

9 Norwegian labour activation

Building or limiting social citizenship for service users far from the labour market?

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Introduction

In many respects, employment forms the basis for social inclusion, citizenship and participation (Betzelt & Bothfeld, 2011a; Hvinden & Johansson, 2006). Moreover, employment is considered a means of achieving self-sufficiency, economic freedom, self-realisation and societal recognition (Halvorsen, 2012). In Norway, active labour market policies (ALMPs) that offer programmes and measures aimed at bringing the unemployed into employment have played a key role in social policies and welfare state interventions. Such ALMPs are connected to general income maintenance schemes, with out-of-work benefits being based on various eligibility criteria, such as reduced work capacity due to health conditions or other complex issues (see Chapter 3 by Heggebø and West Pedersen). The Norwegian Qualification Program (QP) is an example of an ALMP that, through enabling strategies, tailored measures and the close follow-up by social workers, aims to prevent poverty and social exclusion by bringing people who have reduced work capacity due to complex issues out of “passive support” and into activity and employment.

This movement of social policies from “passive” support systems towards activation has been accompanied by normative changes in the relationship between the state and the individual (Betzelt & Bothfeld, 2011a; Gilbert, 2012). This shift in policy has changed “the principles of welfare provision, the structures of social recognition and social redistribution” (Betzelt & Bothfeld, 2011a, p. 4) and affected the normative foundation for citizenship and rights (Berkel, 2011; Betzelt & Bothfeld, 2011b; Beraud & Eydoux, 2011; Gilbert, 2012; Graziano, 2011; Jenson, 2007; Kildal & Nilssen, 2011; Larsen, 2013). Also, frontline workers’ changing interpretations of their work because of this move towards activation have been pointed out (Hagelund & Kavli, 2009; Hansen & Natland, 2017; Nothdurfter, 2016; Møller, 2012; Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2013; Røysum, 2013; Solvang, 2017; Thoren, 2008). According to these scholars, frontline workers tend to approach activation in complex ways, ranging from administrative and standardised bureaucratic approaches, with enforcing practices, to individualised and person-oriented approaches, with more enabling practices, depending on local and organisational contexts. Person-oriented interpretations of the activation policy were mostly

implemented in the form of practices that promoted social citizenship and inclusion. However, individualised understandings of activation could also result in less inclusive practices when frontline workers saw service users as responsible for their own situations (Djuve & Kavli, 2015; Nothdurfter, 2016).

Strengthening the employability of service users is central to labour activation programmes and measures (Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007), which often implies a focus on change, that is, a change in the individual. This means that service users are expected to adapt in terms of resources, capabilities and behaviour, including changing or reworking their identity so as to become employable. Such “change work” focuses on shaping the individual to meet the needs of the labour market and also to become aligned with the norms and values of society. In this respect, both the “adult worker” norm (Betzelt & Bothfeld, 2011a) and the “ideal worker” norm (Scholz & Ingold, 2021; see Chapter 4 by Østerud et al. in this volume) are prominent in activation programmes. The question is how this implicit and explicit focus on changing of the individual to meet these societal needs and become aligned with norms influences service users in terms of social position and status, that is, whether the “change-work” of activation improves the social position and status of those who stand outside the labour market.

While scholars have taken up the issue of how activation policy has affected service users’ sense of self (Chase & Walker, 2013; Gubrium, 2014; Ohls, 2017), identity formation (Hansen, 2018a) and experiences of time and movement in activation trajectories (Hansen & Gubrium, 2022), there has been little exploration of the impact on social citizenship in terms of service users’ participation, inclusion and sense of belonging in a larger social unit. Using Nancy Fraser’s (2003) social justice perspective and Jenson’s (2007) notion of citizenship, we add to this literature by asking the following question: *How may labour activation policy and practice promote and hamper social citizenship for service users far from the labour market?* More specifically, using the Norwegian Qualification Program as a case, we explore the impact of labour activation on service users in terms of social citizenship through their sense of belonging and participation.

In the following section, we present our key concepts and theoretical perspectives on social citizenship and participation. Next, we present the empirical context of the Norwegian Qualification Programme and briefly describe our data and methods. In the findings section, we demonstrate how acquired competencies and the adult worker norm may facilitate a sense of belonging and participation for those who are able to become aligned with the norm, while those who are not able to comply with the norm or are not selected for employment may experience further devaluation and social exclusion. In the final section, we discuss how positive experiences of enhanced participation and inclusion may be short lived and fade over time, resulting in activation policy affirming the marginalised position of subordinated groups.

The notion of social citizenship, a sense of belonging and participation

Traditionally, scholars interested in social citizenship have questioned the ways in which the social rights of social citizenship have been connected to the requirement to participate in the labour market (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Gilbert, 2012;

Orloff, 1993; Room, 2000). The institutionalisation of welfare support within the welfare state has aimed to de-individualise the responsibility for social inequalities and, in this way, de-commodify the requirements for social participation (Esping-Andersen, 1990). However, within the context of welfare activation, scholars have also pointed out that Marshall's notion of citizenship has included a duty to work (Johansson & Hvinden, 2012; Taylor-Gooby, 2009).

While Marshall's goal was to enable working people to live according to prevailing norms (see Chapter 1 by Haug), his focus was less on individuals far outside the workforce, for instance, individuals on the "bottom" of the welfare system hierarchy, those receiving social assistance and those participating in a labour-activation programme. Jenson's (2007) elaboration of Marshall's concept of social citizenship includes those norms, rules and regulations that shape a citizen's life situation. Thus, Jenson's definition encompasses both formal membership, as well as a citizen's sense of belonging in or affiliation with society and community as sources for developing individual, social, and political identity (Betzelt & Bothfeld, 2011b).

For individuals receiving social assistance, the experience of living in (relative) poverty, as well as the experience of being unemployed, is complex in its connection to social exclusion and marginalisation. The impact of unemployment and poverty is not just economic but also social and psychological (Walker et al., 2013). Thus, subjective experiences of how social policy provides an opportunity for recognition, a sense of belonging and membership in society should be considered (Honneth, 2014). For example, participants in labour activation may report the subjective experience of being misrecognised and further excluded from and marginalised in the labour market after participating in activation programmes (Gubrium & Lødemel, 2014; Gubrium et al., 2017; Hansen, 2018a). On the other hand, they may also report a sense of increased recognition after programme participation (Hansen, 2018a; Ohls, 2020). Such reports may indicate activation policy failure or success, beyond a purely economic focus on movement into the labour market.

Nancy Fraser (2003), however, emphasises the importance of encompassing both the redistributive and recognition dimensions of social policy programmes. For a society to be just, Fraser maintains, all citizens should have the opportunity to participate on par with one another. "Participatory parity" requires that all individuals have economic and material resources, as well as access to relevant arenas in society, enabling them to be full participants. This requires the recognition of subordinated groups. Fraser connects recognition and misrecognition to how social values and norms structure and shape the status and subordination of certain groups, for instance, as unemployed, as immigrants and as social assistance recipients. In so doing, social policy failures, such as the failure of activation policy to bring the unemployed into employment, are measured according to one's degraded social position. Thus, in evaluating whether policies and practices are just, Fraser's focus on the social, the structural and the institutional moves us away from personal, emotional impact and towards institutional and interactional relationships, norms, values and meanings – those things that are socially excluding by mal-distribution or misrecognition.

The Norwegian Qualification Program

The Qualification Program (QP) is a national labour activation programme in the Norwegian labour and welfare services (NAV). The programme was implemented to prevent poverty and social exclusion through the labour market inclusion of individuals who experience difficulties obtaining paid employment (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Inclusion, 2006/2007). The programme is regulated by the Norwegian Social Services Act (Norwegian Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs, 2009). The target group is social assistance recipients and the long-term unemployed who are not entitled to other income-securing benefits, for instance, health-related benefits (see Chapter 3 by Heggebø and West Pedersen). The programme is rights based and accessible for all service users who are defined by reduced work capability due to complex issues, for instance, a lack of education, a lack of Norwegian language proficiency or other skills, challenging social conditions or family or health issues, and are not recognised as eligible for health-related benefits. Nevertheless, the programme is designed to resemble ordinary work-life, and therefore, participants should comply with a programme of 37.5 hours per week, which is the norm for full-time work in the Norwegian context. All participants receive a fixed, taxable monthly benefit.

The structure of the QP represents a human resource development approach, offering training, courses and upskilling to enhance service users' labour market prospects (Gubrium & Lødemel, 2014). A fundamental principle is that activation measures and activities should be tailored and adjusted according to each participant's needs, abilities and limitations (Norwegian Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs, 2011; Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Inclusion, 2006/2007). An individual's programme could include a variety of activities, such as work placement (e.g., in boutiques, coffee shops, food services, kindergartens, nursery homes, workshops, offices or schools), courses (in CV writing, work-life knowledge, clergy work, computer skills, care work skills or truck driving), motivational training, social and physical training, medical treatment and recreational activities (Norwegian Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs, 2012, §30). Moreover, individual plans should be flexible and adjustable to the participant's experiences and changing needs during the qualification process (Norwegian Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs, 2011, §1). The focus on change and flexibility that is inherent in the programme also includes a focus on identity formation and change towards a more employable identity for the service user (Hansen, 2018b). The "change-work" is evident, both in the skill-building courses in which service users learn CV writing and self-presentation and in the motivational work in follow-up conversations with service users (Hansen & Natland, 2017).

The QP has been said to represent a holistic and inclusion-oriented perspective on labour activation. Nevertheless, the extent to which participants are offered individually tailored programmes and measures varies (Fossetøl et al., 2016; Hansen, 2020). Nonetheless, the programme, with its goal of preventing poverty and social exclusion through labour market inclusion, may be conceived of as a social policy intervention that strives towards participatory parity for a subordinated

status group through redistributive and recognising measures. The redistributive dimension lies within the programme's attempt to move people into employment and thus become economically self-sufficient, while the recognising dimension lies within the programme's focus on acknowledging the service users' diverse and various challenges in obtaining employment, including the acknowledgement of the fact that, for some service users, paid employment is not a feasible outcome. Even so, programme participation should promote social inclusion and ensure the service users' enhanced quality of life (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Inclusion, 2006/2007). The question is to what extent that is achieved; activation for some service users also may result in experiences of being further excluded.

In principle, the QP has a long-term perspective aimed at stable labour market attachment for the service users over time. Therefore, participants can remain in the programme for up to a year, with the possibility of applying for another 12-month extension. Nevertheless, only about 30% of the participants achieve employment, with many of these working part-time jobs on short-term contracts (Lima & Furu-berg, 2018).

Data and methods

In this chapter, we study activation policy from the bottom up, based on the experiences of the service users. We draw on qualitative semistructured interviews with service users from the Norwegian Qualification Program, a labour activation programme in the Norwegian labour and welfare services (NAV). The data were collected in 2013 for a PhD project studying how labour activation policy and practice facilitated labour market inclusion for persons defined as having reduced work ability and employability (Hansen, 2018b). The research project was recommended by the Norwegian Research Committee. In this chapter, we reanalyse the data on how labour activation policy and practice can build or limit social citizenship.

The study's participants ranged in age from 18 to 58 years old, including 21 women and 13 men, with 22 having an immigrant background. They had varying levels of education, ranging from several years of primary education to a complete tertiary education. They also had varying professional backgrounds, ranging from very limited to extensive work histories, including some in the upper levels of the labour market. Their civil status was recorded as single, married or divorced; with or without children and with current or previous partners living in or outside of Norway.

The interviews were carried out in 2013 and focused broadly on the participants' activation experiences of being enrolled in QP, including their life situation and background, activities in QP, contact with social workers, and hopes and expectations about the outcomes of participation. Using a thematic analysis strategy (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017), in this chapter, we focus specifically on the service users' experiences in terms of whether and how QP facilitated a sense of belonging and social participation through experiences of recognition and contribution (being able to contribute socially and economically) and skills and competency enhancement. Furthermore, we analyse the programmes' redistributive dimension, focusing

on how QP affected the participant's economic status and citizenship in terms of access to sufficient financial and material resources.

Findings

Our findings demonstrate that activation may mean enhanced inclusion and participation for some service users, especially while in the programme, but also the loss of a sense of belonging and status and further exclusion for others, especially in relation to poor prospects for labour market inclusion. Our findings also demonstrate how a sense of belonging and participation relates to not only the social dimension of what one can obtain from activation but also the economic sphere and possibilities that one may acquire or lose through activation.

Enhanced competence and social participation

Even though the activities in QP seldom lead to any formal qualifications and rarely result in employment, the time spent in QP may nevertheless be experienced as worthwhile for many participants in terms of providing the ingredients necessary to participate in social activities over the longer term. Several participants described learning new skills in courses and work placements. They were proud of being able to complete new tasks at their work placement sites, such as operating a cash register, serving customers, taking orders from customers, answering phone calls and gift-wrapping. Having acquired such competencies gave them self-confidence and made them feel valuable because they participated in and contributed to the economy. These participants, often with an immigrant background, also noted the value of acquiring proficiency in Norwegian, which enabled them to communicate with colleagues and engage in workplace fellowship. Because their competencies were enhanced and they were able to participate in fellowship with colleagues, the service users felt recognised and socially included. Additionally, some noted that improving their Norwegian language skills had enabled them to feel confident in socialising with people in other arenas, for instance, in the neighbourhood or talking with parents in their children's kindergarten. Being able to understand what was said and speak up in school meetings was important for their self-confidence and self-esteem, especially for female participants (Hansen, 2018a). Possessing these capabilities created a sense of belonging to a community of parents. The ability to communicate in Norwegian enabled them to more easily participate and engage in activities with other parents, which was an indication of belonging to the wider society. Participants also valued being able to understand the material their children learned in school and help their children with homework. This also contributed to the participants' sense of belonging and participation.

While participation in QP may have enhanced the individual sense of belonging for some participants, not all were comfortable with disclosing that they were enrolled in an activation programme. Several noted that they avoided disclosing that they were enrolled in QP for fear of being stigmatised or looked down on. One described her strategy for not revealing her public affiliation with the NAV and the QP:

This is work for me. My job is to become employed . . . and I do not need to tell the people I meet on the street that I am enrolled in activation . . . because, you now, people have so many meanings about why a person is unemployed.

She added, “Nobody has to know that I’m at NAV . . . because, no matter what, it is very stigmatizing to be a NAV client.” To counter a sense of stigma, she emphasised that she paid taxes on her QP benefit and repeatedly described the QP as “work.” Within this framing, she connected QP activation and the benefit with a sense of belonging, a sense of being a worthy and valuable member of society.

Adhering to the adult worker norm: civic and economic participation

When first rolled out throughout Norwegian municipalities (from 2008 to 2010), QP was met with enthusiasm on the part of social workers, who saw the programme as a way to do qualitatively good social work with service users with complex problems and those who experienced difficulties in entering the labour market. They referred to QP as the “generous programme,” both because they were granted resources (time, space and means) to follow-up on the service users and also because of the qualifying measures and the long-term perspective on labour market attachment that QP promoted. These features were intended to provide service users with the opportunity and time to qualify and prepare for labour market entry. Thus, the programme appeared promising, both to service users and social workers (Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2014).

Service users are eligible for the qualification programme in large part due to reduced work capability because of health issues, a lack of skills (vocational or language) or social issues. Nevertheless, the programme is based on an adult worker norm, with a fulltime activity programme of 37.5 hours a week, which is in accordance with the norm for fulltime working hours in Norway. The adult worker norm is also reflected in other features of the programme. While engaged in the programme, participants receive a monthly benefit that is higher than that for social assistance and remains constant over time. Furthermore, the benefit is paid by the municipality rather than by the labour and welfare service (NAV) and is referred to as a salary by both social workers and QP participants (Hansen, 2018a).

Being able to contribute to the family economy, buying things for one’s children and having one’s own money were important parts of the programme, especially for female participants. Several people described feeling proud of bringing money home to support their families. Furthermore, the payment of the qualification benefit was an element that several participants noted as important in terms of building a sense of civic and economic contribution and participation. The ability to receive the benefit as a salary enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem in many of the participants. The fact that the benefit was called a “salary” by caseworkers created a sense of being a normal citizen for the participants – “working,” receiving a “salary,” and putting “food on the table” symbolized one’s ability to comply with the breadwinner norm. On the other hand, participants also noted that these features were convenient in terms of avoiding having to disclose the “truth” of their situation. As one of

the interviewed participants noted, “When people ask me about what I do or where I work now, I just say I work for the municipality because they are the ones who pay my salary.”

Taxpaying was another important feature for many participants. Female participants especially expressed contentment with a qualification benefit that was counted as taxable income. Paying taxes was a token of contributing and belonging to the broader society. Again, taxpaying was a token of normality: “When you pay taxes, like everybody else, you pay, and you get back . . . you feel like a ‘normal’ person.” Female participants with immigrant backgrounds were especially proud of contributing to society and proud of participating on equal terms with others and according to the social norm of a responsible taxpaying citizen. Thus, the QP benefit and the tax they paid from it facilitated their experiences of fitting into the norms of the country. This led to enhanced self-esteem and experiences of civic participation.

At the same time, many service users found it difficult to comply with the 37.5-hour-a-week programme, with many noting that this was because of health issues. Some also mentioned difficulties due to vague “symptoms,” for instance, old age and tiredness. Even with the possibility of adjusting individual programmes with time to rest between working hours, the fulltime programme proved difficult for many to complete.

Expectations that service users would (re-)enter the standard labour market on ordinary terms were also difficult for many to fulfil. One 58-year-old male participant explained to his QP caseworker the difficulty involved in finding his way back into the labour market. As he said, “It is too late for me. I am nearly 60 years old. There is nothing for me out there now . . . at this age, it is hard to learn new things.” He had been working in the cleaning business for 25 years prior to entering QP and felt he had done his part with many years of hard physical work. He was reluctant about the idea of having to adapt to a changing labour market that required both enhanced competencies and fulltime participation. Nevertheless, he was reminded by the caseworker that this was the norm in working life. Another participant, who was in his fifties, had a university college degree and 20 years of work experience in property administration. He described the difficulties his health problems posed as follows:

(I am) unreliable as an employee, to be frank . . . because I cannot guarantee that I can deliver on time . . . I need a certain timespan to be sure to finish the tasks because my health situation is unstable . . . so what I need is help to get introduced to an employer who sees the value of my competencies and is willing to hire me on those terms, but that kind of help seems to be impossible for NAV to provide.

Both participants struggled to comply with the programme’s imagined norm of an adult worker. Both were forced to participate in a standard activation trajectory, even with very poor prospects of labour market inclusion. For both, a more tailored activation goal could have promoted labour market inclusion, but in failing to do

this, the participants both felt a heightened sense of labour market exclusion and a devaluation of their status.

Broken promises and disillusion about labour market participation

Additionally, many participants were disappointed because promises of becoming employed were not realized and the qualifying measures available proved to be fewer than anticipated. Work placements in public and private companies – where the municipality, rather than the employer, paid the service user their wages – were a commonly used activation measure. As one QP caseworker noted, “Work placement is the key to employment . . . that’s where you can show the employers that you are competent.” Such placements were a key feature of the programme. Some participants experienced the work placement as valuable time spent, even without obtaining employment, either because they learned things and thereby enhanced their competencies or because they could use the competencies, knowledge and skills that they already possessed. However, many participants reported that their work placements had not led to employment, despite having completed several in a row. Participants described feeling disillusioned because of a lack of work offers, especially after having continuously heard the institutional mantra that placements lead to work. One participant noted the following:

I was several months in X, and later I was six months in Y . . . I did a good job for them. I saved them a lot of money by changing the administrative system . . . this was something they needed and which they obviously lacked the competency to do . . . but then I understood they were not going to hire me on ordinary terms, so I quit.

Others described feeling exploited through the work placements, especially after going through several placements without becoming employed:

I worked so hard, and they were happy with the work I did, but nothing . . . he said I just needed to do another month of work placement and then he would hire me, but after that extra month, he said that they could not afford to hire me . . . then, later, I learned they had hired someone else, a Norwegian guy . . . enough of work placements. Now, I just want a job.

Such experiences of exploitation and feelings of being discriminated against were tokens of the subordinated status and social exclusion of these service users, which certainly enhanced their sense of not belonging.

Concluding discussion

In this chapter, we have combined citizenship and social justice perspectives to explore how labour activation policy and practice may promote or hamper social citizenship for service users who are far from the labour market. We found that

well-intended, supply-sided activation interventions may provide, at best, a predominantly short-term sense of belonging and participation. In the longer term, such interventions have the potential, rather, to emphasise service users' inability to achieve full participation and membership in society.

Our analysis demonstrates that the longevity of feelings of increased civic and economic participation depends on whether work activity continues, and whether one continues to receive a salary and have access to the terms of regular work, including paying taxes and accruing a pension. A recent research report suggests that this is not often the case: while the proportion of participants finishing the QP and entering work has increased over the years, only a small proportion find fulltime work after finishing the QP (Lima & Furuberg, 2018).¹

Some research participants also reported a sense of social collegiality and enhanced competence while at their work placements. This feeling may be sustained over time by continued friendships and networks. Also, for those who experienced enhanced competencies due to participating in the QP, for example Norwegian language skills, this may promote a sense of inclusion and social participation over time. However, for others, experiences of social inclusion and participation may also be short lived. Many QP participants neared the end of or finished with the programme without salaried work, and those for whom a move back to social assistance was imminent felt a heightened sense of not contributing and being outside the normal (Gubrium & Lødemel, 2014). The research participants in our study, furthermore, reported broken promises and disillusionment connected to experiences of being offered "more" in the QP but nevertheless not obtaining paid employment, an experience also seen in other studies of labour activation (Gubrium & Hansen, 2019; Gubrium et al., 2017; Betzelt & Bothfeld, 2011c). At best, therefore, a sense of increased social participation may be felt in the short term for those still in the programme, as well as in the long term for the few who find work through the programme and, possibly, for those who acquire lasting competencies and skills that they experience as valuable for social participation in other arenas than the labour market. Furthermore, our analysis demonstrates that participants felt stigmatised as "NAV clients" and exploited having taken part in continual work placements without obtaining fixed employment (see Hansen, 2018a; Gubrium et al., 2017). Such experiences do not contribute to labour activation's goal of social inclusion or to a strengthened sense of belonging and participation. On the contrary, they may lead to a sense of being further excluded. Therefore, in the long term, participants' sense of social citizenship may be actively undermined.

The finding of short-term effects also has methodological implications: If assessments of changed social citizenship take place while participants are *engaged in* a programme, we may paint a more optimistic picture of the programme's impact. Fraser's (2003) strategy of tracing participants' changing position in the socio-economic structure over time is thus crucial to gaining a more realistic picture of the outcome of activation. Over time, not many move forward economically, with many returning to social assistance, and many even move back socially, having failed in another opportunity and been stigmatized as NAV work trainees.

Furthermore, the QP's adult (or ideal) worker norm may be appropriate for those service users with full work capability. The target group for QP is, however, service users with significantly reduced capacity. Our findings suggest that institutional insistence on such a universal norm prevents the possibility of real recognition for groups and individuals with reduced work capability. For many of our research participants, the adult worker norm represented a problem, especially when coupled with the goal of individual *change*: change in terms of behaviour, competencies and motivation to become employable. Contrary to rhetorical promises of individually tailored programmes to promote inclusion and participation, individualised activation based on universal worker norms resulted in the loss of a sense of belonging and further exclusion. Thus, activation policy may reinforce a general adult worker norm as the foundation for social citizenship and may thus withdraw recognition and social rights from those who are not able to live up to such a norm (Betzelt & Bothfeld, 2011a, 2011b).

Finally, the normative change from the recognition of social rights to “deservingness” under such an activation paradigm seems to have undermined the ability to recognise and include groups whose status is especially subordinated – those groups that reside furthest from the labour market (Betzelt & Bothfeld, 2011a, 2011c). Activation may therefore also result in further subordinated status and social exclusion for citizens who already experience difficulties in complying with the societal norm of participation and becoming a full member of society. In this perspective, rather than representing a transformative policy, QP has become an intervention that naturalises, rationalises, and further affirms the marginalised position of subordinated groups (Fraser, 2003).

Note

- 1 Figures are for 2016. One year after finishing QP only 25.8% of participants are employed in a percentage that covers more than 40% of a fulltime position.

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