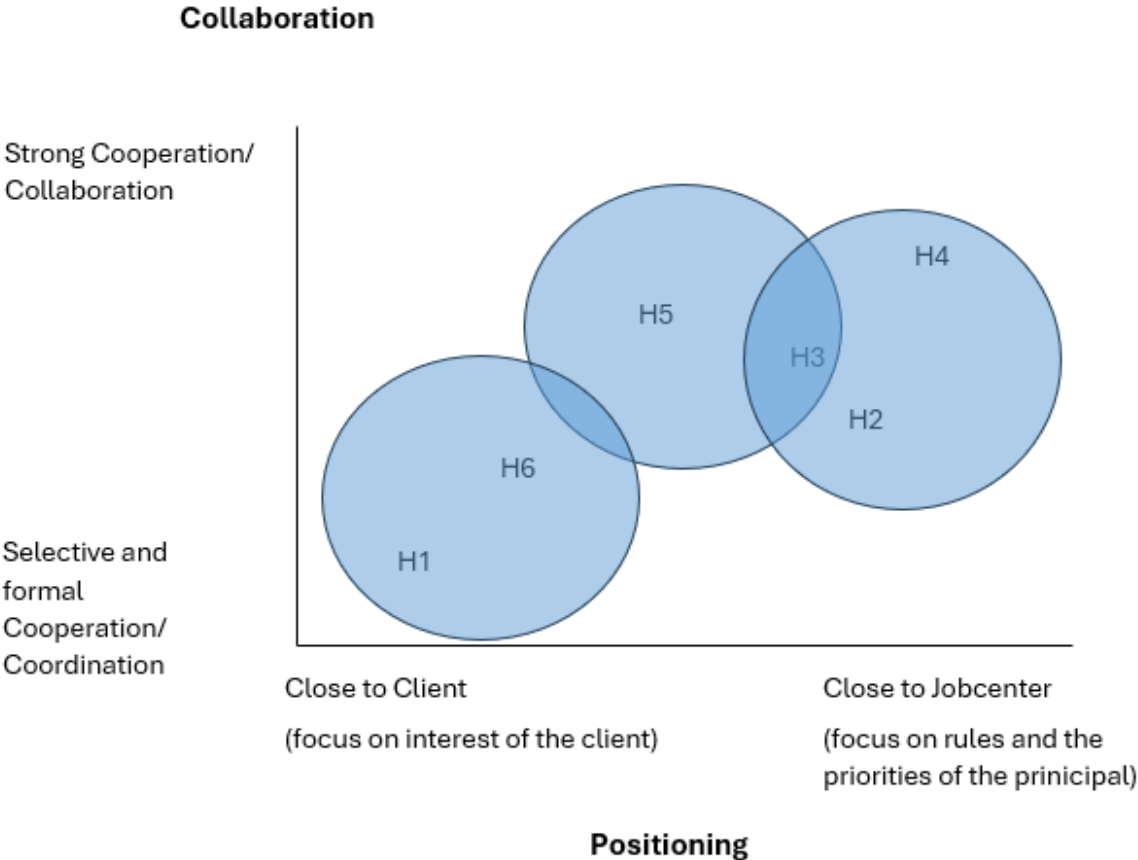
¹⁴For example, the service provider also sends out written invitations (H1). In H2, the invitation is sent in writing, by telephone, and by email, and follow-up is made three times if necessary. In H3, the provider calls those who were announced by the Jobcenter but did not attend the initial information session.

A second, non-linear transfer mode describes a certain back-and-forth movement between the provider and the Jobcenter. An example of this in our study is an information meeting about a specific programme, which took place together with staff of the Jobcenter. During and after the event, just the participants' interest in attending was assessed so that this information could be forwarded to the respective counsellor or case-manager in the Jobcenter.

A similar approach was taken in an observed programme unit. According to the provider, there had been no separate information sessions for groups before. Instead, potential participants contacted the provider on their own initiative or on the basis of information by their job-counsellor (as reported by the participants during our observation) and then again approached their job-counsellors with a request for approval of registering.

Different understandings of roles among the service providers

The understandings of the position towards the Jobcenter, claimed by the service providers in these initial meetings vary. This can be explained in two dimensions – the degree of cooperation in process of service delivery within the programme (1) and the proximity or distance between provider and Jobcenter with regard to the priority of commitment to the clients or to the Jobcenter (2), which may become relevant when trust is required to set up functioning working relations with clients.



1. Loose cooperation, proximity to clients (H1 and H6)

The organizations affiliated with this group emphasize their independence from the Jobcenter and

primarily position themselves as customer-focused service providers. The Jobcenter's involvement in the implementation of the programme is limited – for example, by citing the need for a “safe space” for participants. Cooperation is restricted to specific formal or organizational points of contact.

2. Middle position (H 5)

Providers in this constellation combine an emphasis on their operational autonomy with a commitment to close cooperation with the Jobcenter. A shared "we" is formulated between the provider and the Jobcenter (both county-owned entities), for example, in dealings with the employment agency. To participants, the programme is presented as both market-oriented and holistic, combining professional training with socio-educational support.

3. Close to very close cooperation, commissioned by the Jobcenter (H2, H3, H4)

In this context, cooperation between the service provider and the funding body is particularly strong. The service provider acts clearly on behalf of the Jobcenter or employment agency and understands its work as a supplementary service to counselling benefit recipients. The collaboration is closely coordinated in terms of both expertise and organization; at the same time, the service provider feels obligated to both the participants and the commissioning entity.

3.5. Interaction requirements in the specifications of procured ALMP-measures

Jobcenter employees, in our interviews, cite personal contact with service providers as a significant factor in the success of collaboration within the service process. Discussions with the providers' staff and managers highlighted a desire for professional, case-specific collaboration. At the same time, they pointed out functional and organizational challenges in coordination processes and a lack of transparency regarding objectives. According to our interviewees, personal contacts and established networks are often the crucial guarantee for effective communication and successful collaboration. In contrast, formalized communication channels and the formal coordination of exchange processes appear to play a secondary role in practice, particularly in the process of programme implementation. This must be considered a hindrance to professional collaboration between Jobcenter and service provider staff during programme implementation and to close, cooperative service delivery throughout the service process.

In the light of these findings from the interviews, it is worthwhile to examine the interaction coordination practiced in project management. One way to influence inter-organizational communication

and interaction in a coordinating manner is to place corresponding requirements in the tender documents for procurement projects.¹⁵ The question is: To what extent is the cooperation between Jobcenter staff and provider staff addressed in the specifications of tendered programmes? What criteria for shaping the collaboration between the service provider and the Jobcenter are already defined in the tenders and are intended, at least from the principal's perspective, for a programme yet to be implemented?

Competitive cooperation: The awarding of contracts under the German Social Code, Book II (SGB II)

Public tendering, alongside grants-funding and the issuing of vouchers (AVGS, voucher for activation and intermediation services), is a significant "transaction mode" between German PES and third parties, namely providers of education and training or other employment services (see Knuth 2018, pp. 348ff). Under Social Code, Book II (SGB II), Jobcenters procure ALMP-measures through competitive tendering (ibid., pp. 353f.), often mediated by a centralized procurement hub of the Federal Agency of Employment (REZ), and issue public tenders for this purpose (see also Weishaupt et al.: 2022, pp. 212f.).

As part of the "Make it Work" project, specifications from current tenders for ALMP-measures¹⁶ were subjected to a structured content analysis.¹⁷ Based on this, evaluation criteria were defined and a four-level grid was developed, according to which the tenders could then be ordered on a four-level scale with regard to the communication and interaction requirements mentioned in the service descriptions.

¹⁵ Specifications (or service descriptions) are essential components of tenders. They contain information about the project – target group, scope, content, qualitative characteristics, details of the bidder's personnel and material resources requirements, and technical information such as desired communication channels, reporting and documentation requirements, etc. A specification also provides a platform where Jobcenters, as the contracting authority, can highlight qualitative aspects of the planned measure and related procedures that they consider as particularly important.

¹⁶ The tenders were published between April and August 2025 via the regional procurement platform or federal government's procurement platforms. 38 tenders from 18 Jobcenters, predominantly in Hesse, were evaluated (see Table 4).

¹⁷ The evaluation categories used were: duration of participation, scope of employment, target group, document, programme-related reporting, participant-related reporting, absence documentation and communication, communication between provider and participant, communication between provider and Jobcenter, communication in triangular-meetings (counselling experts of providers and the Jobcenter, including the respective client).

Number of tenders examined	
<i>In total</i>	38
<hr/>	
<i>Tenders...</i>	
...issued by jointly managed Jobcenters (gE)	23
...issued by municipally managed Jobcenters (zkT)	15
...issued by Jobcenters of city district	19
...issued by Jobcenters of a rural district	19

Table 3: Number of tenders examined

Models of cooperation asked for

Four levels of cooperation have been distinguished in the service descriptions: (1) minimal cooperation, (2) limited cooperation, (3) extended cooperation, and (4) intensive cooperation based on personal contact. These levels reflect the degree of coordination, the exchange of information, and the frequency and commitment of contact that is required by the documents

Cooperation	Service descriptions by municipally run Jobcenters (zkT) N=15		Service descriptions by jointly run Jobcenters (gE) N=23		Total service descriptions N=38	
	N	%	n	%	n	%
minimal	3	20%	5	22%	8	21%
small amount	4	27%	13	57%	17	45%
expanded	4	27%	2	9%	6	16%
Intense, personal	3	20%	2	9%	5	13%
Other	1	6%	1	3%	2	5%

Table 4: Which collaboration models are represented? Absolute and relative frequencies. Two service descriptions in the sample refer only to one-day event activities and are listed separately as "Other".

In most cases, the required mode of cooperation is limited to a case-based reporting system, in which providers primarily supply the Jobcenter with final reports and operational data, if required (e. g. on attendance or formal achievements within the programme). Regular or personal coordination is not specified as a requirement.

45 percent of the examined service descriptions envisage a low level of operational collaboration. In addition to reporting, this also includes ad-hoc exchanges when needed or in response to specific occurrences. However, this form remains limited to exceptional cases and does not envision cooperation as ongoing.

Only in a few cases in-depth cooperation is indicated as a requirement. This includes regular coordination regarding the progress of the ALMP-measure, for example through the joint creation and updating of case-specific support plans as well as through final discussions of cases at termination of the measure. The aim is to achieve closer professional and organizational integration between service providers and Jobcenters.

The issue of communication with involved clients was examined separately. Requirements for this were found in only a few of the service descriptions analysed. Triangular meetings as an appropriate format for communication was mentioned only in few cases. For example, two service descriptions mention the possibility of three-way meetings (between the Jobcenter, the service provider, and the benefit recipient). However, it is remarkable how much of detail was provided by the specification of the communication mode in the tender in one of these cases:

"A development plan and a final meeting must be held for each participant. The contractor will submit proposed dates for these meetings to the responsible contact person via email. In addition to the coach, the responsible contact person must participate in these meetings. The personal contact person will decide whether the client also participates."

Conclusion: Service descriptions

Overall, the results show that the vast majority of service descriptions only provide for minimal to limited requirements of cooperation. Cooperation models predominate in which little to no operational collaboration between the service provider and the Jobcenter is planned, and the coverage of inter-organizational communication/interaction is correspondingly limited in the specifications. It is mostly confined to requesting of case-related reports and, if applicable, establishing an obligation to notify in case of upcoming problems. An explicit treatment of bidirectional communication (beyond simple reporting) and the design of operational interaction within the service process is found in only few of the tenders examined.

Ultimately, the analysis of service descriptions reveals a range of operational guidelines and procedural instructions for how communication and interaction between service providers and Jobcenters should be implemented and structured within the context of a specific programme. The examined service descriptions contain a broad spectrum of requirements for inter-organizational collaboration. Furthermore, the concept of "triangular meetings" is also addressed in a few of the programme concepts considered and their associated communication requirements. These examples demonstrate that, at least to some extent, tenders are being used as a management tool to secure the quality of in-depth collaboration within ALMP-measures.

3.6. In addition to the practice of active labour market policy: reports for labour market integration 2023

Each PES-agency in Germany is expected to submit an annual report on its policies for labour market integration and their outcomes in the reporting period, of which most are accessible on the internet. There are no specific requirements for the content and the key issues touched by these reports. As a consequence, there is certain variety of issues highlighted, which may also indicate the priorities of the management of each agency. We examined 16 Jobcenters in the State of Hessen to find out, if the issue of external cooperation is regarded as of relevance for both, the inputs and the outcomes of the policies of the respective agencies. All reports were referring to 2023.

Selection and evaluation

The integration reports were either retrieved (where available) via the SGB II service center's website or requested separately from the individual Jobcenters. For the analysis, the reports were reviewed according to a standardized format, and relevant information was extracted and compiled into a list. The aim was to gather data on individual Jobcenters and Jobcenter districts that was not available through general statistics, such as staffing levels or information on goal attainment. Furthermore, the individual reports were examined for information on the implementation of measures and, in particular, on cooperation with service providers (and other parties).

All reports follow a similar basic structure but differ considerably in the scope and level of detail in the treatment of individual points.

Evaluation category	Number of reports
Structural data, Personnel	5
Specific regional challenges	6
Specific target groups	7
Specific objectives (overall and for individual target groups)	8
ALMP-Measures	11
Implementation of programmes (results, problems)	2
Cooperation with sponsors, other collaborations and networking	5
Goal achievement (please specify target value and result value):	13
Outlook, perspectives	10
Further points, remarks	2

Table 5: Integration reports with details on individual topics (number)

Only five reports provided separate information on cooperation with private service providers and other third party organizations. These reports mostly referred to participation in professional quality circles or local and regional networks. Cooperation with educational institutions, welfare organizations, and associations/initiatives was also mentioned in connection with “job fairs” and group events for specific target groups. One report noted that a planned programme could not be offered due to the lack of a suitable cooperation partner.

4. Conclusion and Outlook

The analysis of the practices and attitudes of the actors in the service triangle of ALMP has shed light on an interorganizational and interpersonal system of relationships that has received little attention in labour market research so far, although it seems to be of major importance for the effectiveness of ALMP.¹⁸ This analysis revealed the strengths of effective and trusting collaboration among competent partners at the regional level, but also identified potential for further development to increase the "systemic effectiveness" within the current regime of ALMP in Germany. It shows that while the design and ongoing development of these cooperative relationships may be something of an intuitively ongoing focus for Jobcenters, it does not yet have the systematic priority that the authors of this report believe it deserves. In particular, the successful design of programme implementation processes in practice appears to depend heavily on personnel constellations and thus, to some extent, on chance. It would therefore be advisable to allocate more attention to this topic within the quality assurance systems of Jobcenters.

In this context, the attitudes of the managers and operational staff of the Jobcenters towards the legal and political mandate of their work under the German Social Code, Book II (SGB II), also play a certain role. Unsurprisingly, there is a spectrum of problem perceptions and priorities, which can be categorized between a practice orientation that focuses more on issues of social inclusion and the enhancement of employability in the long term, and one that is more focused on effective integration into employment on the short term.

On the part of the private service providers, there is an awareness of the strategic importance of their role and work for the successful implementation of the German Social Code, Book II (SGB II). However, there is also a sense that this role is not always recognized by the policymakers who set the framework, as well as by local employment agencies and Jobcenters. Being so strongly focused on supporting people in sometimes utterly difficult life situations, the role of being seen as an interchangeable supplier with short planning horizons and high uncertainty seems inappropriate. The operational staff of these service providers, on the other hand, see themselves as key holders of expertise within the overall SGB II system, which in many respects resembles an ecosystem of its own. In this system, the neglect or even endangerment of one element can quickly trigger systemic chains of consequences and threaten the balance of the entire system.

Regarding their own role in the labour market policy triangle, there are quite different emphases among the service providers – the “realistic” understanding as service providers who must assert themselves in a market with strong competition on the supply side and few demand-side actors with

¹⁸The specific recommendations derived from the findings of this report can be found in section 3 “Recommendations for Action” of the final report prepared jointly with the two project partners. For the English version see Schulze-Böing 2026, pp. 44-58.

strong market positions; the professionally ambitious understanding of them as “systemically important” partners with qualities that complement those of the Jobcenters; and finally, the understanding that service providers are also independent actors in the labour market and social policy arena, who have their own social policy aspirations demanding adequate recognition in that role.

Participants (clients) in ALMP-measures often experience the relationship between service providers and Jobcenters as one of tension, sometimes even as purely formal and lacking in substance. One perception model views Jobcenters and service providers as actors with rather complementary profiles: Jobcenters as strongly rule-oriented and bureaucratic, private service providers as more flexible and empathetic regarding the personal issues of the clients. In another perception both are seen as having a similar orientation and "pulling together." Both models of the relationship between service providers and Jobcenters may contain potential for a sustainably successful integration process. However, it seems crucial that the roles assumed by service providers, Jobcenters, and their respective staff towards the participants are well-considered and consistently fulfilled.

The effectiveness of ALMP-measures, such as those outlined in the cooperation plan, is primarily experienced by the participants in the discussions through practical implementation, through "doing." Against this backdrop, it seems particularly important to enable development pathways that are adaptable to individual needs and specific life situations.

Despite the heterogeneity of the actors and differences in attitudes and assessments, the fundamental characteristic of the actors in the service triangle of ALMP is the common will to cooperate and achieve shared success in line with the legal objectives of the German Social Code, Book II (SGB II). This provides a foundation for further enhancing its potential for a positive impact.

5. Literature

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