

The national Qualification Programme

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This paper addresses the Norwegian Qualification programme – how it is organised and how it functions. The programme is a new nationwide policy instrument, legally based in the Social Service Act, for supporting the integration of people with reduced working capacity into the labour market or labour related activities. It was set up in 2007 as part of Norway's Plan of Action against poverty.

The programme is targeted at people who are remote from the labour market, who have substantial and complex problems, severely diminished working capacity, dependency on social assistance benefits and who are trapped, or in danger of getting trapped, in a passive situation characterised by income poverty. The aim is to help them into employment through an individual two-year scheme under which they also receive standardised income support.

The aim of this paper is to present the programme in the context of the overall Norwegian welfare policy, and to describe some early experiences made by employees, service providers and participants of the programme. Hopefully these experiences may highlight some critical issues related to what can be seen as significant success factors.

1. Introduction

In the introductory chapter we shall give a brief overview of the Norwegian welfare system and strategies for inclusion, which constitute the context and a more general background for the Qualification programme.

The Norwegian welfare system – general features

The welfare arrangements and labour market policy in the Scandinavian countries have many similarities and are usually labelled a Universal Welfare system or The Nordic (Welfare) model. The main features of this system and the Norwegian system in particular, can be summarised as follows:

- A comprehensive welfare state responsibility for providing income security and welfare services to its citizens.
- A universal and quite generous social security system based on individual rights and obligations.
- Extensive public services in education, health, care for the elderly and disabled, services for families and infrastructure that provides citizens and companies with skills and favourable conditions.
- Active labour market policies and training, and the work approach in welfare policies, which aim at high labour force participation and inclusion in the labour market.
- High public (taxation based) expenditures on various schemes (benefits and pensions) for people with low/no income.

- A tripartite system of cooperation at the national level between the state and well organised social partners, in which macro-economic stabilisation policies in particular are important for employment, social distribution and living and working conditions.
- Relations between employer and employee/social partners characterized by centralised collective agreements and coordinated bargaining at multiple levels.
- Social assistance benefit in Norway is a “last resort benefit”, provided as a right to the individual or family, if the eligibility conditions are fulfilled and the person/family in question does not receive sufficient means from other sources. The exact amount to be paid to the individual or family is largely discretionary. The total household income is to be taken into consideration. There is no national minimum standard for social assistance benefits in Norway.

A core feature of this model is the interaction between the labour market and the welfare system: They may be seen as complementary systems.

The financial and administrative responsibilities for public welfare in Norway are mainly divided between the state level and the municipalities. The central Government is responsible for the general labour market policy and the inclusion of vulnerable groups into employment. The Government is also responsible for social insurance and various kinds of family benefits. The municipalities are responsible for primary health care, day care for children, primary and lower secondary school, and care for the elderly and persons with disabilities, social services and social assistance benefits. The county is responsible for secondary schools. The central Government and the municipalities have a common responsibility in the housing area.

Services and social assistance benefits provided by the municipalities are mainly financed by local taxes and state block grants to the municipalities.

Service providers who offer state financed labour market measures are often organised as private limited companies in which a local municipality or county council holds majority of the shares. They can also be entirely private or charitable organisations, municipal agencies or combinations of public and private agencies.). The share of civil society welfare services is small, but in recent years NGOs and voluntary organisations have increasingly received targeted public funding for dealing with problems of social exclusion.

Important elements in the strategy of inclusion

During the last decade or so, Norway has intensified the work approach in welfare policies. Social assistance and social security benefits for persons in working age have increasingly been linked to various activity requirements or assessments of eligibility, in order to enhance labour market attachment for recipients of “passive support payments”. Increased labour market inclusion of vulnerable groups is also the Government’s main strategy for reducing poverty. At the same time there has also been an increased emphasis on user involvement.

An important part of this stronger emphasis on the work approach is the national tri-partite agreement in 2001 between the state and the social partners on a more Inclusive Work life, aiming at a reduction of sickness absence, increased employment of persons with impaired work capacity and raising the real retirement age.

Another important element of the overall strategy for a more inclusive society is the major welfare administration reform (the NAV-reform) submitted by the parliament in 2005. The reform is a merger of the employment and national insurance administrations into a new employment and welfare administration, combined with more formal collaboration between this new administration and the local government social services administration (the NAV-administration). A central component of the reform is the introduction of a mandatory partnership between central and local government, established in local NAV-offices in all municipalities, set up with employees from both administrative levels. The NAV reform involves about 16 000 employees. NAV delivers and governs a broad range of social security benefits, labour market measures and services, social assistance benefits and also the new Qualification Programme, which aims to provide income security and to contribute to the inclusion of unemployed and vulnerable groups in the labour force. Thereby the local NAV-office provides a joint front-line service for a great variety of service recipients: On the one hand employers who have vacancies or employees with reduced working capacity, on the other hand pensioners, employment seekers, as well as recipients and applicants of social assistance benefits, and others in need of services from the welfare system.

General performance – some figures

Over the last 10-15 years Norway, like the other Scandinavian countries, has combined social equality with good macroeconomic performance and generally high employment rates. Norway is characterized by a high degree of social mobility, high productivity and rapid adaption between work and social welfare (“flexicurity”). Norway is also recognized by high participation rates in the labour market for both sexes. The labour force participation rate is 73 per cent and the unemployment rate approximately 3 per cent (see Annex). On the other hand, a relatively high share of the working age population (18-66 years of age), approximately 25 per cent, receive health related benefits and disability pensions. The number of recipients has increased steadily from the mid 1990. More than 100,000 persons (3.7 per cent of the population age 20-66) receive social assistance benefits, and approximately 22 per cent of these are long term recipients (receive benefit for more than 6 month in one year). The number of beneficiaries has decreased during the last years.

The distribution of income is rather equal compared to most European countries. The proportion of the population with very low income is low by international standards. Low income for a particularly prolonged period, or persistently low income, is often used as an indicator of poverty.

2. The new Individual Qualification Programme

The starting point and implementation

In autumn 2006, the Norwegian Government presented a White paper to the Storting (parliament) on “Welfare, Work and Inclusion”,¹ proposing new policy instruments in the field of labour market and welfare policy. One of the main measures proposed in the White paper was the new Qualification programme. The programme was launched as the main policy instrument in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. It was submitted by the Parliament 22 October 2007.

¹ St.meld. no. 9 (2006-2007).

The implementation of the programme is an integrated part of the implementation of the NAV-reform. The process of establishing new local NAV-offices started in October 2006 (pilot-offices) and according to the official plan, it will be accomplished in early 2010, when each of the 431 Norwegian municipalities has got (at least) one local NAV-office.

The implementation of the Qualification Programme started 1 November 2007 in municipalities that already had set up a NAV office at the time, and proceeds concurrently with the establishment of the new NAV offices. By the first quarter of 2010, the Qualification Programme will be nationwide. The municipalities are responsible for the coordination of the programme, which is delegated to the joint state-municipal NAV-offices.

Pilots prior to the qualification programme

The Qualification programme was piloted by a number of programmes and schemes aimed at enhancing labour market integration of more or less the same target groups. Lessons learned through evaluations of these programmes have been of great importance for developing the Qualification programme. In this paragraph we will give a brief introduction to these pilots.

"The activation pilot" (Tiltaksforsøket) was a four year nationally funded pilot project where 16 Norwegian municipalities participated. The objective was "to promote and to support new ways to move long-term social assistance recipients away from benefit dependency and into work." The main instruments were improved access to and use of national active labour market programmes (ALMP), improved cooperation with private enterprises in activation (placements) and the development of new municipal measures. The evaluation suggested that increased local cooperation between municipal social welfare and state employment agencies resulted in positive interruptions of long periods with passive receipt of social assistance payments.²

In 2003, the government launched the *"Labour market activation programme for social assistance recipients"* ("Tiltakssatsing"), a vocational rehabilitation programme for social assistance recipients. Target groups were young people (20-24), single parents, long-term recipients, immigrants and people who receive drug substitution treatment. Before the programme was launched, the two Norwegian welfare sectors, The National Employment Service (state) and The Social Welfare System (municipal), did not co-operate very well. Social assistance applicants were regularly sent from the social welfare office to register as job seekers at the employment services, but most of them were then sent back to the social services as persons labelled "unable to seek employment or to benefit from vocational rehabilitation". The evaluation showed that these kinds of conflicts decreased, and an interdisciplinary common perspective was developed during the programme. Co-operation between these organisations led to better co-ordination and increased availability of their services. Furthermore, the evaluation indicated that labour market schemes that are conducted in ordinary work sites and close individual follow-up were the most important success factors in order to achieve increased labour market integration.³

² Lødemel and Johannessen (2005). Tiltaksforsøket: mot en inkluderende arbeidslinje? Sluttrapport fra evaluering av Forsøk med kommunalt ansvar for aktive, arbeidsrette tiltak for langtidsmottakere av sosialhjelp 2000-2004. HiO rapport 2005/1. Oslo : University College.

³ Schafft and Spjelkavik (2006). På vei til jobb? Evaluering av arbeidsmarkedssatsingen for sosialhjelpsmottakere. AFI-rapport 7/2006. Oslo : Work Research Institute.

"Closer follow-up of individuals" ("TIO") was established as a direct response to findings in evaluations of the two programmes mentioned above. Both evaluations had indicated a need for more intensive individual follow-up of clients who needed special support in order to utilise employment related measures. Developing methods for individual follow-up, inter-agency cooperation and client participation has been a central part of TIO. The evaluation identified training and qualification, motivation, courses in job-application, Norwegian language, IT and school subjects, as well as comprehensive assessment and work placements in ordinary working life as elements which had a positive effect. However, the evaluation identified barriers in cooperation with labour market actors and health services, confirmed by a negative tendency in participants' opportunities to obtain work placements at ordinary work sites during the programme period. A possible explanation was lack of relevant competence and lack of targeted efforts in marketing and cooperation, as well as general capacity challenges.

Tentatively, the evaluation indicated that TIO may have contributed to a decrease in the number of months participants receive social assistance, as well as a decrease in the number of long-term social assistance recipients in TIO municipalities compared to other municipalities.⁴

"New Chance" ("Ny sjanse"), is a qualification programme for immigrants who after several years in Norway still have no permanent foothold in the labour market and depend on social assistance payments. The programme provides 2-years of paid qualification. A survey in the project-municipalities performed by the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi) showed that after two years of participation, approx. 40 per cent of the participants had entered the labour market or advanced into ordinary education.⁵

Experiences drawn from these pilots and other relevant research indicated that the target group for the QuP will have a variety of problems and that it can take quite a lot of time for them to enter into employment. Many of them will previously have participated in labour market schemes without getting employment. A number will suffer from mental and/or social problems, drug related issues, and relatively many will have a minority background and poor Norwegian language skills. Evaluations of these schemes have shown that close follow-up of each individual participant, stable relations to service supervisors, thorough 'mapping', and individual adaptation are key success factors. Social skills training and providing structure and coping strategies in everyday life were seen as preconditions both for employability and for better quality of life, whereas practice and learning through work experience placement and other labour market schemes conducted in ordinary work places, secured by close follow up, were seen as a key to ensuring that participants actually get employment.

Objectives, rules and provisions for the Qualification Programme

The programme shall contribute to improved labour market attachment and thereby enhance the quality of life for people who are remote from the labour market and who have substantial and complex problems. Qualification conditions for participation in and provisions for the Programme are set out in the Social Services Act.

According to the law, participation is a right for those who fulfil the qualification conditions, and it is voluntary. However, the QuP is based on the principle in the Social Services Act that the

⁴ Rambøll Management (2008). Evaluering av programmet Tettere individuell oppfølging. Sluttrapport.

⁵ ECON/Pöyry (2008). Opp om morran. IMDi-rapport 4-2007.

individual must try all means available to support him/herself through labour income, pensions etc. before s/he can be granted social assistance benefits. Participation in QuP represents such a means of income for individuals within the target group. At the same time, the programme shall be tailored to the individual according to the person's needs and abilities.

The Programme is targeted at persons

- with significantly reduced earning ability and no or limited national insurance rights;
- who are trapped, or in danger of getting trapped, in a passive situation characterised by income poverty; and
- who are considered to have a chance of getting a job through individual follow-up, even if this implies a lengthy process.

This applies in particular to persons who in the current system have social assistance benefit as their main source of income. The intention of the programme is also to reduce and prevent long term recidivism of social assistance benefits by helping recipients into employment.

From the terms of the law it follows further that, among other things, a work ability assessment has to be conducted as a part of the qualification conditions. The NAV office is responsible for conducting a discretionary assessment of whether or not a person meets the requirements of the law, including the concretisation/interpretation of the qualifying conditions set out in the law.

According to the provisions, the Qualification Programme *shall* consist of employment related measures that *can* be combined with a broad range of other activities that support the individual participant's transition into employment, as medical/psychological treatment, rehabilitation and training initiatives etc. The programme can draw on all of NAV's labour market schemes, as well as services arranged by the municipality, NGOs and/or private service providers. All the staff at NAV-offices can be involved in working with the programme and its participants: employees from the state agencies (the former employment and national insurance service) and from the municipality (the social welfare service).

The participants in the programme are entitled to receive a standardised qualification benefit. The qualification benefit is set to NOK 145,762 (app. EUR 17,000) per annum for participants 25 years or older, whereas participants below 25 years are entitled to receive 2/3 of this sum. The participants are also entitled to child allowances. Supplementary social assistance payments can be granted on a means-tested basis. Payments are on a monthly base. The Qualification Programme and the benefit can be granted to a person for a period of up to two years, but can be extended by another year after an individual assessment.

Individual week programmes

The participant is supposed to follow the programme on a full time basis (37,5 h weekly). Each participant shall get an individually designed programme for activities and measures that in total sum up to full time activity. This means that each individual can participate in various measures that together shall facilitate and prepare for the transition to work life.

The following examples illustrate some participants' weekly activities and show a variety of the individually tailored programmes. These are "good practice examples" reported from different local NAV offices and as such not necessarily representative of all participants' individual programmes. Some may have even more varied activities, others less.

Example 1: Woman, 53 years, with mental and physical health problems				
<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Friday</i>
Time at free disposal	Participation in a group to train "personal strength" Whole day	Time at free disposal	Work training in sheltered labour market enterprise	End of week programme: Social activities, project work etc.
Work training in sheltered labour market enterprise				
The labour market enterprise is responsible for carrying out the plan and following up the participant. She is supposed to participate in additional training courses offered by the service.				

Example 2: Man, 20 years, with problems related to substance-abuse				
<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Friday</i>
Work experience placement in ordinary work place (8 h)	Work experience placement in ordinary work place (8 h)	Work experience placement in ordinary work place (8 h)	Time at free disposal	Consultation with NAV advisor (1 h)
			Consultation with drug counsellor (1h)	Time for settling private issues (economy)
NAV is responsible for carrying out the plan and following up the participant. In the week-end he performs physical training exercises. The plan also involves training to acquire a more regular day rhythm.				

Example 3: Woman, 47 years, some work experience, but no formal competence and serious family related problems.				
<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Friday</i>
Norwegian language course (6 h)	Work training in a sheltered work place (7 h)	Norwegian language course (6 h)	Norwegian language course (6 h)	Work training in a sheltered work place (7 h)
Regular follow up is provided by the NAV-advisor, who visits her both at the work place and at home				

Example 4: Man, 19 years, earlier placed under the care of child protection authorities, now back in his family				
<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Friday</i>
Work experience placement in ordinary work place (5 h)	Work experience placement in ordinary work place (5 h)	Work experience placement in ordinary work place (5 h)	Work experience placement (5 h)	Work experience placement (5 h)
	Meeting with NAV-advisor	Assisting in a local youth club		Assisting in a local youth club
The local NAV-office has delegated the task of following up the participant on a daily basis to a woman who knows the participant well and has a relationship of mutual trust with him. As a part of the plan visits are scheduled at the participant's foster family every second week-end.				

Example 5: Woman, 20 years, social problems				
<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Friday</i>
Work training in municipal activity centre (7 h)	Work experience placement in ordinary work place (6 h)	Work training in municipal activity centre (7 h)	Work experience placement in ordinary work place (6 h)	Work training in municipal activity centre (7 h)
In addition the participant has regular talks with a municipal consultant at the activity centre, who also meets her at breakfast and lunch.				

Data and research

The Ministry of Labour and Social inclusion has given the task to evaluate the Qualification Programme to The Norwegian Work Research Institute (WRI).⁶ The first evaluation report was issued in August 2009. It is based mainly on qualitative case studies focusing on experiences with the programme in the first 1 ½ years, an early stage of implementation. The evaluation cannot yet provide any research based conclusions on the effects and goal attainment of the programme. In the report priority was given to describing the implementation process and identifying challenges that the NAV-offices can utilise in the further development of the QuP. Data were collected through case studies in 12 municipalities, representing a variety of features like size, geographic location and task load within the welfare sector. In each case, the researchers conducted a number of interviews with NAV employees involved in the QuP, leaders of the NAV-offices, service providers and participants. In total 81 individuals have been interviewed, 26 of them were programme participants. In each of the 12 municipalities, the researchers have visited not only NAV-offices, but also different kinds of service providers for measures offered to programme participants. Another source of data are nationwide quantitative and qualitative accounts from NAV-offices at local and county level, collected through standardised report forms by the Directorate of Labour and Welfare on a regular basis.

Key figures

Within the first seven months of the programme, the recruitment of participants was far behind schedule. By the end of June 2008, the programme had about 700 participants and 420 applicants. Yet the target number of 5 400 participants at the end of 2008 was almost reached by the end of this year.

By the end of July 2009, the number of participants was 5,488. The total number of persons who had participated in the programme since it started was 6,670. Between 1 January 2008 and 31 July 2009, a total of 784 participants (11 per cent) had completed the programme in a regular way and 397 (6 per cent) had dropped out.

⁶ The WRI is conducting a formative process evaluation which has the purpose to support project improvement and learning. For those who administrate the programme on a national, county and local level, this kind of evaluation is suitable to provide feedback on the implementation, identify challenges and give recommendations to make the programme operate as planned. WRI collaborates with the Ragnar Frisch Centre for Economic Research, who will conduct an effect evaluation. The effect evaluation will mainly take place in the period 2012-2013.

About 37 per cent of the 303 persons who completed the programme regularly within the first four months of 2009 got ordinary employment,⁷ 4 per cent entered into further education and 8 per cent into other labour market schemes.⁸ The 37 per cent share that entered into work within a relatively short time is probably not representative of the whole group of participants. Experiences with programmes and pilots for a similar target group have shown lower figures for the transition into ordinary work.⁹

Figures reported nationwide by all NAV-offices until the end of July 2009 show that the majority of participants (77 per cent) had social assistance benefits as their main source of income when they entered the programme, and among them, about 52 per cent had received social assistance benefits for more than 6 months prior to participation. This indicates that the programme may have reached out to the target group it was designed for; social assistance benefit recipients with significantly impaired work capacity and earning ability. Unlike social assistance benefits, the qualification benefits that the QuP participants receive are a more predictable and stable income which is similar to earning wages in the ordinary labour market. The qualification benefits were in many municipalities not significantly higher than ordinary economic social assistance. A considerable share of participants, about 40 per cent, received social assistance benefit in addition to the Qualification benefit, also after entering the programme. 24 per cent of all participants received social assistance benefit regularly to cover ordinary livelihood expenses. This is particularly true for families with children and participants under 25 years who do not live with their parents or guardians.

Key success factors

The following section will highlight four specific features of the QuP, which – according to lessons learned from comparable programmes – most likely will be of particular significance for the goal attainment and success of the QuP. These are:

- The practising of the eligibility criteria for the programme and the selection of participants;
- The provision and availability of suitable schemes for the target group;
- Strategies for securing user involvement;
- Competencies and organisation within the welfare agencies that deliver the services to the participants.

According to evaluations of pilot projects and other research, thorough assessment and individual adaptation will be important success factors. In the QuP it is up to the local NAV-staff to decide whether or not an applicant can be granted participation, as specified by eligibility criteria and the definition of the target group. There is considerable room left for discretion. As we shall see in the following, this has not been an easy task for a number of reasons.

⁷ There is no information available as concerns type of work, number of working hours, kind of contract (temporary/permanent) etc. Nor are figures for months later than April 2009 available yet.

⁸ There was a relatively high proportion of programme quitters where no such information was provided.

⁹ Evaluation of the *“Labour market activation programme for social assistance recipients”* showed for instance that only 25 per cent of all participants had entered the labour market after 10 months of participation, and for 36 per cent of all participants it took 21 months before they entered into a job (Schafft & Spjelkavik 2006, op.cit.).

The success of the programme will also depend on the availability of suitable schemes for a target group that encompasses a variety of serious problems. The QuP can draw on a wide range of measures, individually tailored for this target group. Pilots to the programme have shown that social skills training and providing structure and coping strategies in everyday life are preconditions both for employability and for better quality of life, whereas practice and learning through work experience placement and other labour market schemes conducted in ordinary work places, secured by close follow up, are the key to ensuring that participants actually get employment. Additionally, user involvement in the choice of measures as well as user participation as such can be considered as an important key to success.

The Qualification programme is an integrated part of a comprehensive and demanding welfare reform. At the same time as NAV-employees were supposed to maintain normal services, many of them have had to perform new tasks and to become familiar with a new regulatory framework. Another important success factor and a crucial challenge will therefore be to organise the collective social work and labour market competencies at the new established NAV offices so that they are used in a way that enhances labour market attachment for the target group.

Of course the success of the Qualification programme will most likely depend on other factors too, which are not mentioned in this paper, such as the degree and nature of cooperation with other parts of the welfare system, for instance health care services, educational agencies, NGOs and employers. However, in the actual phase of implementation and consolidation of the programme, the factors addressed in this paper are crucial issues to be addressed in order to further develop and improve the programme. We will elaborate on these issues in the following paragraphs.

The target group - eligibility criteria and assessment

The target group is defined as individuals who have substantial and complex problems, significantly reduced earning ability and no or limited national insurance rights, and who are trapped, or in danger of getting trapped, in a passive situation characterised by income poverty. This implies that the group of (possible) participants is very heterogeneous and encompasses a variety of problems. According to the legal provisions, participation in the programme and the choice of measures is decided by the staff at the local NAV office. The NAV office is responsible for conducting an assessment of whether or not a person meets the requirements of the law, including the concretisation/interpretation of the qualifying conditions set out in the law. These conditions also leave considerable room for discretion. A standardised work ability assessment should be conducted prior to the programme, but this assessment was not available until late fall 2008. This is why NAV-counsellors to a large extent based their decisions about participation on discretionary assessments. Interviews with potential participants were used as a method and basis of assessments, often in combination with NAV's standardised self assessment form or other mapping tools. The lack of a standardised comprehensive work ability assessment tool, or the lack of competence needed to utilize it, led some local NAV-offices to delegate the task of assessment to local service providers who had prior experience with the target group. In such cases work ability and functional assessments were conducted only after the person was accepted into QuP, and not as a basis for making a decision about QuP participation.

The implementation of the programme on the local level turned out to be much slower than expected in the first half of 2008. Therefore the Directorate of Employment and Welfare carried

out a number of measures to increase recruitment of participants to the programme. The result was that the interpretation of the qualifying conditions may have been adapted more to the resource situation at the local NAV -office and the target number set by the Directorate of Labour and Welfare, than to a comprehensive assessment of the participants' needs and abilities. In order to recruit the target number of participants the local NAV -offices chose different strategies. At first some NAV offices prioritised those in the target group who were considered relatively strong and therefore less resource demanding, while others chose to take on as many individuals as possible within a short period of time, without conducting comprehensive prior assessments. Local differences in practising the qualifying conditions are also evident in the case of social assistance recipients with substance abuse problems. At some NAV offices people with current substance abuse problems were offered QuP because there were service providers who had experience with this target group. Other NAV offices chose to exclude people with substance abuse problems from the programme because there were no suitable measures available or known for them in the local community. It is a challenge to develop assessment practices and routines that enable the NAV-staff to identify those who have poor chances of benefiting from the programme – either because they can find work by other means or because they cannot make use of the measures offered by the programme. At the same time it is important not to exclude those who can make use of it even if this implies a lengthy process.

Measures

NAV-employees who work with the QuP reported that they were now able to find better solutions for social assistance recipients who earlier did not get any measures or who did not meet the requirements for measures provided by the former welfare agencies. However, they also reported substantial difficulties and concern about the capacity to implement the programme in accordance with the intentions. Frequently applied labour market schemes include schemes that provide motivation, counselling, mapping and trying out the participant's work-capacity in order to further clarify needs of measures which can contribute to getting a job, as well as work training. This can take place in sheltered surroundings, for instance in labour market enterprises, or in combination with work experience placements in ordinary working life. There seems to have been little development of new measures.

So far, the programme has a clear social work perspective, with a focus on "activity", "quality of life" and the users' need for structure in everyday life, whereas the work oriented perspective has not always been particularly evident. The use of measures that provide social activities and social training and which first and foremost aim at enhancing the quality of life has gradually increased, while the share of those who participate in labour market oriented measures or a combination of both has decreased. This may be due to the fact that the work ability of many QuP participants is far from the requirements of the labour market. The target group encompasses a great variety of serious social and health problems, poor motivation and lack of self esteem, problems which have to be dealt with if they are to get a permanent foothold in the labour market. For these individuals the local NAV-office often recommends starting with low-threshold measures and eventually proceeding into more demanding measures, such as labour market training and work experience placements later on. As mentioned earlier, for some individuals within the target group, the process of becoming "job-ready" can be lengthy.

The priority given to activity and social welfare measures may also be due to weak labour market competence in those parts of the local NAV office that are responsible for the QuP. Many of the

NAV-employees involved in the programme come from care oriented backgrounds and are not familiar with labour market oriented tasks. Almost from the outset of the programme they have expressed the need to improve contact with the regular labour market, their market competence, and competence and resources for close and individual follow-up out to regular work places.

Users' perspective and involvement

Whereas not all participants expressed satisfaction with the size of the payment, they were all satisfied that the qualification benefits came as a fixed contribution in the form of a monthly "salary" from the municipality. First, they did no longer have "to beg" for money at the social welfare office, and second they felt that getting a pay slip was less stigmatising. Some report that this has resulted in greater self-esteem, and the feeling that they no longer "sponge off the welfare system".

The QuP should be able to draw on a wide range of both state and municipal measures. The new feature of the QuP is the possibility to offer individually tailored action programmes and a varied week plan based on the individuals' needs and preferences. However, so far not all participants have received such an individual programme and it seems that many take part in more traditional group based measures, as labour market training courses. Neither does the QuP as such appear as optional for all participants, many feel that QuP is something they have to or should participate in if they meet the eligibility criteria. A recently conducted survey among participants¹⁰ has shown that more than half of the participants felt that participation was not their own choice. 18 per cent expressed that they have had no chance to choose between different measures. The lack of choice experienced by these participants could be due to limited availability of measures, lack of competence among NAV-advisors with regard to the possibilities provided by the welfare service apparatus, pressure to meet target numbers, or that NAV-advisors believe that they alone know best what suits the individual participant without providing the necessary information. Neither of these reasons provides favourable conditions for user involvement. Nevertheless, about 90 per cent of the participants who answered the survey expressed satisfaction with the programme and believed it had a positive effect for them.

One challenge in the QuP is to develop the types and combinations of measures that are suited to individual needs and qualifications. Another is to ensure that participants get well informed about the options and consequences of their choices. The success of the programme will most likely to a great extent depend on the degree of and methods employed to secure user involvement with regard to participation as such, as well as the choice of measures and the design of individual programmes.

Local organisation of the QuP

The first phase of the Qualification Programme was characterised by uncertainty and frustration, not least because of the demanding situation NAV-employees faced at the newly established NAV offices, where they were given tasks and tools that require new competence and work organisation. The implementation of the programme was slow in the first half of 2008 and the number of participants remained low compared to set target figures. Therefore central authorities

¹⁰ Reichborn-Kjennerud, K (2009). En ny mulighet – Brukernes opplevelse av Kvalifiseringsprogrammet i NAV. WRI occasional papers (forthcoming).

launched several measures in order to enhance local implementation of the programme, which in turn caused many local NAV offices to gradually change their internal organisation.

Several offices chose a model where one particular NAV-employee became responsible for the coordination of the programme, while – due to the organisation of the programme and its focus on social assistance recipients – the task of working directly with participants has been given mainly to employees from the municipal sector within the local NAV-office. Most of these employees come from care-oriented backgrounds and their competence and experience as social workers is strongly emphasised in the programme. But employees who work with QuP-participants are also supposed to work in the area of labour market and employment schemes, which is an area these employees are less familiar with. The question is whether they have the necessary competence to find the suitable schemes for QuP participants, to utilise, develop or order the measures that are needed, as well as to follow up the measures that are ordered from external service providers, and to follow up participants in work experience placements or other schemes in ordinary work places.

Close follow-up is a basic element in the QuP, but there is great variation in the degree to which advisors at NAV follow up the participants in the QuP. Many of them point out that the work load and the lack of sufficient manpower resources at the NAV office makes it impossible to fully utilise their expertise as social workers in following-up individual clients. Some say that a small number of participants with substantial, complex problems take up much of their time, which may be at the expense of participants who generally manage on their own, but who still need some follow-up in order to get a job.

One crucial challenge will be to organise the collective social work and labour market competencies at the NAV offices so that they are combined and drawn on in the best possible way in order to enhance labour market attachment for the target group.

3. Brief summary

The New Qualification programme shall contribute to improved labour market attachment and thereby enhance the quality of life for people who are remote from the labour market, who have substantial and complex problems. The programme is targeted in particular at long term social assistance recipients or persons at risk of becoming long term recipients. The paper has drawn attention to four specific features, which – according to lessons learned from comparable programmes – most likely will be of particular significance for the goal attainment and success of the programme. These are:

- The practising of the eligibility criteria for the programme and the selection of participants;
- The provision and availability of suitable schemes for the target group;
- Strategies for securing user involvement;
- Competencies and organisation within the welfare agencies that deliver the services to the participants.

In the actual phase of implementation and consolidation of the programme, we presume that these factors are some of the most crucial issues to be addressed in order to further develop and improve the programme.

Annex: Key Figures

Employment and unemployment rates

In the fourth quarter of 2008, the labour force participation rate (the labour force as a percentage of the working-age population) was 73 per cent (70 per cent for women, and 76 per cent for men), which was about the same as one year earlier.¹¹

In the second quarter of 2009, the unemployment rate was 3.1 per cent of the labour force.¹² Immigrants are overrepresented among the unemployed: Registered unemployment among immigrants increased from 4.0 per cent in May 2008 to 6.8 per cent in May 2009. In the rest of the population, this rate increased from 1.2 to 2.2 per cent. Male immigrants from the EU countries in Eastern Europe had the largest growth.¹³

Health related benefits and pensions

At the end of 2008, 571 000 persons, which is about 25 per cent of the working age population, receive health related benefits and pensions. The majority of them, about 350 000, get disability pensions. About 7.5 per cent receive sickness absence benefits.

Social assistance recipients

In 2008, ca 109 000 people, or 3.7 per cent of the population age 20-66, received social assistance benefits. It is estimated that during one year approximately 5 per cent of the population belongs to households that receive social assistance benefits. Recipients between 20 and 29 years of age account for about 30 per cent of the recipients, and make up the largest group. People in cities with more than 50 000 inhabitants are slightly overrepresented compared to the average population. Only 10 per cent of all social assistance benefit recipients had paid work as their main source of income, while almost half of them, ca 50 000 people, stated that they depend on social assistance as their main source of income. 24 000 people (ca 22 per cent) received social assistance benefits for 6 months or more. Within this last group, 65 per cent had social assistance benefits as their main source of income.

¹¹ Statistics Norway: Labour Force Survey, Q4, 2008. http://www.ssb.no/vis/english/subjects/06/01/aku_en/arkiv/art-2009-01-28-01-en.html

¹² Statistics Norway: Labour Force Survey, Q2, 2009. http://www.ssb.no/english/subjects/06/01/aku_en/art-2009-07-31-01-en.html

¹³ http://www.ssb.no/english/subjects/06/03/innvarbl_en/

Figure: Number of welfare benefit recipients 1980 – 2008

