A Finnish Perspective on the Norwegian rehabilitation and employment policies
Statements and Comments

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Introduction

The current paper will analyse the Norwegian vocational rehabilitation system from the Finnish perspective. First I will briefly describe why Norway is becoming a potentially interesting comparison and learning opportunity for Finland. Second, I will describe two practical examples of the current developments in the field of vocational rehabilitation in Finland highlighting the themes and challenges Finland is now facing regarding the developments of the rehabilitation. Third, I will point out a few themes that seem relevant to both countries in reforming their vocational rehabilitation system.

1. The context for the rising significance of rehabilitation

The economy of Finland has improved in a quite remarkable way during the 2000’s. While in 1995 had the unemployment rate of 15.4% compared to Sweden’s 8.8 % and Norway's 4.9 %. Finland has now almost reached other Scandinavian countries. In 2006 Finland's unemployment rate was 7.7 % and the employment rate 69.3 % as the figures in Sweden were 7.1 % and 73.1 % and in Norway 3.5 % and 75.4 %.

It might be argued that Finland is now at a kind of ‘bifurcation point’ where there is almost a cultural change going on moving from the ‘unemployment position’ towards a ‘lack of labour force position’ although there are currently dark clouds in the sky of the global economy affecting also Finland. The current transition stage creates a considerable challenge in Finland for organising the services in a way taking into account the new need for labour. Finland is moving now towards ‘workforce enlargement’ position where the enlargement process takes place in both quantitative terms (‘extensive workforce enlargement’) and qualitative terms (‘intensive workforce enlargement’) the latter indicating mainly the intrinsic working life development and aiming at keeping those now at work there as long as possible, raising the actual retirement age which in Finland has been relatively low compared to the other Nordic countries. (Arnkil & Spangar 2008b).

In this context Finland is now keenly interested in what is going on in the countries that have a longer experience in taking care of the labour force under the circumstances of relatively low unemployment. In Finland the significance of vocational rehabilitation is rapidly rising as a great share of the labour force and especially the job-seekers have health problems preventing them getting into employment. In Finland the pension policies have been stricter than in Norway and Sweden. Citizens with health problems have remained job-seekers constituting a large share of the unemployed, especially the long-term unemployed. By implication, the health issues regarding labour force in Finland are, almost ‘by definition’, part of labour market policies and the...
development of the employment services. (Hytti 2008). Before discussing the common and differing themes rising from the expert and government papers of Norway I will briefly describe two examples of the Finnish rehabilitation practice and policy.

2. Two examples of the current developments in Finland

2.1. Labour Force Service Centres (LAFOS)

The 39 LAFOS Centres were established in 2004 as a part of the latest PES service reform. The reform was originally a two-strand approach where the ordinary PES offices constituted the first strand and the Lafos Centres the second one. The main target groups for the Lafos Centres are those ‘hard-to-place’, the aged and often long-term unemployed job-seekers or clients of the local welfare. In 2007 34 % of the clients had health problems. The Lafos clients are those in need of intensive personal and individual services in order to upgrade coping and labour market skills. (Karjalainen & Saikku 2008).

The evaluation on the PES service reform raised some important experiences and problems relevant, I think, also when discussing the Norwegian vocational rehabilitation system. In particular, the Lafos experiences relate themselves to the NAV reform undergoing now in Norway.

Starting from the client level it is noteworthy that the clients seem very satisfied with the Lafos services although the service processes are very long. The Lafos experiences emphasise the importance of the multi-professional team work in the client work. Working in teams and pairs (the employment officer and the social worker) has been a real value added introduced by Lafos. In this respect the Finnish Lafos experience seems quite advanced in the international perspective, compared to Denmark for example. The good client work is closely related to the networking capability of the Lafos case workers. The Lafos Centres are now widening up their networks and creating more sustainable partnerships. (Karjalainen & Saikku 2008).

Organisationally the Lafos Centres are located ‘in-between’ the labour administration and the municipalities. The location leads to a relatively high autonomy. On the other hand, it seems to lead also to an ambivalent and ‘swaying’ position. The situation has its pros and cons. The challenge with the Lafos still is how to organise, also at the operational level, the leadership and management structures. Models with two leaders (one form the municipality and the other from the local PES) as well as different forms of joint management have been tried. At the local and operative level, the Lafos Centres seem to have found relatively satisfactory management solutions.

The picture gotten by the evaluation indicates that the Lafos Centres face serious challenges especially regarding the strategic management level. In Finland the central level constitutes of the current Ministry of Labour and the Economies and the Ministry of Social affairs and Health and the association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities. The two latter do not have the power to direct the autonomous municipalities. The situation in Norway with one merged Ministry seems to afford better strategic management. On the other hand, due to the diverse steering mechanism from the top the Finnish Lafos Centres have developed varying working models resonating with
the diversity of the local contexts. This seems to be the main strength of the Lafos centres. (Karjalainen & Saikku 2008).

2.2. The Coach project and the concept of ecological rehabilitation

The Coach project was an Equal project aiming at developing new rehabilitation methods and working models for the disable young and adult clients. The Coach partnership consisted of three educational institutes, one rehabilitation centre, the local PES and a NGO organisation as well as international partners from 4 other countries. (http://www.koutsi.fi/).

The main outcome of the project was a new working model for vocational rehabilitation which might be called the ‘ecological approach to rehabilitation’. The ecological rehabilitation means that the rehabilitation process must stem from the client’s real needs taking into account the everyday circumstances where the client lives. The process should reach out from the rehabilitation institutes or offices to where the client really lives, where his or her social networks are. Reaching out to the client’s life-contexts is achieved by providing the client with the support by the coach. The coach’s role is to act as a counsellor for the client, to catalyse the client’s social and professional networks, to gather up any professional support needed for the client as well as act as a liaison between the client and the workplace. The ecological approach emphasises the real life contexts as a rehabilitation platform. Thus, the role of the workplaces is emphasised meaning that the rehabilitation process should, whenever possible, be planned taking into account the needs of the workplace. The rehabilitation should now be rather demand-driven than supply-driven. (Toivonen & al. 2007).

The evaluation of the Coach project revealed also challenges for the further development of the rehabilitation services. First, still stronger initiatives should be afforded to the workplaces from the win-win-win – position (providing services that are simultaneously beneficial for the enterprise, the client, and the rehabilitation system). Second, further efforts should be invested on developing sustainable markets and ‘smart buying’ allowing the production of new and still more individualised and customised rehabilitation services. Third, the rehabilitation institutes and professionals should be still more courageous regarding enterprise and the working life in general. Fourth, rehabilitation system should develop further and enrich the concept of ‘personalised’ services. (Spangar & Arnkil 2008; Arnkil & Spangar 2008a).

3. Similarities and differences among Finland and Norway

The experiences of Lafos and Coach show that the good rehabilitation practices may be characterised as seeing the client him-/herself the core agent of the process. The client agency is supported by the rehabilitation process where the client is supported by personalised counselling process and the solutions and interventions taken ought to take place in the real working life and in the client’s real life-contexts. The process is supported by multi-professional teamwork and locally sensitive networking with the local businesses, NGOs and the other players.

The good (post)modern rehabilitation practices reflect the nature of the clients’ health problems today. As it is obvious in Norway as well as in Finland that the most challenging clients are now those with mental and social problems. The traditional health issues, mostly physical like hearing
or sight problems or other physical handicaps do not constitute the main target groups from the labour market perspective. Furthermore, there is a relatively long tradition and there are established institutions for dealing with these. The real challenge for the services today are people with mental and social problems as the first problem is to map out and determine what the problem really is. The situation in Norway seems to resemble the Finnish situation in this respect as the youth and the immigrants are seen as the main causes for concern. Also the Norwegian discussion about the working life attachment problems indicates that the motivational factors of the clients are today a challenging problem.

The issue of ‘early intervention’ now seems to be also from the Norwegian perspective quite a crucial one. In the ‘old days’ we had rather clear-cut health problems with the clients. We also had rather clear-cut interventions for dealing with them. In that world there were lots of waiting times at the different phases of the rehabilitation processes (and there still are unfortunately). Today the challenge is to start the process as soon as possible. The difference may be illustrated in the following manner.

Figure 1. The ‘old’ and the ‘new’ client process (Arnkil 2008).

In the ‘old process’ the process proceeded from a relatively ‘light touch’ towards deeper services and finally to networking in a step-by-step manner. Today, as the emphasis is on a strong start, the networks and multi-professional teams should be introduced into the process as soon as possible. The process will stay open to a continuous re-evaluation of the process and not necessarily proceed in a linear or step-by-step manner.
As a whole Norway seems to be in many respects an example of reverse thinking and reforming in relation to what has happened in Finland. In our evaluation (Arnkil & al., ibid. 2008) on the Finnish PES reform we produced a table visualising the differences and similarities among the Nordic countries.

Table 2. Nordic PES reforms in comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>State-municipality changes</th>
<th>Role of regions in management</th>
<th>Strategic emphasis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finnish &quot;three-strand network&quot;</td>
<td>Mainly structural changes</td>
<td>Becoming somewhat stronger?</td>
<td>With the new ministry, competitiveness and enterprises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;three-strand network model&quot;</td>
<td>also growing demand</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway &quot;one-stop-shop&quot;</td>
<td>Rehabilitation and job activation</td>
<td>Weaker than before?</td>
<td>New NAV emphasises welfare and activation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden: 'back to basics'</td>
<td>Matching and search job search</td>
<td>Abolished</td>
<td>PES</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denmark: 'flexicurity and local administration'</td>
<td>Workforce enlargement</td>
<td>Weaker than before?</td>
<td>Stronger role for local government and civil society</td>
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The table seems to indicate that today the Nordic countries are looking for rather different solutions for rather similar problems. The common problem seems to be the concern of how to respond to the growing demand of labour. However, the reforms implemented are very different in many respects. They have differing implications in what comes to their strategic emphasis, role of the regions and the state-municipality relationships. The Nordic countries also have a different focus of actions in their endeavours.

In the Finland-Norway comparison it is noteworthy that the Finnish reform (Lafos) has proceeded very much in a bottom-up manner leading to locally sensitive practices but suffering from an inadequate strategic leadership. Norway seems definitely strategically stronger than Finland while Finland so far perhaps has had a stronger emphasis on the front-line work.

In both countries more studies are needed to assess the effectiveness of the rehabilitation measures. Also in Finland serious research on effectiveness is only now rising. The new network working models and the long client processes seem to imply that also new research designs are needed in order to catch the essence of the new rehabilitation systems.
References:


