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Sep 09, 2020

Theme: Collective agreements in the Nordics



Newsletter from the Nordic Labour Journal 7/2020



Financed by
Nordic Council of
Ministers

NORDIC LABOUR JOURNAL

Work Research Institute
OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University,
Postboks 4 St. Olavs plass, NO-0130
Oslo

PUBLISHER

Work Research Institute, OsloMet
commissioned by the Nordic Council of
Ministers.

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An email edition of the newsletter can
be ordered free of charge from
www.nordiclabourjournal.org

ISSN 1504-9019 tildelt: Nordic labour
journal (online)



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Collective agreements important for people's trust in the future

It has been trying times for everyone participating in the Nordic exercise known as collective bargaining. The social partners deciding, between themselves, how wages should develop, is one of the pillars of the Nordic model.

EDITORIAL

09.09.2020

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Our theme in this edition is how collective bargaining has been influenced by the corona pandemic. The negotiations have so far not started in Sweden, but in the other four countries things have gone pretty much according to plan. The tone might have been a bit more strained, like in Iceland, and strike actions more plentiful, like in Finland. But when the collective agreement for the private sector in Denmark was voted through with nearly 80%, it also demonstrated a very strong belief in the collective agreement model among the wage earners.

We have written portraits of Swedish LO's new President Susanna Gideonsson and her counterpart Jarkko Eloranta at SAK. Both want to defend the Nordic model against all attempts by the EU to change the rules of the game.

"The Nordic cooperation is incredibly important both between trade union confederations and between civil servants and academics. We also completely agree on this issue, which feels really good," says Susanna Gideonsson.

It is only right to highlight that employers too are showing Nordic solidarity. This joint announcement was made by seven Nordic employers' organisations who recently gathered in Brussels:

"The wheels of the economy will only start turning if we can stimulate demand. Demand, trade, consumption and investment will start when there is predictability and solid prospects for business. It is essential to build confidence in the future if we are to boost the economy and secure a green recovery."

In a time with a pandemic, Brexit and an American election with an unknown outcome, it feels safe to be part of a group of like-minded Nordic countries. It was understandable that all of them reacted more or less in the same nationalistic way

when the pandemic broke out, considering this was something completely new.

"But no-one should get a 'bollocking' for that," said Denmark's Minister for Nordic Cooperation, Mogens Jensen, as he invited his colleagues to the first face-to-face meeting since the pandemic arrived.

Instead, the focus should remain on how we, as fast as possible, can get back to what is at the core at the Nordic cooperation – Nordic citizens' freedom to travel, live, study and work in the other Nordic countries.

This is not least important for young students who see their opportunity for international experience blocked because of the fear of infection. Perhaps there will be no studies in Australia or work experience in Ecuador, but a stay in Tampere or Lund instead?

It is also important to look at the positive aspects in the middle of all this. A Norwegian working life barometer made by Norway's Work Research Institute shows that the pandemic has also led to improved gender equality and less stress, while more people also feel they have a meaningful job with positive challenges.



Finnish employers signal backtracking on wage agreements

Not all businesses can afford to pay the agreed wage increases in Finland, warns the Federation of Finnish Technology Industries. Yet the trade unions will not tear up any collective agreements. The corona crisis rises many questions for Finnish labour market politics. Some say Finland's competitiveness could be under threat. Employers argue the Prime Minister's vision for six-hour days makes matters worse.

THEME

09.09.2020

TEXT: BENGT ÖSTLING, PHOTO: CATA PORTIN

Finnish businesses and society have suffered under corona just like the rest of the world has. Still, the country does not seem to have been as hard hit as feared it would be.

Preliminary figures from Statistics Finland show that GDP shrank by 4.5% between April and June compared to the previous quarter. Compared to Q2 in 2019, the working-day adjusted GDP shrank by 6.4%.

Finland is an exporting country. Even if Finland and the rest of the Nordics manage a second wave well, some export mar-

kets are further afield, in countries that struggle more with the spread of the coronavirus.

Both exports, imports and private consumption fell by some 10% in Finland in Q2.

“Not all companies can afford to pay higher wages”

The Finnish economy has managed better than expected. In terms of the number of infections and fatalities, Finland has also done well compared to the rest of Europe.



Jarkko Eloranta, SAK President. Photo: Cata Portin.

The hope is that things will continue to go well, says Jarkko Eloranta, President of the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions SAK.

But many others warn about future waves of infection resulting in a continued crisis.

Former National Conciliator Minna Helle, now Executive Director for industrial relations at the Federation of Finnish Technology Industries, wants to change or renegotiate the agreement. She has been telling Finnish media that some businesses simply cannot afford to pay higher wages this winter.

“Employers won’t let a good crisis go to waste”

Employers will of course exploit all crises as best they can, says Eloranta at SAK. He believes it is far too early to start cancelling, moving or postponing the 2% wage increase due to come into effect next year.

Taking to the Nordic Labour Journal, Eloranta underlines that it is possible to enter into local agreements on the coming wage increase. But employers cannot stop or reduce wage levels.

He is not yet saying no to the proposal, however, but perhaps. The situation is different for different businesses and trades, and prognoses are uncertain. There is no need to offer discounts or help to businesses which do well or even benefit from the coronavirus. But weaker businesses might need support.

Negotiations for the next wage agreement start in 2021, when it will be easier to grasp the full consequences of the corona crisis.

Eloranta does not want to create fear among employees that wage levels might fall. It is very important to maintain domestic purchasing power, he underlines. There is no imminent need to open up to new negotiations.

“Finnish competitiveness under threat”

Both the Bank of Finland and other actors warn that Finnish wages have risen too much – a general 3.3% increase over two years. This increases the risk for Finland to become less competitive in the global market.

A few years back, this problem was solved through a historic “competitiveness agreement”. The collective agreement and the service sector’s collective agreement were expanded to last a further 12 months, with unchanged wage levels. An extra 24 hours were added to annual full-time working contracts, with no extra pay. Holiday pay for public sector workers was reduced by 30% between 2017 and 2019.



Minna Helle, Executive Director for industrial relations at the Federation of Finnish Technology Industries. Photo: Federation of Finnish Technology Industries

The aim was to improve the Finnish labour market’s and companies’ competitiveness, create more jobs and increase growth.

Employees have now been spared the unpopular extra working hours. Employers see how the corona crisis means they might have to give new ground in order to secure profitability, jobs and Finland’s competitiveness.

No concrete work has been made to create a template for such a new agreement. SAK President Jarkko Eloranta is keen to stress that the central organisations are not taking part in discussions about wage costs or the cost of labour.

But he is very happy to talk about better job protection, welfare and wellbeing at work, as well as new models for work division that can help increase employment figures.

New agreements in place before corona hit

Finland has its new agreements, which were reached before the corona crisis hit. Unlike the situation in Sweden, where the entire agreement negotiation was postponed in the hope that the crisis would be over by the autumn.

Yet two sectors in Finland ended up with no agreements this spring – tourism and hospitality, which later became the worst-hit sectors during corona. Jarkko Eloranta believes it might be difficult to reach agreements for these trades.

But most Finnish workers have agreements and can plan their future for a year to come at least.

“In one way I am happy the agreements are there. But many of them end in a year’s time, so we will soon be back to negotiating. Soon we will know more about the state of the Finnish economy and which agreements are possible,” says Jarkko Eloranta

He does not give advice to the Swedish trade union movement representing millions of workers. But he notes that the healthcare sector is under enormous pressure.

“Both at the Swedish Trade Union Confederation LO and at SAK it is our members who have been maintaining important social functions. But the applause fades and the lights go off when one day it is time to pay,” points out Jarkko Eloranta.

It might be difficult to promise large wage increases or corona compensation to Finnish healthcare workers, believes Jarkko Eloranta. Some municipalities nevertheless pay extra to key workers within healthcare, care for the elderly and other sectors.

Troubled budget for government

Finland’s five-party coalition presents its budget proposal in parliament in mid-September. The government has already presented five amended budgets so far in 2020. Many problems have been pushed back to the final budget, and by early September this was far from finished.

So far there is no disagreement on how much money to borrow. The state’s net borrowing is estimated to be around 17.6 billion euro in 2020. Public debt will stand at around 124 billion euro by the end of the year. This represents around 54% of the country’s GDP.

Employment and competitiveness are believed to be the most important themes in the government’s budget, but addressing climate change is also going to be important.

Questions around the timing of six-hour day

There has been a lively debate about employment and unemployment since the government came to power. It gained momentum during the Social Democratic Party’s congress in late August, where Prime Minister Sanna Marin was formally elected party leader after Antti Rinne.



Prime Minister Sanna Marin. Photo: Laura Kotila

During the congress, Marin again brought up the vision of a six-hour working day with no reduction in pay. Both the opposition – the National Coalition Party and the Finns Party – and representatives from the private sector are critical to the Social Democratic vision.

They think it is being put forward at the wrong time while being far too expensive and a threat to competitiveness.

At SAK, President Jarkko Eloranta argues, just like the Prime Minister herself, that the issue is not at all relevant in the next few years. The proposal is not part of this government’s programme nor can it be found in the collective agreement. The working hours bill was recently rewritten and is unlikely to be changed again any time soon.

Eloranta tells the Nordic Labour Journal that he is not foreign to the idea, but underlines that there are many other issues which are more pressing – like working conditions for part-time employees, the shortening of working hours for the oldest employees and trying out of new models for the division of labour.

Prime Minister Sanna Marin has been criticised for not helping and for not understanding the business sector. She was sharply critical of the forest industry company UPM’s decision to shut down the country’s last print media paper factory in Jämsä. 450 people will lose their jobs in the small town when the factory, which has been profitable, is closed down.

The Social Democratic Party is wondering why factories turning a profit are shut down and what kind of social responsibility private business is showing.

Collective bargaining with face masks

Nordic employers and trade unions have spent spring and summer in collective bargaining efforts, except in Sweden where negotiations have been postponed until 1 October because of the corona pandemic. How has sharply rising unemployment impacted on the process? Will certain groups, who have been working even harder during the crisis, get their reward?

THEME

08.09.2020

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The collective bargaining processes are under pressure due to two main factors:

- Unemployment and a frozen economy make many employers feel they cannot afford to pay high wages.
- On the other side, workers in the sectors that have taken the hardest toll during the pandemic – health care and retail – have fresh arguments for wage rises.

Both sides understand that purchasing power must not be weakened too much. But most important of all is to recreate hope for the future.



How will things turn out? Jørn Eggum, President of Norway's United Federation of trade Unions and Stein Lier Hansen, CEO of the Federation of Norwegian Industries, regard each other as Norway's collective bargaining process began on 3 August. The negotiations stopped after only one hour, but an agreement was still reached – with the help of mediation. Photo: Gorm Kallestad, NTB Scanpix

A large apparatus is being ramped up, with similar traits and somewhat different deadlines across all of the Nordic coun-

tries. Sweden alone has 55 employers' organisations and 60 trade unions. The bargaining process has three phases:

First, a central collective agreement is negotiated by the parties in different trades. This creates a framework for how high wages should be.

This agreement then serves as the foundation for local collective agreements between trade unions and different employers. These will also cover more work-specific issues. Once a central collective agreement has been signed, the parties have agreed to "keep the peace". This means that local negotiations take place without any possibility or threat of strike action.

In the third step, employers and employees reach employment agreements on an individual level.

Opposition to minimum wages

All of the Nordic countries oppose the introduction of minimum wages, which are common elsewhere in Europe. It is considered to give too much power over wages to politicians, and the labour market becomes too rigid as a result. However, it has long been agreed that competitive industry wages should set the standard for other sectors in society.

Kristine Nergaard and Kristin Alsos put it like this in a Fafo report:

- If industry wage increases are too high, we lose jobs in the competitive sector.
- If wage increases in other sectors are too high, the industry loses in the fight for labour and is forced to increase wages. In the long run, the economy will correct this when higher unemployment pushes wages down.

In Sweden, this is known as the industry "setting a mark". In Norway, they call this system of wage coordination "frontfagsmodellen" (frontfag being another word for the competitive sector).

This means a ceiling is set for wage increases across the whole country. This also makes it easier for low-pay trade unions to achieve wage increases.

“If left to fend for their own, it is far from certain that LO’s low-pay unions would manage to achieve wage increases similar to the industry norm, the so-called mark. That means the industry norm, together with support from LO, probably has helped these unions be more successful in negotiations than they otherwise would have been. On the other hand, it is not easy to achieve more than the industry norm, and change the wages for other groups – the so-called relative wages,” writes Anders Kjellberg, Professor of Sociology at Lund in his new book: *The Swedish Model Under Threat*?

Mediation offices have also been created to support wage negotiations, stepping in to help when the parties get stuck. They have slightly different mandates in different countries. The Swedish National Mediation Office’s task is to make sure the industry wage standard is adhered to, while the National Mediator of Norway’s aim is to maintain “working peace”.

It is also important that the parties have a shared perception of reality. This is secured by using independent players like Statistics Norway and its *Teknisk Beregningsutvalg* (Technical Assessment Committee) that calculates wage development. It is rare for the Nordic labour market parties to disagree on facts.

Sometimes, however, the positions are so entrenched and the interpretation of labour market rules so different that special labour courts must decide. They are composed of judges from both parties, as well as independent persons.

How did it go?

So what has it been like to perform wage negotiations during a pandemic?

In Denmark, Finland and Iceland the parties chose to carry on with the collective bargaining as before. In Finland, new agreements have been signed for the technology and forestry sector which secures wage increases of 3.3% over a period of 25 months. The forestry industry was paralysed by a two weeks long strike from 27 January.

In Sweden, collective bargaining was postponed. A new industry agreement should have been ready by 31 March, but negotiations will now only start on 1 October. The old collective agreement will be in place until then.

In Norway, the wage negotiations for industry should have started in March, but because of the corona pandemic they were postponed until 3 August. On 20 August an agreement was reached which will secure a wage increase of 1.7% in total for industry for 2020. The agreement was reached just before 28,000 industry workers were about to strike.

In Denmark, there was debate about whether collective bargaining should be postponed. When it started, before the corona pandemic, the Danish economy was doing well. But employers and employees could not agree on marked wage increases for low-paid workers and the Danish national mediator was called in. He chose to continue. In the end, an agreement for the private sector was reached, securing 7.5 Danish kroner more per hour over three years for low-paid workers.

Danish fathers who work in industry can look forward to eight weeks of parental leave reserved just for them. All in all, it looks like the corona effect on Nordic wage negotiations has been smaller than expected. There have been no radical changes, neither up nor down, compared to earlier agreements.



Hot spring and summer for Iceland's collective bargaining

Iceland's newly appointed state mediator Aðalsteinn Leifsson had no easy task when he started work on 1 April 2020. The corona pandemic had a brutal effect on Iceland's economy. Challenging mediating tasks included wage negotiations for cabin crew, nurses and upper secondary school teachers.

THEME

08.09.2020

TEXT: GUÐRÚN HELGA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR, FOTO: ARNÞÓR BIRKISSON

The loudest conflict centred on Icelandair, whose CEO Bogi Nils Bogason threatened to fire all cabin crew and negotiate with a different trade union from theirs.

The negotiations between Icelandair and the cabin crew's trade union Flugfreyjufélagi Íslands took much of Aðalsteinn Leifsson's time and energy during the spring and summer.



State mediator Aðalsteinn Leifsson, photo: State Conciliation and Mediation Office.

“What is special about the negotiations with the cabin crew’s union is that the corona pandemic had such an effect on the company and the future outlook for tourism,” says Aðalsteinn Leifsson.

The enterprise Icelandair has faced enormous problems since the start of the pandemic, both with employers, authorities, creditors and Boeing. Aðalsteinn Leifsson does not want to comment on particular negotiations.

But the company’s negotiations with cabin crew this spring was obviously impacted by the fact that there were no tourists in Iceland. The situation was so difficult that Icelandair threatened to boycott the cabin crew’s union and negotiate with a different cabin crew union instead.

The Icelandic Confederation of Labour ASÍ accused Icelandair of not following the rules and argued that unless they did, the company should not receive state aid.

terests. But when solutions were debated, the remote meetings did not work as well. It was necessary to meet face-to-face.

“We met in small groups in big rooms where it was possible to respect the two-meter rule and other regulations. Sometimes we were only three plus three people in meetings. The negotiators later met their colleagues in different rooms to discuss with them,” explains Aðalsteinn Leifsson.

The collective agreement in Iceland was entered into 18 months ago. Since then, there have been separate negotiations with various trade unions, sometimes with help from the state mediator. Right now the future of the collective agreement is being debated, to find out whether it has worked as intended or ought to be revised.



Bogi Nils Bogason, CEO of Icelandair, photo: Arnþór Birkisson.

Icelandair has now been given a state guarantee worth 15 billion Icelandic krónur (€90.8m).

But the spring negotiations were not easy generally. This was partly because of the corona pandemic, which meant negotiation delegations could not meet due to social distancing rules for meetings.

People did show a positive attitude towards using new methods, however.

“We had to organise remote meetings in order to continue the negotiations. We used modern technology to do this,” says Aðalsteinn Leifsson.

The remote meeting solution worked well to begin with while the negotiation delegations presented their demands and in-



Susanna Gideonsson: Fight attacks on the Swedish model

Swedish LO's new President, Susanna Gideonsson, has deep roots in the trade union movement. At 16 she started getting engaged in work against unfair conditions at work, and now she represents 1.4 million LO members across 14 unions. Her current main challenge is to protect the Swedish model against political interference in labour law reform.

NEWS

08.09.2020

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN, FOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL/AFTONBLADET

"I got engaged in trade union activities because I got mad about bad conditions in the workplace. I carried on being active when I realised nothing happens if you just sit there and wait for someone else to do something. If you take part, it is actually possible to change things. After all, society is made up of people and it can be changed with people's help. Simply put; it is never too late to start and always too early to give up," says Susanna Gideonsson.

Her union engagement started at a carpentry factory in Västerbotten in the north of the country and continued through work in forestry, home care and more. Little by little

her interest in unions and the Social Democrats grew into a full-time job. Before taking the helm at LO, she led the Commercial Employees' Union, Handels. Now, her life-long belief that she in cooperation with others can take the responsibility for changing things has led her to the top elected office of the Nordics' most heavyweight trade union.

Susanna Gideonsson was elected President by a unified congress in June 2020 and became LO's 15th leader since it was founded in 1898. She is the second woman to hold the post, but does not focus much on that. She also does not think this fact makes her leadership any different.

“I don’t know whether the fact that I am a woman makes a difference to the leadership, and I don’t think that much about it. It is mainly speculation that you find outside of the organisation. One individual is not like another in any case, and I think people lead in different ways regardless of their gender.”

Results are more important than the person

When Susanna Gideonsson is asked which qualities made her right for the job as LO President, she sighs and thinks this over.

“Seriously, I don’t know. I did not consider myself to be the perfect candidate for the job. Others do see me as that. The qualities I bring include being solution-oriented, pragmatic and some of those who know me say I’m completely unpretentious. The person is not that important, I feel. It is what I can achieve that matters. I think it is important that we in the trade unions should think about who pays our wages and that we need to stay relevant to our members. Things are a bit different at a confederation like LO, but we should have a way of working that allows us to support each other to do a good job. If I were to suddenly disappear, others should be able to take over.”

We talk over the telephone and she is in no rush. Her answers are thought through and concise, and amplified by her regional dialect. Despite spending 15 years commuting to Stockholm, she remains true to Västerbotten. Umeå and its landscape is her home and will remain so. She has been commuting to Stockholm for 15 years due to her trade union work and also has a small flat there, but she will never become a Stockholmer. At home in Umeå, she has her husband, two cats and a dog. There are four classic cars and a garden. And family and friends.

“It is also a good way for me to switch off. When I get on the plane on a Friday to go home, I shut much of my job away. And I am nearly completely dependent on my garden and find it nearly meditative to do the weeding. I have also had my interest for cars from a very early age,” she says.

Defending the Swedish model

Susanna Gideonsson takes over the Presidency from Karl-Petter Thorwaldsson in a turbulent time. The fact that the congress happened digitally for the first time was perhaps not such a big deal, but it mirrors a world which in a short amount of time has been forced to get used to major changes because of the pandemic.

Bankruptcies, rising unemployment, postponed collective bargaining and right now negotiations between the social partners to reach agreement on labour law reform by the end of September.

A central part of the January agreement that was a prerequisite for the Centre Party and the Liberals to support the Social Democrat government was labour law reform and a loos-

ening up of legislation on employment protection. If the parties now cannot agree, a new and considerably more liberal law on employment protection is expected. This means negotiations are being conducted under extreme pressure. The new LO President is not happy that politicians are getting so involved.

“This is an unusual level of political interference into matters that are normally dealt with by the social partners. It can be compared to what happened in the 1970s, when politicians also passed a raft of legislation turning relations between employer and employees incredibly frosty for a while. We are now trying anew – do we want what we call the Swedish model and to stand up and protect it? And how far can we go in its defence? Because we do see this as an attack on the Swedish model,” says Susanna Gideonsson.

Negotiating under time pressure also complicates things, believes Susanna Gideonsson.

“We dislike negotiating under time pressure because we might then not have time to discuss all matters thoroughly and end up not being able to deliver the best result. Yet the political situation is what it is and it is no use complaining about it. We will do our level best.”

LO members kept society running

Another challenge is EU interference in what is usually trade unions’ responsibilities in the Nordics, for instance minimum wages. Nordic trade unions do not consider this to be an EU matter and want to work together to stop political interference that might set collective agreement solutions aside. And although borders have been closed during the pandemic and countries have taken different approaches, cooperation between Nordic trade unions have carried on without delay – albeit digitally rather than face-to-face.

“The Nordic cooperation is incredibly important both between trade union confederations and between civil servants and academics. We also completely agree on this issue, which feels really good,” she says.

The different trade unions under LO have been hit in different ways by the pandemic. Certain trades have been hard hit with many redundancies, furloughs and higher unemployment. Other sectors have worked incredibly hard, including healthcare and retail, when people were stockpiling.

“We know that it is LO members who have kept society running. If we didn’t have people to drive to busses, collect waste, run wards and making it possible to buy food, society would have ground to a halt,” points out Susanna Gideonsson.

The collective bargaining process was postponed by the pandemic and will begin again in October. Susanna Gideonsson hopes the collective memory of who kept society running,

'face-to-face' with the infection, will still be there when it comes to the will to pay up.

Increasingly important security

LO's members are different and there has been some fragmentation ahead of this round of collective bargaining. Susanna Gideonsson is not surprised that different trade unions prioritise different issues. Their makeup is different; in some nearly every member is on fairly well-paid permanent contracts, in others – like the hospitality and restaurant sector, many work short-term contracts and are not well paid at all.

“And you get different priorities, of course. That is why we need to discuss what we want the Swedish labour market to look like, and really address the core issues. We see that over the past 20 years, the Swedish labour market has not developed in a positive direction for certain groups. How should we, as a large trade union organisation, approach this so that the majority of workers actually get better conditions in future?”

In interviews and at her first press conference in her new role Susanna Gideonsson returns to the need for security.

“I am completely convinced that all people want to feel part of something and to do a good job. So I think it is only fair that people should be able to whistle to and from work. In this context, security is an overarching term. To feel secure is to know that I earn enough money to pay for food and rent this month and also the next.

"I should be secure in the knowledge that I can get to work on public transport that works. I should also be able to feel secure at work and know that my children and older relatives have a good life. Security is a society that works so that I don't have to worry and can do a good job.

"And if I fall ill or become unemployed, I should know that there is a safety net I can trust until I am up and running again. This is what I mean when I talk about security. It is not complicated, it is just basic," says Susanna Gideonsson.



Would-be exchange students losing out

International experience is important in a lot of occupations, but for many, the corona pandemic has left the dream of a colourful CV in tatters.

NEWS

07.09.2020

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJØRN LØNNUM ANDREASSEN

The understanding of other languages, culture and history is part of many university courses. Students with international experience can showcase international skills, says the Norwegian University of Science and Technology NTNU, which has exchange agreements with more than 500 universities in more than 100 countries. Right now, though, none of this is of much help.

Autumn semester hardest hit

Most exchange students go on shorter trips lasting three to six months, explains Anja Linge Valberg, Head of Office at the NTNU Office of International Relations.

“The corona pandemic has first and foremost put a stop to the physical exchange programmes for students on short-term stays this autumn. NTNU has felt it necessary to cancel such exchanges for this semester.

“Foreign students have been accepted for 2020 on the understanding that their courses will be digital during the first semester, with a view to arrive in Norway in January 2021. Some courses have chosen not to accept international students in 2020 because of challenges related to digital teaching,” she says.

Cultural experience

“We see a certain level of drop-off now during this first semester, and it is clear that digital solutions do not provide a total package in many ways. A major part of the exchange experience is normally to gain cultural experiences and to physically live in a foreign country. We also get feedback saying digital courses can be challenging for some. They might have bad internet connections, there are different time zones and other technical problems too,” says Valberg.

“We are working towards securing a more normal study situation by spring 2021, but there are many things that must be worked through at NTNU first,” she tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

“It is too early to say whether the corona pandemic will lead to a fall in application numbers for our international master's degree programmes. The situation is different from country to country and many things can still change for the students.”

A broken dream

Markus Hoff Skudal studies industrial economics and technology management in Trondheim.

“My studies have carried on without major delay, but I lost out on job experience. I was due to work as an exchange student with data analysis in Ecuador. It was really disappointing to miss out on that,” says Skudal.

He still does not know whether exchanges planned for next spring might be cancelled too. His plan is to study in New Zealand. He says the current situation means he risks losing sorely needed and desired experience from studying and working abroad.

“My planned foreign stay means a lot. It is not usually possible to postpone it, but it looks like the institute might have made an exception. It might be accepted to do the exchange during the fourth year of study, rather than next spring, but I still don't know. NTNU management or the department must authorise a delayed exchange programme,” he explains.

“I have been studying from home and taken most of my exams at home, with less follow-up from lecturers than I had expected. I really enjoy being present in physical lectures. The situation is unfortunate but understandable,” he says.

Nearly stopped before getting off the ground

British student Sebastian Porter is currently on a work exchange in Trondheim.

“I came to Norway two and a half weeks ago and spent 10 days in quarantine. That was not much fun, but apart from those 10 days, most things have gone pretty much according to plan. I have been fairly lucky. Norway seems to have fewer restrictions on meeting other students, compared to Belgium where I have been living. If the situation makes it necessary to travel more back and forth, it would be really disruptive to have to spend more time in quarantine. This also depends on whether online studying will be offered or not,” he says.

“Besides studying, I am working for a company in order to get some international work experience, which is essential. But I did not have a formal work contract because I already knew the company well. When I arrived at the airport ready to leave, I realised I had a ‘small’ problem. I was not allowed to board the plane to Norway without a work contract. After

a somewhat stressful telephone call to my leader, a contract was sent over just minutes before my departure for Norway.”

Cancelling out of fear

The International Association for the Exchange of Students for Technical Experience, IAESTE, facilitates work experience for overseas students.

“We have not been able to send any Norwegian studies abroad this year. That is a dramatic situation. Many students are worried and there has been a lot of back-and-forth. Many are worried about travelling and have cancelled the day before departure. We have dealt with a lot of very unhappy students who have had their dream jobs abroad cancelled.

“Many of those who come back with working experience gain a lot from this when they enter into the working life,” says Caroline Oksnes at IAESTE and NTNU.

“We have been able to receive a few European students, but some unpredicted issues have popped up. Suddenly some countries have turned red and made it challenging to find a place to live and working digitally during the quarantine.”



Which student cities do students prefer?

What are students most and least happy with in 10 Nordic student cities? Statistics Norway have used data from the Eurostudent VI survey to compare students' situations in different countries.

NEWS

07.09.2020

TEXT AND GRAPHS: BJÖRN LINDAHL

Eurostudent is a major European survey which is carried out every three years in 30 countries. It includes statistics for 26 Nordic student cities. Researchers Daniel Albertsen and Anna-Lena Keut at Statistics Norway have looked at conditions in the following cities: Aalborg and Aarhus (Denmark). Tampere and Turku (Finland). Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim (Norway). Stockholm, Linköping and Lund (Sweden).

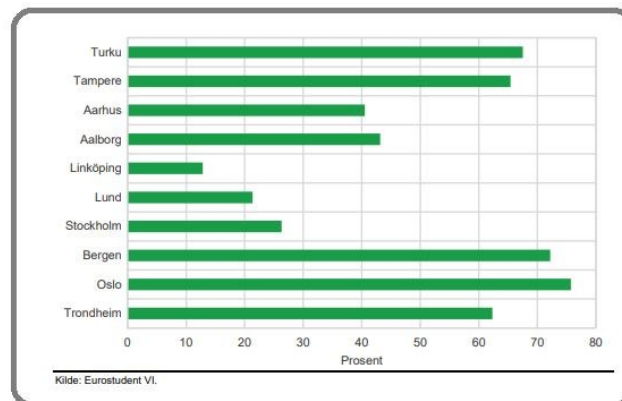
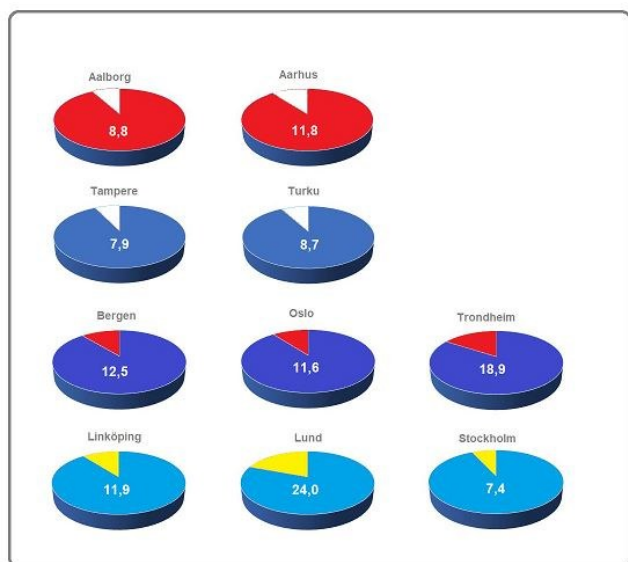
Some of the conclusions include:

- It is far more common to live together with other students in Norwegian cities compared to the other student cities. 58.9% of students in Trondheim live with friends or other students. In Turku and Stockholm, the number is 11.6%.
- The Finnish student cities of Tampere and Turku stand out by having the largest number of

students who are happy about different aspects linked to their accommodation.

- Monthly student support in several of the Swedish cities is higher than the median monthly cost of living. Oslo has the highest median cost of living, at more than 10,000 kroner (€8,450).

WHICH STUDENT CITIES DO STUDENTS PREFER?



One of the greatest differences in the survey is how many of the students have not been able to afford not having a job while studying. 70% of students in Oslo said they had to work, while the figure for Linköping was less than 15%.

Oslo has the highest number of students out of the ten cities with 76,793, but students make up the largest proportion of the total population in Lund and Trondheim with 28,433 and 36,595 students respectively. This means Lund's population is made up of 24% students and the figure for Trondheim is 18.9%. Graph by NLJ, based on figures from Statistics Norway.

"In terms of how students experience their student lives, we found differences between the cities when it comes to how happy students are with both the quality of teaching and with how courses are organised. Norwegian cities have the lowest number of students who are content with the quality of teaching," write the two researchers.

On average, more master degree students are happy with the quality of teaching compared to bachelor degree students. Across all of the cities, more students are content with the quality of teaching than are happy with how courses are organised.

Linköping stands out as eight in ten students there consider their job prospects to be good in their home country at the end of their studies. Only half of students in Bergen say the same. Linköping also stands out, together with Tampere and Turku, in terms of how many students see their job prospects abroad as good. More than half of students in these cities consider job prospects to be good.



Danish Presidency: The Nordic cooperation passed the Corona test

Closed borders, economic confusion in Nordic cooperation forums and hundreds of millions of kroner for environment and climate work. These are some of the issues on the agenda for Nordic Ministers for Cooperation when they meet face-to-face for the first time since before the pandemic.

NEWS

03.09.2020

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: BAX LINDHARDT

Closed borders will be debated but no blame proportioned when Nordic ministers for Nordic cooperation gather around the same table on 10 September for the first time since the Covid-19 crisis began, expects the Danish Minister for Nordic Cooperation Mogens Jensen. He will be hosting the meeting as Denmark holds the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

“Nordic citizens’ right to travel, live, study and work in other Nordic countries is at the core of the Nordic cooperation. That’s why it is sad that Denmark had to close its borders

during Covid-19. Yet it was not the only country in the world that had to do that.”

He does not think Denmark will face criticism during the co-operation ministers’ meeting for stopping Swedes at the border during lockdown, while Danes were free to travel to and from Sweden.

“None of the Nordic countries will face a bollocking because of Covid-19, a situation that was new to everyone and which the different Nordic countries naturally approached in different ways.”



He points out that countries had different levels of infection risk and organised their responses to the virus in different ways. But now, as everyone knows much more about Covid-19, it makes sense to work towards increased Nordic coordination and cooperation in order to tackle the pandemic and similar crises, believes Denmark's Minister for Cooperation.

New cooperation and cancellations

He believes the Nordic cooperation has worked well during the pandemic and that it has made a real difference across a range of issues.

"The Nordic cooperation has prevailed. We have shown that cooperation allows us to continue to create good solutions.

Nordic countries for instance cooperated on social support for citizens who became victims of closed borders, and there was also a common effort to find the best ways of repatriating Nordic citizens who were stranded abroad during the pandemic, the minister points out.

During the pandemic, meetings have also been held to deal with both health and economic consequences, with Nordic ministers initiating a joint survey of the pandemic's effect on Nordic labour markets. This includes mapping which groups have been the hardest hit.

Most of the Nordic Council of Ministers' face-to-face meetings during the Danish Presidency have been cancelled, including ministers' meetings in Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Mogens Jensen deeply regrets this, since both Greenland and the Faroes form part of the Kingdom of Denmark, and as such are part of the Danish Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers. In both places, many people had been involved in organising the Nordic ministers' visits.

Virtual meetings

Covid-19 has been disruptive, but it has also helped identify new frameworks that can strengthen the Nordic cooperation, believes Mogens Jensen. One example, he says, is the need for Nordic Ministers of Cooperation to meet virtually.

"The Nordic cooperation's success is to a large extent built on the fact that ministers and parliamentarians from the Nordic

countries meet face-to-face and get to learn about each other's cultures and societies. Virtual meetings do not offer this, but they have other advantages. People who might normally be prevented from being there for practical reasons can now participate, and we can meet at short notice when needed. These are good experiences that we will take with us going forward."

Green millions and gender equality

The Ministers for Cooperation are also expected to adopt an action plan during their September meeting which will execute the Nordic Prime Ministers' vision of making the Nordic region the world's most integrated and sustainable.

Mogens Jensen says the plan includes several hundred million kroner earmarked for green change, including greener transport. The plan also stipulates that climate and environment issues should be central to the Nordic region's economic recovery. Covid-19 does not change the fact that being as sustainable and integrated as possible is at the core of both the Danish Presidency and the Nordic cooperation.

Mogens Jensen expects the Nordic region to become a global leader too in gender equality, even though the pandemic has led to the cancellation of several important international conferences where joint Nordic participation on government minister-level had been planned.

LGBTI-beacon

Mogens Jensen is also Denmark's Minister for Gender Equality, and in 2019 he entered into political cooperation with his Nordic colleagues aimed at strengthening the protection and improving the lives of LGBTI people across the region. He has high hopes for this cooperation.

"I am incredibly happy for and proud of this common Nordic platform to secure the opportunities and rights of LGBTI people, since there are still places in the world where they face persecution. This cooperation is here to stay, also beyond the Danish Presidency, and I believe that we in the Nordic region can inspire and be a beacon to the rest of the world."

Economic confusion

The Ministers for Cooperation meeting will also address the economic management of the Nordic Council of Ministers' administration. The introduction of a new finance system has led to economic confusion which, according to Mogens Jensen, Denmark finds so unacceptable that the country withheld some of its contribution to the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2019. Now, Mogens Jensen has invited a Danish public auditor to attend the upcoming ministers' meeting.

"It is very concerning that there seems to be challenges connected to accountancy and financial management, which we should be able to have full confidence in. This must be sorted out, and that is why we will use this meeting to present our strongest political recommendation to fix this issue."



A silver lining for working life during corona

Improved gender equality, less stress and more people who feel they have a meaningful job with positive challenges. Those are some of the surprising results found in the 2020 Norwegian working life barometer.

NEWS

14.08.2020

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The answers to the main question – whether Norwegian workers are satisfied with life – show a negative trend, however. More now say they are somewhat satisfied with life than those who say they are very satisfied. People with a looser connection to the labour market are less satisfied than those who have the safest jobs. The trend is unusually sharp and is a result of the corona crisis, the researchers behind the barometer say.

The Norwegian Work Research Institute, WRI, has performed this survey for twelve years in a row now, on commission from the YS trade union. There were 2,900 respondents. Several corona-related questions were added to this year's survey, and there were many pessimistic answers to these – especially from those in low education/low-wage jobs. The Nordic Labour Journal has written about that part of the sur-

vey here: Interim Norwegian study of the corona epidemic's effect on workers.

But answers to many of the usual, annual questions are also coloured by the corona crisis.

No high anxiety level

The survey's most general question is "how satisfied are you with life today?".

"The lack of change in the lower part of the scale is interesting. It does not look like workers have entered into a state of depression or high anxiety level. But there has clearly been a mood change," write the three researchers Mari Holm Ingelrud, Dag Ellingsen and Arild Steen.

The researchers believe the following to be some of the changes linked to corona:

- Trade union support has increased, especially within trades that have seen the highest furlough numbers because of corona. On a scale from one to ten, school and kindergarten workers put trade unions' importance at 8.3 on average, while IT workers say 7.10. The average for all other workers is 7.7, while last year this number was 7.59.
- The fear of losing one's job has increased. Those who are the least worried are naturally people working in the health care sector. They put themselves at 7.8 on the scale for how safe they felt, with 10 as the highest number. Restaurant and tourism workers are the least secure, putting themselves at 3.6 on the same scale.

There is no overall significant increase in the level of fear for change and redundancies. But the numbers for the vulnerable trades are very high compared to in previous years. The sense of security within the restaurant and tourism sectors has fallen from 6.0 to 3.6.



Retail is one of the trades that has had a lot of attention of the positive kind during the corona pandemic. Here Stein Bakken has just received the morning delivery.

Not only negative

The corona crisis has not had purely negative consequences, however. Gender equality has improved during the months when many have been working from home. The number of women and men who share the responsibility for housework and childcare has risen. The barometer's total gender equality number is now 5.35, up from 5.05 last year.

All of Norway's schools and kindergartens had to close on 13 March. The survey was performed between 24 March and 20 April, one week before the lower school classes and kindergartens reopened.

Fewer people have experienced workplace stress during the corona period compared to last year. Workers are less ex-

hausted and more of them experience a better work/life balance.

Hailed as heroes

"Many did not have to travel to work – in Oslo this can take an hour – and they got more time as a result. But the corona period led to more than just a reduction in demands put on workers – organised activities closed down, it was not easy to go out, be social outside of the home or travel to somewhere else. All this meant people had less of a programme in their spare time," says Mari Holm Ingelsrud.

More people also feel they have a meaningful job with positive challenges.

"The biggest differences are seen among retail workers. They were hailed as heroes for going to work and stacking shelves with food. It helps to have your job recognised."

On a scale from one to ten for how meaningful people's jobs felt, food and other retail increased from 6.7 in 2019 to 7.3 this year.