

News

Letter to the EU exposes cracks within European Trade Union Confederation

Theme

The Öresund cooperation was set to expand – then corona hit

Editorial

A Nordic state of emergency

Theme

National decisions have major consequences for border regions

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Theme: Closed borders



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A Nordic state of emergency

The corona epidemic has closed borders in the Nordic region and the rest of the world. In most countries governments have increased their powers and citizenship has become more important, while personal freedom has been restrained.

EDITORIAL

15.04.2020

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR IN CHIEF

This has become a crisis where power is weakened in both ends and concentrated in the middle. International cooperation has not worked well. Countries compete to get their hands on personal protection equipment, the World Health Organisation's advice and warnings are being ignored and cooperation at UN, EU and Nordic levels suffers. Border regions like Øresund get caught between a rock and a hard place, and even regions inside certain countries are being isolated, like Uusimaa in Finland.

The smallest unit – the family – is also facing splits. Older members are isolated and cannot receive visits from their children, while the not-too-old cannot help with looking after their grandchildren. Individual freedom has been limited in a way that has not been seen before in peacetime.

This is a state of emergency for trade unions too. Wage negotiations have been postponed in Finland, Norway and Sweden. The state is providing support for companies in crisis and for occupational groups that have been temporarily banned from working.

Yet the Nordic societies are still functioning. The initial stockpiling ended when it turned out warehouses did have time to replenish stock. Those who can work from home. The corona epidemic has shown that highly digitalised societies allow companies to function as before, to a great extent – only now they are run from kitchens and living rooms. Health services in the Nordic countries have so far managed to deal with the increased number of seriously ill patients. Communicable disease, however, has become the greatest work environment risk.

News about the coronavirus has been dominating the media for a long time now. In this edition, the Nordic Labour Journal has chosen to concentrate on the consequences for the Nordic cooperation. We report from a Council of Ministers where the staff can no longer commute across the Øresund bridge – like thousands of others in the region. What are the consequences for plans for the expansion of regional cooper-

ation between Denmark and Sweden? What is happening to Nordjobb? And what about all the Nordic students who are studying abroad?

When the strict anti-infection measures begin to be lifted, the political debate will gather momentum once again. Certain sectors, like tourism, will take years to get back to pre-pandemic levels, if ever. Investments in airport expansions and new hotels look shaky.

Should the economic crisis be mitigated by handing out money to citizens? Using negative interest rates? Will crisis-hit companies be nationalised?

According to Henning Jørgensen, a Danish Professor of labour market policy, there is nevertheless hope that the crisis will lead to a more social and green labour market. He believes there is a need for a considerably more active labour market policy.

What is needed more than anything to secure the future, is a major public push for future education for those rendered unemployed. He believes the Nordic welfare models will experience a renaissance.

“The crisis has allowed the welfare state and the Nordic model to showcase their strengths, and the Nordic populations have demonstrated through the corona crisis that they support solutions where we all look after each other more,” he says.



National decisions have major consequences for border regions

Activate the networks, develop the dialogues, identify the updates. These are necessary and urgent tasks for the Nordic border region information services, thrown up by the corona crisis. Öresunddirekt in Malmö remains closed to visitors. Behind doors, there is plenty of action.

THEME

15.04.2020

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO: ANNA PALMEHAG/NEWS ØRESUND

What in national legislation might concern the border regions? Finding such answers is part of everyday work at the three Nordic border region information services – Grensetjänsten Norway-Sweden, the North Calotte Cross-Border Advice Service and Øresunddirekt. But for some weeks now, the work has been ramped up, as Nordic countries try to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

“We have to try to dig down into national decisions. Often nothing has been written down about regional border issues, so we do some interpretation and look for answers to see whether we have interpreted things correctly,” says Sandra Forsén, Head of Office at Öresunddirekt Sweden.



The information centre is situated next to the Malmö central station, and houses representatives from the Tax Agency, Employment Service, Social Insurance Agency, Skåne Regional Council and the Skåne County Administrative Board.

Due to the infection risk, no visitors were allowed at the time of writing this, but staff from the different agencies answer questions via email and telephone every day about housing, work or education in Denmark, as well as questions surrounding what this new situation means for Öresund commuters. They also help in various ways by focusing on topical problems.

“Our collective expertise contributed to the letter which the Skåne Governor sent to the Minister for Social Affairs and the Minister for Public Administration about the consequences of the first stage of the corona epidemic,” says Sandra Forsén.

Consequences for people living in Sweden

When Denmark closed its borders and Danish employers started sending their staff home, it had consequences for people living in Sweden and working across the Sound. The same was true for those living in Denmark and working in Sweden, when both childcare and schools closed down in their home country.

“For the border commuters, a lot depends on which country they are registered in for social security purposes. Normally you would pay taxes in the country where you work and have social security there. But what happens when you are forced

to work from home, many of the people contacting us wondered,” says Sandra Forsén.

The Governor’s letter got a near immediate answer. Sweden’s Minister for Social Security Ardalan Shekarabi and Denmark’s Minister for Employment Peter Hummelgaard put together a Danish-Swedish expert group. Shekarabi tells the Nordic Labour Journal:

“The expert group is working on cross-border social insurance issues. Civil servants at the Ministry of Social Affairs are in regular contact with the affected parties, including the Social Insurance Agency. The group is tasked with working through any issues and problems that are identified. The most pressing one – how to adapt legislation – has already been dealt with, as the countries (Denmark and Sweden) agree that regulations do not automatically lead to changes for people living in a member state while normally carrying out their work in a different member state.”

The government ministers’ decision means that “social insurance regulation for people who normally commute across borders should not be influenced by the restrictions imposed as a result of the coronavirus/COVID-19” as Öresunddirekt puts it in a press release.

Pragmatic decisions

“The Swedish Social Insurance Agency quickly understood, as did Udbetaling Danmark. Both agencies rapidly made pragmatic and wise decisions for border commuters,” says Sandra Forsén.

Her work is now more than ever focused on using existing networks to increase the number of dialogues and, as she puts it, to put pressure on different parts of the chain. It is also important to communicate new decisions and recommendations.

“We maintain close contact with the other border organisations and also talk with different government ministries which perhaps do not always think about the border regions. We are in daily contact with the Nordic Council of Ministers and its Freedom of Movement Council.

“This is a continuous exchange of knowledge which results in considerably more frequent updates of our portals in Danish and Swedish, for private individuals and businesses, which is carried out by Øresunddirekt Denmark.”

Current EU legislation is a recurring worry which has been given renewed importance due to the corona crisis.

“It needs updating because it is not adapted to today’s digital ways of working, and this is particularly noticeable in a situation like this,” says Sandra Forsén.

Optimistic about the future

Despite the intensive work situation, she is optimistic about the important role Öresunddirekt can play as an information service.

“In a crisis like this, what we do becomes particularly important. So we are very happy that Greater Copenhagen writes in their labour market charter that they want to run more campaigns to increase knowledge about what we are doing. All cross-border commuters, or those who consider becoming one, should know about us.”



The Öresund cooperation was set to expand – then corona hit

Billions of kroner. That is the estimated annual benefit for Denmark and Sweden resulting from a fully integrated labour market across Öresund. Nine focus areas have been identified and presented, ready for action as soon as the corona crisis ends.

THEME

15.04.2020

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The crisis has led to suffering and problems, but it might also lead to a greater understanding of the advantages of Denmark and Sweden cooperating more on labour market issues across this dynamic border region.

Even before the Öresund bridge opened on 1 July 2000, several visions for the Øresund Region were making the rounds. Since then, the visionaries have faced many disappointments as the expected speed of integration has not lived up to initial hopes and the ideal outcomes never materialised.

At the same time, exchanges between Eastern Denmark and Southern Sweden have increased in the 20 years that have passed. And there is more to be gained, according to Greater

Copenhagen's labour market charter. It was published just days before anti-corona measures were introduced, severely limiting physical mobility within as well as between the two countries.



Heino Knudsen, Chairman for Greater Copenhagen. Photo: Thea Wiborg/News Øresund.

“Greater Copenhagen is a political cooperation whose focus is to create growth. The labour market is therefore a very important part of this, and it is our expressed ambition to maximise the great potential the labour force in this metropolitan region represents,” says Heino Knudsen, who has been the organisation’s Chairman since January 2020.

The Greater Copenhagen cooperation comprises Region Zealand and the Capital Region of Denmark, as well as Region Skåne and Region Halland in Sweden. Altogether they count 85 municipalities with 4.3 million citizens. Greater Copenhagen calls its area a metropolitan region.

For this cross-border organisation, an integrated labour market means more than the elimination of barriers and the coordination of skills and other resources in a west-easterly direction.

“It would make us stronger if the labour market was regulated not only on a national level but also between Halland and Skåne, between Zealand and Copenhagen, so that we could harness the great potential of the labour force here,” says Heino Knudsen.

Also, he adds, the metropolitan region’s geography attracts labour and talents from the outside.

So when Greater Copenhagen has developed nine focus points for the new charter, they have taken several levels and factors into account. Each of the points represents a concrete proposal, underlines Heino Knudsen.

The nine measures identified in the labour market charter are:

1. Improved knowledge of supply and demand for skills in Greater Copenhagen.
2. Increased coordination of employment measures.
3. Increased flexibility in Greater Copenhagen for highly qualified workers from third countries.
4. Different employers’ fees in Denmark and Sweden are a

hindrance to mobility.

5. Economic and time-related costs linked to transport across Öresund.
6. Cooperation on skills development and further education.
7. Those involved with education in Greater Copenhagen should cooperate closer in order to meet the future demand for skills.
8. Reciprocal recognition of professional qualifications in Denmark and Sweden.
9. More information for businesses and workers as well as joint digital identification.

“With political backing, we can soon get going with proposals one to five, while proposals six to nine need more analysis before they can provide solutions,” he says.

“Greater Copenhagen is not alone in solving this. Thorough and close dialogue with national, regional and municipal authorities is needed, as well as continued cooperation with the social partners who are already involved in the work with the charter.”

Almost 3 billion kroner gain?

An integrated labour market in this metropolitan region could result in an annual payoff for the Danish and Swedish economies worth between 1.5 and 2.9 billion Danish kroner, according to Greater Copenhagen’s calculations.

“This calculation takes full integration into account and covers a longer period of time. It is crucial to demonstrate the big potential using real numbers so that we can create full insight across all political levels. This can be very beneficial for society, as the Öresund bridge has already demonstrated. It will be paid for faster than what was projected,” says Heino Knudsen.



The Öresund bridge is 20 years old this year. It has paid for itself faster than expected, but traffic has fallen dramatically in the past few weeks due to anti-corona measures. Source: Oresund.com

The corona epidemic is slowing down the execution of the labour market charter, just as it is slowing down many other strategies across the world. The Greater Copenhagen Chair-

man says the health and care sectors are now facing the greatest challenges in both Denmark and Sweden, but he is not worried that the pandemic will impact badly on an integrated labour market in the long term.

“We created our charter during a boom. The labour market will look different once the corona epidemic is over. We will then be mainly focusing on helping businesses and fighting unemployment. Thanks to our existing cooperation and the social partners, we will be able to adapt to the new situation quickly, and then continue our work towards a fully integrated labour market,” says Heino Knudsen.

Positive after all

Johan Wessman is also optimistic about Greater Copenhagen’s labour market charter, despite the current situation. Since 2014, he has been the Managing Director for the Danish-Swedish Øresundsinstittet, which is financed by more than 100 members from the state level, regions, municipalities and universities as well as the private sector.

Johan Wessman is very happy that Greater Copenhagen has taken the initiative to create a fully integrated labour market in the region, and he considers a majority of the proposals to be executable. Which measures will be executed at which levels remain to be decided, he points out.

“The Nordic Ministers’ Freedom of Movement Council has the most executive power. It is in contact with the countries’ parliaments and governments and makes us realise border obstacles do exist and that they can be removed. There is a common engagement among politicians which I have not seen before. They have realised that something must be done, and that is very positive,” he says.



Johan Wessman is the Managing Director for the Danish-Swedish knowledge centre Øresundsinstittet. Photo: Jenny Andersson/ News Øresund.

Johan Wessman agrees with the Greater Copenhagen Chairman that some of the charter’s proposals can be addressed in the near future. For instance a joint overview of labour short-

ages in the regions, and a website listing jobs in both Denmark and Sweden.

“It might be just as easy for a Swedish jobseeker to find the dream job in Køge as in Landskrona and vice versa for a Danish jobseeker.”

The Managing Director at Øresundsinstittet sees an opportunity for closer cooperation and better coordination between Greater Copenhagen and EU financed cross-border programmes which Interreg Öresund-Kattegat-Skagerrak are carrying out.

“Companies and labour are not interested in hearing about national rules or municipal projects, they just want things to happen,” he says.

However, Johan Wessman believes the charter’s point number two, on the coordination of employment measures, and point number four, on different employer’s fees in Denmark and Sweden, will take considerably longer to realise.

“These issues are controlled by national systems. We must be realistic and realise that it might be difficult for a border region to demand that an entire country must change. There is no ill will or anything egotistical on the part of the nation-states in this, but the systems are already in place and the question is how do you open up existing structures.”

A bipolar view of the Øresundregion

Johan Wessman says he is a slow-motion optimist and calls the image of the Øresundregion bipolar, where both the good and the bad things are being exaggerated.

“News often focus on exceptions from the norm, for better or worse. This means the image we get of the Øresundregion sometimes becomes the sum of all crises and exceptions. My thesis is more grey. This is about the everyday job that is being carried out or what has already been done. So much has already happened on both sides of the Sound since the catamarans stopped. If we get a steady development with an annual growth of 1 to 1.5% over a ten year period, we could see pretty amazing results.”

Greater Copenhagen’s estimate of billion kroner gains for both of the Nordic countries do not sound impossible, Johan Wessman thinks. He is a professional economist and has long experience as a business journalist, yet he points out that for these kinds of calculations you have to apply a birds-eye view and they involve considerable uncertainties.

“When the corona crisis is over, there will be a greater need to understand the advantages of Denmark and Sweden working together. If we manage to create an efficient labour market in the Øresundregion, there are billions to be made in the long run,” says Johan Wessman.



Freedom of movement sacrificed to protect Finnish population

Rapid measures and tough restrictions characterised the first Finnish reactions to the corona pandemic. As the only Nordic country it locked down an entire region, which included the capital city, from the rest of Finland.

THEME

15.04.2020

TEXT: BENGT ÖSTLING, PHOTO: HEIKKI SAUKKOMAA/LEHTIKUVA

Freedom of movement and the open Nordic borders have been put to the test during the corona crisis. For now, Finland's borders are closed to all "non-essential" movement in principle. The border to the Uusimaa region, which includes the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, is patrolled by police and military conscripts.

Finland's government has asked the few ferries still carrying supplies not to sell passenger tickets from Sweden, Estonia or Germany. Planes can only carry out essential passenger transport, which includes carrying Finns and others returning home from other countries.

It is still possible to travel by boat from Åland to mainland Finland.

The Finnish National Emergency Supply Agency pays millions in support for essential transport between Sweden and the Baltics/Central Europe. The support is meant to guarantee enough capacity to keep a total of seven vessels running. The Finnish Seafarers' Union has protested against other vessels flying a Finnish flag getting the support. 2,500 Finnish seafarers have been furloughed until the summer, and they want their jobs back, the union pointed out.

Stop for Swedish hospital staff in Åland

The autonomous region of Åland was instructed just before Easter that hospital staff commuting from Sweden could no longer go there. Any staff would have to self-isolate for two weeks before being allowed to work in Åland, because they would be arriving from abroad. Ålanders have the same right to a healthy life as people in the rest of Finland, said Minister of Justice Anna-Maja Henriksson.

Around ten doctors and 30 health workers are no longer able to travel to do occasional shifts in Mariehamn. The Finnish government has promised to send necessary doctors from mainland Finland to Åland instead. This is not good enough for Åland, which has close contacts with Sweden and a great need for Swedish-speaking personnel.

What is impossible in Åland is desirable in Norrbotten

Ålanders are surprised they cannot receive Swedish hospital staff when things are fine the other way around, to the north. It is still possible to commute to Sweden. Many of the Nordic ideals for open borders are a reality in the Cap of the North. There is broad cooperation, a complementing business structure and labour market on both sides of the border from Tornio/Haparanda northwards.

But now the border with Sweden and Norway is closed to “non-essential” traffic, e.g. tourism, shopping trips and for Norwegians who want to visit their second homes in Finnish Lapland.

The Finnish government wants to further reduce movement in the commuter region near the border. But authorities in Norrbotten appealed to the Finnish government to allow Finnish hospital workers to continue working on the Swedish side of the border.

The Nordic exchange can continue

Only the most essential work commutes remain. Any worker must carry a certificate from their employer showing that their job is necessary. The Finnish government would have liked to see Finnish hospital workers staying put for now in the place where they work.

In the very least, hospital workers should only move between their home in Finland and their work in Sweden, as if they were in self-isolation. Swedish hospitals that are dependent on Finnish labour have promised to make this work.

This means Sweden’s Emergency Supply Agency demands open commuter traffic to a certain extent, in both directions. But 95% of border traffic is reported to have disappeared already.

Some in Finland have argued for shutting the north-western border completely. The Minister of the Interior Maria Ohisalo (the Green League) told a press conference earlier that Sweden should not be left in the lurch. Finnish hospital staff

are needed there. In return, Finland has been promised intensive care beds at Swedish hospitals in the north.

Minister of Justice Anna-Maja Henriksson (the Swedish Parliamentary Group) has also highlighted the need for a functioning Nordic cooperation. Finland has been listening to the Swedish government’s pleas. There is no reason to weaken the existing good Nordic border cooperation, said Henriksson.

But Finland is following infection patterns closely. The number of infections has risen on the Finnish side of the border and the government is ready to impose further restrictions on border traffic if necessary.

The hardest restriction: internal border checks

The capital region and the entire southern Finnish coast have been closed off from the rest of Finland since 28 March. It is an attempt to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

Two thirds of infections in Finland are found in Helsinki and Uusimaa, and attempts are made to protect the rest of Finland from this.

Only people with essential business have been allowed to cross the border. Police and conscripts have been guarding more than 40 border crossings. In the beginning, it was estimated that some 700 police would be needed for the operation. Retired police have been recruited and shifts can last up to 16 hours, according to the Finnish Police Union.

Quite a lot of Finns have been considered to have essential business and have been allowed to cross the border. In the days before Easter, more than 40,000 vehicles travelled in and out of Uusimaa every 24 hours. This included necessary workplace commuting, public assignments, health visits and more.

The goal has been to stop the serious coronavirus from spreading. Erecting this internal border which stops freedom of movement in Finland has been considered to be the greatest and most serious limitation of citizens’ rights in Finland during the pandemic.

Time-limited legislation

The emergency legislation, which has been put in place parallel with the communicable disease act, scarcely allows for such drastic measures. The legislation does not allow for long-term closures. After three weeks, the government must present new compelling reasons for prolonging the measure.

Prime Minister Sanna Marin (Social Democrats) promised before Easter that the government is not preparing to prolong the shutting of the border between Uusimaa and the rest of Finland. This promise seems to have been strengthened.

This has come as a surprise. The speaker of parliament Matti Vanhanen has said that extremely strong scientific reasons

must be presented before a decision on prolonged closures is made.

If Uusimaa continues to register a substantially higher corona infection rate than the rest of Finland, there could be grounds for prolonging the isolation with another three weeks.



SATS is closed in Norway but not in Sweden.

Corona crisis drives up Nordic unemployment

Unemployment has risen dramatically across the Nordics since the emergence of the coronavirus. The countries have chosen different ways of handling the situation, however, based on different labour market models, measures imposed and the shape of the labour market.

THEME

15.04.2020

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

For anyone who wants to see how the Nordic labour markets are doing, the Nordic Council of Ministers has gathered links to all the figures here: *The Nordic labour markets and COVID-19*

It is, however, tricky to compare unemployment statistics between the countries right now, because the COVID-19 measures they are taking differ a lot. New forms of support, like what Denmark has introduced, means the state covers much of the cost if the employer does not lay off employees.

The graph below shows the annual average unemployment figures according to labour market surveys (AKU) across the Nordics between 2015 and 2019. AKUs describe labour mar-

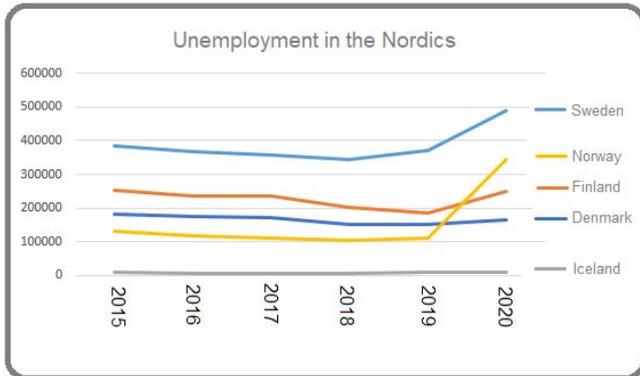
ket developments for the respective countries' citizens aged 15 to 74.

Unemployment figures are harder to pinpoint right now, as the different countries have chosen different strategies. If we look at registered unemployment figures according to what is traditionally reported, these have increased like this:

- Denmark: 31,763 more unemployed people between 8 and 26 March, compared to the same period last year.
- Finland: 17,600 more unemployed and out of work, up to 29 March.

- Iceland: Unemployment has risen from 7,400 to 10,200.
- Norway: 270,000 more unemployed people over the past few weeks.
- Sweden: The number of unemployed people rose by 57,000 in February.

This is what these numbers look like as graphs:



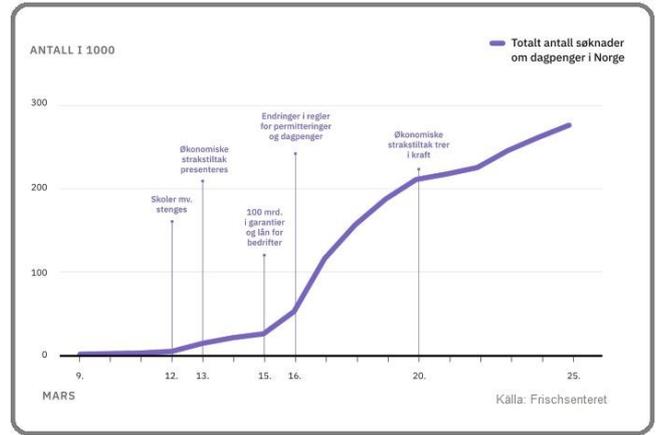
The graphs show official figures related to unemployment so far in 2020.

Norway has seen the most dramatic rise in unemployment. A large number of the country’s businesses have been forced to close – services that depend on close social contact which are not crucial society to work, like hairdressers and beauticians. In some places, like Oslo, the serving of alcohol has also been suspended.

The Frisch Centre and researchers from Norway’s employment agency NAV and Statistics Norway have in record time put together a survey of what has happened. In 72 hours they linked information from population databases and information from NAV.

The development accelerated when the government changed the rules for applying for unemployment benefits, so-called day money.

The government’s changes mean 100% of wages will be paid from day three to day 20. Employers have to foot the bill for only two days, down from 15.



The graph shows the number of Norwegians applying for "day money" from when lockdown measures were introduced on 12 March through different economic measures being presented and finally implemented on 20 March.

In two weeks, unemployment rose from 2.3% to 10.4%, as 260,000 people signed up for benefits. Shopworkers made up the largest group of newly unemployed people, with some 18,000 women and 7,500 men. Waiters, hairdressers, chefs, cleaners, receptionists and drivers made up the other large group. 60% of hairdressers and beauticians are now unemployed, and top of the list.

Tripartite agreement in Denmark

The Danish government has put nearly as strict restrictions on business as Norway. But unemployment has only risen by less than 32,000 people. This is due to a rapidly negotiated tripartite agreement which saw the state commit to paying 75% of wages for those whose jobs are threatened. Employers pay 25% of wages while the employee pays by losing five days of holiday this year.

In Denmark this is known as a temporary wage compensation agreement for employees under threat of losing their jobs.

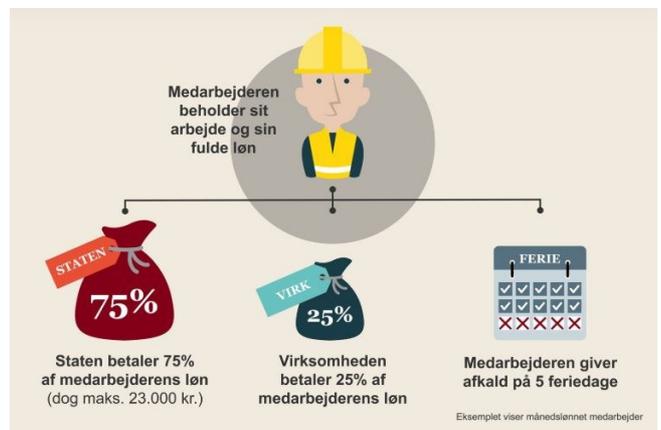


Illustration from the Danish Ministry of Finance’s information about the tripartite agreement.

The agreement lasts from 9 March to 9 June this year. It covers all companies and businesses at risk of having to let 30% of their staff go, or if 50% of employees are at risk of losing their jobs. The compensation is capped at 30,000 Danish kroner (€4,020) per employee in private businesses. Companies that receive the compensation cannot lay off their employees.

It is still too early to say just how many Danes are “three quarters” unemployed. But in the first week alone, 10,000 companies applied for support. The agreement keeps the official unemployment figures on a lower level than Norway.

All the Nordic countries’ governments have passed legislation to support vulnerable sectors. In Sweden, consequences for businesses have been smaller due to the less restrictive measures in place there. But the number of people put on notice has risen by 36,800 up until 29 March.

Negotiations before layoffs

In Finland, employers who plan layoffs must first enter into negotiations with trade unions. According to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, more than 300,000 people are subject to such negotiations right now. Unemployment is therefore expected to rise considerably. On 4 April, all restaurants will also close in Finland.

Globally, tourism is the hardest hit sector. Borders have been shut to all types of travel that are not strictly necessary. This has had immediate consequences for Nordic airlines – SAS, Norwegian and Finnair. Airports are hit too. The countries’ main airports are all among their biggest employers. 22,100 people usually work at Copenhagen Airport Kastrup, across a thousand different businesses.

Tourism most important in Iceland

For Iceland, tourism has been the most important sector. In 2018, the OECD reported that it had overtaken fisheries. At one point tourism represented 8% of GDP and 14% of the entire labour force worked in the sector. The decline began before the corona epidemic, however, as the low-cost airline Wow went bust in early 2019. It had been carrying a large proportion of the tourists visiting Iceland.

Tourism makes up less than 2% to 3% of GDP in the other Nordic countries. Since the coronavirus hit, Iceland’s tourism has all but disappeared.

The Icelandic government’s support package includes a promise that the state will cover the costs of securing those who are forced to work part-time 75% of their original salary.



Nordic labour market crisis: Professor sees hope

The coronavirus creates a crisis for Nordic businesses and workers, but hope too of a more social and green labour market and society, argues Henning Jørgensen, Professor of labour market policy and co-author of a new book.

THEME

15.04.2020

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO HENNING BAGGER/RITZAU SCANPIX

“A hopeful wakeup call”. That is how one of Denmark’s leading labour market researchers describes the coronavirus’ consequences for the Nordic labour markets. Henning Jørgensen is a Professor at Aalborg University and the co-author of a new book on the past 25 years of Danish labour market policy.

In the book, Jørgensen and two research colleagues predict that without rapid changes to labour market policies, Danish businesses will pay dearly and inequalities will increase. Current measures to get Danes working – the employment measures – are, according to Henning Jørgensen, reactive and focusing on unemployed people being the problem.

According to the book, a deep and long-lasting labour market crisis can only be prevented by labour market policies that are far more “proactive”, where the social partners and the state cooperate to create a more social and green vision for society.

Hoping for new understanding

The book was written just before the corona crisis hit, and even though corona can lead to mass unemployment and recession, Henning Jørgensen believes the crisis could bring even more hope for great positive changes for Nordic labour markets in coming years.

“Through the corona crisis we clearly see a greater understanding of the need to help each other, and that we must act together in order for society to function. This can be seen in the labour market in particular, where the only way of getting out of this crisis is to help each other. New understanding is emerging, and that creates hope in the middle of all this,” says Henning Jørgensen.

He points out that during the corona crisis, the governments and the social partners in the Nordic countries have demonstrated their ability to execute rapid, wide-ranging and solidary changes.

This could be because a carefully calibrated cooperation between the parties already exists, built on the Nordic tradition of finding broad solutions and of cooperation – the Nordic model or the flexicurity model. The Nordic welfare model and the Nordic welfare state is about to see a renaissance thanks to the corona crisis, the Professor believes.

“Something completely new is about to happen. The crisis has allowed the welfare state and the Nordic model to showcase their strengths, and the Nordic populations have demonstrated through the corona crisis that they support solutions where we all look after each other more. This creates a lot of hope.”

He believes one positive outcome of the crisis will be increased understanding for the fact that mass unemployment can only be prevented when we cooperate to create a more socially fair and greener society which is more environmentally friendly and focuses on upskilling unemployed people.

An old and tested recipe

His latest book looks at Denmark in the 1970s and 1980s, which was characterised by economic crisis and high unemployment. The efficient solution back then was a very active labour market policy with massive public investment in further education of unemployed people throughout the 1990s. This was heavily inspired by Swedish 1950s labour policies, the Swedish term “security by wings” and the Swedish Rehn-Meidner model.

The Swedish model is built on both push and pull when it comes to the labour market, so as to achieve movement between employment and unemployment. This is a principle that can still be used. Both supply and demand must be included in policies, explains Henning Jørgensen.

In the 1990s and up until 2005, Denmark led a very active labour market policy, which ended with full employment in 2007. This recipe can and should be repeated now, he argues.

“We need to go big on public investments in further education of unemployed people in order to secure a future for businesses and for the many workers who are losing their jobs because of the corona crisis.”

Henning Jørgensen is a proponent of far more active use of education policies, employment policies, financial policies and labour market policies as steering tools, just like what was done in the 1990s and until 2005, but in a new combination suited for modern conditions. At the same time there will be a need to reassess what the goal of that policy is, he says.

“In the first decade of the 2000s, Denmark’s labour market policy lost its focus on education. It was all about getting unemployed people into work. But if the workers are to thrive for 50 years in the labour market, it is crucial to continuously train them – and this is as important as ever right now and on the other side of the corona crisis. Businesses will also be secured the most important competitive advantage: qualified and motivated labour.”

New megatrends

Former solutions cannot be completely copied, however. The labour market has changed, Henning Jørgensen explains. In his book he points to several modern megatrends which will influence the labour market and the skills workers will be needing:

- New technology, e.g. digital solutions
- More so-called platform workers who do not enjoy the same rights as hired staff
- More migrant workers
- Climate change which means new skills are needed to secure a place in the labour market

Henning Jørgensen is in no doubt that the Nordic region’s strong position when it comes to digitalisation is a strength – which also helps in the handling of the corona crisis. But without continuous skills development when it comes to using digital solutions, this position of strength can soon be lost, he warns.

Letter to the EU exposes cracks within European Trade Union Confederation

It is with regret that we need to inform the Commission that the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) reply regarding the consultation on European minimum wages is not representative for us. That is what ten trade union confederations from Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden write in a letter which highlights a historic crack in ETUC.

NEWS

15.04.2020

TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG, EDITOR EU & ARBETSRÄTT

The letter is directed to the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis and the Commissioner responsible, Nicolas Schmit. The signatories are Danish FH; ASI, BSRB and BHM from Iceland; Norwegian LO, Unio and YS; and Swedish LO, TCO and Saco.

The ten unions explain how they ended up in a minority as the member organisations voted on how the ETUC should reply to the Commission's proposals for the possible introduction of European minimum wages. That is why they now feel it necessary to present their views to the Commission directly.

Far-reaching formulations

They underline that they do share the same goal regarding an internal market without inequalities and social dumping, where nationwide collective agreements lead to increased wage shares and fairer wages.

They also highlight the fact that the ETUC secretariat has tried to find a balance among the member organisations, which they appreciate. But the ETUC reply contains far-reaching formulations, like member states shall "ensure", "guarantee" or be "required to"..., which indicate that binding legislation must be passed.

And that is precisely the main problem, according to the ten organisations. Legally binding EU rules concerning wages and collective bargaining would have huge negative effects on the Nordic countries' labour market models.

No right to pass binding legislation

It would upset the balance of power between state/EU level on the one side and the social partners on the other, they write. Furthermore, they argue, the EU has no right at all to pass binding legislation on wages.

They therefore hope that the Commission will abstain from presenting any initiative on binding EU legislation on minimum wages.



Everyone at the Nordic House works from home

There were doubts at first at the Nordic House in Copenhagen as the corona epidemic became a reality. Should staff be sent home or not? On the Danish Prime Minister's orders, all 130 staff have been working from home since 11 March. One of them is Anna Rosenberg, who lives in Malmö.

THEME

15.04.2020

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

"I work as a communications advisor at the Nordic Council of Ministers, and I'm responsible for policy areas including labour markets, gender equality and agriculture. I try to highlight Nordic cooperation in these areas. I tell Nordic stories by writing texts, making videos and running social media campaigns," says Anna Rosenberg.

When the Nordic Labour Journal talks to her on the telephone, she has spent just under three weeks working from home. She says things have gone pretty well, much thanks to the fact that she can still send her children to school – unlike her Danish colleagues.

"This means I can maintain my usual rhythm of dropping off and collecting the children. It helps with structure and working from home. At the same time there are some things I don't have to do, although I do have many digital meetings of course," says Anna Rosenberg. Her Öresund commuter life began in 2015, the same year Sweden introduced passport controls for travellers coming from Denmark. Since November last year, Denmark has carried out occasional passport controls for travellers coming into the country.



“The passport controls fly in the face of the free movement we have enjoyed for so many years in the Nordic region, and they slow down travel across the Sound. When the countries close their borders, the challenges relating to international cooperation are thrown into stark relief. Will cooperation carry on in good times and in bad? We seem to cooperate less during a serious crisis like a pandemic. It should be the other way around,” says Anna Rosenberg.

A sudden stop for Nordjobb as mobility became a dirty word

For 35 years, Nordjobb has found work for 25,000 Nordic youths who have wanted to try working in a different Nordic country. This year nearly all jobs have been cancelled due to the corona crisis.

THEME

15.04.2020

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN

“Nordjobb is in a temporary state of emergency,” says Fredrik Jakobsen, Programme Director at Nordjobb.



He describes how Nordjobb’s mission changed suddenly and unexpectedly. The day before Denmark closed its borders, he participated at a conference on regional Nordic cooperation. It was held at the Nordic House in Copenhagen and was, as is usually the case for Nordic conferences, filled with people enthusiastically backing the Nordic cooperation. This was on 12

March, and since then he and his colleagues have been working from home, attending online conferences.

“The conference had high ambitions for more cooperation within the Nordic regions. I went home and since then it has been difficult to carry out any Nordic cooperation at all,” says Fredrik Jakobsen on the telephone from his home on the Swedish side of Öresund.

Mobility has become a dirty word

Nordjobb helps Nordic youths find summer jobs in different Nordic countries, where they can get to know a neighbouring country, meet other Nordic youths and take part in the host country’s culture and language. Nordjobb helps them find a workplace and accommodation, and also assists them with practical issues like opening bank accounts, organising taxes and ID numbers. The youths become aware of the opportunities that exist for working and studying in any Nordic country they want.

“The whole idea of Nordjobb is based on mobility across Nordic borders. Now, mobility has become a dirty word. Everything has been turned upside down,” says Fredrik Jakobsen.

He normally commutes to Copenhagen for his work at Nordjobb, where he has been since 2006. Jakobsen’s first meeting with Nordjobb was during his summer job in Skagen in 1997.



Back where it all started for Fredrik Jakobsen, at a fish processing plant in Skagen. This visit was to find more jobs for Nordic youths – before the corona epidemic hit. Photo: Private

“For me personally, Nordjobb has meant everything. After finishing my military service, I sent an application form to Nordjobb and got a job cleaning fish in Denmark. Everything I have done since springs out from that. It's my job, I have gained Nordic friends and cross-border knowledge. I see the Nordics as a region and this helps me apply the same approach to the EU as well as other regions,” says Fredrik Jakobsen.

Nordjobb started in 1985, and has facilitated a total of 25,000 jobs for youths who have wanted to check out the open Nordic labour market which has existed for nearly 70 years. Every year, some 750 jobs are found across the Nordic countries and in the autonomous areas Greenland, the Faroes and Åland. When the corona crisis hit, most of this summer's jobs were already planned and ready.

“We have been hit by crises before, for instance the finance crisis, but we could still carry out our work more or less as usual. We can't do that now. Nothing of what we usually do works anymore. I work with strategies and can see how conditions keep changing. This represents the greatest change since Nordjobb's creation in 1985,” says Fredrik Jakobsen.

Reduced Nordic effect

Nordjobb is run by the Confederation of the Norden Associations in cooperation with the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers. With closed borders, travel bans or advice against travel, Nordjobb cannot carry on as usual. The Nordic Council of Ministers' Committee of Senior Officials for Labour (EK-A), has therefore decided that Nordjobb this summer should match jobseeking youths with jobs in their home countries.

“Our mandate is now wider, and more like that of a regular jobcentre. We are used to cooperating with the national employment offices, but usually we help the jobseekers with so much more. This summer there will be less of a Nordic effect, which in normal times is our inspiration for what we do,” explains Fredrik Jakobsen.

“But we have still not crossed this summer out. Where there are openings, we do as much as we possibly can for Nordic mobility, for instance finding jobs for in Åland for Finnish youths. Still, we are far from achieving the matches we used to find before the corona crisis.”



Read our special issue about Nordjobb and how it all began.

He believes Norway might allow job applications from other Nordic countries for sectors that face labour shortages, including health, service and agriculture. But if quarantine rules are still in place, special permissions will be needed. Stockholm also needs labour in the health and care sector. Sweden is still open, but at the moment it is difficult to move between countries. That makes Nordjobb's mission difficult.

Moving in the wrong direction

Fredrik Jakobsen hopes this spring and summer will represent an exception for Nordjobb, and that they can get back on their feet as soon as borders reopen and quarantine rules disappear. Many Nordic countries are also predicting high unemployment levels.

“Many youths will probably be keen to find work in a different Nordic country. Nordjobb can play an important role here,” he says.

Still, he cannot but contemplate the longer-term consequences of the coronavirus situation.

“I hope what we are living through now is a temporary situation, but I still can't help thinking: what will this do to budgets? What will be the impact on the Nordic cooperation and not least free movement? It is sad when everything that has been created over so many years starts moving in the wrong direction, for instance the border controls at Öresund. We want to encourage more cooperation. The Nordic ministers should talk together before they close borders,” says Fredrik Jakobsen.

Regardless of what happens in the future, the past month has made him think a lot about the Nordic cooperation.

“On a professional level, I have been surprised over how quickly so much work has been destroyed, but also how quickly well-functioning societies are put under emergency measures. Personally I am also surprised that countries interpret the situation so differently, and that the administrative cultures within the Nordics are so different,” says Fredrik Jakobsen.



Nordic students in Europe fall victim to physical land borders

An entire generation Nordic students have grown up in a borderless Europe. Thousands are studying in other European countries. Most went back home in March as old borders started being reinstated because of the coronavirus.

THEME

06.04.2020

TEXT: LARS BEVANGER, PHOTO: PRIVATE/THEA HØYER

On 28 February 2020, the Swedish ambassador to the UK, Torbjörn Sohlström, addressed Nordic students at City Hall in London.

“Some [of you] have been really concerned, some of you have found the process really frustrating and difficult to understand,” he told them. He was talking about the students’ future status in the UK after Brexit, an issue which up until then had both engaged and worried many foreign citizens living in the country.

Little did he or any of the others in the hall know that few short weeks later, borders between the UK and the Nordic countries would be all but shut, and the majority of the students would have returned back to their home countries – unsure about when they could return.

International career put on hold?

Johannes Kvisselien from Oslo moved to London in the autumn of 2019 to begin his bachelor’s degree in International

Social and Political Studies at University College in London (UCL).

“I went home again on 15 March. That’s when Norway was about to close the borders, and my family started getting worried, he says.



For Kvisselien, who is hoping for an international career as a civil servant, closed borders have definitely thrown spanners in the works.

“In Norway, I could not find the degree I am studying for in London now. It is clearly worth a lot for me to be able to travel and find the environments I want to engage with. It also gives me an international network which is impossible to gain in Norway.”

Kvisselien can still follow his course via online teaching which is being offered to all by UCL now, but he misses the companionship and the direct contact with his university professors. He hopes to be able to return in the autumn, but takes nothing for granted.

“We still don’t know when this is going to end, so I have also applied for spaces at Norwegian universities in case I have to continue my education here,” he says.

Deprived of her liberty

Marie Solgard from Eidsøra near Molde in Norway is studying for a teaching degree in English and history. She has been busy writing her bachelor’s thesis at the University of York.

“On 11 March I was still planning to go on trips around the UK. I wanted to visit Edinburgh for instance, but one day later I was booking my flight home to Norway. My family advised me to return as the borders were about to close,” Solgard says.



She describes feeling deprived of her liberty. Solgard was attending the Norwegian Study Centre at the University of York, which has received some 1,100 Norwegian English students each year since it was founded in 1982.

“This has been a very strange situation to be in for a centre which was built to welcome Norwegian students, and whose entire reason for being is just this,” says Erik Tønning, the centre’s leader.

“We have had many messages of support from institutions in Norway, and promises that students will be arriving after this too. It is very inspiring to hear this,” he says. Solgard and the other students on her course are now offered online tuition.

Higher than the EU average

There are no precise statistics for how many Nordic students travel to other European countries to study. According to the report "Nordic Students Abroad", published by the Finnish welfare agency KELA in 2010, there were then more than 50,000 students from Nordic countries at foreign universities.

The number varies a lot between the different Nordic countries, but all have a higher number of students abroad than the EU average, which is around 4%.

The report’s authors, Miia Saarikallio-Torp and Jannecke Wiers-Jenssen, believe this is due to the Nordics being relatively small, with a rather peripheral position in Europe, both geographically and linguistically. Hence, there is a greater need for citizens with international experience and linguistic and cultural skills.

“I still have not met anyone who says they regret going to study in a foreign country. They tell me they have expanded their network with friends from the whole world, they have learned a new language, acquired new knowledge and become able to put their own backgrounds into a more international context,” says Hanna Flood.



President of ANSA Hanna Flood. Photo: Thea Høyer

She is the President of ANSA, the Association of Norwegian Students Abroad, which has been looking after these students' interests since 1956.

Flood herself studied in the UK and Germany, and says that this allowed her to appreciate Norway even more.

"It really made me realise how lucky I am to have the support of the Norwegian system. Today's situation is quite strange for me and my generation, who have grown up with completely free mobility, at least inside Schengen. It is not every day you see the foreign ministry issue advise against travel to all the countries of the world," says Flood.

20% foreign students

Most international students go to the UK. According to the British parliament, 20% of all the students in the UK come from other countries, and nearly half of these are from other EU and EEA countries.

According to University UK, the organisation looking after the interests of British universities, international students contributed some 29 billion euro to the British economy between 2014 and 2015. Closed borders are clearly not something the universities can live with either.

As a result, many British universities are taking action to be able to offer tuition to existing students, and to make it easier for future international students to plan for next autumn.

"In just one week, we moved to what we call virtual classrooms. This means we can carry on with interactive lessons where students can discuss with their professor, participate in group sessions, projects and presentations," says Anni Ritzler, advisor for Nordic students at Hult International Business School in London.



The university has put a range of measures into place to make things easier for Nordic and other international students who are contemplating studies at Hult this autumn. This includes easing some rules on documentation, making deposits refundable and preparing for more virtual teaching in case closed borders will still prevent new students from being physically present as the new semester begins.

Cautiously optimistic

Since the borders closed, staff at ANSA have been extra busy providing advice to Norwegian students around the world. Hanna Flood says a sudden fall in the value of the Norwegian krone has also made student life particularly challenging for many.

"This makes things difficult because student loans and grants are given out in Norwegian kroner. Many have seen their rent increase quite dramatically," she says.



Press Release

Date: 14 March 2020

Ministry of Foreign Affairs advises against non-essential travel to all countries

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs advises against all international travel that is not strictly necessary. The reason is the increasing spread of coronavirus internationally and the unpredictable and difficult situation faced by many travellers. For now, this advice will remain in effect until 14 April.

"We are in a serious and increasingly unpredictable situation," said Prime Minister Erna Solberg. "Our priority is to safeguard life and health. That requires extraordinary steps. The situation is changing rapidly in many countries, which is why we are advising against travel that is not strictly necessary to all countries."

Coronavirus transmission is on the rise in many countries, and the situation in countries experiencing significant outbreaks of the virus is changing rapidly and is unpredictable.

There has never before been issued travel advise like the one issued by Norway's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 14 March 2020.

Norwegian students in the UK who applied for support last year paid just over 10 kroner for one British pound. Today, one pound costs 13 kroner.

We still do not know when anti-infection measures like closed borders can be lifted, and different countries still find themselves in different phases of the pandemic. Deadlines for applying for university spaces at home and abroad are just around the corner. Hanna Flood at ANSA is cautiously optimistic.

"We do hope that the situation will allow for student exchanges to take place this autumn – if not everywhere, then in certain regions. The disease epicentre does move, and the WHO has said that the USA might be next. So it is important to stay calm, follow developments and look for opportunities and not just challenges," says Flood.



Kjetil Jacobsen

Norway finally joins dual citizenship club

Norway opened up for dual citizenship on 1 January 2020, not only as the last of the Nordics but as the last country in Europe. Ironically, not long after that, the borders closed because of the corona crisis.

THEME

27.03.2020

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL

“From this year, everyone born to a Norwegian mother or father have the right to Norwegian citizenship, regardless of whether they were born in or outside the country and regardless of whether or not their parents are married,” Kjetil Jacobsen said during an information meeting for Norwegian citizens in Oslo in early March. This was before the epidemic had taken off in Norway.

Jacobsen heads the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration’s department dealing with citizenship issues.

Different policies

Despite all the cultural, political and welfare policy similarities across the Nordics, the separate countries have handled

dual citizenship very differently. Sweden introduced dual citizenship back in 2001. Finland and Iceland followed in 2003 while Denmark came onboard in 2015.

“Denmark’s decision was a big surprise, since they had taken the lead in the European club that had been working against dual citizenship. What turned the tide in Denmark was the possibility this presented for revoking someone’s citizenship,” Professor Grete Brochmann, one of Norway’s leading experts on immigration, told the same meeting.

In 2017 the then Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen said no to a proposed visit from the Turkish Prime Minister, because it would have taken place shortly before

general elections in Turkey and Danes worried it could create splits among Turkish people in Denmark. This led to a debate in the Danish parliament.

“There are two reasons why we want to allow dual citizenship. One is for Danish citizens abroad to be able to keep a link to Denmark,” said Lars Løkke Rasmussen.

The other reason, he said, was that it was very difficult to revoke someone’s citizenship, because it is illegal under international law to make someone stateless. If some immigrants keep their original citizenship, it becomes easier to take their Danish one from them.

“This is also something I take into consideration when I reflect over whether dual citizenship is a good idea,” said Lars Løkke Rasmussen.

Cannot be revoked

In Norway too, the possibility of revoking someone’s citizenship was what led to a majority vote in parliament in favour of dual citizenship. In Sweden, it is not possible to revoke someone’s Swedish citizenship once it has been granted, regardless of whether the person has dual citizenship or not.



Grete Brochmann and a group of other researchers have studied the debate and the legislation in the three Scandinavian countries. They interviewed 22 leading politicians, civil servants and experts on citizenship.

“We asked them about their thinking around the concepts of nations, integration and social cohesion, and how this might have influenced dual citizenship legislation,” she said.

The trend in international migration policy has been for international conventions and the EU (for Norway the EEA agreement) to limit national sovereignty. Politicians have been looking for new legal ways of controlling access to full citizenship in the host country.

“It is interesting to compare the three Scandinavian countries because they have been covering the entire scale for what is needed to become a citizen. Denmark has some of the

strictest rules in the whole of Europe for becoming a citizen. Sweden is at the other, liberal, end of the scale. Norway is somewhere in the middle, which is typical for that country’s immigration and integration policy,” said Grete Brochmann.

The full scale

The Scandinavian countries cooperated far closer on citizenship policies between 1870 and 1979. There was even talk of introducing a common Scandinavian citizenship document. That never happened. 1979 saw the end of the systematic consultations which the three countries had used to carry out before making any changes.

“The end of the consultations also meant the emergence of new citizenship issues. National interests had become so important that there no longer was any desire to be tied to a joint Nordic or Scandinavian norm. Immigration was clearly the main reason for this change,” said Grete Brochmann.

Three national considerations

National considerations can be taken within three areas.

- How long does someone have to wait before applying for citizenship?
- What level of knowledge is needed?
- To what extent must someone be able to support themselves?

Even if all the three Scandinavian countries share an overarching goal for citizenship policies to improve integration, Denmark has treated the citizenship issue more as a stick and Sweden has treated it as a carrot.



Sweden introduced dual citizenship back in 2001. This picture is from a ceremony at the Stockholm City Hall some years, where new citizens were given their certificates proving they had become Swedish.

“In Sweden, the policy is seen as a people’s rights issue, a modern and progressive issue. In Denmark they are more focused on nationalism, they are more restrictive and conservative. They focus far more on the nation state than Sweden. Norway combines integration issues and immigration control, but this is far less rooted in ideology,” said Grete Brochmann.

"Danish at heart"

“The Danes consider integration to be something that takes time. To become “Danish at heart” – a commonly used term – is something that is both ambitious and thorny. It can even be unrealistic over the span of only one generation. Here you find a link to the country’s immigration policy: the fewer who arrive, the better in many ways.

“Swedes, however, consider social cohesion as a joint project in a multicultural society. The majority should adjust just as much as the newly arrived in order to make things work. Integration might take time, but the indirect message is that it is not that hard.”

According to Grete Brochmann there has been vocal opposition among the Swedish researchers in her research community to discussing Sweden’s citizenship policy.

“Nevertheless, the citizenship policy is now emerging as a tool for integration, albeit not a very important one. Sweden is the only European country where people applying for citizenship are not required to prove any knowledge about their host country. The application time is also the shortest in Scandinavia – only five years.”



St Olavs Hospital in Trondheim, Norway

Hospital wants to double the number of healthcare assistants

Will hiring more health care assistants make hospitals more efficient? Nurses at St. Olavs Hospital in Trondheim, Norway, welcome the hospital management's aim to increase the number of healthcare assistants. They are happy to leave certain working tasks to the assistants, but several conditions must be in place before this can happen.

THEME

26.03.2020

TEXT: BJØRN LØNNUM ANDREASSEN, PHOTO: FRODE DREIER

No other occupation in Norway faces a greater labour shortage than nursing, according to a survey carried out by the country's welfare agency NAV. But there is also a serious lack of healthcare assistants. The two occupations futures are closely linked.

Today's nurses must be experts in everything from slicing cucumbers to looking after extremely ill patients, according to Kenneth Sandmo Grip. He is the Norwegian Nurses Organisation's representative at St. Olavs Hospital (STO). His col-

leagues would welcome more healthcare assistants at Norway's fifth-largest hospital.

Specialisation

"I believe other occupational groups can help specialise the nursing profession. We have already seen some tasks transferred to healthcare assistants. But STO mainly maps which tasks are performed by nurses, and what others might be able to do. The Norwegian Nurses Organisation believes more

healthcare assistants are needed,” says Grip, adding that more healthcare apprentices are due to start in the autumn.



“I believe nurses have acted as buffers for greater efficiency for years. Secretaries have been removed and nurses have taken over. Nurses are doing more cleaning tasks. We have been far too good at taking on jobs which we really should not be doing. We see the need for other occupational groups to step up, especially on wards,” he says.

The hospital management wants to more than double the proportion of healthcare assistants from 6.9% to 15% by 2022. Figures from Statistics Norway (SSB) also show there is a lack of healthcare assistants. The number of full-time posts across the country must increase by 35% over the next 15 years.

Bottlenecks

Half of a nursing course is practical work. Grip explains how more apprentices in hospital healthcare might represent a challenge to nurses’ chances to mentor those who study nursing and who are doing their in-house training. That is why the Norwegian Nurses Organisation there is a need to map several issues.

“It is perfectly OK that the number of healthcare assistants is going to increase from 6.9 to 15% at STO by 2022, as long as we have proper mapping that shows this is possible. Tasks that are to be moved away from nurses must, in that case, be the same for all the shifts – day, evening, nights and weekend,” points out Sandmo Grip.

The number of nursing training spaces and a shortage of apprenticeships is said to be leading to a shortage of nurses. Another reason is the many Swedish nurses who have returned home.

“An absolute need”

The need for more healthcare assistants has existed for a long time, says Torild Enge. She is a veteran healthcare assistant and a trade union rep. Her departments are now mapping new tasks for healthcare assistants.



“When I started back in 1977, there were far more healthcare assistants. There is definitely a need for more than those STO has today. Our trade union reps are looking forward to this, and see how it can ease nurses’ jobs. Too many tasks land at nurses’ feet. One thing is certain – healthcare assistants must work with patients, not do menial tasks,” she says.

Typical tasks

“Healthcare assistants should be where the patient is. We have patients’ rooms situated around a workstation. Healthcare assistants will be in the rooms while nurses spend more time on the workstation, preparing doctors’ visits and more. The healthcare assistants will provide patients with information and be there when help is required. That’s the way it used to be when I worked on wards. Things will become a bit more like that again.”

In addition to looking after patients, healthcare assistants can take blood and monitor a patient’s condition. Other tasks

involve changing band-aids, help out with equipment and maintaining contact with municipalities when patients are to be sent home.

Increasing the numbers

Heidi Magnussen is the STO HR Director. She earlier told the publication Fagbladet that it will become easier for healthcare assistants to find jobs. STO is going to increase the annual number of apprenticeships from 23 to 50, and healthcare assistants will be taking on more tasks.

SSB has made some alternative calculations. Even if there is an expected 20% increase in trained healthcare assistants and nurses, there will still be too few of both groups by 2035.

Employment rates for healthcare assistants and others with similar training has improved less than expected between 2000 and 2014, according to an official Norwegian government report.



“We believe a good mix of occupational groups will lead to the best quality and the most efficient way of running things,” she told Fagbladet.

Magnussen added that the plan was not to increase the total number of jobs, and that no nurses need fear for their jobs.

Immigration is important

SSB has pointed out that it will probably be necessary to import healthcare workers from other countries in order to meet demand. There will be a shortage of some 4,500 nurses and 3,900 healthcare assistants in the coming years. No other occupational groups in Norway face the same labour shortage.

One of several reasons for this is the fact that there are too few student nurses and many existing nurses over 50, SSB writes. The lack of healthcare assistants is also explained by the fact that half of them were over 50 in 2010. The result: high age-related drops in numbers.