



Frontline provision of integrated welfare and employment services: Organising for activation competency

Gjersøe H. Frontline provision of integrated welfare and employment services: Organising for activation competency

Using the Norwegian case of an integrated welfare and employment service organisation, this study examined how organisational factors of this far-reaching, street-level agency have affected frontline workers' opportunities to provide individualised services to users with complex needs. The article reports on two different policy and organisational settings: frontline workers as 'generalists' in a 'national employment policy context', and frontline workers as 'specialists' in a policy context that emphasises 'empowering the local level'. Findings suggest that the generalists in the study did not experience an opportunity to utilise the flexibility available to them in selecting suitable measures, nor did they develop user-specific knowledge. The article argues that caseworker specialisation can create more room for discretion and professional knowledge about users and which measures should be applied, thereby improving the opportunity to tailor services in a 'one size fits all' organisational context.

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Across Western countries, social welfare and employment services have integrated benefit and service provision to include more client groups with complex social problems, such as ill health, low skills, heavy care burdens and drug misuse, to improve their employment chances (Minas, 2014; van Berkel & Borghi, 2008). When this type of service integration involves multiple policy fields (health, employment, social services) and multiple stakeholders (external service providers), the scope of action for the frontline agencies is altered and becomes increasingly demanding (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016a).

This article reports on a study of the Norwegian Employment and Welfare Service (NAV), an agency in which the Public Employment Service (PES), national insurance and social services are integrated and co-located. NAV constitutes a far-reaching reform relative to other Western countries' integration efforts (Minas, 2014). The agency's central objective is to provide holistic and individualised services in order to cover the complex needs that represent obstacles to labour-market integration for many clients.

Extensive efforts have been made to provide all NAV employees with common working procedures combined with ample room for discretion (Heum, 2010; Sadeghi & Fekjær, 2018). Corresponding to the idea of holistic service provision, the caseworkers provide follow-up of users according to quite broad

differentiating procedures that reflect the 'efforts' they need from NAV to reach their goal – preferably (re)entering or retaining employment (NAV, 2010). 'Efforts' are determined through a Work Capability Assessment and refer to follow-up and service measures provided by NAV or external providers (Gjersøe, 2016). Users are allocated to one of the following four categories, listed from lowest to highest level of effort: 'standard effort', 'situational effort', 'specially adjusted effort' and 'permanently adjusted effort'. The categorisation allocates service measures according to the degree and complexity of the clients' needs for support from NAV. The most comprehensive service measures consist of long-term national employment services in the category 'specially adjusted effort', allocated to users deemed to have reduced work capability (Ministry of Labour and Inclusion, 2006–2007). These users generally have ill health or social problems as their main cause for being outside the labour market. Frontline workers who work with this category thus have a large toolbox of measures at their disposal and could thereby be expected to exhibit knowledge about service measures and various barriers to employment. Although the four categories can be considered a means of specialising the caseworkers, their broad nature means that the individuals allocated to these 'specialists' are highly heterogeneous. A more reasonable characterisation of the caseworkers' role is therefore that of 'generalists'.

Despite the integration efforts of NAV, the reform outcomes have not been regarded as a complete success (Fevang, Markussen, & Røed, 2014; Hansen & Lorentzen, 2018; Vågeng Committee, 2015). NAV has been criticised for not being sufficiently work- and user-oriented. In the light of this criticism, policy documents have stated that local autonomy should be increased further in order to strengthen the NAV offices' opportunities to provide employment and user-oriented services (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2015–2016, 2017). In addition, young benefit recipients constitute a group that has lately attracted close attention and become a prioritised group within NAV. The allocation of staff resources to young users as a prioritised group has become a form of *caseworker specialisation* within the agency. Such caseworker specialisation should lead to expertise about the clientele (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016a).

To what extent generalists and specialists, respectively, can provide individualised services depends on service budgets, staff resources, room for discretion and degree of competency (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016a). These aspects were investigated in this study in order to answer the following question: How do organisational factors of an integrated service model affect frontline workers' opportunities to provide individualised services to users with complex needs?

Important factors in the frontline organisation of integrated service provision

NAV in Norway serves as an example of how '[l]ocal worlds of welfare and service provision are at the core of the "new", activating and service-oriented welfare state' (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016b, p. 3; see also Heidenreich & Aurich-Berheide, 2014). Integrated employment and welfare services can be characterised as 'personal social services' (i.e. activation services); as such, it is necessary to allow frontline workers to communicate with clients to find suitable service measures and reach a desirable outcome – preferably labour market integration (van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007). This two-way communication allows for 'individualisation', meaning 'services should be adjusted to individual circumstances in order to increase their effectiveness' (van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007, p. 3). To what extent 'inner-organisational capacities' enable integrated services to be 'adjusted to individual circumstances' is of importance (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016a). The following factors are likely to affect integration efforts in the frontline organisation: differentiated procedures, service budgets and staff resources, caseworker flexibility and professional knowledge (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016a).

Differentiated procedures are necessary in order to tailor the provision of services to fit each individual

(Valkenburg, 2007). They are therefore a vital element of the allocation of service budgets and staff resources in an integrated service context. The provision of differentiated service measures is typically achieved through client profiling and categorisation. The client's problems, barriers and resources, such as sickness, skills and interests, are mapped (Baumberg, Warren, Garthwaite, & Bamba, 2015; Gjersøe, 2016; Mabbett, 2003). The mapping results in a target group definition. For instance, clients considered to have extensive problems and barriers are categorised in such a way that they are eligible to receive intensive services and in this way are allocated monetary resources within the integrated service agency. Caseworker specialisation according to a specific target group serves as a means of allocating counselling time that is staff resources. This means having caseworkers working with a specific group such as single parents or young clients. Specialisation typically involves lower caseloads so that more counselling time is allocated per individual in the specific target group compared with those in other groups of clients (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016a).

Service budgets and staff resources. Service budget relates to the range of services offered and the number of service spaces available. The amount of *staff resources* available at a particular point in time can be determined by assessing the frontline workers' caseloads. Both service budgets and staff resources directly impact the extent to which clients receive services adjusted to their needs. The point of this factor is not to establish what the perfect volume of resources is, but rather to assess budgets and resources in order to identify when other factors may be of greater importance that is when a lack of resources is not the main problem (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016a).

Caseworker flexibility. This refers to the caseworkers' discretionary space which can concern, for instance, decisions on the frequency and duration of client conversations or on the selection of suitable service measures. Because categorisation procedures tend to be standardised, caseworkers' room for discretionary manoeuvre is a vital means of counteracting rigidity (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016a).

Professional knowledge. In order to utilise the room for discretion available to them and make decisions about what services to provide in individual cases, frontline workers also need professional knowledge (Grimen & Molander, 2008; Molander, 2016). Professional knowledge about activation is underdeveloped (van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012). In integrated activation services, frontline workers need to act as both employment counsellors and social workers. This requires user-oriented competency (such as counselling techniques), relational competency and knowledge of users' assistance needs.

Labour market knowledge is also important, including knowledge about means and measures that can help users to become integrated into the labour market (Frøyland & Spjelkavik, 2014; Heidenreich & Aurich-Berheide, 2014; Heidenreich & Rice, 2016a; Sadeghi & Fekjær, 2018).

Organising integrated services in the Norwegian frontline service

In 2006, the NAV reform merged the former National Employment Service (PES) and the national insurance agency. In addition, the municipal social assistance service was co-located with the national services in joined-up NAV offices. A central argument for the reform was that the three agencies appeared too fragmented to be able to remove benefit recipients' multiple barriers to obtaining work (Christensen, Fimreite, & Læg Reid, 2014). The political objectives were not only to establish a holistic service and local autonomy, but also to equip NAV offices with a comprehensive set of means to develop coordinated services adapted to individual needs (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2011; Fossetøl, Breit, Andreassen, & Klemsdal, 2015). However, 'there were few clues as to how the local offices should in fact implement this general idea of holistic services' (Fossetøl et al., 2015, pp. 295–296). A competing reform logic existed that emphasised a uniform user service and national control through standardisation. A central challenge for the NAV offices was 'how and to what extent' they could incorporate holistic services that were consistent with uniformity and national control of services (Fossetøl et al., 2015, p. 300).

NAV caseworkers are titled 'advisors', signalling an equal power relationship in which the caseworker's role is to motivate, negotiate and agree with the user on suitable activities. Hence, although some procedures, such as client categorisation, may contribute to formalise discretion, frontline workers have considerable discretionary space in which to select suitable services for the users. The educational background of NAV frontline workers is heterogeneous, although the largest occupational group is social workers. There are small differences in how staff in general report their activation competency (Sadeghi & Fekjær, 2018).

In the following discussion, some expectations for the study are elaborated in connection with an account of relevant aspects of the Norwegian integrated service model and the factors concerning inner-organisational capacities, as presented in the previous section. The expectations are summarised in Table 1.

National policy context: broad categorisations, flexibility and a large toolbox of service measures

Long-term unemployed users are assessed through the Work Capability Assessment. The category

relevant for this study was 'specially adjusted effort' for those who had been deemed as having reduced work capability. This category constitutes a main target of the integration reform and these users can be granted the widest range of services. In 2020, this category consisted of 5.4% of the Norwegian working-age population (18–66 years) (Grønlien, 2020). The notion of 'work capability' encapsulates a wide range of issues, such as health, age, skills, education, occupational background, care burdens, social problems, housing, transportation facilities and employment opportunities in the labour market (NAV, 2010). The extensive service measures consist of work training provided by external providers that are either pre-approved sheltered enterprises¹ or contracted providers, in which the frontline workers are granted discretionary space in the matching of users with available measures. The usage of these external providers is a continuation of the service measure structure of the former PES. National employment policies can therefore be said to constitute a dominating policy context for the organisational setting of the 'generalist' advisors. In addition, the advisors can approve individually targeted activities such as education, work training provided by regular workplaces, and medical treatment and rehabilitation in the health sector (NAV, 2010). Service budgets are generous and the generalist advisors can be expected to exhibit knowledge about a wide range of service measures so that they can be adapted to individual needs.

Empowering the local level: autonomy and specialising on a target group

A policy goal promoted around 2015 was stronger local autonomy for the NAV offices in their follow-up work (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2015–2016). Therefore, one can expect even stronger flexibility among the specialist caseworkers in the 'empowering the local level' policy setting. Young people (under 30 years of age) not in employment or education ('NEETs') have increasingly become a concern for Norwegian authorities. A comparatively high share (56%) of NEETs in Norway have dropped out of upper secondary school (attended between the ages of 16–19 years), which could contribute to long-term unemployment. In addition, Norwegian NEETs have a much higher risk of experiencing mental health problems than those reflected in OECD averages (OECD, 2018, p. 9). Other factors may include

¹ A sheltered enterprise is 'organised as a private limited company in which a local Authority/county council holds a shareholding majority, or as a separate professional and financial unit linked to the scheme arranger that also organises other labour market schemes' (Eurostat, 2017, p. 30).

Table 1. Expectations for how frontline workers can provide services within the Norwegian integrated service model (NAV).

Policy context	National employment policies	Empowering local level
Organisational setting	'Generalist advisors'	'Specialist advisors'
Differentiated procedures	Expectations: Allocation of services via broad client categorisation of users with reduced work capability	Expectations: Allocation of staff resources via caseworker specialisation on young users with complex needs
Service budgets	Generous A large toolbox available to assist users through different stages of their journey	Regular caseloads Lower caseloads due to a prioritised group
Staff resources	High	High (emphasis on local autonomy)
Caseworker flexibility (discretionary space)	High	High (emphasis on local autonomy)
Professional knowledge of caseworkers (discretionary reasoning)	Individually adapted services based on knowledge about a wide range of service measures	Advisors exhibit expertise about the user group

Note: Based on the concepts of Heidenreich and Rice (2016a).

involvement in crime, family issues, low self-esteem and learning difficulties (Frøyland, 2018). The policy towards this group and to the NAV offices included the means to create designated youth contacts within NAV (Strand, Bråthen, & Grønningsæter, 2015). A majority of the NAV offices have organised youth teams or a designated youth contact in the office (Strand et al., 2015). Youth teams complete close follow-up of young users to clarify their needs and to activate them into school or employment. The youth advisors typically have lower caseloads compared with other advisors in the NAV office. By concentrating on one target group and having lower caseloads, one can expect the 'specialist' advisors to exhibit expertise about young people who are not in employment or education. Young users in NAV are recognised as a group with complex needs that require extensive services, although not every young user is deemed to have reduced work capability. Young users can be offered a range of services. In line with the emphasis on local autonomy, more local initiatives, such as in-house activation centres, are included in the service measure range. In addition, an amendment in 2017 to the Social Welfare Act states that activation requirements come into effect when social assistance benefit is granted to persons under 30 years old, called 'mandatory activation'. This law contributes to encouraging NAV offices to pay special attention to young recipients of social assistance benefit (Gjersøe, Leseth, & Vilhena, 2020).

Research methods and data

This article reports on findings from two sets of empirical data comprising interviews with frontline workers in nine NAV offices. The organisational settings that the informants worked in differ between the two data sets. The first data set consists of interviews conducted by the author in 2012 and 2013 with 24 'generalist' advisors in the national policy context, i.e., caseworkers who completed follow-up of users categorised as

having reduced work capability. The data were collected during a period when NAV was still a new organisation learning how to overcome the challenges of providing integrated user- and work-related services (Vångeng Committee, 2015).

The second data set consists of interviews conducted in 2017 and 2018 with 25 'specialist' advisors who worked with young users in the 'empowering the local level context'. This organisational setting represents caseworker specialisation as a means for allocating counselling time to a specific target group. Many of the specialist advisors in the study were part of a youth team in the office. The interviews were conducted by a research team consisting of the author and two other researchers, Anne Leseth and Susana Vilhena. Some of the young users were categorised as having reduced work capability, whereas others were not and were merely receiving social assistance benefits. A common feature, however, was that many of the users had complex problems other than just unemployment, as described in the previous section. Thus, a common characteristic between the two organisational settings was that the users were considered to be in need of comprehensive support because of complex problems.

Most of the advisors had high levels of education and consented to voluntary participation in the study. The NAV offices varied in size from small to large, and geographically from rural to urban locations. Although the interviews in the two data sets were not conducted in the same offices, they offer insight into significant differences in the frontline service provision.

All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. In the first stage of analysis, a method of open coding involving reading through the data and attributing codes based on the participants' own words and focuses was used in order to allow codes to 'emerge' from the data. This inductive approach was applied to gain an overview of what the informants spoke

about rather than a distilled perception of central themes (Rapley, 2016). Furthermore, the data analysis concentrated on how the advisors experienced the follow-up in different organisational settings in the offices. A pattern observed for this study was the generalist advisors' orientation towards service measures and the specialist advisors' orientation towards the young users. These findings are elaborated in the following section.

Findings

A common finding in both the 'national employment policy' setting and the 'empowering the local level setting' was that *service budgets* were seldom discussed by the advisors. The advisors had a range of external providers at their disposal, offering different measures, although sometimes with waiting lists. In the following, findings from the two policy and organisational settings are presented in detail and then summarised in Table 2.

Generalists' provision of services to users with reduced work capability

The generalist advisors worked with users who had been assessed and categorised by NAV as exhibiting reduced work capability and in need of 'specially adjusted effort'. The advisors' caseloads consisted of between 90 and 200 users, although most had caseloads of between 120 and 150 users.

When the advisors talked about the follow-up of their users, they talked more about service measures than the labour market into which they were to assist users to integrate:

I think it can be very hard, yes. They can be narrow fields [of employment] that I don't have a clue about. Niche occupations, like what's that really, what does it actually involve, what are the work tasks, and what are the requirements. Yes, then we have to use the Internet.

With regard to labour market knowledge, the advisors appeared uncertain, as observed in other studies (Frøyland & Spjelkavik, 2014; Hagelund, 2016; Sadeghi & Fekjær, 2018). External providers of employment services and referral of users to these measures were frequently thematised. The advisors were oriented around service measures and the challenges of matching the users with a suitable measure, as expressed by an advisor in the following way:

It's challenging to remember all service measures when you're in a counselling session with a user, because it is huge. There are work training companies, different types of employment training

courses, specialised internal units, and all the education programmes that exist. There are many alternatives. It's about knowing what measures suit the user and in which situation. I think that is often a challenge, just figuring that out. And the fact that I don't know the content of the measures very well. I don't always know to what I'm referring the users. Sometimes it goes wrong. Considering the information, it appears as a reasonable measure, but then the user doesn't always experience it like that. It's hard to inform the user about something you don't know very well yourself.

The 'specialised internal units' that the advisor refers to above are internal units in NAV that provide specialised support to users, such as career counselling or language skills testing. The large portfolio of service measures available reflected generous service budgets. However, the advisor cited above expressed the challenge of keeping an overview of all service measures when talking to the users, which she appeared to experience as stressful. The relational work was hampered both by the lack of overview and by the advisor's limited knowledge about the content of the measures; this was expressed as frustrating, both by experienced and less experienced advisors:

There are many measures and that is very good. I think that many of the users are spellbound. However, there is a lack of focus on the right type of work, and the right type of measure. Focus is more directed at placing them somewhere.

The advisor above not only points to the challenge of a large service portfolio, but also to a lack of competence in using the measures, both from the advisors' and the users' perspectives. The advisor indicated that measures tended to be used without a clear thought or goal.

When asked about how the advisors cooperate with the users when finding a service measure, agreement was emphasised. Any agreement should be documented in an action plan:

It should be stated, written out, those measures or means that we collectively agreed on. That it is stated that we agreed on it. And it shouldn't just be on paper, but we should have agreed in reality, in a consultation. It should also state that when the service measure has ended, we should meet to discuss it, or discuss during the measure. So that if the user is going to work training in a sheltered enterprise, we should meet after a half year together with the counsellor in the measure and talk about how things are going.

The advisors generally stressed that the external providers are crucial partners in the follow-up of users. The advisors' emphasis on mutual agreement reflects a user-oriented approach. However, the advisors did not appear to exhibit a close familiarity with, or knowledge of, their users. When asked about what they talked about with users in consultations, one advisor replied:

Well, it is about the person's challenges. Very often it is a lot to do with health. Then we talk about that. Then I often ask how they picture the next half year, if I think the plan is lasting through the next half year. You often don't get any answer. Then you try to draw things out a bit. What do you currently do in your everyday life? Do you still go to treatment? Those who don't know what they want and who are close to finishing treatment, I refer straight into employment measures, towards work. Then I document it in the plan.

By relying heavily on the external providers, the advisors have a less significant role in the follow-up, which, as a result, appears to involve somewhat distant relations to the users. The follow-up was characterised by choosing from a 'catalogue' of service measures, and not based on a deeper knowledge of the client. Although the advisors were given relatively ample room for discretion in how they reached an agreement and decided on an activity, referrals to external labour market measures appeared to be more ritualistic than involving close cooperation. External labour market measures, such as sheltered enterprises, appeared a natural choice, as these measures are readily available. Given the advisors' large caseloads, they were also an efficient choice.

This is not to say that the advisors did not have conviction in their decisions. The external services may well have been conceived of as an appropriate means of moving users a step further along the process. However, the advisors' room for discretion was mostly utilised in relation to *what kinds* of external services to choose, whether to seek part- or full-time participation and at what point users could be considered ready to work. Discretion was applied less in deciding the content of the service delivered.

Service provision by specialist advisors

The specialist advisors expressed an expectation to provide close follow-up to young users, many of whom had complex needs. Typical problems faced by the young users included unemployment, inactivity resulting from dropping out of upper secondary school, and mental health problems. The advisors' caseloads ranged from 30 to 85 users, but most of the informants had caseloads of between 30 and 40 users.

Some of the advisors explained that their office had practised mandatory activation for young social assistance recipients for several years before the law amendment in 2017. This included providing the young recipients with close follow-up, development of in-house activation centres and a high degree of interaction with local employers. Thus, they regarded themselves (and their office) as pioneers and local, autonomous innovators, considering the provision of integrated services to young users. Although many of the advisors had experience of working with young claimants in their previous portfolios of mixed ages, working solely with young users represented something new, as stated by one advisor: *It has become very pronounced (...) having a youth team makes the advisors more energetic.* The advisor further pointed to the mandatory activation of young users as stimulating the staff's interest and expertise concerning the group. One of the advisors described his workday as follows:

It is very much providing follow-up. Previously, when I worked with ordinary [unemployed] users, there were many administrative procedures. This is still the case, but we have a significantly smaller caseload that enables me to have a lot more contact with the young users.

The advisor above points to the connection between smaller caseloads and increased contact with the users. The specialist advisors also appeared to be tuned into the common characteristic of age and that the users were in a particular phase of life to which the advisors were attentive. Several of the advisors mentioned a new web-based messaging function which they could use to instantly message with users. The messaging service was experienced as especially well-suited to young users who are already accustomed to digital communication. Some of the advisors were also available by mobile phone and assisted their users with various needs (e.g. visiting a doctor or an employer). However, when asked about the role of speaking face-to-face in the NAV office, this was still regarded as important:

I think it is a matter of trust – to get to talk with them and that they get to see me and that they feel a little safe ... that we spend a good length of time on the first conversation to make them feel comfortable. Because youth are very ... many are very insecure and it may be the first time they speak to someone in a public agency. I think we need to take extra care of young people and that we must spend some time creating the necessary trust and a good relationship.

The advisors were concerned about the working relationship with the users and expressed a sensitivity

to challenges they thought young people might experience. The advisors' attentiveness towards the users' young age was also evident in their pointing out typical issues related to upbringing and in advising on general practical life issues. The advisor quoted in the following excerpt viewed young users as a group whose needs differed from others:

The main focus is getting them into work. (...) However, we talk about many different things. They [young users] talk about their challenges. Then we need to tell them not to take things too seriously. When we are young, things are scary, but in a few years, it's trivial. It's like talking about life, really. They start talking, it's so natural, it's natural that it [life] comes in. It's not just work we're talking about, to say it in that way (...) It's about living. What it means to live, really. We have to pay bills, we need a place to live ... and you know, there's no public transport out here. (...) They [young users] are completely dependent on their parents driving them everywhere. But the parents need to go to work, too. Then I tell them 'what you have to do is get your driving license'. It's about planning your daily life. 'You can manage to save money for a car, and you have to pay a little to live at home'. It's often like this in my work. (...) Some people think that when you work with young people you should be cool, but I have not chosen that ... I have chosen to be an adult. I have chosen to be a supportive person because I think it's important for someone to be that person too.

When the advisor talked 'about many different things' with the users and further stated that she had 'chosen' the role of adult, she emphasised her flexibility in the sense of discretionary space as well as indicating that she had user-specific knowledge. Although work was the main goal, the advisors

expressed close follow-up and a familiarity with their users that allowed for different and individualised paths towards the goal. This also implied that labour market knowledge was less thematised than user-oriented knowledge. However, a frequently mentioned measure was work training with local employers, in which the advisors engaged directly in the follow-up with the user and the employer.

When asked about the young users' participation in agreeing on an activity, one advisor responded with the following:

Oh yes, they are the ones who should choose it. So when I'm in a meeting with a user, I come up with various suggestions on what opportunities exist, state measures and also municipal [measures] ... we are aware of these and we have conversations with substance abuse [units] and mental health [units]. We have the health-training centre, community work services, there is much to be aware of that might be the right tool for a particular youth in the first phase. Then, we introduce these state or work training measures eventually. So it's the user who has to figure out where he stands and what's most suitable ... and then I often give them a week or two to they spend a little time at home and think a little, and then we talk again before we potentially sign them up.

This interview extract illustrates that the advisors have a large toolbox of service measures at their disposal, including local services such as 'health-training centres' and 'community work services'. Although the advisors stressed the users' participation and responsibility to decide on the most appropriate service measure, they appeared to exhibit ownership and control of which service measures were chosen. Both target group specialisation and advisors paying close attention to

Table 2. Summary of findings.

Policy context	National employment policies	Empowering local level
Organisational setting	'Generalist advisors'	'Specialist advisors'
Differentiated procedures	Findings: Allocation of services via broad client categorisation of users with reduced work capability.	Findings: Allocation of staff resources via caseworker specialisation on young users with complex needs
Service budgets	A wide range of service measures from external actors such as sheltered enterprises	A wide range of service measures from external actors such as sheltered enterprises and various local providers
Staff resources	Caseworker-client ratio: 1:120–150 ^a	Caseworker-client ratio: 1:30–40 ^a
Caseworker flexibility (discretionary space)	Little usage of flexibility. Standardised referrals	A flexible approach to measures
Caseworker professional knowledge (discretionary reasoning)	Weakly-developed knowledge about the labour market and service measures Little knowledge about the users' individual needs	Good knowledge about suitable measures and sensitivity to user-specific needs

Note: Based on the concepts of Heidenreich and Rice (2016a).

^aCaseloads varied, but the given ratio was the most common.

the groups' special characteristics contribute to an interest in each individual and to thinking more broadly, resulting in the advisors making better use of a broad range of measures.

Discussion

As illustrated in Table 2, limited service budgets was not found to be a pressing issue in either of the policy contexts. Rather, the service measures were generous. Differences observed in caseloads between the two contexts can contribute to explaining the advisors' different approaches. The size of caseloads is a well-established influencing factor in the literature on street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010) and in more recent research on integrated social welfare services which found that large caseloads constrain the opportunity to provide individualised services (Garsten, Jacobsson, & Sztandar-Sztanderska, 2016; van Berkel & Knies, 2016). Factors such as limited time resources and coordination problems facing external service providers have also been pointed to in previous work on user experiences with NAV (Lundberg, 2012).

The findings of this study suggest that large caseloads could have contributed to hindering generalist advisors' use of discretion and development of knowledge about the range of service measures. A reliance on external service providers further hinders a deeper understanding of the users' needs. Among the specialists, smaller caseloads are an important factor making it possible for them to exhibit their knowledge about both the users and the service measures. A few specialists had larger caseloads, of approximately 85 young users. User sensitivity, knowledge and attention were also observed among advisors who had more users to cater to. Hence, discretionary space and knowledge of and sensitivity to users do not seem to be dependent on caseloads alone. In the following, other relevant factors in addition to caseload size are discussed.

As integrated welfare and labour services have the primary aim of entering people into the workforce, knowledge of people from different life situations, of the labour market and of service solutions are a vital prerequisite for frontline workers (Hagelund, 2016; Heidenreich & Aurich-Berheide, 2014; Sadeghi & Fekjær, 2018). In addition, identifying a person's obstacles to and possibilities for labour market integration requires a good relationship between the user and the frontline worker.

User categorisation in this study was primarily a procedure for service measure allocation, i.e., for differentiating users according to work capability and the need for follow-up (Heum, 2010). This represents a more general specialisation. A crucial aspect of

user categorisation is the striking of a balance between discretion and the standardisation of frontline workers' opportunities to provide responsive services (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016a). This tension can also be recognised as 'responsiveness versus standardisation', which refers to taking into account the clients' wants and needs, on the one hand, and the need for equal treatment, on the other (Hjörne, Juhlia, & van Nijnatten, 2010; Lipsky, 2010). A previous study (Hollertz, 2016) suggested that allocating service measures through categorisation procedures could hamper individualisation by restricting caseworkers' room for manoeuvre in the event that the individual's needs did not fit with their categorisation. In the present study, another aspect of user categorisation contributed to advisors experiencing a rather low degree of flexibility in choosing measures in accordance with individual needs. Although the role as generalist advisor with a portfolio of one of four categories of users implies flexibility in counselling and the selection of measures, the advisors interviewed in this study reported applying quite standardised referrals. The standardisation represented weak responsiveness but did not appear to be caused by wrong-fitting categorisation or considerations of equal treatment. Rather, the range of centrally procured employment service measures appeared to hamper follow-up and relational work with the users. More specifically, what appeared to hinder flexibility was the combination of a lack of an overview of all measures, a lack of knowledge about the content of the service measures, and a lack of knowledge about the users. This finding is supported in previous research on NAV and service measures (Fossetøl et al., 2016). Hence, discretion is not just a matter of flexibility in the sense of the *room* for discretion, but also the opportunity to *reason* about what measures suit a user that is the professional knowledge held by the frontline workers (Grimen & Molander, 2008; Molander, 2016).

The extent to which NAV should rely on externally provided employment services or innovate in-house public services is contested terrain (Hernes, 2014; Official Expert Report, 2012) and marks a division between the two policy contexts in this study. The standardised referrals can be attributed to the *availability* of measures offered by external providers. Heidenreich and Rice (2016a) pointed out that national employment policies typically centre on uniform placement services contracted to external providers of employment services. This results in the generalists in the national employment policy context becoming concentrated on the services and not seeing themselves as being the ones who provide the close follow-up to reach solutions for the users. This finding can be related to what Hollertz (2016) characterised as a normative pressure arising from the

norm and value of client activation within the PES. The activation norm can turn the frontline workers' attention to 'being in activity, rather than the actual content or outcomes of activation for the individual' (Hollertz, 2016, p. 62).

In their role as 'referrer' to external measures, the advisors in the study acted more on the 'surface' than providing 'deep' advising. Being an advisor 'on the surface', not having deeper knowledge about either the services or the users, there is less need for flexibility. This resulted in flexibility not being utilised. This finding is in line with previous research highlighting the impact of the organisational context on how users receive services and, more specifically, how frontline workers utilise their room for discretion more narrowly than they could have done (Brodkin, 2013; Hansen, 2020).

A previous study defined frontline workers as generalists in the earliest years of NAV, which implied that there was *no* user differentiation (Helgøy, Kildal, & Nilssen, 2010). NAV advisors' professional knowledge as 'generalists' was limited, making it difficult to cooperate closely with users. In the present study, the categorisation of users with reduced work capability into one of four groups can be considered a caseworker specialisation in comparison with no differentiation of users. Nevertheless, the categorisations involve grouping persons of different ages and with different life situations and health and/or social problems. This specialisation, according to one of four broad categories, is in line with the central idea of the integrated service model which is to approach users holistically. A reasonable interpretation of the findings in this study is that the generalists experience an 'over-complexity'.

Among the advisors specialising in young users, a central finding was their attention and sensitivity to the specific needs of this group of users, including the service measures. The users' needs were not related to a specific phase of their work capability or assistance needs, as was the case with the categorisation procedure. Although young users might experience a wide range of difficult life situations, their shared age is likely to expose them to common challenges, such as those related to limited work experience, struggles in school, insecurity and immaturity. This seems to make it easier for the specialist advisors to develop user-oriented knowledge.

The specialists also appeared to have a more tailored use of measures from the external providers, and thus a more flexible use and knowledge of both the users and the service measures. Although the advisors in the study also referred users to external providers, this appeared to have been more strongly based on relations with the users. Understanding the users' life situations

added meaning to the follow-up work; informants felt that they were not just referrers but 'real' advisors. In addition to small caseloads that made relational work more feasible, working with a prioritised group appeared to generate a feeling of working on something important and valued.

Although street-level organisations facilitate individualised approaches, a continual investment in professional training is arguably important, because working with 'easily applicable measures' could constrain the individualisation of services (Rice, Fuertes, & Monticelli, 2018, p. 107). Since there exists no professional training for frontline activation workers, previous research has suggested that this type of expertise could be developed in different ways: by in-house training courses or by fostering network connections between caseworkers and external collaborators (employers and service providers) (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016a). In this study, the frontline workers' roles as 'specialists' for a certain target group appeared to stimulate their having a more prominent role than that of 'generalists' working with a broad user category. Hence, in the policy context of empowering the local level, the specialists were encouraged to utilise their flexibility as advisors, and the close relational work with the young users 'produced' user-oriented knowledge.

Conclusion

Integrated services can be viewed as a 'one size fits all' approach. As service provisions should at the same time be individualised, this creates a paradox, which has been underlined in previous research (Berthet & Bourgois, 2016; Minas, 2016). The findings of this study suggest that local autonomy and a 're-specialisation' across broad client categorisations can serve as significant means for frontline agencies to enhance staffs' knowledge of users' specific needs and which measures should be applied, thereby improving knowledge and the opportunity to tailor services.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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