

**SEMINAR REPORT**

# **EMPLOYMENT AND DISABILITY – HOW DO WE MAKE IT WORK?**

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Nordic Centre for  
Welfare and Social Issues

EMPLOYMENT AND DISABILITY  
– HOW DO WE MAKE IT WORK?

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# **EMPLOYMENT AND DISABILITY: A COMMON NORDIC CHALLENGE**

High employment is the very cornerstone of the Nordic welfare model and vital to the high standard of living in the Nordic region. Work is also important for the identity and development of the individual. Having a job to go to provides financial independence and social opportunities. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) gives the Nordic countries an obligation to ensure equal work opportunities for all, regardless of their degree of disability. All the Nordic countries share the ambition of enabling as many people as possible to participate in working life.

Even so, statistics show that women and men with disabilities or poor mental health struggle to be included in the Nordic labour market, in spite of a number of measures at national level. There is a great lack of documentary evidence about the effect of different methods for including persons with disabilities in working life. A recent OECD report concluded that a fundamental change of perspective on mental health is needed in the labour market. There are regular reports of successful trials, projects and local efforts, but these success stories often remain individual and local.

In May 2016, the Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues and the Finnish Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers organised an expert seminar on the subject of disability and employment. Researchers and representatives of organisations and civil service departments from all the Nordic countries and self-governing territories participated in the seminar “Employment and Disability – How do we make it work?”.

The main purpose was to develop concrete recommendations to the Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Labour (EK-A) about new Nordic collaborative projects that could provide a basis for getting more disabled persons into work. The seminar took as its starting point the research and reports in this field that already exist in the Nordic region and drew examples of successful practice. The event was financed by the EK-A and was partly an activity in the Action Plan for Nordic Cooperation on Disability 2015-2017. Evaluation of the conference in Helsinki showed that researchers and representatives of organisations and civil service departments all derived great benefit from meeting in a common expert arena in a Nordic context. Feedback to the Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues was consistently very positive.

By means of round table discussion, the fifty experts arrived at a number of proposals for greater and wider Nordic cooperation on more inclusive employment in the Nordic region. In this report, the Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues presents the experts’ recommendations to the EK-A. A summary of input, debate and conclusions from the seminar demonstrates the assessment that lay behind the proposals.

The recommendations of the experts include annual Nordic expert meetings, which also include parties from working life and representatives of the education sector. In this way a structure can be created for more rapid progress in cooperation at Nordic level and for a continuous Nordic exchange of information and experience, with positive effects for employment at national level.

A common Nordic challenge requires a common Nordic effort. The recommended measures could be implemented with clearly designated resources and a close cooperation between the

EK-A, the secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues and the Council for Nordic Cooperation on Disability, among others.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EK-A

### NEW NETWORKS AND MORE SHARING OF EXPERIENCE

- *Annual Nordic expert seminars.* An annual arena for civil service departments, researchers, umbrella organisations for the disabled, the national organisations of municipalities, employer organisations and the labour movement, coordinated by the Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues. This measure will help to benefit the Nordic region by means of increased cooperation and the exchange of knowledge and experience across national borders. The Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues will organise a new seminar in 2017 with the remaining funding in this project. Annual expert seminars *should* be included in the next action plan for the disabled with effect from 2018. They *could* also be included in the annual executive committee programmes. The seminars will be important arenas for giving the Nordic Council of Ministers a professional and technical supplement to its sector report on employment (the Poul Nielson report 2016), which does not include the disability perspective.
- *Annual inspirational leaflets.* The expert seminar presented a number of examples of successful Nordic practice in the area of disability and employment. Most of these are connected to local initiatives and projects. Annual inspirational leaflets that illustrate relevant examples would benefit the Nordic region by spreading these experiences among Nordic municipalities and national decision makers. The Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues has the knowledge and networks necessary to continuously gather and disseminate this type of knowledge, as it is developed. The leaflets could also be an important supplement to the Nordic Council of Ministers' sector report on employment (the Poul Nielson report 2016), which does not include the disability perspective. This measure should be included in the next action plan for disability with effect from 2018. Even so, it should start as early as 2017, through project financing for example.

Relevant topics would include:

- National and municipal trainee schemes reserved for persons with disabilities
- Social entrepreneurs and voluntary sectors as employers and experience arenas for jobseekers with disabilities
- Local experiences of the implementation of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) as a method for inclusion in employment

## **ALL-OUT EFFORT FOR MORE KNOWLEDGE**

- *Start of work on improving Nordic statistical data.* Establish a forum in which the Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues, NOSOSKO (the Nordic social statistics committee), Nordforsk, NORDREGIO, the Nordic network for research into disability and the national statistics agencies could prepare, formulate and perform a common Nordic population survey about various forms of disability, education and participation in employment. This measure should start as early as 2017, through project financing for example.
- *Support for research into the effect of measures.* Give targeted support, via NORDFORSK for example, to inter-Nordic, participant-based research on the effect of employment and educational measures for various groups of persons with disability or poor mental health. More knowledge about this subject would make it easier to target national efforts towards the most effective measures and help to spread good examples across all the Nordic countries. This measure should be included in the next action plan for disability with effect from 2018.

## **COOPERATION ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF UNCRPD**

- *Initiate ministerial meetings on individual follow-up across sectors and stronger cooperation with employers.* If the Ministers for Nordic Cooperation allow for ad hoc ministerial meetings, EK-A should initiate a joint meeting of the Nordic cooperation, employment and social ministers (MR-SAM, MR-A and MR-S) on the subject of disability and employment. The meeting should consider good examples and potential joint Nordic efforts for individual follow-up across different sectors (a one stop service), cooperation with employers and the public sector itself as employer. The Nordic employer organisations and representatives of the other civil servant committees should be invited to the meeting. A ministerial meeting would help to put this topic on the Nordic agenda, since the Nordic Council of Ministers' sector report on employment (the Poul Nielson report 2016) did not address the disability perspective. This measure should be implemented quickly.
- *Investigate a potential joint Nordic action plan for implementation of article 27 of the UNCRPD.* The Nordic countries share the same obligations under the UNCRPD and to a great extent they face the same challenges in relation to disability and employment. A joint plan could include cooperation on definitions, objectives, monitoring, breaking down obstacles to the use of assistance and adaptation in education and employment, incentives and information initiatives directed at employers and other target groups. One of the relevant initiatives that was put forward at the expert seminar was an annual Nordic Job Week aimed at persons with disability or poor mental health, as well as a joint Nordic award for inclusive employment. A specific study would be a necessary and useful supplement to the Nordic Council of Ministers' sector report on employment (the Poul Nielson report 2016) as a starting point for joint Nordic employment initiatives in future years. The measure could be started in 2017 by means

of project financing and could also be included in the next action plan for disability from 2018.

## **50 NORDIC EXPERTS: THIS IS HOW WE TAKE THE NEXT STEP**

### **MORE LABELS AND MORE TAILORING**

“Much has been done for a more inclusive labour market in the Nordic region and we have very good rehabilitation systems. Even so, the question is still ‘how do we get it to work?’” So said Dr. Rita Asplund in the first main presentation when Nordic experts in employment and disability met in Helsinki in spring 2016.

Asplund is head of research at the Research Institute of the Finnish Economy, ETLA and has done a great deal of work on the differences between different groups in the Nordic labour markets. She believes that one of the reasons for the lack of progress is that measures are directed at very different people as if they were one homogeneous group.

“For example, measures are often directed at ‘the disabled’ or ‘young people’, but seldom at ‘young people with a disability’. Some forms of disability can appear to be limiting in an educational situation but not in employment. Others affect freedom in day-to-day life, but not the ability to work,” said Asplund.

She pointed out that existing knowledge and statistics are mainly linked to persons who already receive or have already received support with rehabilitation or have been classified as disabled. But we know little about the actual challenges involved in the transition between phases of education and between education and employment. Knowledge here is often anecdotal, through the media.

“We must look systematically and individually at groups with various forms of disability and compare their situation in the labour market with the situation for the non-disabled, Asplund concluded.

“Perhaps in the Nordic region we are too afraid of putting labels on people. The statistics that are available in the Nordic countries are difficult to compare. If we cannot manage to define target groups for a measure, it becomes very difficult to achieve the goals,” commented Solveig Osborg Ose, a researcher at the Norwegian institute SINTEF. She presented the example of the Norwegian agreement on inclusive employment.

“Even though industry organisations and the government have defined getting more disabled persons into employment as a target, the agreement has not led to measurable changes. Perhaps this is not surprising, when the agreement neither defines ‘disabled persons’ nor attaches indicators to the target.”

Siv Friðleifsdóttir, special adviser to the Icelandic Ministry of Welfare and former chair of the Nordic Council’s welfare committee, also maintained that we must acquire more knowledge about the actual pitfalls, challenges and opportunities faced by people with disabilities. In Iceland, the Ministry of Welfare has taken an initiative in this direction.

“The ministry is now working with organisations and individuals from industry on a study to identify what prevents persons with disabilities from joining the labour market and how companies can meet the various needs of disabled persons,” Siv Friðleifsdóttir explained. The report is expected towards the end of 2018.

During the round table discussions, many of the experts mentioned stronger Nordic cooperation on the concrete implementation and follow-up of the UNCRPD as an appropriate introduction to cooperation on disability and inclusive employment. The Council for Nordic Cooperation on Disability should have a key role in this. It was maintained that a continuing Nordic debate on interpretation of the obligations under the convention, as well as cooperation on monitoring and information initiatives, could in themselves lead to progress in this area.

### **THE EFFORTS MUST BEGIN AT SCHOOL**

“The efforts made for persons whom we know will face difficulties in the labour market must start much earlier. In order to reach those who are born with disabilities that mean a reduction in the capacity to work, we must start obtaining knowledge and giving individual follow-up in schools, said Rita Asplund. The Nordic experts in Helsinki were in agreement that this applies not only to what has traditionally been looked upon as disability, but also poor mental health.

Dr. Lidija Kolouh-Söderlund is responsible for the project *In focus: Mental Health among Young People* at the Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues. She has led the work on a report that addresses the growing number of young people in the Nordic region with mental health problems. The report, which was commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers, points out a clear connection between mental health and completing education – which is in turn important for opportunities in the labour market.

“The Nordic region has a drop-out problem. We speak too little about the working environment in Nordic schools, even though we know that prevention and early initiatives are cheap and the opposite is expensive. Our report recommends the introduction of multi-professional teams of social and youth workers in schools. This will also give teachers more time to teach,” says Kolouh-Söderlund.

Preventing drop-outs in upper secondary schools is about ensuring the necessary formal competence for employment, but it is also about taking care of and developing self-confidence and social competence. Young people who drop out of school cannot just go straight back into education or into a job, because follow-up action is only taken when they have been on the ‘outside’ for a lengthy period.

“It is easier to help people to remain in education or work than to help them get back. OECD data from Austria shows that almost all are lost to the labour market once they have applied for disability benefit. This even applies to those whose applications are rejected,” stresses Siv Friðleifsdóttir.

### **EASIER START ON THE WAY BACK**

The Norwegian umbrella organisation Unge Funksjonshemmede (Young Disabled) has implemented a jobseeker course for young people undergoing so-called work clarification or who receive some form of full or partial disability benefit. In other words, for persons who have been or will be investigated for a reduced capacity to work.



“We find that many in this target group are interested in using the working capacity that they have,” said project manager Sofie Bejbro Andersen. She explained that it was therefore a surprise to the organisation that relatively few registered for the course and that almost all those who registered had been outside education or job related activity for a long time.

“Most had low self-confidence. Some eventually had difficulty in distinguishing between their disability and their personality. Many were really not ready for work or education, but first had to get involved in activity and a social context.

Sofie Bejbro Andersen explained that many of the course participants who had already been classified as fully or partially disabled found that they were rejected by the welfare agencies when they asked for work-related assistance.

“We simply do not have follow-up to offer to young people who receive full or partial disability benefit. It is as if they are regarded as ‘closed cases’ by the system,” said Sofie Bejbro Andersen.

“It is vital that young people continue to be part of a social context together with others and that they participate in regular activity, even if they find it hard,” maintained Lidija Kolouh-Söderlund. She pointed out that young people who have been excluded from activity for a long time are particularly dependent on individually tailored follow-up.

“We must listen to the individual. These young people are a heterogeneous group. Our report shows that some need a little push, others need more measures and still others have a very complex starting point that requires an extremely flexible welfare system. The focus is too often on what the obstacles are rather than what the individual is already good at,” said Lidija Kolouh-Söderlund.

“Very many of the participants in the Unge Funksjonshemmede jobseeker course were subject to what some researchers call *self-exclusion*,” added Sofie Bejbro Andersen.

“They had no faith in themselves as interesting jobseekers and took the view that possible employers are characterised by prejudices against the disabled or people with mental problems. So they do not apply for jobs – even though getting a job is what they dream about.”

## **MEASURES ACROSS THE BOARD**

Many experts pointed out that multi-professional teams with flexible toolboxes are a success factor, and not just to counter educational drop-out. This is also an important tool for helping people with a disability or poor mental health to get into, or back into, employment.

In Denmark, municipal educational guides have been working independently of sectors since 2004 on guiding as many young people as possible into education and job opportunities. The guidance offices have a mandate to get involved at an early stage in order to prevent drop-out. Both the OECD and the EU have presented this as a well-functioning scheme, along with the systematic cooperation that exists between the mental health and labour market authorities in the Netherlands.

“This is an example of a type of initiative for more and better cooperation across sectors that we need more of, both at strategic level and towards individuals. There is too large a gap between political objectives and the actual organisation of the services,” said Siv Friðleifsdóttir. The round table discussions during the conference of experts resulted in a unanimous desire for stronger incentives to cross-sector cooperation, both locally and nationally. The exchange of

information and experience at Nordic level will provide a natural basis for new national initiatives in this area.

Psychologist and centre manager Beate Brinchmann explained about one concrete example from Norway. At the Nordland Hospital's competence centre for work and mental health, Brinchmann and her colleagues have established a collaboration between the primary health service, the labour market agencies and local employers. The young people who are assisted quickly have the chance to try normal working life, but they are closely monitored over time by the health and social services. This trial is an example of a method that is known as Individual Placement and Support. The results have been good.

“This is about ‘placing and training’ in the ordinary local labour market – based on the individual’s own preferences and abilities, not ‘training and placing’. Research shows that with this method the chances of getting into ordinary employment are twice as good, compared with traditional rehabilitation measures,” said Beate Brinchmann. The [OECD report \*Fit Mind, Fit Job\*](#) (2015) also recommends combining activity and treatment.

“In fact we know a great deal about what works and what doesn’t when it comes to work and mental health. The problem is that we don’t do enough of what we know works and that the existing systems in Norway are not suited to this way of working,” said Beate Brinchmann.

## **INFORMATION AND INCLUSION**

The ‘place and train’ method presupposes cooperation with interested and benevolent employers and the right match between jobseeker and employer. Sofie Bejbro Andersen pointed out that both employers and many of those outside education and employment perceive the “system” to be a jungle.

“On the Unge Funksjonshemmede jobseeker course, we saw that the participants mainly knew very little about opportunities and rights in the labour market. There are a number of schemes for supported employment, practice, support for education and so on, but it is difficult for even the local case workers to get an overview,” said Bejbro Andersen.

This is a challenge that the Finnish authorities have tried to do something about.

“The problem is not a *lack* of measures or schemes. On the other hand, they are not often tailored to the recipient and they are not sufficiently seen in context with each other. For this reason, Finland introduced coordinators for persons with a partial or residual capacity to work, the so-called OSKU programme,” explained Dr. Päivi Mattila-Wiro from the Finnish Social and Health Ministry and Dr. Nina Nevala from the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (TTL). They believe that OSKU has led to a more systematic follow-up of target groups.

“Evaluation also shows that we have changed and improved attitudes within the official agencies,” said Nina Nevala.

Organisations for disabled persons in Finland have been positive towards OSKU but wish to be more involved in the further formulation of OSKU.

“We must continue to work towards more flexible and user-adapted systems. We must therefore systematise the inclusion of the disabled persons’ organisations in the formulation of the services,” said Pirkko Mahlamäki, secretary general of the Finnish umbrella organisation Handikappforum.

She is also a member of the Council for Nordic Cooperation on Disability, which has contributed expert knowledge to all sectors of the Nordic Council of Ministers since 2012. Mahlamäki was one of many experts who stressed the importance of having more meeting places for Nordic organisations in the field of disability and employment. Several wished to see a more combined Nordic effort to resolve the various issues. A natural starting point for a joint approach might be the countries' work on implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Many of the experts would also like to see a more systematic approach to diverse recruitment from governments, regions and municipalities as employers.

“The Nordic countries have different legislation and different systems, but this must not prevent joint goals and joint efforts. We must also look at measures that have worked internationally. The use of quotas is an example of an instrument that is used in other European countries, but about which opinion is divided among the Nordic experts,” said Siv Friðleifsdóttir.

### **EMPLOYERS MUST BE INCLUDED**

Many of the experts who met in Helsinki pointed out that complex problems require more complex solutions than those we have today. These means that more organisations must be brought in to help devise them. Most of the experts pointed out one group in particular that must be brought in to a much greater extent.

“At present, relatively few employers see the inclusion of persons with disabilities as part of their social responsibility,” said Solveig Osborg Ose of SINTEF. She believes that there is potential here that Nordic authorities can build on, but it is a prerequisite that the public employment agencies begin a formal cooperation with employers. This viewpoint was shared by Lidjia Kolouh-Söderlund of the Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues.

“Company managers listen to other company managers, not to researchers or politicians,” said Kolouh-Söderlund. She believes it is vital that employers that have already appointed people with disabilities or poor mental health should help to recruit new employees. It is also important for jobseekers who need adaptation or who have perhaps not had a job before to get to know employers better.

“On our jobseeker courses, we allowed the participants to learn more about the actual opportunities that exist to receive support from the Norwegian welfare system for getting into employment,” explained Sofie Bejbro Andersen of Unge Funksjonshemmede. But she believed that the most important thing was to enable the course participants to meet real employers, one-on-one.

“They were able to try out real interview situations with employers who had vacant jobs and also to meet other disabled people who already had jobs. Many found that these meetings with working life gave them a push in the direction of actually applying for jobs and taking the next step towards employment.”

In Iceland, both employers and trade unions are involved in the rehabilitation offered by the public welfare system to a much greater extent than in the rest of the Nordic region.

“In 2008, the parties in industry established VIRK, which works together with the authorities to develop, integrate and analyse measures for rehabilitation and entering employment,” explained Siv Friðleifsdóttir of the Ministry of Welfare.

There are more examples in the Nordic region and in Europe of other parts of the civil society contributing to concrete solutions for an inclusive labour market. The KLAP project, under the auspices of the Danish Landsforeningen LEV, a private national association for people with learning disabilities, helps to create workplaces for persons with cognitive disabilities. The director of Landsforeningen LEV, Torben Wind Jensen, believes that KLAP shows that the ordinary labour market can work in an inclusive manner if many parties collaborate on the right measures.

“We work with large employers that have workplaces spread throughout the country. The starting point is the employers’ ordinary needs in the workplace. After a short practice period, around 85 per cent of jobseekers are employed by the company at a low hourly rate that is in addition to their disability benefit. The municipalities pay for the necessary follow-up of employees by colleagues.”

Wind Jensen explains that finance is the biggest issue.

“This way of obtaining workplaces assumes that disability benefit is being paid as a basis and that the municipalities will contribute to their residents with cognitive disabilities finding jobs. Also, the public employment services in a municipality often have neither the competence nor the desire to clarify the working capacity of persons in this group,” says Wind Jensen.

In France, the organisation L’Adapt has organised the Disability Employment Week for more than 20 years. The aim is to mobilise the civil society, the authorities, the government and private companies in the fight for a labour market that includes the disabled. During the Disability Employment Week, L’Adapt organises a number of activities in which jobseekers can meet employers or try out jobs. In parallel with this, the organisation runs media contact, attitude campaigns and various kinds of local events. Now they wish to spread the idea to the rest of Europe.

“In 2015 the Disability Employment Week was also run at European level,” explains Henri-Pierre Lagarrigue of L’Adapt. More than 4,600 jobseekers met more than 740 employers at 35 different events. One of these events was a so-called Job Date organised at the European Parliament in Brussels. The next step for L’Adapt will be to work on opportunities for organising national weeks in Belgium, Spain and Italy. Many of the Nordic experts fell for the idea of job weeks that include practice days with employers and a joint Nordic Job Week was among the ideas that emerged from the concluding group discussion in Helsinki.

# DO YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE?

All the presentations from the expert seminar are available on the [Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues website](#). Here you will also find a number of other publications from the Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues on employment and disability.

- **A Nordic perspective on labour market and disability**  
*Dr. Rita Asplund*, Research Director at ETLA, the Research Institute of the Finnish Economy.
- **Young adults with reduced working capacity – how can society better see their strengths and abilities?**  
*Dr. Lidija Kolouh Söderlund*, Researcher and Project Manager of the NVC-project "Young People in the Nordic Region - Mental Health, Work, Education".
- **Concrete challenges and solutions for young adults with disabilities who want work**  
*Sofie Bejbro Andersen*, Project Manager and advisor for labour and education, Unge funksjonshemmede/Norwegian Young Disabled.
- **From Evidence to Practice in Mental Health and Work: The OECD report Fit Mind, Fit Job (2015) and Iceland's policy on the topic**  
*Siv Friðleifsdóttir*, Special Advisor at the Icelandic Ministry of Welfare and former Minister of Health and Nordic Cooperation.
- **Disability and diverse needs perspective in strategies for diversity on the labour market**  
Short presentations of national examples of successful inclusion strategies. Success factors and key issues.
  - **Success through strategic inclusion in Finland**  
Partial work ability programme (OSKU) and follow-ups – *Dr. Päivi Mattila-Wiro*, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and *Dr. Nina Nevala*, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health.
  - **Social responsibility at company level and inclusion of disabled persons**  
The Norwegian IA Agreement - *Solveig Osborg Ose*, Research Scientist, SINTEF. Comments from Funksjonshemmedes Fellesorganisasjon (FFO)
- **Promising Nordic and European examples**  
Short presentations of promising Nordic and European examples of successful policies, projects and services
  - **Nordland Hospital's Competence Centre for labour and mental health (Norway)**  
*Beate Brinchmann*, Licensed Psychologist/Centre manager
  - **Klapjob (Denmark)**  
*Torben Wind Jensen*, head of KLAP and director of Landsforeningen LEV.

- **L'Adapt and The European Disability Employment Week (France)**  
*Henri-Pierre Lagarrigue*, Head of European Affairs and International Development, L'Adapt.

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