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ARTICLE

Work First or Education First? Frontline Service Challenges of Providing Enabling Activation

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Activation policies, especially formal upskilling, can strengthen social inequality among long-term unemployed people. Also, receiving skill-enhancing activities may be at odds with the 'work first' principle. Drawing on interviews with frontline workers in the Norwegian employment and welfare service (NAV), this article analyses how frontline workers handle the challenging aspects arising from activation policies in providing enabling activities to claimants who need comprehensive support. The findings suggest that frontline workers face claimants who expect to embark on an education, and on the contrary, claimants who lack motivation or capability to do so. In both cases, frontline workers are challenged in terms of experiencing contradictory expectations from policies and users and in assessing future outcomes and suitability of the services. Education activities provided by the public employment agency (PES) involves multiple policy fields and require specific competency on the part of frontline workers.

Keywords: activation policies; employment assistance; enabling policies; frontline work; social investment

Introduction

Activation policies aim to move people off of benefits and into employment. The goal is two-fold: to include people in disadvantaged situations in society and to reduce long-term reliance on public welfare benefits (OECD, 2019). The measures for achieving this consist of both enabling and demanding elements (Eichhorst *et al.,* 2008). Enabling elements include supporting services and activities like follow-up of claimants, guidance, training and education. Demanding measures centres around tightening eligibility criteria, reducing benefit generosity and conditionality (ibid). Enabling measures, some of which are also known as social investment, have been primarily investigated at the national level (Hemerijck, 2013; Morel *et al.,* 2012) and supranational level (Ferrera, 2017). This article directs attention to the frontline workers who put policy into practice through service delivery of enabling activities (Lipsky, 1980). Succeeding with enabling activities depends on the service user's own will and wish for the activity (Larsen and Caswell, 2022). Work training activities require a considerable effort by the claimant and thus motivation is necessary (Gjersøe and Strand, 2023). This means that the frontline workers' role is important in matching claimants with a suitable activity. This task requires skills and knowledge of users' assistance needs to decide what service will suit an individual claimant (Heidenreich and Rice, 2016). However, frontline workers do not necessarily possess the specific training, extent of expertise or degree of autonomy as do professionals (van Berkel *et al.,* 2010).

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In addition, although enabling activities increase job chances or formal job qualifications and are widely considered the positive side of activation, these supporting services are often obligatory activities because benefit receipt is conditioned upon participation (Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). Hence, enabling and demanding elements of activation are intertwined (van Berkel and van der Aa, 2012). This implies that when providing enabling actitivities, frontline workers' tasks involve motivating or persuading the claimant (Grandia *et al.,* 2020; Nielsen and Monrad, 2023; Senghaas *et al.,* 2019). How the claimant's autonomy should be balanced against what frontline workers believe is the right thing to do, becomes a central issue (Molander and Torsvik, 2015). Much of the activation research focuses on conditionaliy, i.e., on the demanding aspects of activation (Dwyer *et al.,* 2020; Vilhena, 2021). The dilemmas in providing comprehensive and 'positive' measures to service users is a subject that has received less attention in the research literature (Caswell *et al.,* 2017, p. 182). On this background, the article investigates the following research question: *How do frontline workers handle the challenging aspects arising from activation policies in providing enabling activities to claimants who need comprehensive support?*

Policy, governance, organisation, & professional competency

Frontline workers' provision of enabling services occurs in a context that include four elements: state policies, governance, organisation and professional knowledge (Caswell *et al.,* 2017). During recent decades, *activation policies* have challenged national and broad employment policies by introducing tailored services promising a quicker employment result, i.e., a work-first orientation (Heidenreich and Rice, 2016). Activation policies are also 'individualised', reflecting a recognition that each service user has different needs and thus, requires enabling services tailored to them (Van Berkel and Valkenburg, 2007; Rice *et al.* 2018).

Policy implementation by frontline workers is increasingly regulated through different *governance* types, such as a mix between bureaucratic governance or network governance (Heidenreich and Rice, 2016; Nielsen and Andersen, 2024). The emphasis within the norms of traditional public bureaucracy is applying rules to obtain equal treatment and accurate decisions (Adler, 2003). Typical traits of network governance, also called New Public Governance (NPG), are stressing autonomy in the frontline services to stimulate new solutions to wicked problems, acknowledging the need for new types of responsiveness to complex needs such as interdependent collaborations to obtain high quality services (Osborne, 2006; van Gestel *et al.,* 2023). However, the mix of governance approaches may create a demanding work situation for frontline workers (van Gestel *et al.,* 2023).

The *organisation* of service delivery is important to secure citizens' access to services (Heidenreich and Rice, 2016). Not all need the same intensity of services, and some groups may be prioritised. Caseworker specialisation according to a specific target group serves to allocate staff resources (ibid). This means having caseworkers working specifically with a group such as young claimants. Further, differentiating procedures are necessary to tailor enabling services to fit each individual claimant (Van Berkel and Valkenburg, 2007). In addition, to cover various degrees of individual needs, enabling activities vary in their comprehensiveness (Greer *et al.*, 2017; Bonoli, 2012). Some types of activities are designed for efficient transfers to employment by 'removing obstacles to labour market participation' (Bonoli, 2012, p. 185), typically direct job training with little support or short-term employment-directed qualification courses. Supported work training in ordinary workplaces or in sheltered enterprises represent more comprehensive types of enabling activities (Gjersøe, 2021). However, the most comprehensive activities are those who provide the claimant with formal upskilling, such as completing upper secondary school, various vocational certifications, and higher education, intended to provide 'a second chance to people who were not able to profit from the training system or whose skills have become obsolete' (Bonoli, 2012, p. 185). Hence, upskilling activities is the 'vanguard of the social investment approach' (Deeming and Smyth, 2015, p. 301).

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Frontline workers need flexibility to select suitable services as well as knowledge about the 'wide range of life problems and associated service solutions' (Heidenreich and Rice, 2016, p. 41). Should the claimant be granted an activity, or can the person obtain employment with less resource-demanding measures? This entails questioning the necessity for enabling services becomes important to consider in each case. This concern is in line with the so-called 'lock-in' effect, meaning that a there can be a worse outcome if the claimant suspends their normal job search efforts to undergo activation activities (Card *et al.,* 2018).

The Norwegian context

A hallmark of Norway's welfare state is the combination of social protection and social investment (Allmendinger and Leibfried, 2003; Böheim and Leoni, 2018). This includes employment assistance and upskilling for those claiming social security benefits. The Norwegian Employment and Welfare Service (NAV) is organised as one-stop shops (Askim *et al.,* 2011). NAV offices provide benefit recipients with personal follow-up to assess their ability to participate in the labour market.

NAV addresses a broad range of service users' issues in addition to unemployment, including, for example, health problems combined with inadequate job qualifications. People with impaired working capability caused by a health problem are eligible for Work Assessment Allowance (WAA) (*arbeidsavklaringspenger*) (*The National Insurance Act* § 11-5) and to more comprehensive support activities than service users who are not deemed with reduced capability. WAA receipt is also conditioned on participating in some form of activity to clarify the recipients' work capability.

The assessment and follow-up of WAA recipients include considering if a benefit recipient can do 'any work', i.e. irrespective of whether the work is status-maintaining and whether activities are considered 'necessary' and 'suitable' (Circular to the *National Insurance Act* Chapter 11 - Work Assessment Allowance; *NAV Act* § 14a). At the national level, in annual formal governance letters, NAV authorities have declared 'transition to work' to be a central goal and WAA recipients are expected to be engaged in activities toward that aim. These governance signals and guiding principles are linked to a decline in the granting of upskilling activities provided to WAA claimants over the past decade (Nicolaisen and Kann, 2019). Thus, although WAA recipients can participate in more comprehensive activities compared to the unemployed (with no reduction in work capability), the policies aim to create an efficient track to employment (Mandal *et al.,* 2015).

Over time, young benefit recipients have become a strongly prioritised user group in NAV concerning the comprehensiveness of support (Strand and Svalund, 2021). The aim of the prioritisation is to counteract the social risks facing young people in Norway who are neither employed nor in school. Many of them have not completed upper secondary school and struggle with mental health problems (OECD, 2018). Thus, they have trouble entering the labour market and obtaining a stable job. One of the organisational measures to target services to young claimants is dedicated 'youth teams' where NAV advisors specialise on providing close follow-up to young people and are the given the flexibility to provide a broad range of activities irrespective of benefit receipt (Strand, *et al.,* 2015). In 2017, 'transition to education' was posed as a goal in the formal directives concerning young services users, in which encouraged the frontline offices to be more generous with providing education to young people as part of the follow-up (Nicolaisen and Kann, 2019).

Methods and research design

This article reports on qualitative interview data from two studies. The findings from the two studies were combined because they investigated frontline workers' assessments concerning provision of qualifying and supporting activities for claimants with large support needs. Interviews

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provide insights into the views and experiences of frontline workers (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The first study investigated NAV advisors reasoning when conducting assessments and making activity plans for WAA claimants (Gjersøe, 2017). The informants were so-called 'general advisors', which means that they provided support to all types of WAA recipients, i.e., people between eighteen and sixty-seven years old and with various health barriers causing a reduction in working capability. Twenty-five general advisors were interviewed between late 2012 and early 2013, in two NAV offices. The interviews were conducted by the first author, and lasted for about sixty to ninety minutes each, taking place at the NAV offices. The study was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (*SIKT*, former Norwegian Centre for Research Data (*NSD*)). Even though the study dates some years back, the guiding rules and principles for WAA advisors have remained the same and still applies to the NAV offices (Circular to the *National Insurance Act* Chapter 11 - Work Assessment Allowance; *NAV Act* § 14a).

The second study was conducted in 2017–18 and examined NAV advisors' practices regarding education measures in a context of policy signalling more upskilling for a prioritised user group (Nicolaisen and Kann, 2019). The study includes interviews at four NAV-offices with a total of fifteen advisors responsible for supporting young welfare claimants with complex problems between the ages of eighteen and thirty, so-called 'youth advisors'. Most of the young claimants received WAA. The interviews were conducted by the second author and took place at the NAV offices. The interviews lasted for about sixty minutes. The study was approved by the Directorate for Welfare and Employment Services (NAV).

In both studies, all informants gave informed consent to participate. As civil servants in public agencies, advisors may feel pressure to participate in research due to a sense of obligation. In both studies we therefore stressed the voluntariness to participate. The interviews brought up reflections on their reasoning and practising that took place in service delivery, which are topics that can represent sensitive topics that the informants might think could potentially affect their professional standing or the office's reputation. Therefore, we assured maintaining confidentiality in storing and reporting the findings.

The NAV offices in both studies ranged from large to small and from urban to rural; this was purposeful, to obtain breadth of data. All interviews were employed by semi-structured question guides. Even though the questions were not identical across the two studies, both mapped out how advisors make assessments in offering enabling activities. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded for analyses.

Although the data were collected at different periods, they are not compared across time, but rather combined to illuminate a broader range of aspects associated with providing enabling measures than one of the data sets would provide alone. The combination of studies is beneficial to highlight the impact of mixed policies and governance signals that is highly evident in frontline employment services to date (Larsen and Caswell, 2022; Fossestøl *et al.*, 2015).

The two data sets were re-analysed for the purpose of this article. The authors familiarised with the other study findings, and through critically examining and discussing findings in each study, we identified similarities and differences in the frontline workers' reasoning when asked questions about how they assessed and provided education. For instance, while the first study included codes related to restricting access to employment measures, the second study had codes centring around the challenges of usage of education. We grouped codes across the materials into larger themes, such as how the frontline workers experienced contradictory policy signals, and what were their strategies to handle tensions and dilemmas in providing support.

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Findings

Experiencing contradictory expectations from policies and users

All of the informants believed NAV's emphasis was on efficient routes to work, interpreted by many as offering less comprehensive assistance, as one of the general advisors stated: 'Our goal is the fastest way to work.' By saying 'our', the advisor clearly expressed a commitment to the policies. As the advisors specialising in serving young adults ('youth advisors') also received policy signals that upskilling for young claimants should be increasingly provided, they experienced a dilemma between the different signals. They stressed that the rules pertaining to the benefit system and the assessment guidelines hampered a more 'education friendly' attitude. As one youth advisor explained:

> Education is important, but we must always think about work first. It is a dilemma for us who work with work assessment allowance recipients because we get signals that education is very important. (Youth advisor 5)

As the education signals related to only young claimants, i.e., a branch of WAA recipients, the youth advisors received mixed policy signals. Some thought that the general guidelines and the benefit rules overruled the specific signals towards young people. They struggled to balance these mixed considerations in their day-to-day work. They emphasised the work first principle that was integrated in legal rules pertaining to WAA and NAVs general guidelines on work capability assessments.

The general advisors experienced a similar dilemma, however the signals of more comprehensive education requests, came from the claimants, as one put it:

> There are many activities that the users ask for that we do not consider appropriate. It is often education ... and often users are not familiar with the sheltered enterprises. So then it is often education they come up with, that is my impression. So it's often there I feel the biggest challenge really lies. In relation to education requests. (General advisor 4)

The quote illustrates the challenges and dilemmas that faced the general advisors when users' requests for assistance did not align with the principles and goals of the organisation. They were caught between respecting the users' wishes for further education and adhering to the agency's focus on efficiently transitioning claimants into the workforce or other considered suitable activities. They argued that claimants' desires for education reflected a lack of knowledge about NAV's extensive range of activities. These activities include workplace training, either in sheltered environments or in the ordinary labour market, and vocational training procured by NAV. These initiatives were considered less resource-intensive and were viewed by the advisors as being more efficient. Hence, the general advisors wanted to draw the users' attention towards NAV's own activities.

Some of the general advisors indicated they had experienced situations where approving an education request had resulted in what they perceived retrospectively as a waste of resources. On the other hand, denying such requests could lead to protracted disagreements, causing strain on the relationship with the user and potentially hindering progress. The following quote highlights the dilemma of choosing between potentially unproductive education paths and the resultant friction in relation to the users if such requests are denied:

> NAV's main goal is not to give people higher education. Then there are dilemmas whether to follow the user's wishes when you know that it may not be the smartest thing. Or, if you are going to say clearly no, no it is not possible, you cannot have a mysterious education. Should you say no to it and the user will spend the next half year in a way to fight with beak and claws

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> against NAV because the person thinks himself badly treated and this is the only thing I can do and so further. I've done both. I have both approved an education that I may think is completely . . . which I now know in retrospect that was completely wasted. And I have argued with the user, not argued but in a way had a disagreement that led to us not getting anywhere else either, about as long as that education would last. Yep, that's a dilemma too. (General advisor 6)

The dilemma quoted above is about rejecting the claimant's preferences because this will have further consequences of not leading to work and only to prolonged benefit receipt. The advisor was not simply rejecting the claimant's preferences but also considering what was in the best interest of the claimant. A common view among the general advisors was seeing themselves as experienced and knowledgeable about the choices of activities. Hence, their rejections were not just about following the rules but also about using their knowledge. Hence, the quote reflects the complexities and dilemmas the general advisors faced in honouring the user's wishes for education (which they may see as vital for their future) and the advisors' assessments of what was practically realistic and beneficial.

The burden of proof in finding the right course of action

When determining whether to approve education as an activity for claimants, all the advisors considered economic considerations, in particular the budget of their own NAV office. The advisors felt responsible for choosing an activity that was not too lengthy, not too expensive, and not unnecessary for the purpose of clarifying the work capability and getting into work.

When faced with the claimants' education requests, some of the general advisors expressed a feeling of accountability for their employer, NAV. For instance, they stressed that the claimants' wishes for education often implied a particular vocational direction that was narrow, potentially limiting their job prospects. In addition, claimants often could provide no persuasive reason for their chosen area of study. There were also many other considerations regarding whether a given activity would benefit the claimants' employability. In particular, the general advisors expressed uncertainties when it came to assessing the outcome of granting education:

> Some are very motivated for one thing, but not for anything else. They have formed an image of what they must do to get to work. Without being able to fully document that it is the right thing to do. (General advisor 17)

Education is a long-term social investment that can but is not guaranteed to lead to employment. Both general advisors and youth advisors saw education as potentially fostering inactivity rather than activity, and hence, as possibly counter-productive to the goal of entering the labour market. To reduce uncertainty about job prospects, a common strategy sought to identify low-risk educational pursuits. One youth advisor explained this as follows:

> I am very concerned that there is a job afterwards when I grant an education. It does not have to be a concrete job, but that the labor market is there to be able to receive such a type of education. Preschool teacher or something like that will be important to consider then. (Youth advisor 3)

When struggling to motivate the claimants for NAV's own activities, like supported employment or training in sheltered enterprises, some of the general advisors responded by expecting the claimants to convince them that receiving education was a suitable activity. One advisor explained:

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> Ideally, we should set a goal first and then choose an activity. But it is often the case that the user (claimant) already has an activity for which he or she is very motivated. This is often education. We have developed some questions for users about career choice, because it should be in place when they think about education. They should formulate it themselves; what is the vocational goal? what is the purpose of the education? (General advisor 9)

This quote highlights the dilemmas and challenges the advisors faced when claimants came with career or business ideas that the agency considers unrealistic or unviable. When claimants came with education as a pre-defined activity in mind, some responded by developing questions aimed at helping users consider their career choices before pursuing education. Another advisor said:

> We often ask that they conduct market research if it is a question of education. That they must investigate a bit like that, yes, such a mini market survey. (Generalist advisor 11)

A strategy was to encourage claimants to think critically about their vocational goals and the purpose of their education, helping to align their motivations with clear, defined outcomes. In this way, the advisors also attempted to respect the claimants' autonomy, but also to turn the burden of proof away from themselves. Some advisors would also suggest that claimants get an expert opinion as a form of 'evidence' to support a decision to invest in their education:

> There is not much disagreement with me, but we have had a lot of it here in the house. For instance, that someone wants to become a rose therapist or similar, which we think is not so easy to make a living from – start your own rose therapist clinic. I have had some who have had ideas about starting a business that I have not thought have been completely realistic, but then I have asked them to contact the local business council and get help to make a business plan and ask them to consider whether this is something. And it has always resolved itself in that they have realised that this does not hold up. (General advisor 14)

By asking claimants to collect evidence and outsider opinions, the advisors seemed to attempt to create an atmosphere of neutrality and avoid giving users a feeling of being judged or treated arbitrarily, that also could avert arguments and uncomfortable consultations with the users. By not directly opposing the claimants' ideas, they subtly guided them towards a rather predetermined process that they believed would lead the user to the same conclusion that the advisor had already reached.

Challenges arising from lengthy processes

Despite pressures to emphasise work-oriented activities, the youth advisors also acknowledged the young claimants' educational needs and tried to find ways to implement the prioritising of educational activities. Many were concerned about the shift towards more formal certification requirements in the labour market that especially affected young people with low formal qualifications. As one explained:

> If you are going to have a stable job as a care worker, then you must have a certificate of completed apprenticeship. In the past, you could get a job without it. And the same applies to those who want to work in a kindergarten, or as school assistant. They (young claimants, authors comment) must have a craft certificate as a childcare and youth worker if they are to get a permanent job. (Youth advisor 6)

Most of the youth advisors saw the qualification requirements as real challenges for young claimants. This situation also raised questions about access to these training and education

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opportunities, and how to best support individuals in obtaining these necessary qualifications. The young claimants were diverse and represented a wide range of challenges and needs. Hence, a central concern for the youth advisors were who of their young claimants were fit for an education. The youngest ones were eighteen years old. The advisors often perceived these youngest claimants as less motivated and less able to embark on an education than claimants who were over twenty five. To motivate the youngest was hard because of their experiences with years of low performance in school and consequent low academic self-esteem. If they had any idea of what they wanted, they typically said, 'I want to work', according to the advisors. Among all available activities, work training corresponded best to this preference. Many of the young claimants were also undergoing medical evaluations to determine if their problems were related to impaired health. This scenario presented a dilemma for many of the advisors: balancing the immediate goal of finding employment for these individuals with the need for them to address their health issues first. One advisor explained:

> Many of the young people are mentally ill. They may start on medication when they are eighteen to nineteen years old. It may take some time to find the right medication and treatment. We also have lots of eighteen- to nineteen-year-olds who have intoxicated themselves to numb problems and who spend a long time understanding that they have to go through a treatment. There is a big difference between the youngest and when they are in their mid-twenties. Then they have often become healthier and have been in and out of bad jobs and realise that they need education. (Youth advisor 10)

This quote highlights the challenges the youth advisors faced when assisting young people, particularly those dealing with mental health issues or substance abuse. There were complexities of navigating mental health treatment, and the advisors noted that finding the right medication and treatment could be a lengthy process. Some advisors implied that pushing for immediate employment might not be the most beneficial course of action for young claimants in the long run. The advisors attributed this shift in attitude to better health due to medical treatment, general maturing and their intervening job experiences in a labour market where those with low education are often relegated to low-wage positions with poor working conditions. Mental illness was common among the members of youngest and in many cases, it so overwhelmed them that they had been unable to progress through upper-secondary school. They observed that by their mid-twenties, many of the young people have had experiences with unstable jobs and have realised the value of education. The challenge for the youth advisors was to support these young individuals through their personal struggles, while also guiding them towards long-term employment stability, often through the path of education. This required a nuanced understanding of each individual's circumstances and a flexible approach to employment support.

Experiencing insufficient knowledge to serve young people

Some of the youth advisors pointed to the varied needs of the claimants and the complexity of the educational system as challenging their competency to serve their young claimants well. The advisors found providing individualised advice about education especially difficult. Competency among the advisors varied with respect to the educational system and helping claimants who had yet to complete upper secondary education school. One advisor described some of the challenges:

> I feel that I know what courses are in the various schools nearby. The problem is more about individual adaptation and being able to help those who are on the verge of dropping out. Concerning refugees, there are fifteen- to sixteen-year-olds who receive Norwegian language training three to four days a week, and then you should apply further in upper secondary school, perhaps the following year, with semi-good Norwegian. What opportunities are there

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> then for the person to start upper secondary school? Or do they then have to spend another year learning Norwegian before they can start upper secondary school? Such things. (Youth advisor 12)

The system of upper secondary education is as complex as are for possibilities making adaptations on an individual basis for young people with special needs. Some of the youth advisors reported feeling insufficiently competent to help young claimants with such issues and noted that few guidelines exist about how to assess the need for education.

> I think it is very difficult to navigate all the opportunities that exist today in the form of craft certificates and education because it is so much different. There are so many choices today. So, I think we should have a little better knowledge about that. I think maybe we should have a reference work if nothing else, which we can browse in. (Youth advisor 5)

This quote reveals the challenges that the advisors faced in navigating the vast array of educational opportunities available. The advisors acknowledged the difficulty in keeping abreast of all the different options. Many reported, depending largely on websites geared towards helping young people navigate the education system, and said they wished for clearer guidance in how to help claimants understand their educational options. Some noted that getting an overview of all NAV's rules and systems was hard and that trying to learn about the education system on top of that was burdensome.

Discussion

The general advisors in this study showed more concern to control access to education than to provide it – a practice that can be linked to the policies and rules emphasising efficient support activities to obtain employment results. Hence, the general advisors complied with the signals and did not deviate from the policies as street-level bureaucrats tend to do (Lipsky, 1980). The policy intention is likely to ensure that provision of any educational activity align with market demand, and therefore increase claimants' chances of employment. Therefore, the general advisors' compliance with policies can be regarded a strategy of 'realism' (Nielsen and Monrad, 2023). However, their judgements of claimants' education wishes were not just in line with the policies, it was also based on what they believed would promote employability, based on their own experienced knowledge. In advising and controlling the access to enabling activities, they exerted an expert status vis á vis the claimant. A pitfall is of course that their knowledge is incomplete or not up to date, which can lead to misguided advice, potentially limiting users' opportunities to make well-informed decisions about their education and career paths.

While the intention behind requesting evidence from the claimants was to help them make informed decisions, such practice also subtly directs claimants towards a predefined process that the agency deems best. This is a common strategy (Grandia *et al.,* 2020; Nielsen and Monrad, 2023), that suggests a paternalistic approach (Molander and Torsvik, 2015). This way of exercising discretion by frontline workers is often viewed in a less positive way, as using their discretion mainly to administrator legislation, which leaves some leeway for them to judge the necessity and suitability of services (Soss *et al*., 2011, p. 233).

When services are combined with conditionality, such as in the PES/NAV, it implies that claimants do not primarily apply for the activities per se, but for the benefits. How claimants react to suggestions for activities is therefore fused with uncertainty compared to other public services where a citizen has asked for a particular service. If goals and measures of the agency activities are not shared by the claimant, it can negatively affect the employment outcomes (Ravn and Bredgaard, 2021).

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Targeting enabling activities is a means for reaching a group whose needs are not being met by the broad services (Andersson, 2018). The youth specialists were serving a target group – in this instance, teenagers and young adults – and they did not experience the strong user demand for education as did the general advisors. The youth advisors often struggled to offer the young claimants' educational opportunities that fit their circumstances. For all the advisors, there was a gap in policy expectations and the claimants' situation. However, while the general advisors effectively lowered the claimants' expectations, the youth advisors had challenges when the young were not in a situation that made them ready to participate in education. They experienced a lack of opportunity to execute the policy signals of granting more education to young people with low formal skills. Hence, when policies of prioritising a certain activity for a certain group does not fit the target group, it can create a feeling among frontline workers of failure of putting policy into practice.

A key characteristic of NPG is relying on pedagogical measures instead of hierarchical steering (Andreassen and Fossestøl, 2014). The policy signals of prioritising education for young people can be seen as an NPG signal. The prioritisation signals did not provide the frontline workers with concrete instructions on how to provide education. Provision of these activities can be hampered if frontline workers struggle to 'sell it' to the users. The youth advisors were less paternalistic towards their claimants, which also aligns with NPG oriented signals of emphasising cooperation with stakeholders, including claimants.

The youth advisors expressed concerns about their competency to provide education activities. Caseworker specialisation is described in the literature as an organisational means to increase knowledge about a user group's needs (Gjersøe, 2021; Heidenreich and Rice, 2016). The youth advisors in this study had deep insights into the claimants' situations and challenges. However, the specialisation and autonomy to encourage and find ways to granting suitable education activities for the young proved difficult. Embarking on education is a highly individual activity that requires motivation and readiness. The advisors indicated the difficulty to obtain knowledge about an external system such as the educational system compared to navigating PES/NAV's own activities. This resonates with previous research in the Norwegian context, suggesting that NAV advisors have difficulties to engage in inter-professional exchange due to absence of boundary spanners between institutions (Bakken and van der Wel, 2023).

However, the general advisors experienced less pressure regarding competency about education. The policy signal of prioritising more efficient employment outcomes made them able to deflect any lack of knowledge by asking claimants to provide them with 'evidence' that a specific education they wanted would likely lead to employment.

Conclusion

Providing enabling activities to long-term unemployed requires frontline workers in the PES to be sensitive to how employment can be achieved by people in disadvantaged positions. As education is a long-term activity that does not lead to guaranteed employment, it stands out to be a less secure investment than in-house or procured activities provided by PES. Granting such traditional PES activities require less risk-taking by frontline workers compared to approving an education activity. Frontline workers' responsibility to be accountable for their decisions means that education activities place a heavy responsibility to permit users to such activities. Not least, providing education rests on autonomous judgement on behalf of the frontline worker *and* the claimant.

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