

## **“Promises and practices of personalisation: Discursive trajectories in Norway’s new work approach”.**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The language of labour activation has moved to a recent emphasis on personalisation. The EU showcases Norway as a leader in this direction (Duffy, 2010). Norway’s new work approach for social assistance (SA) system users introduced in the past half-decade has been touted by the EU and international observers, such as UK’s Institute of Policy Research, as a potentially successful approach to the alleviation of social exclusion. Such praise emphasises the approach’s encouragement of “autonomy” and “active citizenship” as well as the provision of “intensive personal support” for those people whose goal it is to move into the labour market (Duffy, 2010; 15; Prins, 2009). The new work approach, built on a broad political consensus, was described as involving a new national activation programme and a comprehensive reorganization of state and municipal agencies that were intended to ensure that resources were prioritized for helping the most marginal groups among the unemployed, namely SA users (White Paper nr. 9, 2006-2007).

Tailored, individualised or personalised welfare services represent a move away from a one-size-fits-all approach and follow an emphasis from the European Employment Strategy (EES) on the need for more closely tailored activation measures along with the use of “personalised action plans” (Council of the European Union, 2005, p.25, as cited in van Berkel and Valkenburg, 2007). Scholars agree that the personalisation idea lacks a precise definition and strategy for operationalization, yet have suggested that there are several, oft conflicting, discourses and ideals attached to this approach (Borghini and van Berkel, 2007; van Berkel and Valkenburg, 2007). Two of these – enforcement/discipline and empowerment/enablement – reflect varying motives in the zeal behind the call for personalised services. Publicly, Norway’s Qualification Programme was sold as a new approach to – and opportunity for – work activation for eligible SA users. This approach was to move beyond the (albeit, discretionary) rhetoric of enforcement and punitive discipline and add the new offer of services to motivate, empower and enable eligible claimants (via positive sanctions) to enter the workforce.

The Norwegian policy development stands out as a paradox. It has unfolded during a decade within which many Western European schemes targeted toward minimum income claimants have moved in a direction of increasingly harsh sanctions and workfare style programming. Furthermore, only ten years ago, comparative research suggested that Norway took an especially hard line with SA users, applying strategies typically associated with the U.S. workfare approach – with a primary focus on work and work seeking (Lødemel and Trickey, 2001; Lødemel and Johannessen, 2005). This article analyses in detail the objectives that have brought international acclaim to Norway’s new work approach. It argues that in order to determine a programme’s social potential, one must consider not only its political intentions

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as stated in policy documents, but also the way in which it is implemented on the ground, given limited resources, particular professional practices and user orientations. This article places emphasis on the latter and highlights the crucial place of the system user in the evaluation equation.

From Norway's position as the pinnacle of the personalisation movement, this paper employs a "mixed methods" approach to investigate the possibilities and limitations circumscribing this movement. The country's new work approach for SA users has been touted for its successful use of a personalised approach to alleviate social exclusion and stands in contrast to other Western European schemes, which have moved in a direction of harsher sanctions and work first style programming. This paper contrasts the findings of two, related analyses.

The first is a targeted policy analysis of national policy documents and media narratives to examine the development of the provisions attached to Norway's Qualification Programme from introduction to enactment. This analysis traces the extent to which this programme represents a move from a work first to a more personalised, human-capital orientation. More specifically, this section traces the ways in which the human-capital oriented promises of choice, participation and tailored programming attached to early policy proposals concerning the approach translated into the reality of written policy.

The second section of this paper takes a more reflexive stance in contrasting these findings with the accounts relayed via a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with 28 SA users who have experienced the new approach first hand. Regardless of whether or not the Qualification Programme better fits a human capital and work first ideal, both approaches are both informed by the tenets of rational choice theory, and this strongly influences the practices associated with programme provision. The methodological exercise of comparing and contrasting these varying datasets offers the potential to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the project of personalisation in Norway and beyond.

Using this two-pronged approach the paper addresses the following questions:

**Part 1:** *How do promises attached to Norway's Qualification Program – concerning choice/participation and programming -- represent a change along a continuum from a "enforcement" work-first ideal to an "empowering" human capital ideal? How much are these promises borne out in written policy?*

**Part 2:** *How does the role of the system user fit into this work activation strategy? In particular: how do individual system users experience the varying motives underlying this strategy?*

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Part 1: Data selection and mapping welfare reform**

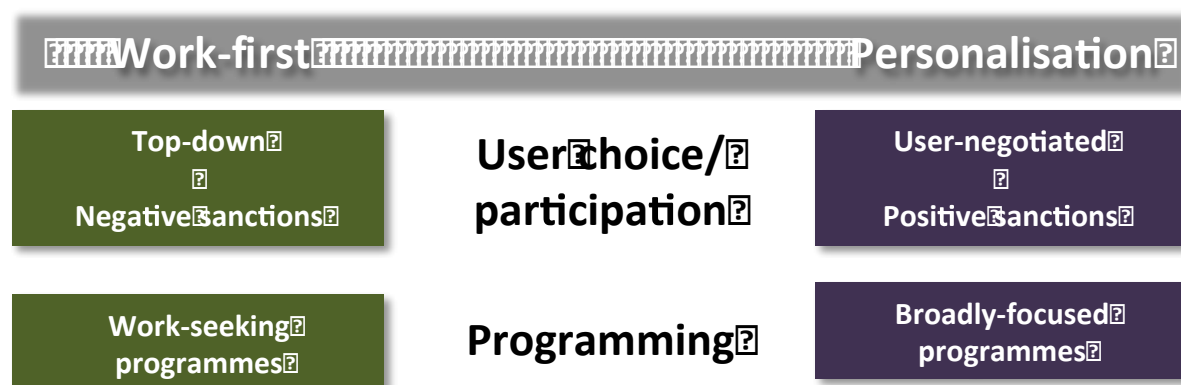
The focus for part 1 was limited to the years 2000-2007 as this period reflected the time frame spanning the development of the promises linked to the QP and the reality of first policy enactment. We drew from a variety of data sources, including political platforms of the seven largest political parties in Norway from the country's 2001 and 2005 election cycles, party declarations released by reigning Norwegian government coalitions in 2001 and 2006 and the comments of key public political figures concerning the QP and the NAV reform, as reported in two of Norway's national newspapers, using the searchable database, ATEKST. The media search focused on the period from 2004 – 2007, representing the years surrounding the development of the NAV reform's work approach and the ensuing development of the QP.

In order to examine how rhetoric translated into written policy, we analysed all of the policy documents directly dealing with the development of the QP at multiple phases of the development process. We accessed these documents from the Norwegian administration web pages ([www.regjeringen.no](http://www.regjeringen.no)) and the Norwegian Parliament web pages ([www.stortinget.no](http://www.stortinget.no)).

The 2001 cross-national study of welfare activation programs by Lødemel and Trickey mapped the terrain of minimum income welfare activation policies in eight OECD countries – including Norway – during the mid-to-late 1990s. We drew upon this work when mapping the QP along a continuum of varying welfare activation strategies. This map was then used to compare the promises concerning new offerings to the offerings available to Norway’s SA users in the 1990s and early 2000s in order to elucidate whether the reform represented a move toward personalisation for minimum income claimants in Norway or whether this “new” approach in fact merely represented the consolidation of a work-first model that had earlier taken shape.

We restricted our focus to those aspects measured before the implementation stage of the policy process. Within this updated framework, a pure work-first model would be associated with top-down directives and the threat of sanctions whose main purpose is to punish recipients via the discretionary application of penalties by social services personnel.<sup>2</sup> These strategies are aimed at moving SA users back into work as quickly as possible (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Analytical framework for policy reform mapping**



The new personalisation model adheres more closely to what Lødemel and Trickey (2001) have termed the “human capital development model” in its focus on the user’s skill level. Additionally, this approach is also characterized by the promise of user participation in determining his or her means of activation, the offer of incentives (for example, higher benefits) as well as programmes and services that are better matched to the user’s needs and skill set (Borghini and van Berkel, 2007; van Berkel and Valkenburg, 2007). This approach focuses on discipline that encourages users to meet their specific programme obligations, so as to bolster the relationship between service personnel and user (Moreira, 2008).

## Part 2: Everyday experiences of the new approach

We conducted in-depth interviews with 28 respondents in Norway – these individuals were 1) currently receiving SA benefits, or 2) were or had participated in the QP or 3) were youth

<sup>2</sup> At the time of enactment of the new approach, SA services and benefits in Norway were stipulated and regulated according to the 1991/2007 Social Services Act. Here, “social services” pertains to those municipal level offices and personnel providing the services and benefits to this group of minimum income recipients.

living in families receiving either benefit. Our participant sample was selected from among a population of SA users and Qualification Programme participants in three study sites (a small, coastal Norwegian town; a wealthy city suburb; and an industrial city suburb), two of which were located in or near to Oslo.<sup>3</sup> Adult interview respondents were recruited through social worker interlocutors at the NAV office in the chosen sites.

In-depth interviews were conducted in order to produce “thick descriptions” of participants’ general experiences with the NAV system. Our interviews focused particularly on respondents’ everyday experiences making ends meet. The broad working question was “What do these economic challenges mean to you?” and interviews focused on the experiences that these individuals had in relation to the anti-poverty programs and policies that were directed toward them.

An analysis of these experiences – and the discourses generated in accordance with these experiences – allowed us to trace with interview respondents the possible social and cultural underpinnings for their attitudes, actions, and behaviour within social and economic realms. Each interview was transcribed and coded to draw key words and phrases from the data. We used discourse analysis as our primary methodology. Our analysis emphasised the use of broader discursive categories: on how respondents used language to describe “specific social activities and social identities”, as well as “memberships” in various social groups, cultures, and institutions” (Gee, 1999, 1). We also analysed how interview respondents described their current and past activities and situations. In addition, we focused on the identities, roles, and relationships that respondents assumed as they carried out, negotiated and characterised these activities and situations. This task helped us to illuminate the values, beliefs, and ways of knowing that contextualized respondents’ behaviours and interactions. Finally, we focused on how respondents assigned value to certain social goods and analysed how social networks, status, and power shaped their discursive treatments of their socio-economic situations.

## **PART 1. RHETORIC VS. REALITY: NORWAY’S NATIONAL STORY**

### **Norway’s Work-First Years**

The welfare activation policies affecting social insurance and SA schemes that emerged within Nordic welfare states in the 1990s explicitly suggested that municipal social workers use their discretion to require claimants to participate in work-seeking activities and/or training or skills-building measures in exchange for minimum and locally-distributed benefits (Harsøf, 2008; Lødemel 2001). While these policies represented an attempt to further encourage use of the work approach, this approach rested on a social policy strategy that had long been present in Norwegian policy. Norway’s 1964 Social Care Act (*Lov om sosial omsorg*) introduced a reformed assistance scheme for individuals in need of economic support, in contrast to the earlier municipally provided poor relief under the Poor Law of 1900 (*Lov om fattigvesenet av 1900*) (Hvinden, 1994). The Act laid the foundation for the subsequent five decades of SA in Norway at both discursive and practical levels.

Discursively, the basic notions included in the Act specified that assistance was to be temporary and targeted towards a marginal population outside the broad eligibility criteria of the National Insurance scheme. The Act included a specific “help to self-help” ambition for individuals of employable age, along with a “work line” approach directing claimants towards

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<sup>3</sup> Our three sites represented “extremes” as far as economic health, percentage of the population claiming SA and demographic profile.

improving their qualifications and actively seeking work and an explicit “rights and duties” ideology (Hvinden, 1994, 49-50).

### **Context for Reform**

Norway’s basic work approach still continued five decades later. However, while the 1964 Act was introduced in a period of near full (male) employment and strong optimism about continuous economic growth and negligible unemployment, with substantial increases in unemployment both in the early 1980s and early 1990s the number of SA claimants increased dramatically (CITE). In practical terms, SA became a form of means-tested unemployment support for young people and others with insufficient records of work incomes to qualify for income-related benefits. With an inflow of asylum seekers and refugees in the 1990s onward, SA and similar forms of means-tested support came to be an important source of livelihood for these groups, sometimes for prolonged periods. Additionally, since the 1960s the Norwegian labour market had had a diminishing role of jobs for unskilled or low-qualified workers (CITE). As a result people with few qualifications have been overrepresented among long-term claimants of SA – those to whom Norwegian policy makers have attached the threat of long-term dependency. Accordingly, Norway’s 2007 Qualification Programme (QP) for eligible SA system users was borne out of the perceived need to help this new population of claimants to help themselves in order to enter the workforce (White Paper nr. 9, 2006-2007, 218-228).

This mission occurred in tandem with a comprehensive 2006 work and welfare administration reform, merging its labour, social security and welfare agencies into a unified entity, NAV (*Ny Arbeids- og velferdsforvaltning*). With this reform, the formerly separate governance of National Insurance Administration and the National Employment Service were merged at the national level into a single entity and this merged entity co-localised at the local level with local authority social services into common front-line municipal NAV offices. The NAV reform and the QP were both cast as a new set of support services for Norway’s SA users and the reforms were presented as a “fix” to an unwieldy system that was difficult for users to navigate. Early on, the NAV reform was propelled by a concern for those claimants who were described in passive terms as “balls” (*kasteballer*) bounced continuously between the three agencies and who, as a result, risked falling between the cracks into permanent dependency (White Paper nr. 35, 1994-95; Green Paper, 2004:13, 166; Reegård, 2009).

The administrative goal for Norway’s new labour and welfare administration was to provide system users with a unified, yet holistic, protocol for their intake, as well as more accessible and individual programming and follow-up (St. meld. nr. 9, 2006-07; Harsløf, 2008). In conjunction with the new NAV structure, the QP would for the first time provide eligible SA system users to access active labour market programming that focused on strengthening each individual’s capabilities rather than merely moving these individuals into the labour force. The approach envisioned by the policymakers who created the programme was not in and of itself a new concept. This type of programming had long been offered within Norway’s welfare system, but had mostly been targeted to those individuals in or recently in employment (Lødemel 1997a; Lødemel and Trickey, 2001). NAV reform innovations allowing for a unified intake regime for all incoming system users was to enable the increased use of human capital programming for SA users as well. Norway’s “Work, Welfare and Inclusion” White Paper (nr. 9, 2006-2007) described as a primary goal the provision of a full range of individually tailored programming to “provide economic motivation for the individual to test out work life” (St. meld. nr. 9, 2006-2007, 218). In this way, the QP represented a test case for a new way of offering welfare provisions to Norway’s most

vulnerable members. Below, we examine how these promises were translated into policy.

### **User Choice and Participation**

The QP was touted as a way to enable a new era of independence for eligible SA service users. The programme was framed around the idea of enhanced rights and incentives that would better enable users to negotiate the terms of their activation and hence, to have a role in determining their paths back into the labour market (White Paper nr. 9, 2006-2007, 218).

The idea of SA users being encouraged to negotiate their own activation contrasted with Norwegian laws and policy recommendations concerning SA provisions spanning the 1990s to the early 2000s, which had explicitly encouraged local discretion to apply work- and work-seeking requirements at the local level (Social Services Law nr. 81, 1991, Sec. 5-3; Circular I-34/01; Dahl, 2003; Harsløf, 2008). The white paper introducing the QP represented the programme's contents as a "right" and an "incentive" for eligible individuals (White Paper nr. 9, 2006-07). In order to be selected as a participant, local NAV offices had to judge an applicant as having the potentially elusive combination of possessing a work and income ability that was reduced by at least half (Parliamentary Prop. nr. 70, 2006-07, 34), yet strong enough that the programme might effectively move a participant into work life (St. meld. nr. 9, 2006-07, 224). Additionally, the possibility of having access to such an offering was contingent upon the establishment of a local office with the resources to offer these services. Noting many of these issues, the union for NAV frontline employees critiqued what they described as a weakened guarantee: "the qualification programme does not give an equal offer throughout the country, neither in terms of access nor content. ... [I]t is not acceptable that assistance to long-term SA claimants will be dependent upon economy, competence, and interest/conditions of the municipality in which the individual lives" (NTL, April 2007). Proposals also suggested that while participation in the program was framed as a choice, one's decision *not* to participate in or inability to complete the programme came with a the possibility for a new level of sanction in the form of having one's financial entitlement reduced or terminated (White Paper nr. 9, 2006-07; Parliamentary Prop. nr.70, 2006-07). The severity of sanction imposed was left up to the discretion of the local authorities.

The presumption that giving agency to the user would be the mechanism to usher them more quickly into work was cast as problematic by the union representing frontline service providers working within NAV. The union critiqued policymakers for relying upon an oversimplified assumption that individually-targeted incentives and sanctions were the appropriate stimuli to move these users into work and for the failure to recognize larger structural challenges: "Most want to work, but the obstacles are related to health, lack of competence or lack of employers who want to recruit this group into ordinary work...one cannot starve SA claimants out into work" (NTL, March 2007). The union touched upon the paradox that – given larger issues not addressed – an approach framed as a right and incentive for a select group of eligible users might also be experienced as a punitive measure.

### **Tailored Programming**

Policymakers introducing the QP described the goal of providing a transition into work life via the normalization of users' everyday routines and the offer of individually tailored activation programming. This rhetoric was in contrast to the more restrictive reforms and guidelines that had characterized the regulatory framework for SA in 1990s and early 2000s Norway. During this period, SA service users had received limited access to broader programming with a human capital approach and many of the accessible measures for these

clients had had the work-first goal of quickly moving users into the labour market through low level skills training and work incentives (Dahl and Lorentzen, 2008; Harsløf, 2008; Lødemel, 1997b; Lødemel and Johannessen, 2005).

The white paper outlining the QP proposed strategies and measures to strengthen the inclusion of people who, for various reasons, had difficulties in gaining proper access to the labour market and working life (White Paper nr. 9, 2006-07). Much of the discourse surrounding this new work approach reflected a Norwegian ideal concerning equality, inclusion and strong social citizenship (Marshall, 1949/2006; Esping-Andersen, 1990; CITE). At the same time, one of the most important tools to enable individual customization and follow-up of participants was the creation of the socio-liberal idea of a “welfare contract,” with a strong emphasis on ensuring reciprocity between citizens’ empowerment and the enforcement of new duties (Johansson and Hvinden, 2007). Based in part on the customer-oriented thinking of New Public Management, contracts would take the form of individual plans, to be co-negotiated by programme participants and their caseworkers, thus enabling the QP to be more closely tailored to the needs of each SA client (Parliamentary Prop. nr. 70, 2006-07, 35, 54; van Berkel and Valkenburg, 2007).

The plans would enable the generation of customised goals and programming for participants (increased rights) under the close supervision of a caseworker (increased duties), with the risk of losing one’s benefits should the plan not be followed. The rhetoric describing these new rights and duties framed them within a discourse of higher expectations that was implicitly contrasted with the lower expectations users had encountered as formerly “passive” benefit claimants. Norway’s Labour and Inclusion Minister emphasized this contrast: “the user has rights to economic benefits, guidance and assistance. On the other hand, society will demand that the user does what he or she can to qualify him/herself to work” (White Paper nr. 9, 2006-07, 2).

In practice, caseworkers within the local NAV office would map out the factors that affected the programme participant’s work and functional abilities – such as competence, experience, interests, desires, health, social conditions, ability level, reading and writing skills, and local/national work possibilities – in order to clarify and develop a “good quality and individually matched offer for the individual” (White Paper nr. 9, 2006-07, 225). This individual approach would allow the creation of an appropriate set of expectations that would match the needs and possibilities of each participant. The revised proposal sent to the Parliament also specified that local NAV offices act in conjunction with specialists such as work psychology counsellors (Parliamentary Prop. nr. 70, 2006-07, 27).

This expansion of offerings for system users was a massive new undertaking within the context of it taking place alongside a massive reform in the governance of Norway’s labour and welfare system. Seemingly, these efforts were only a reality insofar as the NAV reform was successful in the establishment of local offices with sufficient numbers of appropriately trained personnel. Not surprisingly, the enacted policy language allowed for loopholes in the provision of this guarantee as the types of courses and services promised to and later guaranteed for QP participants were, in fact, narrowed in focus throughout the policy development process. The enacted legislation described a much less generous level of guaranteed QP offerings (Social Services Law nr 81 (revised 2007), Sec. 5A; Bryn, 2008). While participants in the programme were “entitled to” an individual plan of which they were to help in developing (Sec. 5A-5), only “work-related measures and work seeking” programming were guaranteed; other preparatory measures such as “training, motivation counselling, skills training, etc” would depend on local circumstances (Sec. 5A-2). Thus,

while the enforcement role of the “welfare contract” was an explicit and intentional part of the services available to programme participants, many of the broader ranging terms and offerings that had been described earlier were made technically conditional.

Details concerning the specific terms of the programme reflect a broader tension that policy makers felt between the goal of emphasizing the norms and expectations of Norwegian waged work life and offering programming that was appropriate to the individual needs of the programme’s target group. The new work approach represented by Norway’s QP was predicated upon the idea that participants would gain motivation from the higher expectations suffusing the programme’s new set of offerings. As opposed to the more stringent work approach in other Western European countries, Norway’s new expectations were framed using “give more, get more” rhetoric. However, while the policy language that was ultimately enacted maintained the idea of explicitly stated terms and conditions in the form of a “welfare contract”, the individualized and co-negotiated *rights* tied to this plan were in the end made subsidiary to the discourse of *duties* and individually tailored activation plans were left to the discretion of the local authorities.

### **Broader Challenges to Personalisation**

Political intensions often differ greatly from policy practices (van Berkel and Valkenburg, 2007; Hill and Hupe, 2002). The limitations of the reality of enacted policy language, given earlier promises, must be circumscribed within the particular historical/political context of Norwegian policymaking, with a strong tradition for local political autonomy (Danielsen, 1987, as cited in Hvinden, 1994). The Norwegian state has long been careful to loosely define the rights of SA claimants who receive municipally-provided benefits and services in order not to overburden the particular competences and resources of local authorities (Lødemel, 1997a; Kjellevoid, 1995). Norway’s Centre Party, part of the coalition government that enacted the QP, had as a primary focus the maintenance of local authority rights.

These traditions and interests may have been reflected in the government’s efforts to maintain local autonomy despite the introduction of a state-devised programme and benefit. While the state could propose the new terms and offerings of the QP it was in the end left up to the local authorities to implement the policies. This was also mirrored within the programme’s diluted language. While the government’s rhetoric and discourse had reflected the possibilities side of the equation, the enacted language describing the QP acknowledged these realities and limitations and couched the program’s broader offerings and terms in language that was framed less as a guarantee – which would have translated into a strict requirement for municipal offices and co-localised staff – and more as a locally, contextually-dependent possibility. Preliminary follow-up studies have suggested that the provision of individualised plans with close caseworker follow-up has largely failed to take place (Andreassen and Fossetøl 2011; Norwegian Board of Health Supervision, 2011; NAV Directorate, 2011 – as cited in Gubrium et al., 2012).

The QP’s rhetorical focus on empowerment via customized programming moved away from the workfare emphasis of the SA policy recommendations of the decade before. At the rhetorical level, this reform stands in contrast to recent reforms in other Western European countries. The reality, however, will perhaps prove to be less of a marked shift than envisioned: work seeking was the only guaranteed programme focus, the level of programme customisation remained up to local discretion, and ill-suited new responsibilities and duties could potentially undermine the effort to shore up a sense of independence and social inclusion among the programme’s participant group.



Furthermore, while the QP reform reflected a move away from traditional welfare approach directed toward SA service users, policymaker emphasis on personal responsibility and motivation reflected an individualized discourse in which the individual recipient's location outside the workforce was the primary site of attack and which failed to acknowledge the structural factors surrounding poverty and exclusion (for example, workplace discrimination). That the troubled individual was the primary site of focus in the enacted QP reform was reflected in the programme's core strategies and offerings. Given that the QP has now passed the introductory phase in NAV offices across Norway, we have been able to take a more in-depth look at the shifts in everyday experiences of those individuals whose lives this reform have sought to change.

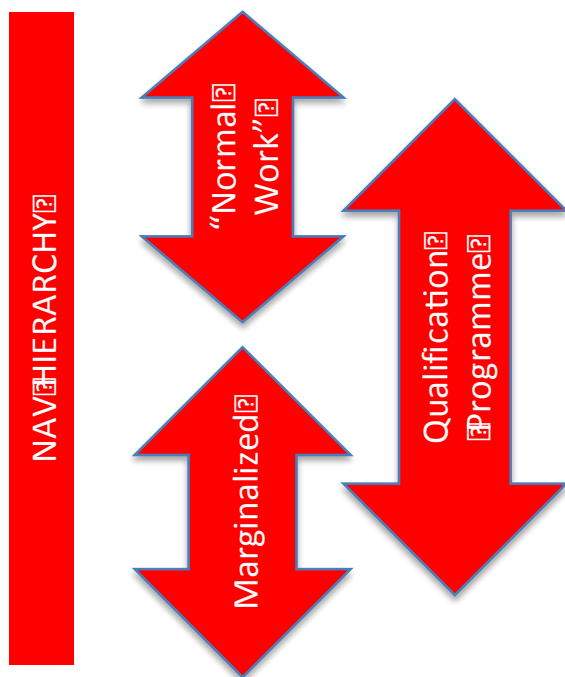
## **PART 2. THE PLACE OF THE USER: DISCURSIVE TRAJECTORIES**

Policy intentions are not always borne out in practice. The findings in the first part of the paper suggest that the more empowering characteristics of the Norway's personalisation approach for SA service users were not, on paper, guaranteed. Rather, while the primary legal guarantee boiled down to a framework for more in the sense that it guaranteed *some* programming and expectations for eligible users, the only written guarantee was work-first oriented activities. Given the reality of local authority and discretion in Norway, the attempt to map and predict how the Qualification Programme would actually work in practice was seemingly also an exercise in abstraction.

Our discussions with QP participants further emphasized the difficulty in mapping and evaluating the potential outcomes of policy intentions based on an analysis of written policy. Moving beyond the issue of potential differences in local outcomes that might result from the local interpretation of a broader policy framework, these discussions emphasized that policy practice did not have a one-way and generalizable "effect" on individual users. In other words: individual users experienced similar sets of agendas and practices in remarkably different ways. As a case in point, we draw upon two discursive particularities that our respondents described when discussing their varying experiences within the QP.

### **Welfare System Hierarchy**

The respondents described below were either enrolled in the Qualification Programme or had previously been enrolled in the programme. Many respondents placed themselves – and described as being *placed* or *categorised* – along a hierarchy of statuses within NAV (see Figure 1). Most respondents described the shame and embarrassment they felt – or had felt, if current QP participants – connected to belonging to the “lowest rung” status as a SA user. When describing what this status entailed, respondents pointed to assumptions made by caseworkers and society of neediness, laziness and dependence. Respondents the demeaning experience of receiving little individualised concern from case workers. Most respondents emphasised that the expectation that SA users would receive benefits and little else from NAV resulted in a lack of daily structure, positive expectations or follow-up for this group of users, which then led to an unfortunate cycle of de-motivation, cynicism and frustration with the system.



**Figure 1: NAV Hierarchy.** Interview respondents placed themselves within a hierarchy in which, bottommost was a marginalized status as social assistance service user. The QP was described as a means out of this status and into either “normal” wage-earning work or a medical diagnosis as “deserving” of disability benefits.

Kari Anne, a QP participant, described the different expectations concerning individuals claiming disability and those on SA:

People who deliver applications to the disability office - they're received in a totally different way than those who become...those who apply at the SA office. There are categories, you know? ...[In the SA office] it's a little like “tisk tisk shame shame.” In [the disability office]...it's because of health and...other reasons (202-223).

Kari contrasted her experiences as an SA user to the “better” identity she might have had had she been receiving long-term disability benefits, where she might have been seen as deserving of more generous help. Similarly, Kenneth, a long-time SA system user who had begun the QP and who, as a part of the programme, had recently entered an internship position, described the self-conscious embarrassment and shame he had felt when claiming SA:

You don't look people in the face. ...Also [small laugh], you hear that, that you're a parasite on society, that kind of thing. That it's other people that work, they pay taxes and it's them that pay your wages. ...It's darn depressing to be on SA, there you are. ...For my part, I'd like to work. One thing you become from getting SA is lazy, you know? You watch the clock. ...You, yeah...that's not what I want to be (196-257).

Many respondents similarly spoke of experiencing shame attached to their former identities as SA service users that was due less to where they fell upon the NAV hierarchy and more to the feeling of being put into a category by the NAV system and, most often, being placed in a category they felt was beneath them. Kenneth pointed to the shame of being a SA service user, but emphasised the mismatch between his own identity and actions – as someone interested in working – and the typical characteristics associated

with being an SA user. While Kenneth and other respondents internalised shame from what they perceived as demeaning categorisation, they also engaged in “othering” through the active refusal to identify with a particular category via the suggestion that the *typical* identity, actions and behaviours of members of this category were beneath them.

In addition to feeling placed within a lower category than one felt one belonged, respondents also spoke of having to actively play a role to fit the expectations associated with various levels of the NAV hierarchy. Gabriel described how his former SA caseworker had viewed him with suspicion for not appearing to “need” economic help. He described a common assumption that one could only “earn” one’s right to claim assistance benefits if one were in truly dire straits: “The impression they have of me at NAV is that – ‘Gabriel, he doesn’t have any problems,’ I feel like. That’s how they see me... ‘Gabriel, yeah, you’re doing fine’...but I, that’s not how it works” (373-377).

Gabriel described incidences of appearing at the SA counter neatly dressed and with an energetic attitude and having trouble claiming his SA benefit check. This suggested to him that he needed to force himself to act the part and make the “right” impression for his caseworker: “The more pitiful you look, the more help you receive. ...And since I arrive looking so good every time...they don’t look at me, I feel that they don’t look at me like someone who’s having difficulties. I must almost...play a part...yeah. And that’s not how I am” (1095-1105). Looking “needy” was also to be accompanied by the proper behaviour and many respondents described the requirement to accommodate to the expectations of caseworkers and of the larger system to be especially demeaning.

### **Personal Trajectories**

Most respondents tied their place – and placement – on the “NAV hierarchy” to a narrative concerning their everyday trajectory forward (and for most, upward). A common thread throughout all of our discussions was the presentation by respondents of a personal trajectory narrative. For most, the personal trajectory narrative began with 1) a description of one’s *former status* (drug abuse, poor family situation, cultural alienation, disability, or full-time employment); 2) reaching a *low point* due to varying events. The low point included a move from difficult times or from social insurance benefits (unemployment benefits, disability or rehabilitation benefits) to SA benefits. The upward portion of the trajectory began with 3) new motivation or new possibilities that enabled one to consider making positive life changes and *turning one’s life around*. Once one’s life was stabilized, respondents spoke of 4) *seeking work*, with hopes for 5) the eventual transition into “normal” *paid work* and the security, inclusion, and balance that this status represented (see Figure 2).

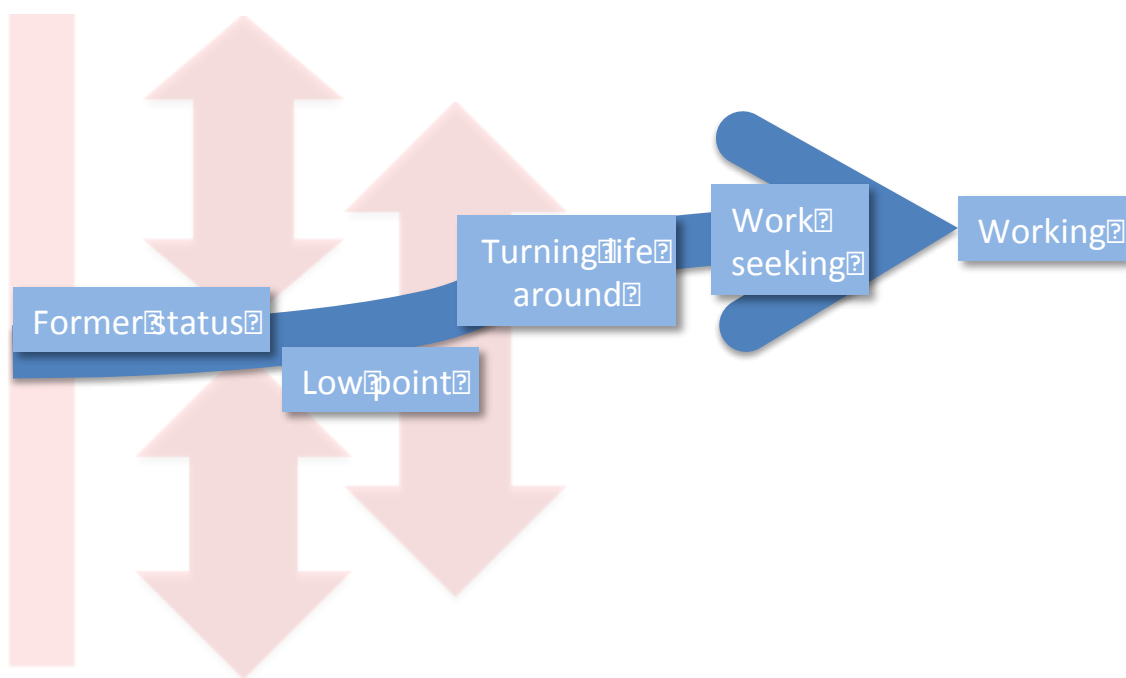
### **QP Experiences: Discursive Trajectories**

As with the NAV hierarchy, respondents varied in where they placed themselves along this trajectory. The experiences and perceptions of individual respondents concerning the effectiveness of the QP was predicated upon both how each identified themselves, often in connection to the perceived NAV hierarchy and according to where one was in the trajectory into “normal” described above. According to these particulars, respondents described the QP as useful and motivating or as pointless, demeaning and exploitative – in other words, as yet another arena for feeling shame or being shamed.

### ***Early Trajectory Experiences***

Those respondents who described themselves as having recently come out of difficult times and at an early point on the trajectory back into a normal life often focused less on the goal of attaining a job. Many of these individuals had had limited or sporadic work experience and described the QP, and especially their experiences within the programme's self-help courses, as a life-changing resource.

A survivor of long-term domestic abuse and a single mother of three, Lisa described her participation in the QP in hopeful terms. She viewed the programme as a vehicle to continue to help her, to eventually receive work-related training and, in the longer term, to obtain a job. For Lisa, the programme was a way out of what had been a shameful situation of hopelessness and depression. She described herself as finally (after years of difficulties) moving in the right direction.



**Figure 2: Personal trajectory.** Interview respondents also placed themselves along a personal trajectory. Respondents' placement along this trajectory bore greatly on their experiences with the QP.

Lisa's QP courses – especially those that had helped her to think in terms of moving from goals to action and to making good choices – had helped her to learn ways to deal with challenges. As she described:

You get out and get positive feedback and you get energy from that, you feel like you're on a path then, dare a little here and dare a little there, I have so much energy in the day that it's completely insane. Through the QP I've taken two very good courses that focused on how you deal with things...how to get up and make a decision, how you can choose to a certain degree to take things positively or should I take things negatively, you can't of course manage your whole day, but you can choose...to be positive (Lisa, 356-379).

Like Lisa, most respondents who identified themselves as just beginning their trajectory forward after reaching a low point described how higher expectations they received from assigned caseworkers and daily programme-related activity provided motivation to work harder. These respondents described how the QP had helped them to move out of a cycle of low expectations, passivity and stagnation. They were happy not to be “forgotten” anymore, to have more daily structure and activity, as well as more security. These respondents noted that the activities they engaged in within the programme felt like a transition into a normal and balanced life.

### *Late Trajectory Experiences*

In contrast to “early trajectory” respondents who described themselves as just beginning to turn their lives around, many of the respondents who had had past professional experience and saw themselves as employable and who had enrolled in the QP with the hopes of quickly moving into work described how a lack of individually tailored programme content and a tendency toward lump categorization with more “needy” individuals was demeaning. Many of these used an “othering” strategy to distinguish themselves from other programme participants in discussions of disappointments and frustrations with the QP. Several of these respondents also described feeling disillusioned from having believed in the promise of movement into work life that had been attached to QP participation.

Throughout our conversations with them, both Petter and Gabriel emphasized their identities as workers and highlighted the fact that they had sought the QP because they had envisioned the programme as a vehicle for quickly entering the workforce. Within this context, they found more the foundational courses they had been required to take to be less useful. As Petter explained: “They’re eager for you to be sent out to various courses. But I’ve said plain and simple that I’m not interested in courses, I’m interested in *working*. I want a job as fast as *freaking* possible, I’ve said” (365-369). Gabriel also emphasized his lack of interest in what he saw as useless foundational courses and his lack of shared identity with many of his fellow course participants, describing both with some derision:

They give you some sort of “motivational pointers” and also [show you] how a CV should look, what type of “posture” you should have...I feel...I’ve been categorized – a little like – [with] a group of people who I’m really not – I feel the need to advance...I’m not saying that I’m too good, it’s not that. But I’m saying that I’m maybe a little more, you know, many of them in the QP are just here... who aren’t in my situation, it’s two different situations. ... What I really want is a job, a good job, and get me out as quickly as possible (86-110).

Like Gabriel, Petter separated his own identity from that of many QP course participants, noting that he did not “prioritize [getting to know] people who went to [QP courses]” and that he “really wanted to get it over with so quickly as humanly possible and earn wages and instead talk with people who were at work” (452-461, 605-608). Both saw themselves as necessarily having to bear the temporary shame of being categorized with those they saw as more troubled in order to mitigate their own shame of joblessness by quickly moving ahead into the workforce.

Thomas, who had had long-time professional experience as a skilled carpenter, provided an exception to the rule: he was a self-described late trajectory participant who had had a positive experience in the QP. Thomas contrasted his frustrations in receiving a monthly SA check with the motivation he had received via his QP internship. He described how his participation in the QP had offered him a bridge to something more:

(When on SA) you have no rhythm and so you don't move forward. As long as you don't have money it's difficult to search for a job and pick yourself up. Like, the only thing you deal with is economic problems that move around in your head. All the time. You don't see any possibility to fix it, and so there are many that just give up... Who just sit down and think, yeah, I guess that's the way it'll be. ... The killer is to not have anything to go to during the day... as a SA client you don't have *shit* to go to, and that's almost the *worst*. ... You don't get offers or anything... you have to get things on your own... The past year I've started this QP... it's the *first time* I've heard or noticed that they have any interest in helping you find the right direction (Thomas, 586-612).

Thomas noted that he had recently been told that his QP internship would result in a regular, wage-earning position. For Thomas, therefore, the QP had fit with his late-trajectory aim of moving quickly into work, an effort that was seemingly aided by his particular set of professional skills.

## CONCLUSIONS

In Norway, the idea of user choice and user participation in shaping individually tailored activation programming was to be reflected in cooperation between users and caseworkers in the creation and implementation of individualised “welfare contracts”. Our analysis of written policy suggests that this was not, however, a guarantee for Qualification Programme participants. Our analysis of written policy documents from the paper's first section suggests that whether or not Norway's QP represented a move away from work-first and towards a more personalised, human capital approach depended less on written guarantees and more on the resources, priorities and traditions of particular local contexts of programme provision. This complexity has made pinning down the QP as “more work first” or “a move toward a personalised, human capital approach” quite difficult in practice. What we can say is that, on paper, the programme represents a move *away* from the former work first ideal, placing it as an exception to the broader movement toward work first programming across the Europe and in the US (Gubrium et al. 2012) and represents an attempt to incorporate the personalisation elements of user choice and tailored programming to a limited degree.

The policy analysis in part 1 of this paper was informed by the assumption that particular policy offerings were grounded in varying discourses (such as empowerment and enforcement) and that it would be the variable application of these discourses that resulted in differential user effects and experiences. The analysis failed, however, to account for the active role of user particularities (identity, trajectory, status, relationships) in determining these experiences. Our evidence suggests that the effects of anti-poverty measures, as experienced on the ground, are more complex than would otherwise be suggested through a theoretical analysis of purely written policy. Qualitative research on the impact of labour market activation approaches has been limited (see Eskelinen and Olesen, 2010; Kjørstad, 2008; and Koivisto, 2007, 2008). Section two of our paper applied a qualitative lens to highlight the impact of Norway's new activation approach for SA users from the perspective of users.

The question of whether or not the QP represents a move away from a work first and toward a personalised, human capital approach leaves out, however, a critical consideration of how both approaches have been shaped by rational choice assumptions. What varies between each approach is how each connects the will to work to differing levels of incentives and disincentives (Lødemel and Trickey, 2001). A harder-nosed version of rational choice theory applied to policymaking focuses on how individuals pursue their own interests according to calculated advantages. A softer version is concerned with how positive sanctions (incentives)

can be employed in policymaking in order to improve or increase human capital.

Following the ideas of proponents such as Gary Becker (1964) and the Chicago School of Economics, which have drawn the focus to the improvement of individual human capital, policymakers across Europe have to varying degrees employed a work approach guided by the idea that individuals make choices of investing in their own human capital based on rational benefits and costs that include a return on their investments, yet the trend also suggests a returned focus on disincentives and the application of a tougher, more hard-nosed calculus, with the exception of Norway, since the early 2000s (Lødemel and Moreira, 2012).

It has long been taken for granted that both hard and soft versions of rational choice theory tend to ignore structural explanations for social phenomena in favour of a focus on the “micro”. The focus of part two of our paper is not, however, on whether or not Norway’s personalisation approach affords individuals the space, time, and resources to balance costs against benefits to arrive at an action that maximizes personal advantage. Rather, we challenge the presumptions of this approach concerning the individual and individual agency. While the personalisation movement has been characterised as placing a new focus on the user – via user choice, user participation in shaping the means of activation and programming tailored to the user’s particular – solid adherence to the work approach suggests that the psychological and sociological roots of an individual’s “decision” to stay home and out of work remain largely unexamined. Our findings in the paper’s second section provide a solid empirical contrast to the basic assumptions underlying the rational choice notion of agency and its link to individual activation. Our interviews with programme participants suggested that user-centred programming was not typically the case. Moreover, the programming offered was experienced for some as a negative thing – demoralizing, a sort of move away from their goal and by others as a positive thing – motivating, a step up.

Practitioners of rational choice theory tend to work according to a presumed notion of individual “agency” and tend to place less emphasis on the origins, nature, or validity of human motivations (why we want what we want). In our case of labour market activation, what is deemed relevant is an examination of the costs of staying home (the hard-nosed version) or of the incentives needed to prevent this (the softer, human capital version). Moreover, the potential for an individual policy target to actively negotiate (make meaning of, respond to) a particular set of policy expectations and provisions remains largely missing from our focus on labour market activation and its effects.

The evidence from our conversations with SA users and QP participants, however, suggests that a consideration of the social psychological particularities – the identities, relationships and social histories – of the individuals who are to be activated is, indeed, a crucial undertaking, given the presumed aim to motivate participants (into work or into continued programme participation) rather than to demotivate or demoralize further. Our data suggest that one way in which these social psychological particularities take shape is via a trajectory (and hierarchy) from marginality to “normal” in which claimant’s motivations and individual choices are constrained or even opposed by a range of particularities.

The data presented provide examples of this idea – when these users described their experiences within the NAV (social service) system they described their identities, relationships and activities *as users* in relation to a NAV system hierarchy. Their self-presentation was articulated within this relation, not as individualized actors. As shown, the personal trajectory described was connected to the NAV hierarchy and this shaped the users’

experiences with the programme in different ways. In other words, this relation continuously mediated their experience, but did not determine it.

In terms of policy consequences, our data suggested a mismatch between presumptions concerning users' rationality and free agency to make life decisions (choose to work) and user particularities, here exemplified by a relation between the NAV hierarchy and personal trajectories. In more concrete terms: for many users, the dissonance between the choices available as a system user (when characterized as "marginal", "a non-participant", "lacking motivation" or "passive") versus the choices one was expected to have (as a resident of a rich and generous welfare state) created a strong sense of shame. We would even venture to say that one's lack of agency given the very presumption of agency was what most enhanced the shame of our respondents.

In summary, the data suggest that the one-size-fits-all presumptions of agency informing the activation approach are both not a good fit for the particular needs of many SA users and moreover, heighten the shame that claimants experience. For this reason, the reports from Norway noting that the provision of individualised plans with close caseworker follow-up has largely failed to take place are especially troubling. In the absence of strategies that take into consideration the particular experiences, histories, needs and expectations of individual users it is difficult to imagine how activation programming can move beyond a one-size-fits-all work first approach. Our data provide convincing evidence that there is a need for the rational choice assumptions framing the design and provision of activation programming to be reconsidered.

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