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From Problems to Barriers: A Bottom-Up Perspective on the Institutional Framing of a Labour Activation Programme

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Human resource development (HRD) approaches aim to increase service users' labour market prospects through training and upskilling. However, research on activation policy implementation suggests that individualised, tailored measures may be difficult to implement because of organisational structures, standardised procedures, contradictory professional interests, and broad framework laws. This qualitative study explored the institutional framing of the Norwegian Qualification Programme and how that framing created barriers in service users' trajectories towards labour market inclusion. The study applied a bottom-up perspective to analyse how these barriers are entangled in a multidimensional web of interrelated and sometimes contradictory relations. Highlighting the service users' perspective, the study aimed to examine how institutional framing may interfere with the activation policy goal of qualifying service users for the labour market. The results point to how institutional framing governs local practice and creates barriers that ultimately may impede activation policy goals.

Keywords: Labour activation policy, labour and welfare services, service users, bottom-up perspective.

Introduction

In the Scandinavian activation policy context, human resource development (HRD) approaches with individually tailored measures are considered an important means to move service users facing complex challenges and extensive barriers into the labour market (Halvorsen and Jensen, 2004; Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Inclusion, 2006–2007a; Bengtsson, 2014; Lødemel and Moreira, 2014). HRD approaches emphasise enabling strategies which aim at strengthening an individual's resources through upskilling and training. Nevertheless, the difficulties service users encounter in entering the labour market constitute a challenge that reaches beyond their individual barriers (e.g. lack of skills and education, family and/or housing situations or health problems) and into structural, institutional, and organisational domains. Previous research suggests that broad framework laws (Thorén, 2008; Brodkin, 2013; Gubrium *et al*., 2014) and local interpretations of national activation policy (Fossestøl *et al*., 2016a, 2016b; Nothdurfter, 2016; Jacobsson *et al*., 2017) make activation a diverse field of practice. Furthermore, organisational structures (Andreassen and Fossestøl, 2011; Raeymaeckers and Dierckx, 2013), standardised procedures (Fuertes and Lindsay, 2016), and conflicting professional interests (Røysum, 2009, 2013; van Berkel and Van der Aa, 2012), as well as personal understandings of activation (Nothdurfter, 2016), influence labour activation practice.

This study aimed to contribute to this body of knowledge by taking the service user's perspective as a point of departure to investigate how institutional settings may impede qualification processes and the potential outcomes of participation in a labour activation programme. The research context was the Norwegian Qualification Programme (QP), a labour activation programme for long-term service users facing difficulties in obtaining employment.

The study aimed to answer the following question: "What barriers, beyond individual ones, do QP participants experience in labour activation and how can such barriers be connected to the QP's institutional framing?"

A bottom-up approach to activation policy implementation

A substantial body of research demonstrates that activation policy implementation diverts from formal policy intentions, suggesting that policy is shaped in local settings (Newman, 2007). Much of this research builds on Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy perspective, in which frontline workers' pragmatic use of discretion and problem-solving practices in their everyday meetings with service users plays an important part in policy implementation (see Thorén, 2008; Brodkin, 2013; Nothdurfther, 2016; van Berkel *et al*., 2017).

Focusing on policymaking processes and street-level organisations, Brodkin (e.g. 2013) elaborated on Lipsky's perspective: she argued that due to policy ambiguity and broad framework laws, street-level organisations and their frontline workers have the power to actually *transform* formal policies into policy practices. Using a variety of strategies (for instance, administrative means, organisational performance measurements, ample documentation requirements, accessibility of offices and frontline workers, complex claiming processes etc.) street-level organisations and their frontline workers develop informal but systematic practices which determine who gets what and when (Brodkin and Majmundar, 2010; Brodkin, 2013: 23-24, 29-30). In this way, street-level organisations and their frontline workers create concrete politics that have real consequences in people's lives (Brodkin and Majmundar, 2010; Brodkin, 2013: 23). Further, Hupe and Hill (2007) argued that policy implementation is not merely the result of frontline workers' discretionary practices, but that policies are shaped in a multidimensional web of horizontal and vertical relations, through which frontline workers are held accountable for the outcomes of their actions with colleagues, service users, managers and other stakeholders inside and outside the street-level organisation. Thus, frontline workers, too, are influenced by a wider organisational and policy context in their encounters with service users.

Caswell *et al*. (2017) emphasised how national policy context, governance context, and the organisation of activation at the local level must all be considered in order to understand street-level activation practices and their outcomes for service users. Thorén (2008) highlighted how activation work in Swedish municipalities is embedded in conflicting interests between organisational and local political contexts and how this situation results in a practice that contradicts the overall policy goal of offering service users individually tailored measures. From the Norwegian context, Gubrium *et al*. (2014) pointed to broad framework laws and a lack of resources as obstacles to offering service users individualised activation measures, while Fossestøl *et al*. (2016a) highlighted how differences in statutory and municipal governing cultures in the merged labour and welfare services complicate frontline workers' fulfilment of official activation policy.

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Valkenburg (2007) further added to the street-level perspective by emphasising the role of service users in this context: they are policy *fulfillers*, not only policy receivers, because, at the end of the day, activation policy succeeds or fails based on its concrete outcomes for service users. From this perspective, there are expectations for both service users (namely, that they participate in activation measures and make an effort to become employed) *and* activation services and institutions (namely, to provide that which is needed for this to happen). Offering individually tailored services and HRD approaches with enabling strategies is an attempt to promote labour market inclusion and fulfil activation policy goals. However, research on service users' experiences has indicated that activation policy implementation does not necessarily respond to service users' actual needs. Even though service users may have positive experiences when encountering social workers (Skjefstad, 2013; Hansen and Natland, 2017), their expectations related to acquiring work as a result of participating in an activation programme are rarely fulfilled (Gubrium, 2014; Hansen, 2018). Failure to obtain paid employment may in turn lead to disillusioned service users who experience a loss of social value and status regarding their employability and labour market attachment (Gubrium, 2014; Hansen, 2018).

Building on these scholars' work, I approached QP from the service users' perspective in order to investigate how their activation process take place within a broader context that includes QP social workers and staff in local labour and welfare offices (NAV offices), as well as employers and work-placement contacts, policy papers, legislations, municipal finances, and local labour markets.

The institutional context of the Norwegian Qualification Programme

The Qualification Programme (QP) is a municipal labour activation programme that targets the long-term unemployed of working age (18–67) who have significantly reduced work capacity and who are not entitled to other income-securing benefits (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2009). The voluntary entitlement programme provides participants with a taxable benefit of approximately 1500 euros per month, equivalent to the Norwegian minimum pension; however, participants who do not fulfil the requirements of full-time participation (37.5 hours per week) may lose their benefits.

Many among these service users have complex challenges that make employment difficult, such as mental or physical health problems, substance abuse, little formal education, lack of work experience and relevant skills, insecure housing situations, and family issues (Wel *et al*., 2006). When introduced in 2007, the QP was considered a 'generous' programme for those who were hard to employ and who needed comprehensive assistance to improve their labour market prospects. With a maximum caseload of eighteen individuals (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Inclusion, 2006–2007b), social workers, in principle, were allotted time to perform close, comprehensive follow-up of participants.

A fundamental principle of the QP is that activation measures and activities should be adjusted according to each participant's needs, abilities, and limitations. Therefore, individual programmes should be planned in close collaboration with social workers, and participants should be offered individual and tailored measures to improve their employment prospects (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Inclusion, 2006–2007a; Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2011). Even though paid employment is the ultimate goal of the QP, enhanced quality of life and self-efficacy also are important

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outcomes. Thus, an individual's programme could include a variety of activities, such as work placement (for example, 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 and Social Affairs, 2012, §30). Moreover, the plan should be flexible and adjustable to the participant's experiences and changing needs during the qualification process (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2011, §1).

The Qualification Programme is unique and differs from other programmes in the Norwegian labour and welfare context, in particular regarding its tailored measures and long-term perspective – up to two years – and the close and comprehensive follow-up of service users by social workers. As such, the QP represents a more holistic and inclusion-oriented perspective (see also Caswell, 2006) on labour activation and labour market inclusion of individuals for whom it is particularly difficult to gain paid employment. Nevertheless, there are local variations in QP implementation, and QP practice may vary regarding the extent to which participants are offered individually tailored programs and measures (Schafft and Spjelkavik, 2011; Fossestøl *et al.*, 2016b).

Data and methods

This study was based on fieldwork in four labour and welfare (NAV) offices in south eastern Norway conducted during seven months in 2013. The Norwegian Social Sciences Data Services (NSD) approved the study. The study included thirty-four service users participating in the QP. All study participants gave informed consent. The QP participants consisted of twenty-one women and thirteen men, ranging from nineteen to fifty-eight years of age. Twenty-three had an immigrant background. Their educational backgrounds varied from a few years of elementary school to a lower college degree. Several of the male participants had as much as thirty years of labour market experience, while the female participants had from none to a few years.

Data consisted of verbatim transcripts and field notes from observations of thirty-three meetings between QP participants and social workers, and fifteen individual interviews with QP participants. Observational data on interactions between social workers and service users, including how social workers responded to service users' expressed needs, along with data collected in individual interviews with QP participants provided insight into the participants' QP activities and experiences, as well as their collaboration with the social workers. In addition, policy documents and legal texts, such as parliamentary reports, regulations, and directives, provided a frame of reference for analysing how the QP's institutional framing governed the participants' activities.

Taking the QP participants' experiences as a point of departure, my analysis approached activation policy implementation from a bottom-up perspective. The aim was to identify how the institutional framing of QP created barriers for service users and for activation policy goals. In order to identify barriers, I applied contextualised dialogical analysis (Linell, 1998), which incorporates various contexts in which activation takes place, namely institutional and organisational, structural, relational, and interactional (Eskelinen *et al.*, 2008). Approaching the programme from the standpoint of the participants, I analysed what they experienced as problems in the QP regarding their need for support and/or qualifications to be able to enter the labour market using thematic analysis.

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However, the overall focus in the analysis was on the institutional framing of QP activation and the barriers created by this framing and not on the service users' individual and subjective experiences of problems. Therefore, the identified problems were used as entry points to identify the institutional and structural conditions and processes that hindered the participants' activation processes. Moreover, I investigated how those institutional conditions and processes led to the problems participants experienced and caused certain barriers.

To carry out the analysis, I used a dialogical strategy of posing questions to the data (McCoy, 2006: 111) while simultaneously comparing them to contexts that were relevant for the participants' activation processes. One such context on the institutional level is the relational context in which the activation process took place, namely the meeting between participants and social workers. Another institutional-level context concerns how QP implementation is regulated and organised at the street level, for example through policy papers, laws, and regulations. The data pointed towards wider contexts for analysis on the structural level, such as reductions in municipal finances, employers' preferences, and the labour market situation. These contexts were important for understanding how the framing of the programme created barriers. Information about these contexts derived from the interview and observation data; the contexts of the municipal economy and the labour market were harder to delineate than the textual contexts (policy papers, laws, and regulations). Therefore, these wider structural contexts were not analysed per se, but rather were used as a frame of reference when interpreting the participants' experiences in order to understand how the institutional barriers appeared in the QP. The lack of thorough analysis of the wider context might be regarded as a limitation of the study. Nevertheless, these steps facilitated analysis of how institutional, organisational, structural, and/or relational context shapes practice (Townsend, 1996) in the QP.

Findings

The findings of the study suggest that QP participants experienced several problems related to their needs and the requirements of the programme. In particular, the data demonstrates that the programme's work-oriented requirements, along with other requirements, often contradicted the participants' need for qualification and therefore were experienced as hindrances to their activation processes. The findings also suggest that failure to provide individual and relevant measures – for instance, supporting participants with health issues – was experienced as a problem for the participants because they felt that they lost their chance to obtain paid employment. While participants experienced these problems as hindrances to their activation trajectories, I interpreted them as institutional barriers because they emanated from how the programme was framed.

The policy goal of the QP is to improve participants' levels of qualification and develop their competencies for the purpose of obtaining paid employment and becoming self-sufficient; therefore, participants should be offered measures that suit their needs and preconditions. Most participants in this study did not wish to follow long educational trajectories, but they aspired to acquire adequate qualifications that were relevant to the labour market. Therefore, the participants applied for measures such as vocational training, driver's licensing, or a formally qualifying Norwegian language course. However, they rarely received such formally qualifying measures. The following extract from a conversation between a social worker and a participant is an example:

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> *Participant*: They told me if I had the driving license [I would get a job], but I cannot because I do not have enough money. I passed the theoretical part, but I cannot afford the rest.
> *Social worker*: Yes, I see that it is much easier to get a job with a driving license, but I cannot help you with that . . . unless you get an employment guarantee from an employer, then I could try.
> *Participant*: So if I get a confirmation from an employer that he would hire me, ninety-nine per cent sure, then . . .
> *Social worker*: Then it *may* be easier, but I cannot promise you anything, but, yes, I do agree that your possibilities of getting a job would have been much better with a driving license.

This participant's problem relates to retrenchment in municipal finances and the local NAV office's policy of refraining from granting individual measures that entail financial commitments unless the participant has a job guarantee. However, the same economic retrenchment that restricted both the public and private sector labour markets also limited the participant's ability to find a job guarantee. Therefore, this participant could not get the intervention that he considered necessary (i.e. a driving license) to improve his labour market prospects, even though the social worker agreed that the measure would be beneficial. Instead, he continued his job search through personal networking, hanging out at cafes with fellow countrymen – a strategy that was not productive because most of the people in his network were also unemployed and therefore lacked valuable contacts.

Another participant from a different NAV office considered a one-year vocational training course as necessary to obtain paid employment. As in the first case, his lack of a concrete job offer prevented him from having his request granted. He said,

> I told them several times that I needed substantial competency to be qualified for jobs. So, I looked at courses and I tried to get support from NAV, but that was very hard (. . .) because they don't have money for that, only language courses for immigrants and some elementary IT courses (. . .). I suggested a one-year vocational training course, but that was not accepted unless I had a job guarantee from an employer.

Instead of a formal qualifying course that would improve his labour market prospects, this participant received weekly conversations with a job coach as he continued to search for job vacancies posted on the Internet. However, this strategy failed because he lacked the necessary qualifications for the labour market, a deficiency the job coach could not address.

Immigrant participants in this study – particularly women – considered improvement of language skills fundamental to their progress in their activation processes. Because they had devoted years to care work and child-rearing, female immigrant participants had experienced repeated interruptions in their studies, resulting in poor Norwegian language skills that hindered them in obtaining paid employment or work placement. Therefore, these participants asked for Norwegian language courses before entering work placement, a request that usually was denied. The following extract from a conversation between a social worker and a female immigrant participant illustrates this situation:

> *Participant*: I asked for work placement in kindergarten. My children attend kindergarten; I asked there.
> *Social worker*: For work placement?
> *Participant*: Yes, but she said, 'I am sorry, but I cannot take persons who have not passed level 3, because of the new rules'.

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Social worker: [The new rules] from the municipality, yes. Maybe we haven't talked about this, but it is not worth contacting kindergartens because it is impossible to get a job there unless you have completed Norwegian language level 3. And, since you no longer have the right to free classes, I think it will be very difficult. But, of course, if you really want that, then you have to go to evening classes [. . .] you know, because you have been [in Norway] too long, so you have lost the right.
Participant: Yes, I went there [municipal adult training] and asked them and they said 'No, you cannot learn Norwegian for free'.
Social worker: You can learn more Norwegian, of course, but then you have to pay.
Participant: Yes, [. . .] but I am already paying kindergarten and activity school for the children, that is a lot . . . and I cannot afford that.

In addition to being unqualified for work placement in kindergarten because of her poor language skills, this participant was *neither* entitled any longer to the municipal free language courses for immigrants *nor* allowed to take a Norwegian language course before entering work placement. Instead, she was expected to improve her language skills in work placement, which itself was difficult to obtain because of her poor language skills. The participant's lack of Norwegian language skills and inability to improve them as part of the QP programme, represented a hindrance in her qualifying process.

In this woman's case, the problem of not being qualified for qualifying measures resulted from a combination of 1) municipal regulations regarding language skills requirements from certain employers (www.oslo.kommune.no), 2) statutory regulations on immigrants' participation in language classes (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2012), 3) statutory QP regulations that require employment-oriented activities for participants (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2011, 2012), and 4) the social workers' common interpretation of 'employment-oriented activities' as work placement. Thus, what at the individual level was experienced as a problem regarding insufficient language skills can be traced to a combination of contradictions on the institutional level. These contradictions affect the participant's activation process in a rather paradoxical way: in order to obtain Norwegians skills she had to obtain a work placement, while obtaining work placement required that she already master the Norwegian language. On the individual level, this situation represents a hindrance in this participant's activation process. On the institutional level, however, it seems to represent a barrier to the very policy goal of including disadvantaged service users in the labour market.

Another example demonstrates how failure to support service users with special follow-up according to their needs may hinder their attempts to enter the labour market. In this case, a service user who had comprehensive competency from auditing and property management had quit his longtime workplace a few years ago due to chronic health problems. He was now recovering and opted to reenter the labour market. However, because he still suffered from health problems, he would need special arrangements as an employee. He related his experiences as a QP participant and reflected upon how the social worker's inability to provide adequate support made him disillusioned about his prospects on the labour market:

I have done lots of job applications on my own. But now I have given it up . . . the social worker told me there are no other measures available, so I should try to find something on my own. I told her I have tried hard, but it is not easy to get in. But she said I should just keep trying.

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> From my point of view it is useless and a waste of time. I know that I have the competency that is requested, but with my shortcomings I will not get in position to acquire a job . . . I need help to get in that position, to be introduced to employers who are willing to take that risk. But, such support is clearly very difficult to obtain from NAV, they don't seem to possess the necessary competency . . . my caseworker, nice and friendly, but she was not able to do anything for me to approach the labour market . . .

In this case, the service user's health problems required specific individual measures in order for him to be able to enter the labour market: he needed somebody to promote and introduce him to employers for whom his competency was relevant. The service user expected to receive support in his effort to obtain paid employment; thus, for him, the programme or the social worker's failure to provide him with such support represents a hindrance in his process towards labour market inclusion. As reflected by this example, the lack of competency among QP social workers and/or their inability to provide what service users need seems to represent a barrier to the policy goal of moving service users into the labour market – a barrier that is institutionally embedded.

Discussion

Drawing upon a bottom-up perspective and a contextualising analytical strategy to examine the QP from the standpoint of the service users, this qualitative study underscores the complex relationship between activation policy and activation implementation and practice. I will now discuss how QP practice is shaped in a multidimensional web of relations across contexts and how this may affect the process participants go through to qualify for the labour market, as well as effects on outcomes and policy goals of the activation programme itself.

First, the results point to how the interrelation of institutional, organisational and relational contexts affects how QP participants are helped and what measures are offered. Whether and how the necessary qualifying measures are offered depends above all on the social workers' interpretations of statutory QP rules and regulations. The interpretation of rules and regulations in welfare services is in itself normally not considered a problem. However, in line with Brodkin's (2013) description of the problematic nature of broad framework laws, the QP regulations' lack of specific prescriptions regarding individually tailored work-oriented measures may represent a problem: it leaves it open to the local NAV office to interpret what kind of measures may be considered work-oriented and to the social workers to further interpret and decide in each individual case. Based on the data in this study, social workers tend to interpret *work-oriented measures* narrowly as training in work placement and job-search activities (writing applications, contacting employers). However, upskilling through courses may also fall within the category of work-oriented measures, depending on the content of the course.

Further, the measure a social worker selects in each individual case is related to the organisational context: for instance, the Labour and Welfare Administration (LWA) purchases activation measures, including courses and counselling, from private companies. These courses can be employment preparation courses (including CV-writing, basic computer skills, job search, work-life knowledge and communication skills) or courses for truck drivers or janitors. However, as pointed out by several participants, these courses rarely provide formal qualifications and therefore have limited value in the ordinary

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labour market. Nevertheless, social workers tend to refer participants to these pre-paid courses (Fossestøl *et al*., 2016b), as was the case with the participant who received weekly job counselling but no support for vocational training. This practice may relate to local NAV office policies, including not paying for any measures themselves or requiring that service users obtain a job guarantee before granting externally purchased courses.

Hence, when we consider the organisational context and its influence on social workers' interpretations and practice, the fact that social workers interpret individually tailored work-oriented measures to mean work placement or non-qualifying courses also connects to the context of the municipal economy: first of all, because local NAV offices are funded partly by the state and partly through municipal budgets, lack of municipal resources in the municipalities may leave these offices with few activation measures apart from the courses purchased by the LWA. As demonstrated in the examples in the findings section, due to economic retrenchment in the municipality, local NAV offices were unable to pay for a participant's qualifying courses and certification unless the participant presented a job guarantee. Second, local economic retrenchment also influenced the local labour market, making it difficult for job seekers, and unskilled QP participants in particular, to obtain either a job or a job guarantee.

Coupled with QP legislation that bars offering formal higher education, including high school, college, and university, as an activation measure (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2011, 2012), local NAV office policy of requiring a job guarantee in exchange for granting participants qualifying courses results in the following paradoxical scenario: in order to receive adequate measures the participants already need to have a job; however, they enter the programme to acquire a job, which they are not able to get without further qualification. Notwithstanding, these practices and policies at the local NAV offices contradict the law stating that service users should receive individually tailored measures, as well as the stated intention in QP policy papers of providing individually tailored programs as a means to obtain paid employment (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Inclusion, 2006–2007a). Consequently, the structural level context of the municipal economy, together with local NAV office policy and social workers' practice and interpretations of statutory laws, may create barriers in the service users' qualification processes that are institutionally embedded.

The study identified further contradictions between municipal and statutory legal contexts, specifically in regulations regarding language instruction for immigrants and those regarding immigrant employees. Statutory regulations restrict immigrants' entitlement to language instruction to a maximum of five years after arrival to Norway (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2012). As shown in the language skills example, this might be too short a period in which to acquire satisfactory language skills for the labour market, for example due to childbirth and caring obligations. According to municipal regulations, immigrants must document a certain standard level (1, 2 or 3) of Norwegian language skills to be considered for employment or for work placement (e.g. in kindergartens and nursing homes) (see e.g. Oslo Kommune, 2017, www.oslo.kommune.no). Coupled with the statutory QP regulation that prescribes work-oriented measures (Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2012), which is normally interpreted by social workers as work-placement and which excludes full-time language courses, the service users' problem may be traced back to this conflict between how QP is framed on the institutional level and the municipal regulations: in order to learn Norwegian, service users have to obtain work placement; however, it is difficult to obtain

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work placement without language skills. These types of work placement, which immigrant female participants in particular seem to prefer, are unavailable without the required language tests. Hence, barriers are created by the contradictions between structural and institutional contexts, and these barriers may inhibit opportunities for female immigrant participants, in particular, to improve their language skills, thereby impeding their labour market prospects.

The context of the labour market, with its demand and supply sides and employers' preferences for high-performing, qualified labour, was also identified as a significant factor governing local activation practice and which, in combination with regulations and municipal finances, may represent a barrier in participants' qualification process. Based on the experiences of the participants in this study, there seems to be little demand for unskilled, low-performing labour, and employers may be more prone to accept these persons for work placement than to hire them under ordinary conditions. In combination with the institutional discourses in the local NAV offices regarding the importance of work placement as a means of labour market inclusion, employers' practice of offering work placement without hiring may represent an institutionally, or rather structurally, embedded barrier to labour market inclusion.

In regard to social workers, the study also demonstrated how various contextual factors, such as contradicting rules and regulations, local policy practice, municipal finances, and local labour markets, limited their ability to respond to the participants' needs. Although QP social workers in principle have the power to grant a wide range of measures, in these cases, they seemed to have a limited ability to meet participants' needs. According to Gubrium *et al*. (2014: 34), the extent to which QP participants are granted individualised measures strongly depends on local NAV office personnel and municipal resources. Following up on Hupe and Hill (2007) regarding how social workers are held accountable for their actions in a multidimensional web of relations within the institutional and organisational contexts, the failure of QP social workers to adequately respond to the needs of participants may relate to the fact that they are stuck between various contexts (e.g. different sets of laws and regulations, organisational policy, and economy). They seem to manoeuvre the best they can in the intersection of these contexts to find solutions to service users' problems, and, as described by Lipsky (2010), to find coping strategies for their work pressure, exemplified by their narrow interpretation of work orientation and habitual referral to work placement.

Nevertheless, as pointed out by Brodkin (2013), broad framework laws that facilitate extensive use of discretion at the local authority level may result in service users not obtaining welfare services to which they are legally entitled. The findings in this study indicate that social workers implemented QP according to local policy definitions and available resources. Notwithstanding, based on their discretionary practice, social workers are the ones who decide who gets what and when (Brodkin, 2013). Therefore, social workers themselves may also represent a barrier to service users' labour market inclusion. On the institutional level, through their informal but systematic practices (Brodkin, 2013), social workers may limit the intended scope of a programme that should be tailored to users' individual needs. Moreover, QP social workers' insufficient knowledge about local labour markets (Schafft and Spjelkavik, 2011; Malmberg-Heimonen *et al*., 2016) and their lack of resources to establish collaboration with employers may impede service users' efforts to obtain paid employment. These challenges in local NAV offices may represent barriers to the realisation of formal policy intentions and goals.

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Conclusion

This results of this study suggest that what QP participants experience 'from below' as problems and hindrances regarding individual expectations about labour market inclusion, which on the institutional level may represent barriers for the realisation of policy goals, may stem from contradictions on the institutional level. Such institutional barriers may in turn lead to prolonged activation trajectories: participants continue to lack relevant and necessary qualifications and may suffer from a lock-in effect precipitated by insufficient and inadequate measures and support (Fossestøl *et al.*, 2016b). Concurrently, they may produce demotivated, disillusioned participants (Hansen, 2018) with large gaps in their CVs, which in turn may result in participants being further removed from the labour market.

The study's results suggest that social workers' autonomy and discretion to facilitate individual measures for participants is overridden by organisational and institutional settings in the QP as well as economics and labour market demands. The results from this study align with previous research indicating that labour activation fails to deliver individualised and tailored services (Wright, 2013; Fossestøl *et al.*, 2016a, 2016b; Fuertes and Lindsay, 2016: 539–40). Hence, contradictions within and between the institutional and structural levels may undermine the good intentions of the HRD approach and, under these conditions, neither service users nor social workers may be able to fulfil activation policy goals.

To conclude, what looks promising in policy papers may be difficult to implement in everyday practice. Therefore, research in policy implementation should be conducted contextually from a bottom-up perspective to include service users' and frontline workers' interactions and experiences. However, research should also move beyond the frontline setting to consider the wider contexts in which policy implementation occurs. As exemplified in this study, this wider scope suggests that 'the problem' of unemployment and activation must be addressed not only at the individual level with HRD approaches but also at the institutional level.

An important implication of these findings is that the institutional framing of activation programmes may obstruct policy outcomes and lead to prolonged activation processes for participants. Despite this study's limited sample size and exploratory character, these findings may be of interest for practice, policymaking, and further research within the activation field both in and outside Norway.

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