



AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK



LISES

Local Innovation in Social and Employment Services

1. The Context

The Danish welfare state is often internationally portrayed as a model country as it stands out as a way to balance competitiveness and social security. However, there are several challenges for maintaining the economic sustainability in such a type of welfare state configuration and one of the most important of these is to have a high proportion of the population in employment. This is not least due to demographic changes with a higher proportion of the population being outside the labour force because of ageing. Another challenge is due to international competition making it increasingly more difficult to redistribute economic resources between groups in- and outside the labour market through higher taxation. The strongest potential for higher labour market participation is to enhance employment for the most vulnerable groups in society. This has been recognised as a main political challenge in most countries in the developed world. The political attention has been accentuated because of the limited success so far to increase employment for this group. Despite various efforts such as applying both enabling and disciplining elements in the policies implemented, the success has been limited. Around 20-25% of the population of working age (depending on economic conjunctures) have been outside the labour market for the last decades in the North European countries (Bredgaard et al. 2014). The introduction of active welfare state reforms, with social services, welfare-to-work and policies regulating the interface of previously separated programs (in the Danish terms labour market policy and social policy) has further given rise to new challenges when it comes to bringing the most vulnerable clients into employment. There seems to be an increasing distance between compulsory requirements in policies and the ability/motivation for the most vulnerable groups to live up to these. The process of moving from activation into regular employment has turned out to be more than difficult. These challenges call for new knowledge and new partnerships when developing practice.

2. Research Question

The objective of this project, in the light of the current situation, is to develop new innovative employment services in the Danish municipalities. The point of departure is that such new innovative models must acknowledge both political and organisational issues as well as how these shape citizens' behaviour and attitudes. Or to phrase this differently: it may not only be a question of what services and benefits you get as a citizen (and how this impact the success of policies), but also how you get it. An important aim of the project is therefore to invent new models for including the client's perspective in ways that both can improve the quality of the cooperation between the clients and professionals in jobcentres or benefit offices and lead to more effective services in terms of both administrative costs and long-term employment for clients. Hence, the project's point of departure is that the client perspective is of immense importance for policy and its possible success.

The overall research question and ambition with the project is:

How are employment services delivered to vulnerable clients in Danish municipalities and what is the role of and implications for the client in this process? How can this evidence be used to further develop models for service delivery and client participation in order to promote labour market participation whenever possible?

In relation to the research question, five pre-assumptions or hypotheses for more effective and innovative services have been formulated:

- 1) Combining a political and organizational readiness to adapt to overall changing policies and financial conditions and internal firm strategies for the content and qualities of employment services holds a positive potential for improving the results of the implementation of employment services
- 2) Integrated services seem to improve both the effectiveness and efficiency of employment services, (e.g. by continuous care, information and knowledge sharing between professionals, avoidance of duplication and gaps in the delivery, reducing waiting times and thereby better and quicker identification of the needs and of the adequate responses, reduction of service costs by limiting multiple interlocutors and repeated interventions, etc.).
- 3) The institutional interaction (such as meetings and conversations) between professionals and clients is crucial for the effectiveness of services, why factors like institutional and organisational settings, knowledge of the dilemmas and complexities of institutional interactions, innovative responses to identify client needs and qualifications and skills of front-line workers, are important in order to deliver better outcomes.
- 4) The role of the client and the possibility for actual client participation is essential to achieve the goals of active welfare policies and employment services. Personalised services with elements of empowerment seem to have a positive impact on labour market participation.
- 5) Employment services for vulnerable groups entail employment (and employer) related services. The precondition for higher labour market participation is matching labour market demands, employer expectations and employer engagement in services.

3. Research Method

This is not only a research project but a partnership based project between the Association of Municipalities (KL), Herning Municipality, Holstebro Municipality and a research team from Aalborg University (and other municipalities to be included during the project period). Hence, throughout the project there will be close collaboration between the research team and a number of dedicated professionals and managers in the two municipalities. The project has a two phase structure starting with a two year long analytical phase followed by a two year long innovative phase. This structure enables the project to provide state of the art research results, linking them to an evidence-based practice and development. It is important to note, that this way of developing an evidence-based practice differs significantly from the current top-down way of disseminating evidence-based knowledge to social workers. This project argues that a true evidence-based practice hinges on the feedback and involvement of the frontline professionals. Hence, we stress the need for a more inclusive and pluralistic evidence-strategy where knowledge is exchanged between practice and research rather than being handed over from researcher to the frontline professionals.

Methodologically the project encompasses a variety of different social science approaches to the development of new research based knowledge across the traditional quantitative/qualitative divide.

Linking these scientific methodologies by drawing on recent developments in mixed methods design (Greene 2007, Frederiksen 2015) will enable us to address the research question. Also drawing on new approaches on cooperative knowledge production (CKP) (Hüttermann & Sommerfeld 2008) and collaborative innovation (CI) (Sørensen & Torfing 2011) we will use the knowledge generated through research to develop welfare solutions for vulnerable clients to promote labour market participation whenever possible. The starting point is to initiate such type of innovative changes in Holstebro and Herning municipalities, further expanding this to four other selected municipalities and finally (with assistance from the Association of Municipalities (KL)) disseminating these experiences with innovative changes of services to other municipalities.

Empirically this project furthermore contains both intra- and international comparative case studies. The intranational cases studies will be conducted in six strategically selected municipalities (including the participating municipalities). The initial data collection will focus on intensive comparative case studies in the municipalities of Herning and Holstebro. In the second wave of data collection, four new strategically chosen municipalities will be included.

The international comparative approach is a collaboration between LISES and the Norwegian INNOWEL project (Front Line Innovations in the Welfare Services). The collaboration will be implemented as an extensive comparison of different aspects of practice and user involvement in the front line of the welfare services in Norway and Denmark.

4. Work Plan

The research in the analytical phase and the innovative phase are structured around the following four work packages:

Work package 1: Delivering active welfare.

This work package will link a focus on active welfare state reforms (represented by employment and social policy reforms) and governance with a focus on face-to-face delivery of active welfare policy. We focus on recent welfare state reforms linking them to the setting where the active welfare is delivered: the local municipal organisations (primarily jobcentres and benefit offices). We focus on how organisational key factors influence street-level bureaucracies' interactions with vulnerable clients. The starting point of this analysis will be desk research outlining the history and present framing of employment policies (policy, organisational and financial reforms) and services. There will furthermore be conducted interviews with strategically chosen managers and middle managers in the participating municipalities.

Work package 2: Face-to-face welfare.

This project will take a micro-sociological approach to analysing the assessment and participation of clients at the frontline of active welfare organizations. This will be done by using ethnographic methods to analyse face-to-face interactions in organizations with an institutional interaction perspective. The analytical focus will be on the street level workers and the worker-client interactions. Thus the focus in this work package will be on the 'how' of service delivery within the active welfare policy.

Work package 3: Experiencing welfare.

This project will combine qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse the experiences of vulnerable clients as well as the consequences of active welfare reforms on important client centred outcomes. The literature on street-level practices has highlighted the active role of professionals in forming actual social policy. We will combine this approach with a focus on the active role of clients in making policy work. The activities of clients are important in ensuring effective implementation of active labour market policies and through qualitative interviews, we will examine how clients experience social policy, the way policy is delivered and how they participate in and modify policy delivery. This work package includes a PhD project focusing on the quantitative sequence analyses of client trajectories before and after policy reform. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data will allow us to examine both the outcomes of social policy and the mechanisms through which these outcomes are produced.

Work package 4: Promoting evidence-based practice and development.

This work package is closely linked to the other work packages, but with a strong focus on interaction between research and researchers on the one side and the practical reality of the municipal organisations including frontline practitioners and managers on the other. Through this, we wish to ensure that knowledge generated through research is challenged, utilised and firmly anchored in the municipal organisations. It is part of the exit strategy of the project to highlight this as a possibility for the participants of the project to take ownership of the models developed throughout the project period. Drawing on the idea of CKP and CI (see above) this work package will contribute to the four different phases in the innovative process: cooperatively developing ideas, selecting ideas, implementing ideas and dissemination of innovative solutions. This work package will use and further develop the initial hypotheses of the project (see above). The activities in this work package are cooperative between research and practice.

5. Novelty of the project

The project is original and novel in its approach of combining often separated research traditions by focusing on both policy, governance, organizational issues in relation to frontline-practices and the experiences and behaviour of the clients. This project is not the first to address this internationally recognized problem of limited labour market participation for vulnerable unemployed. However, contrary to other projects addressing the problem, this project differ by not only focusing on the effects of single measures/instruments, but also by focusing on the dilemmas and trade-offs when services are to be designed and delivered. Moreover, the project includes an explicit client perspective often absent in other studies. Hence, the study is based upon the assumption that the role of the client and the possibility for actual client participation is essential to achieve the goals of increasing labour market participation. This is also the argument for looking more closely at the interaction (such as meetings and conversations) between professionals and clients. Combining a policy perspective with an institutional perspective and a client perspective has never been done in Danish research of active welfare. The combination of these perspectives holds a positive potential for developing knowledge that can improve the results of the implementation of employment services for vulnerable unemployed.

Finally it is ground breaking that these perspectives are not only used to describe dilemmas and trade-offs in employment services (in the municipal job centres), but also include a collaborative ambition (between research and practice) of innovating new and more effective practices to increase labour market participation for the most vulnerable groups. As stated earlier, this collaborative ambition is grounded in a critique of the typical one-sided and hierarchical relation between research and practice, which permeates the current discourse of evidence-based knowledge. Instead, this project wish to further a collaborative production of evidence-based knowledge where the (often tacit) knowledge and experiences of social workers are not ignored or deemed irrelevant.

About LISES

Duration of the project:

1/3/16 – 28/2/2020 (4 years)

Funding by project partners:

Innovation Fund Denmark: 8.311.699 DKR

Aalborg University: 1.971.917 DKR

Holstebro Municipality: 338.307 DKR

Herning Municipality: 290.892 DKR

The association of Danish Municipalities (KL): 187.500 DKR.

Total budget:

11.100.315 DKR

Research Unit:

LISES is a joint research project between Center for Employment Research (CARMA) and Center for Social Work in the Frontline of Employment Policy (SAB).

The Research Unit consists of:

Professor Flemming Larsen, Department of Political Science, Aalborg University (Project Manager)

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Advisory Board:

To ensure international perspectives and inspiration the research unit is supported by an international advisory board with some of the most prominent researchers in the field from the US, the Netherlands and the UK:

The Advisory Board consists of:

Associate Professor Evelyn Brodtkin, School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago

Associate Professor Rik van Berkel, School of Governance, Utrecht University

Senior Lecturer Sharon Wright, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow

Professor Michael Lipsky, Georgetown Public Policy Institute, Georgetown University.