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A new starting point for labour market research

The pandemic created a need for new labour market research. NordForsk will soon announce nearly 50 million kroner of funding for future research. This is our starting point as we look at how the Nordic countries coordinate their research programmes.

EDITORIAL

28.01.2022

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

“What was a gradual and continuous process suddenly changed because of the pandemic. External factors suddenly controlled what used to be planned changes,” says Arne Flåøyen, Director of NordForsk in Oslo.

He says the pandemic has been a game-changer for labour market research.

NordForsk is an independent research body under the Nordic Council of Ministers. Its main objective is to facilitate Nordic research cooperation based on scientific quality, efficiency and trust. In addition, this cooperation is expected to generate Nordic added value.

To become a researcher you must have a Ph.D. In Sweden, just over 2,500 students get their dissertation accepted every year and can start their research careers if they want.

We talk to Johan Alfonsson, whose dissertation about casual employees last year was named the best research paper on the labour market and work environments. He is critical of the fact that both Social Democrat and centre-right governments in Sweden have been reducing employee protection.

“There is a trend where individuals to an increasing extent must make themselves available rather than being protected with the help of state regulations,” he says.

At the same time, he is unsure whether his dissertation will have an impact on developments, or whether that should even be a goal for research.

But his dissertation does show that it is possible to make a mark in the debate, even as a lone researcher.

There are many institutions that fund or carry out labour market research. In order to show some of the scope, we interviewed the heads of the Danish Rockwell Foundation and the Icelandic Labour Market Research Institute, Varða.

Yet state research councils are behind the funding of most Nordic research.

“Our research is meant to be adaptable and applicable,” says Anna-Karin Florén at Forte. She heads a decades-long working life research programme which has now reached its halfway point. She and her colleagues in the other Nordic countries are key people when it comes to deciding which research, in particular, would benefit from Nordic cooperation.

Sweden and Norway have taken part in nearly all research programmes announced by NordForsk, but due to various limitations for the two largest Danish funds, it is often more difficult to get Danish researchers onboard. Iceland is perhaps the country that benefits the most from being part of a broader research platform. If you look at the number of participating researchers from each country, Iceland’s contribution is impressive.

For each application round, NordForsk has a programme committee that decides which projects get funding. Dag Ellingsen, a project leader for one of the successful Nordic projects, tells us about his experiences. The research on male power structures in the armed forces and police led to controversial findings and much debate.

It changed how Norway’s police do things. As a result of the research, everyone working in the police today will have had to attend dilemma exercises exploring what is and what is not OK in their relationships with colleagues.

There is a large leap from Norway’s military and police to the Faroe Islands, where we follow up the theme of our previous edition: How autonomous can Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland become? For the Faroese, one of the areas left to claim control over is their judicial system. But in order to do that, a prison must be built. Today, prisoners must serve their time in Denmark. But would things really be much better in the Foggy Valley – or Mjorkadalur as it is known in Faroese?

Finally, we also look at the unusual row in the European Trade Union Congress, ETUC, which has made Swedish LO stop paying its membership fee or participating in meetings because it believes the ETUC no longer speaks for them in the minimum wage debate.

Minimum wage is a topic we have written a lot about and which we surely will come back to. The Nordic Labour Journal is funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers, and they have renewed their trust in NLJ's publishers – Norway's Work Research Institute – to carry on publishing it for four more years.

We are looking forward to it!



NordForsk funding labour market research with 50m kroner

NordForsk is set to announce close to 50 million Norwegian kroner (€5m) in funding for research on the future of work in the Nordics. The Corona pandemic means the need for research is considerable.

THEME

28.01.2022

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL

“The pandemic is a game-changer with consequences for both the speed and direction of changes to the labour market,” says Arne Flåøyen, Director of NordForsk in Oslo.

NordForsk was set up in 2005 with 16 – 17 staff as an institution under the Nordic Council of Ministers. It is at the top of the food chain when it comes to Nordic research and can inject a research programme with a funding booster, to borrow some disease control terminology.

Arne Flåøyen and Siri Bjarnar welcome the Nordic Labour Journal in near-empty offices in Oslo’s Stensbergsgata 27. There are bottles of disinfectant on all the tables in the common room we enter into. Siri Bjarnar is responsible for the

new labour market programme which the NordForsk board decided to pursue at the end of last year.

“We have established a programme committee with representatives from all the participating national research funding organisations. They will meet towards the end of this month to discuss the shape of the application text,” she says.

At least three Nordic countries

Before NordForsk can start a research programme, funding from at least three Nordic countries must be in place. They must also contribute two-thirds of the total cost before NordForsk can make up the final third.

“The countries taking part in the new labour market programme are Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Åland and Lithuania,” says Siri Bjarnar.

When the programme committee has finished the application text, research groups can apply for funding. The same rule applies – researchers from research institutions of at least three of the Nordic countries that finances the research must participate. The application is then assessed by an international group of experts that mainly consider the quality of the research.

“They rank applications on a scale from 1 to 7, where 7 is top. NordForsk can only fund proposals that get 5, 6 or 7,” says Arne Flåøyen.

Clear division of responsibilities

There is a clear division of responsibilities. The national research funding organisations decide on the research topics. NordForsk is responsible for making sure the research provides value in a Nordic perspective, either because it is especially relevant to the Nordic region, that Nordic data are being used or that the cooperation creates a wider Nordic research platform that will allow the researchers to apply for EU projects, for instance.

So asking Arne Flåøyen and Siri Bjarnar to tell us what they personally believe are interesting labour market issues is not getting us very far.

“The way we are working now, it is the national funders of research who propose which themes to focus on. That means research priorities are developed in the national systems and then elevated to a Nordic level,” says Arne Flåøyen.

A Forte initiative

“Swedish Forte took the initiative to launch the labour market programme and saw the value in making it a Nordic venture. I cannot say that they pointed out any particular areas where Swedish funding was missing. It was more a case of them highlighting areas where they believed comparative studies might be useful, areas where Nordic research might bring something extra,” says Siri Bjarnar.

But some areas still stand out, she says – like how mobility in the Nordic region has been affected by the pandemic, digitalisation and the green shift in the labour market.

“This is about applying research to help create a knowledge base in order to develop the future of work in a sustainable way,” she says.

“Take digitalisation. It is nothing new that the labour market is being digitalised, but it is happening so much faster. What was a gradual and continuous process suddenly changed because of the pandemic. External factors suddenly controlled what used to be planned changes,” says Arne Flåøyen.

“The changes have already happened and this means you cannot simply go back to how it used to be. We have a new starting point.”

Different ways of organising funding

The Nordic countries have organised the research funding in slightly different ways. Norway has one single state research organisation – The Norwegian Research Council – which grants money to all research areas – be it basic or applied research. The Academy of Finland works in a similar way, by providing funding through four research councils.

Sweden has four independent state research funds: Forte, Formas, The Swedish Research Council and Vinnova, while state research funding in Iceland is handled by the Science and Technology Council (Vísinda- og tækniráð) and the Icelandic Centre for Research Rannís.

“We cooperate with all of these, in addition to the Independent Research Fund Denmark. The other main Danish fund, the Innovation Fund Denmark, is very focused on finding technological solutions and therefore not so relevant for labour market research for instance,” says Arne Flåøyen.

Fewer participants from Denmark

It is, however, a problem that the Independent Research Fund Denmark funds research *bottom up* (allowing researchers themselves to propose projects) and not thematically. That is also one of the reasons Denmark is not part of the new labour market programme.

This is also reflected in the statistics for how many researchers in the different countries have received NordForsk funding. Norway and Sweden are nearly always part of the various research programs. They have the highest number of participating researchers for the period 2010 – 2018:

- Norway: 671
- Sweden: 650
- Finland: 505
- Denmark: 415
- Iceland: 192

Denmark’s population is 16 times bigger than Iceland’s, but there are only twice as many participating researchers from Denmark compared to Iceland.

“Being a small country, Iceland is well aware of the benefits of being part of international cooperation, because they do not have that many researchers. The smaller countries enjoy extra benefits from the Nordic research cooperation, building networks, improving skills and getting access to relevant research,” says Arne Flåøyen.

“But all the countries get more back than they put in,” he points out, since the Nordic funding comes on top of the national money.

With a 130 million Norwegian kroner budget, this means that NordForsk releases research worth around 300 million kroner (€30m) annually.

Open or closed pot

In some cases, researchers from other countries also participate since there is an “open pot” allowing researchers themselves to decide who they want to invite. Danish researchers participated in the programme for societal security, for instance.

The new programme for the future of work has what is called a “virtual pot”, however.

“This means that all the money will go to the countries that have put money in the pot,” says Siri Bjarnar.

Since Lithuania is participating, there will likely be researchers who are keen to see what happens with labour migration after the Corona pandemic.

“The Nordic countries have been used to dealing with a large degree of flexibility where it has been easy to import foreign labour. Both Norway and Iceland have large diasporas of Lithuanian workers. But will they want to work here after the pandemic?” wonders Arne Flåøyen.

He thinks it is difficult to predict how many research proposals will come in.

“We announced a round of open research where we invited researchers to present *preproposals*, which are slightly simplified applications. These are light on detail, and more focused on selling the idea and concept. We got 334 proposals. We asked for proper applications for 55 of them and 12 got funding in the end.

“That was an extreme example. I also remember we announced a programme on childhood cancer, which got four applications. There was enough money for all four, but only three succeeded because number four was found not to be scientifically rigid enough.”

The research groups that secure funding usually work on their projects for three or four years. NordForsk aims to announce who has secured funding towards the end of this year.



Norwegian researchers' deep-dive into male power structures

It started with the question of whether female conscripts are more accepted by male ones if they sleep in the same room. It ended with disclosures of sexual harassment during police training in Norway. Dag Ellingsen led a research project funded by NordForsk which in more ways than one showed the benefits of Nordic research cooperation.

THEME

28.01.2022

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL

“It was a big research project with a 9.5 million Norwegian kroner budget (€95,000), numerous researchers from four countries and several types of research being performed. We had historians, ethnologists, sociologists and political scientists. It went really well. I didn’t lose a single night’s sleep over that research programme,” says Dag Ellingsen, a researcher at Norway’s Work Research Institute at Oslo Metropolitan University and professor at the Norwegian Police University College.

Together with Ulla-Britt Lilleaas from the University of Oslo, he had been asked by the Norwegian armed forces to look into why so many of the women who had joined the forces quit.

“There were many reasons why. But one was that the women felt almost as if they were unwanted by some of the men in the forces.

“We spent three years on this, and got a lot of attention for what in reality was a positive find – that things went better when male and female conscripts shared rooms.”

Swedish, Danish and Finnish researchers who were interested in similar issues got in touch with Ellingsen and Lilleaas.

“We had already met several times – in Sigtuna, Stockholm and Aalborg. So we already knew each other when NordForsk announced the research programme on “National security and shared Nordic values”.

“We defined gender equality and diversity as part of what it meant to be Nordic and built our project around that. The fact that we already knew each other was a big advantage. I would recommend it to anyone who wants to do a similar project so that you don’t end up with people you have never seen before, who might have their own hobbyhorse or who fail to deliver as agreed.”

Applications for NordForsk funding first go to an international group of experts. They judge the research projects according to their scientific worth and whether they bring something new to the table, whether the ethics have been considered and whether the researchers can demonstrate a knowledge of what has already been done within that area of research.

Dag Ellingsen was the project leader. The application was rated a 7, the highest possible score. It was then sent to a programme committee comprised of representatives from all of the research councils that were providing funding to the national security programme, as well as representatives from NordForsk and the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The programme committee decides what research should be given funding, and also considers whether it provides added value to a Nordic perspective.

“The wording of the research programme was just open enough. They wanted a certain angle, so we couldn’t do whatever we wanted, but we did enjoy considerable freedom within that framework.”

That suited Dag Ellingsen, who describes the research group’s methodology as “starting in one place and following the arrows that point upwards and outwards”.

The two Norwegian researchers had already been working on getting a new research project about the Norwegian police force off the ground. Ellingsen had heard that female police were questioning parts of the training of personnel for what is called *Utrykningsenheten* (the emergency unit), which is called upon to handle particularly serious situations.

“We had tried to secure funding first from the Western police district and then from the National Police Directorate, but without success. NordForsk, however, were very flexible and said “sure, you can do research on this as well”.

In the beginning, sexual harassment was not something the two Norwegian researchers were particularly interested in.

“Our starting point was what is known as homosociality, which in this case was how men seek each other out in order to confirm that they are the best in this particular area. Women can take part, but it must be on the men’s conditions and it is they who define what good police work looks like.

“We found homosociality in the shape of an existing, informal group within the police force in Western police district which was known as “Gutteklubben Grei” (the good boys’ club). The group set the standard for how to work in an emergency unit.

“But gradually we started hearing stories of sexual harassment in the shape of comments, humour or whatever you want to call it. Some older men also misused their position with female students who were on workplace training, and an event organised by the Norwegian Police University College referred to something called “knulletorsdag” (shagging Thursday).” Much of this pointed away from the Western police district and away from the emergency unit.

Such juicy details naturally drew a lot of attention in Norway when the research was presented, and the researchers came in for criticism from both the police and other researchers in this field.

“We assured the quality of all our findings were this was possible. We have transcribed more or less all the interviews we did, and the ones we didn’t record were written up within ten minutes. So we know very well what people have and haven’t said.

“But we have a duty to remain totally loyal to our informants, who we promised anonymity. We can also not argue against them. We more or less discovered *shagging Thursday* by accident. It was a small phenomenon but a significant one which was not acceptable.”

Because the research was part of a larger Nordic project, the findings could also be put into a bigger context. A common thread was the way in which female conscripts were constantly exposed to coarse, sexualised humour. One of the Danish researchers, the ethnologist Beate Sløk-Andersen, had herself been a conscript and used that experience in her research.

Together with Dag Ellingsen and Ulla-Britt Lilleaas, she published an article in a science magazine on gender research, describing the phenomena thus:

“You could discuss to which extent the use of humour is a conscious tool or “just a joke”, but the result is that some people must put up with more than they feel comfortable with, and some are exposed to ridicule and harassment. Laughing at other people’s jokes, or even being able to make a joke that is appreciated, can be a sign that you are part of the group. Who, then, wants to be a “killjoy” by speaking up?”

“The humour is very similar in Denmark and Norway. When it comes to the crudest humour, it is as if the men have been looking at the same websites.”

Dag Ellingsen says that the Nordic comparisons were very informative, including when it comes to how the four countries have solved the issue of gender-neutral rooms for conscripts.

“You could say that Norway and Sweden have experimented the most. The Danes have more or less followed their lead, but conscription is much shorter there and conscripts are less isolated and in close proximity to each other compared to those who are in Northern Norway or onboard a vessel. Finland introduced shared rooms only just recently.”

There is something genuinely Nordic with conscripts of both genders sleeping in the same room, even if it is voluntary for both the men and the women, believes Dag Ellingsen.

“We have tried explaining this “mixed rooms” solutions at international conferences in the USA. But they just look at us funny and say “Good luck with your social experiment”. A French senator visiting Norway wanted to study how you get more women into the armed forces. Our shared rooms concept was completely beyond her comprehension.

“She wanted to know whether “Norwegian men have different hormones to French men? Is there something wrong with them or is something up with the food?” she asked. I am convinced that had we tried to do an EU project based on this research, we would end up looking at each other across a chasm of different understandings of reality.”

With these controversial findings and research topics, did anyone from NordForsk at any time react?

“I have a lot of time for NordForsk’s flexibility when it comes to changes to topics during the course of the project. There were changes to the research team too. Nothing major, but this did not cause problems either. Because of the pandemic we were also allowed to move money from the travel and accommodation budgets to salaries. We got a science assistant towards the end of the project, which was extremely valuable.

“There is always a balance to be struck. I am used to applied research where you have a client who often follows the project very closely and in some instances nearly gives orders. Then you have clients who are very open, like the Norwegian Ministry of Defence. When it comes to NordForsk, I could have wanted even closer professional contact, but the pandemic must take some of the blame here,” says Dag Ellingsen.



10 year Swedish research programme into the future of working life

Green change, globalisation and artificial intelligence are among the changes facing the labour market today and in the future. In 2017, a ten-year-long research programme was launched in Sweden, aimed to better understand and tackle the future challenges facing working life.

THEME

28.01.2022

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN

“The labour market is in the midst of incredible change and working life shapes both our individual lives and society as a whole. The programme represents a unique opportunity to address the working life issues that are most important and to develop new insight. Our research is also meant to be adaptable and applicable,” says Anna-Karin Florén, head of the research council Forte’s decades-long national working life research programme.

Digitalisation, demographic change, globalisation, automation and the green shift are all parts of the structural changes that are all happening simultaneously.

“Many of the challenges we see in the labour market are not new, but the context is new,” says Anna-Karin Florén.

Impact of the pandemic

Digitalisation is one typical example – it got a huge and unexpected boost during the pandemic. Suddenly large groups of people were working from home, which impacts many parts of working life – including the work environment, leadership and organisation.

It is still too early to draw conclusions about the pandemic’s effect on working life, but Anna-Karin Florén believes it will certainly raise many research questions going forward.

“We have no hard and fast results for how the pandemic has impacted on working life yet, so it is too early to say anything about its effects. But it has influenced our research, partly because it has been harder to gather empirical data from workplaces,” she says.

Artificial intelligence is another example of dramatic change, and it is taking over more and more administrative functions. What will that mean for older women, whose jobs are at risk of being taken over by AI? Retail is also undergoing rapid change, a sector that employs more women than any other, bar the health sector. Many physical shops have closed during the pandemic.

Online retail has grown and in physical shops self-checkout is becoming increasingly common. Retail has also traditionally been a labour market stepping stone for young people. What happens to them when technology replaces many shop assistants' jobs? And what are the alternatives for women who lose their retail jobs? The ten-year research programme aims to gather enough knowledge in order to face these challenges.

“Structural change will be a good thing for many, but it also represents major challenges. Society must find ways of making structural change easier to handle, and develop safeguards to prevent large groups of people from falling outside of the system. Our research is crucial because it gives a knowledge-base for decision-makers,” says Anna-Karin Florén.

13 future challenges

The national labour market research programme is one of seven programmes launched in 2017 as a result of the Swedish government's ten-year-long research programme aimed at identifying and addressing the challenges facing society today. Six new programme areas have been added since 2021, including migration and integration, applied welfare research, mental health, climate, democracy and antibiotics resistance.

Forte divides the world of work into three areas – labour market, work organisation and work environment. To fund the research programme, the research council has at its disposal 80 million kronor this year and 100 million kronor per year in the coming four years (€7.7m and €9.6m respectively).

“The world of work is such a wide area and covers everything from how you sit on your office chair to global trends. So it is important to get your priorities right,” says Anna-Karin Florén.

Update this spring

The work is undertaken according to a strategic research agenda which will be updated this spring, halfway through the programme's ten-year run. The agenda focuses on particular challenges facing the labour market and is agreed up-

on through dialogue with researchers, the social partners, authorities and civil society.

The strategic research agenda has identified three main challenges: Creating a sustainable and inclusive labour market, promoting good work environments and creating a health-promoting working life.

“We have gathered relevant stakeholders to identify the challenges in working life, which needs must be followed up and to find out what is happening elsewhere in the world. Our work, like the other programmes, is also informed by the overriding issues of gender equality and Agenda 2030.

“Our strategic agenda, which will be presented this spring, has also included global issues impacting on working life, like the possible consequences of the pandemic and the green shift's impact on the labour market,” says Anna-Karin Florén.

The programme also involves creating networks for researchers and other stakeholders to meet and discuss challenges as well as ways of spreading the results that are beginning to come in. Cross-discipline projects and international cooperation is encouraged.

The impact the green shift will have on working life is something Anna-Karin Florén considers to be a new and so far relatively unknown area of research going forward. Funding was recently granted for research in this area.

An advisory committee assesses research applications. Academic excellence has top priority, but the applicability of the research is also taken into account.

Applicable research results

Florén calls the labour market research programme “challenge-driven”, meaning all research initiatives are built on challenges that have been identified by labour market stakeholders, and on the government's desire to find solutions.

This approach is sometimes criticised by researchers who want to do basic research and not be told to work within certain existing research areas. Forte also allows researchers to apply for funds to choose their own line of enquiry. The government's latest research bill from 2021 also says there should be opportunities to carry out so-called free research or basic research.

“Forte is a research council that finances both basic and applied research within the areas of health, working life and welfare,” says Anna-Karin Florén.

Nordic research cooperation

As head of programme for the ten-year-long labour market programme, she also serves as a representative for several Nordic research backers at NordForsk. She is on the programme committee for programme finance in cooperation

between Forte and NordForsk within the “Future working life” area.

“When talking to Nordic colleagues, I see that we share many interests and challenges, for instance the impact of digitalisation in all of our countries. We are similar but dissimilar enough to learn from each other,” says Anna-Karin Florén.



Danish foundation supporting more research on welfare states

The Rockwool Foundation has shares in a major Danish industrial concern and billions of kroner in assets which help fund research into the welfare state's challenges. That is the kind of research the Nordics need more of, believes the foundation's president Elin Schmidt.

THEME

28.01.2022

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER

How can the Nordic countries deliver growth and high quality service to citizens without anyone falling through the net? Research will be needed to solve this tricky question in the coming years, believes Elin Schmidt, President of the Danish Rockwool Foundation.

"The Nordic welfare state is under a lot of pressure, especially from globalisation and ageing populations. Research that highlights how we can handle this pressure will be important to all the Nordic countries in the coming years. One of the things we will need to look at is what the welfare state should provide for citizens whose own pensions are insufficient and who will be expecting a certain level of support," she says.

The Rockwool foundation already delivers a lot of research of this kind. 2020 it spent 125 million Danish kroner. The amount is growing every year. Its aim is to strengthen the welfare state's social and economic sustainability by creating solid knowledge about the challenges of ensuring cohesion and the financing of the future welfare state, and knowledge about possible solutions to these challenges.

So the foundation's activities are research and practical interventions in for instance the labour market in order to help vulnerable groups of young people and refugees find jobs.

Among the foundation's most recent publications is a survey which shows that refugees stop taking Danish language

lessons as soon as they get a job. Another new study from the foundation shows that young people with little or no labour market connections also often face challenges related to health or crime, and that this is closely linked to their lack of “perseverance”.

Inequality like in the USA

The Rockwool foundation is also behind two sensational studies into social inequality that show how, despite a well-developed welfare state, social mobility in Denmark is in many areas similar to social mobility in the USA. In both countries, your social background has an impact from birth and lasts a lifetime. It manifests itself in for instance children’s skills in kindergarten and through school, in youth crime, completed education levels, income and labour market access.

The foundation has its own research unit with 40 researchers, Ph.Ds and research assistants who often cooperate closely with other research institutions. The studies on social mobility are therefore carried out by Nobel laureate and professor at the University of Chicago, James Heckman, together with research professor at the Rockwool foundation’s research unit, Rasmus Landersø.

Nordic similarities and differences

The Rockwool foundation also regularly produces comparative surveys of the welfare state and the Nordic countries’ labour markets. In recent years, the foundation has been particularly focused on comparing the Scandinavian countries and has produced several major publications including the 2020 book “Welfare states and populations in Scandinavia”.

In it, the Rockwool foundation compares the socio-economic development in Denmark, Norway and Sweden since the birth of the welfare state, based on data from the countries’ statistics agencies, Eurostat, the OECD and the Nordic Council of Ministers, as well as the Rockwool foundation’s own research.

The comparison shows that the Scandinavian welfare states are generally very similar, but that they have taken different directions when it comes to immigration and integration. Sweden has also experienced rising crime rates while this has fallen in Denmark and Norway.

The foundation concludes that since the 1980s, all three countries have seen a slight increase in social inequality. For the past few decades, they have also experienced the financial challenge of an ageing population leading to the need for major reforms to the welfare state.

Independent research

The Rockwool foundation is happy to work with others but never accepts money for research from external sources other than public research institutions. This is a firm principle that secures the foundation’s total independence, explains Elin Schmidt.

“We always finance our research by using our own economic means, and we have no ideological or political links, not even to industry. This independence gives us a unique and really good basis from which to offer completely impartial knowledge about the welfare state.”

The impartiality is crucial in order to be listened to by the foundation’s primary target group – political decision-makers.

“The new knowledge that we create is given to stakeholders in society so that they can have a meaningful democratic conversation about the welfare state, and to the political decision-makers so that they can prioritise in a rational manner and adapt the welfare state’s institutions. That is why our credibility must be sky high – and it is,” says Schmidt.

Political credibility

The foundation’s credibility is regularly assessed by the political parties in the Danish parliament, and the politicians’ view is clear.

“We enjoy the same credibility on the left and on the right, and this is extremely important to us as we want to avoid any kind of blindspot in our research and measures. The foundation itself never proposes concrete political solutions,” says Elin Schmidt.

New research from the foundation is published in reputable scientific publications and is also presented to decision-makers at press conferences or in briefings where ministers and opposition leaders discuss relevant political consequences of any new knowledge that the foundation has created about the welfare state.

The foundation’s latest study about social inheritance in Denmark and the USA was debated by two former prime ministers from opposite sites of the political spectrum – Lars Løkke Rasmussen from Left, Denmark’s Liberal Party, and Poul Nyrup Rasmussen from the Social Democrats – in a briefing organised by the foundation.

A big money bin

The Rockwool Foundation has plenty of its own money to use for independent research. It owns shares worth billions of Danish kroner in the Rockwool International group. The group produces energy solutions, and was founded and is still partly owned by a large Danish industrial family, Kähler.

40 years ago, six of the family members decided to establish a foundation and contribute a large part of their already considerable wealth to it.

The Rockwool foundation was given the equivalent of 25% of Rockwool International’s shares and a mandate to produce independent, trustworthy research that would benefit society. The foundation’s board operates independently from

Rockwool International when choosing focus areas and which projects to fund.

It gets dividends from Rockwell International, and these make up the financing of the foundation's activities. The foundation can not get involved with projects or activities that might directly or indirectly influence Rockwool International's commercial development, explains Elin Schmidt.

"Our most noble task is to provide facts to the welfare society debate. In order to do that, nobody must think we are looking after anybody's special interests. That is why we cannot carry out research on issues that could influence the commercial development of Rockwool International.

"For instance, we cannot look at any aspects of the green shift that involves energy renovation. Several descendants of the foundation's founders sit on the board that decides which projects to support based on recommendations from a committee of leading professors from Scandinavian universities.

"The research is carried out and communicated totally independently from the board and often in close cooperation with external researchers from the best universities and research institutions in Europe and the USA."

Jobs for 5,000 young people

Since 2015, the foundation has also run a so-called intervention unit that focuses on the welfare society's systemic challenges and helps find solutions to some of the seemingly deadlocked welfare challenges that the foundation's research has identified.

For instance, every year 5,000 young Danes are not in work or training, which equals some seven percent of all youths of a certain year group. This has been the case for nearly two decades, with no sign of progress.

This costs the welfare state 15 billion Danish kroner (€2bn) a year, according to the Rockwool foundation's research unit. It also estimates there are similar deadlocked and extremely expensive challenges when it comes to integration. That is why 20 employees at the Rockwool foundation's intervention unit are working with what the foundation calls practical "system innovation" – new ways of getting for instance young, vulnerable people into work or education.

"We support experiments that try to find new solutions to systemic faults in the welfare state, for instance the fact that we for the past 20 years have failed to get more vulnerable youths into jobs or education. And we only provide support through projects that are evaluated according to extremely high standards, so we produce evidence for what actually works," says Elin Schmidt.

The Rockwool Foundation has developed the NExTWORK employment initiative, which goes beyond the traditional role played by job centres and uses a direct network linking

young people and businesses that can offer vulnerable youths internships and help them get work experience.

"There are many signs that this project has hit on something that really works," says Elin Schmidt.

She also uses her spare time to work for social mobility and to give vulnerable children and young people the same opportunities as everyone else to get an education, a job and a good life. For 17 years she has been chair for the humanitarian organisation Mødrehjælpen (Mothers' help).

"I am not political or ideological, but my personal belief is that social mobility is important and that in a welfare society everyone should have the opportunity to contribute to society and create a good life for themselves. That is why I would like to help give the next generation of children good opportunities."



Varða in Iceland: a bridge between trade unions and academics

Iceland's labour market research institute Varða was set up in February 2020 by The Icelandic Confederation of Labour ASÍ and the Confederation of State and Municipal Employees BSRB. The purpose was to strengthen social and economic labour market research and bridge the gap between academics and the labour market.

THEME

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TEXT: HALLGRÍMUR INDRÍÐASON, PHOTO: PRIVATE

The aim was for the resulting research to lead to better informed discussions during wage negotiations and to give the trade unions something to build their case on.

Kristín Heba Gísladóttir has been Varða's Managing Director from the start.

"In the beginning, we were not sure how this would go. There was a strong demand for such an institution but no vision for how it should work. But soon it became clear that there was a big need for statistical data on the employers' position," she says.

ASÍ and BSRB jointly finance the institute's basic expenses, which is its offices and CEO salaries. Research is funded either through funds or by selling services to the trade unions, which usually means carrying out research on working conditions from various perspectives.

Gísladóttir says that research institutions, such as the universities, have not had a proper connection with the unions. This institute has bridged that gap and it has applied for scholarships in cooperation with the universities.

"I'm hoping this institute will be a permanent bridge between the trade unions and the academics," says Gísladóttir.

According to her, Varða has really made its mark with two big surveys on workers' economic and social situation. Here, they told their subjective opinion of their own situation, for example whether they could easily make ends meet and how they feel in general.

What made that survey special was that 16% of the participants were immigrants, which is unusually high in research in Iceland.

"This pleased the trade unions and also brought a lot of attention from elsewhere. This will also be an important tool for the unions and will benefit them in collective agreement discussions."

The big difference between these surveys and the statistics that for example Statistics Iceland collects is the objective value of the participants.

"We did not ask about income, and we checked whether the results differed between social groups, for example immigrants," explains Gísladóttir.

That research showed that immigrants were worse off financially and they also had more difficulties finding proper housing.

The results of the latest survey were published on 19 January, so now it is possible to compare from one year to another.

"It is clear that the pandemic has had a considerable effect. When we did the first part of the research, in November and December 2020, there were tough restrictions and unemployment was high. Now, a year later, workers' financial situation is worse especially among immigrants, even though unemployment is much lower.

"Mental health has deteriorated and stress at work is increasing, especially for women in the public sector. This is a big worry. There is a lot of discussion about how to get companies through the pandemic, but we also have to consider how we can get the people through it. So it is important to follow the effects on the quality of life," says Gísladóttir.

She says they have also looked at workers' mental health and their access to proper mental health care, which is a big part of the quality of life.

"We have found out that a large number of workers are not able to get health care, which is something the trade unions have been fighting for. There are also certain groups that have to rent apartments because of a tough financial situation.

"With this information, the trade unions can check if they need to do something. At least, with proper research, they are in a better position to state their claims."

The institute has also carried out research on young people who are not in education or work. That research showed that immigrants are more likely to be in that situation. Similar research showed that female immigrants had real problems getting recognised in the Icelandic labour market and in society, and they were even refused services.

"So if they lose their job it's extremely difficult for them to get another one instead. This was very sad to hear," Gísladóttir says, but adds that similar research in other countries gives similar results. She says that an article will be published soon in a scientific magazine on the connections between people's financial situation and mental health.

Gísladóttir is convinced that the institute has a bright future.

"We are grateful that the academics are very willing to cooperate with us on their research and it is much easier to get funds when you are working with them. It will become even easier as we build up our reputation. We have not had set plans on where we have wanted to go, we have simply let it grow and that has worked out well."

Drífa Snædal, the President of the Confederation of Icelandic Labour Unions ASÍ, agrees.

"The purpose of Varða has been to deepen our understanding and knowledge of the situation of workers. Varða has certainly done that, not only with the big annual research they've done but also as a platform for cooperation with the academics and other institutions. This has made us better prepared in our fight for better terms on behalf of our members."



Sweden: most casual jobs and lowest work protection

Sweden has the highest unemployment levels among the Nordics, and also more casual jobs and lower employment protection levels for those on temporary contracts. An award-winning dissertation shows the consequences deregulation has had for people without permanent employment.

THEME

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TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO: AXEL KRONHOLM

Sweden stands out both in the Nordics and beyond when it comes to employment protection. The country used to offer the best protection within the EU for people in short-term employment. Now it is near the bottom, says Johan Alfonsson at the University of Gothenburg's Department of Sociology and Work Science.

"Since the early 1990s, all Swedish governments have supported the deregulations of employment protection and all political parties have presented the same arguments. They have wanted to modernise the labour market and make it more flexible," he tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

A political shift

Alfonsson analysed the changes to the Swedish labour market in his dissertation "*Alienation and work: The conditions among young casual employees in flexible capitalism*".

"I have noticed a common political shift from the Social Democrats to the centre-right parties where all have been advocating change which benefits growth. As a consequence, they have abandoned the idea of protecting employees from the insecurities of the labour market," he says.

Alfonsson says there is a trend where individuals to an increasing extent must make themselves available rather than being protected with the help of state regulations.

Different conditions across the border

Johan Alfonsson compares this to the situation in Norway, which does have lower unemployment but also strong employment protection.

“It is harder for Norwegian employers to hire people on casual contracts. Employment protection is much more regulated there. It is also easier for job-seekers to refuse to accept certain conditions because there are fewer people competing for the same job,” he says.

Consequences of flexibility

In his dissertation, Johan Alfonsson describes what effect deregulation has had on people without a permanent contract in the Swedish labour market, dividing them into three groups:

- Those on informal, temporary contracts
- Those on zero-hours contracts
- Normal employees

For these so-called casual employees, working life will in many cases appear to be the opposite of the safety people in a permanent job experience, who know where and when they will be working, with whom, for how long and at what pay.

“Casual workers can feel uncertain about the future in many ways. Which workplace will you be at, will you stay in that job, how many hours will you be working and how much will you be paid,” says Alfonsson.

Social uncertainty

Yet the uncertainty does not end here. Zero-hours contract jobs also lead to what he calls social uncertainty.

“For instance when you don’t know when or where you are going to work, or with whom. You cannot plan your time off. As an example, it can be difficult or impossible to plan for when you want to see your family or others.”

The degree of uncertainty varies between the groups. The most uncertain form of employment is found among those who Johan Alfonsson calls nomad employees – those who can be called in to work any day. Or not. You could also be one of 100 people who receive the same text message with a job offer. Whoever answers first gets the job.

Then there are those who have developed an individual relationship with a particular workplace and who are called upon when someone goes on leave or are ill.

“For this group, the insecurity is less severe,” says Johan Alfonsson.

Research and politics

His dissertation was named the best research paper on labour market and work environments in Sweden in 2020 by FALF – the Swedish Labour Market Research Forum. One of the things FALF said was that *“The dissertation will be of huge importance for researchers, decision-makers, the social partners and all others who are involved in improving conditions and reducing insecurity in the labour market.”*

Johan Alfonsson is not sure his dissertation will lead to changes in the Swedish labour market, however.

“Labour market research is not meant to change things, but research can be used by politicians in various ways in order to advance arguments.”

He nevertheless notes that labour market research is a loaded topic among political parties since issues like unemployment, employment protection and payroll tax are often central themes in the debate.

“This is true also indirectly since labour market issues are also important for instance in taxation politics,” says Johan Alfonsson.



The Faroe Islands: A country without prisons

If you are sentenced to more than 18 months in prison in the Faroe Islands, you will suffer the additional penalty of being sent to Denmark to serve your sentence. Because there are no prisons in the Faroe Islands.

NEWS

28.01.2022

TEXT AND PHOTO: RÓLANT WAAG DAM

The autonomous region has one detention centre, a temporary solution at some military barracks from the 1960s. A new prison would cost 233 million Danish kroner (€31.3m) but the Faroese authorities have only been granted one million.

The place is known as Mjorkadalur – Faroese for foggy valley. There is space for only 14 detainees, and the centre is high up in the mountains, 21 kilometres from the capital Tórshavn. It might sound like the perfect place to keep inmates. But it is not, something both prisoners and prison guards have known since the detention centre was moved from Tórshavn to Mjorkadalur in 2011. Faroese politicians have also taken an interest in recent years.

Many millions not enough

“Mjorkadalur originally served as military barracks. It will never be a prison, even if we spent millions restoring it,” Heðin Askham, deputy leader for the Faroese probation service, told the public broadcaster Kringsvarp Føroya when they made a report about conditions in Mjorkadalur in November last year. Askham is a prison guard and has served for more than 40 years.

That same week, a report on detention conditions in the Faroe Islands was published. We will get back to that, but Askham’s statement mirrored much of what the report highlighted. It was built on a survey commissioned by Edmund Joensen, a Faroese member of the Danish parliament. Together with fellow MP Sjørður Skaale, he has been busy high-

lighting the situation at Mjørkadalur, and they have been trying to secure more funding to improve conditions there.

Snowed in for three days

Askham and the other Faroese prison guards are dreaming of a detention centre, an open prison and a closed prison. Preferably in Tórshavn and definitely not up in the mountains. That location has certain drawbacks, as highlighted in the Danish Prison Federation's magazine after a visit to Mjørkadalur in 2020.

“At one stage we were snowed in for three days. We finally almost ran out of food, and we ordered a helicopter for the change-over of guards,” prison guard Birgir Hansen told them.

The detention centre's 14 cells are also too big, and this creates security challenges. It also means the cells are located across three floors, which bring further challenges.

“If we have three arrests in one day, they cannot be placed on the same floor because the walls are so thin they can talk to each other through them. This means we have to spread them out over all the floors, and as a result, people who are serving prison sentences and people on remand are living side by side in Mjørkadalur,” Elkin Klettheyggj, head of the Faroese probation service, told the Breddin radio programme earlier.

More than 1,000 kilometres away

The poor physical conditions at the Faroese detention centre have led some to point out that people who have been sentenced to more than 18 months in prison will face additional punishment. They are sent to Denmark to serve, more than 1,000 kilometres away from home. This means family and friends wanting to visit must travel from the Faroe Islands to Denmark and back again. This takes time and it is expensive, so they too are being punished.

“I have a two-year-old girl who needs looking after. I must pay for a day or two off work, which is 1,000 kroner a day. Then I must buy a plane ticket, which might cost 3 to 4,000 kroner. So each visit could cost me 6 to 7,000 kroner (€940),” explained one mother of a Faroese prisoner in a Danish prison to the podcast “The Faroese prisoners”.

And there are quite a few of them. According to the probation service, 22 detainees and prisoners were moved from the Faroe Islands to Denmark between 2011 and 2021. The numbers were published after Sjúður Skaale asked the Danish justice minister for them last summer.

“The main purpose of the probation service must be that people who are sentenced for a crime should not do another crime when they are released, but become good citizens again. That is very difficult to achieve if you ship them abroad to a foreign environment where the only chance they have to form new bonds is with other prisoners,” Sjúður Skaale said at the time.

The in.fo news site also wrote that this is an expensive solution, as two police officers usually have to escort the prisoner to Denmark at a cost of 10 to 12,000 kroner each time.

A new 234 million kroner prison

There is broad agreement in the Faroe Islands that a new prison is needed. When the Faroese parliament last opened, the Prime Minister's speech touched on the issue of a Faroese prison, or the lack thereof.

“We must improve prison conditions in the Faroe Islands. They are not satisfactory. We need a modern prison where people get the chance to develop and get an education. I think the best solution is to build a new prison,” said Bárður á Steig Nielsen, the Faroese Prime Minister.

But a new prison will cost 233 million kroner (€31.3m), according to the above-mentioned report on detention and prison conditions in the Faroe Islands, which was written by Faroese and Danish civil servants.

This solution, which the report calls “Establishing a new institution”, is the only model that solves all the challenges around Mjørkadalur facing the probation service today. This solution is basically a new prison in a new location. But for now, this is not going to happen.

One million for improvements

The Faroe Islands have in recent years been given more and more autonomy from Denmark but has yet to gain the responsibility for its judicial system and with that, the prison system.

So for now, it is the Danish parliament that must grant money for a new prison in the Faroe Islands. Just before Christmas, the Danish Minister of Justice Nick Hækkerup, announced a long-term plan to spend four billion kroner on the probation service between 2022 and 2025. On 14 January, he told MPs from the Faroe Islands, which was not part of this spending plan, that one million kroner have been set aside to improve Mjørkadalur.

“I just have to say it as it is. This is not good,” Skaale told Faroese radio after his meeting with the minister. Joensen, who was also present in that meeting, agreed. He does, however, think that the survey about conditions at Mjørkadalur (which he contributed to) has served a purpose.

“Perhaps the Danish authorities now realise what we have known all this time. The conditions are not fit for purpose. A new prison is needed, and it is only a question of time before money will be set aside for the project,” he said.

Sheep in heat

And there might be light at the end of the tunnel. In 2016, one of Faroese police's big challenges was the six annual weapons training sessions their officers must attend. This is what the Danish police wrote about it on their website:

“Faroese police pay to use a sheep farmers’ land to shoot in a deserted area, since the police themselves do not have access to a shooting range. But the weather is often so poor that the shooting must be cancelled. Or the sheep are in heat, and shooting is out of the question.”

Back then, the police officers dared not dream of a shooting range. Today it is being built – although at a lower cost than 233 million kroner.



Swedish LO: The ETUC no longer represents us

The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) has stopped paying its membership fee to the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and will no longer participate in the organisation's meetings – all in protest against the ETUC's handling of the directive on adequate minimum wages.

NEWS

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TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG

The rift within the ETUC became evident even before the European Commission had presented its directive proposal. In February 2020, ten trade union confederations across Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden wrote a letter to Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. In it, they underlined that they did not share the ETUC's favourable view, but that they hoped the Commission would not propose any binding EU regulations on wages.

But it did, and a majority of the ETUC's member organisations not only want the directive – they want the regulations to be even stricter than what the Commission has proposed. Meanwhile, it seems the Swedes' (and the Danes') continued opposition to the directive as a whole has only served to increase the conflict, despite the secretariat's attempts at find-

ing solutions to the conflict. LO believes the secretariat actually prioritised going with the majority all along, rather than pushing for an agreement.

In the meantime, the proposed directive has been discussed by the European Parliament and by the member states' governments in the Council of Ministers. As usual, the ETUC lobbied against the Parliament, and that is where things turned sour in the end.

"The majority wants *each and every* employee in the EU to have the right to a statutory minimum wage fixed in legislation or by collective agreement. That is difficult for us to fulfil, of course, since our collective agreements do not cover everyone. So we tried through the Parliament to get an ex-

ception for Sweden and Denmark only – but that failed because the ETUC was opposed to it,” says Hanna Björknäs, an LO lawyer.

That was the final straw for LO’s leadership, and just before Christmas, it decided to sever contact with the ETUC.

“Paying a fee to an organisation that works against us is not possible. We cannot allow them to represent us, we must speak for ourselves,” LO’s contract secretary Torbjörn Johansson said in a comment.

The Parliament, the Council of Ministers and the Commission will now negotiate to try to agree on a final text. The Parliament’s position largely mirrors what the ETUC wants. However, the Council of Ministers’ negotiation mandate secures sufficient guarantees to safeguard the Swedish model, the Swedish government believes. The Danish government, meanwhile, was not convinced when the Council of Ministers voted on the issue.

And of course – nobody knows how the negotiations will end. You can only assume they will be difficult.