

English summary
of Fafo-rapport 2020:19

Time for activation
Evaluation of NAV's
intensified youth initiative

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There is continued concern for young adults who are outside the labour market. Various statistics, such as the figures on unemployment, NEETs, young recipients of economic social assistance, young adults with disabilities and upper secondary school dropout rates, show that exclusion among young adults has either been stable or has increased in the last two decades. Initiatives aimed at activating unemployed young adults are therefore crucial.

On 1 January 2017, NAV introduced an intensified youth initiative, where the goal was to increase the number of economically active young adults. The initiative was first introduced in Southern and Western Norway, followed by the rest of the country. In this report, we evaluate the first implementation phase of the initiative. We examine the goals and measures that form part of the new initiative, and we look at the implementation of the initiative, including the characteristics of young service users in the target group and the support they receive, i.e. what instruments are used in the provision of employment support. We also look at barriers to employment that young adults face. Furthermore, we examine internal factors at NAV, such as prioritisation, organisation of the initiative, cooperation and competence. We then take a closer look at the young service users' experiences with NAV's activation services within the initiative. Finally, we look at the effects of the intensified youth initiative on the transition to education and employment. The report concludes with a summary of the main findings of the evaluation in the form of effects and results, as well as lessons learned, from the first phase of NAV's intensified youth initiative.

The evaluation entails both a process and outcome evaluation and uses a variety of data sources. We have conducted an analysis of the management documents that formed the basis for the implementation of the intensified youth initiative in the period 2016–2018. We have also carried out a case study based on qualitative interviews at five different NAV offices, with NAV managers, NAV advisors who work with unemployed young adults and the young adults themselves. The interviews were held in the period June–September 2018. In addition, five employees at NAV Working Life Centre (Arbeidslivssenter) were interviewed. An online survey was sent out to the 200 largest NAV offices in the country and was answered by advisors who provide support for unemployed young adults. A total of 421 NAV advisors from 156 NAV offices responded to the survey, which constitutes a response rate of just under 80 per cent measured at office level. The survey was conducted at the end of 2018. In addition, we have analysed registry

data on unemployed young adults for the periods immediately before and after the implementation of the intensified youth initiative, i.e. the years 2016–2018. A workshop has also been held with NAV staff and with service user representatives from the mental health organisation for adolescents (Mental Helse Ungdom) and the Change Factory (Forandringsfabrikken). The workshop was used to discuss findings with managers and other NAV staff and to take a detailed look at the service user perspective in the evaluation.

In Chapter 3 of the report, we review the policy guidelines applied in the introduction of NAV's intensified youth initiative, the most important of which is giving a high priority to the efforts to increase the number of young adults who are in employment or otherwise economically active. The employment strategy thus forms the basis for this work. The policy guidelines are mostly a continuation of previous activation policies, with the addition of some new elements. The target group for the initiative is clearly defined as everyone under the age of 30 who comes to NAV with a need for employment-oriented support. Young adults are to be given priority for employment-oriented support and for participation in employment programmes. The most important single instrument for getting young adults into work must be individual, employment-oriented support. In addition, a deadline of eight weeks is set for providing such support. The policy guidelines emphasise that NAV should help to improve the coordination of the service provision for young adults, across different agencies, disciplines and management levels. They also stipulate that NAV has a responsibility to help young adults gain qualifications through the education system. This can be interpreted as an increased focus on the education strategy in addition to the employment strategy, which is the dominant policy guideline in the support for young adults. This requires good cooperation with the municipal education authorities. Emphasis is also placed on NAV strengthening its efforts within the labour market and improving its knowledge of and cooperation with local employers. The new elements that have been introduced in the intensified youth initiative are the new criterion to include everyone under the age of 30, a clear prioritisation of young adults and an eight-week deadline for providing support. The stronger emphasis on education can also be considered a new element. The education strategy, individual follow-up, emphasis on cooperation with other agencies and the strengthening of efforts within the labour market must be regarded as an extension of existing policies.

The results of the intensified youth initiative will be measured according to whether the eight-week deadline for providing support is met and whether there is any increase in the transition to employment or education in the target group. Qualitative indicators or secondary goals in the initiative, such as improved life skills, are not measured. The absence of defined qualitative secondary goals

means that the initiative will also potentially have some very positive effects that are not identified in NAV's goals and performance management.

The initiative is aimed at unemployed young adults who are registered with NAV. Statistics also show that there is a group of unemployed young adults who are not economically active and are not registered with NAV (inactive NEETs). This group will eventually contact NAV, and are likely to have potentially great challenges with regard to finding work. The intensified youth initiative does not include any measures that cover this group. The inactive, unregistered and unemployed group remains an underlying and problematic obstacle to achieving the goal of increasing the number of economically active young adults, because there will be a constant flow of young adults with a long period of inactivity transitioning to NAV. These are service users who potentially need extensive support. In the further development of the intensified youth initiative, consideration should be given to creating more pro-active measures aimed at unemployed young adults who do not contact NAV on their own initiative.

In Chapter 4, we look at the characteristics of young service users in the target group for the intensified youth initiative. We identify characteristics based on various data sources: registry data, interviews with NAV personnel and unemployed young adults, and online surveys of NAV advisors who work with the target group. The evidence is the same in the different data sources in terms of what characterises young service users. Important characteristics are that a majority of the young service users have not completed upper secondary school and that many are struggling with mental health problems. The characteristics of young service users have not changed since the intensified youth initiative was implemented. Qualitative sources also show that many young service users have low self-esteem and low levels of motivation to work, and they struggle with various challenges in their lives as a result of difficult childhoods and poor health, particularly mental health problems.

Registry data analyses based on service user figures on all young users between the ages of 18 and 30 show that the number of young adults in the target group for the intensified youth initiative decreased in the period 2016–2018 in all regions. This decrease almost exclusively relates to the group of service users who, in principle, were the most likely to find work (from the standard initiative). Men are slightly overrepresented among the young service users, but the gender gap has narrowed during the analysis period. The majority of the service users are in the oldest age group, 25–29 years (52 per cent), while about six per cent are below the age of 20. A majority of young service users have not completed upper secondary school (62 per cent). Almost one in four young service users have a registered diagnosis and have received work assessment allowance (AAP). The most common diagnosis is a mental health issue (66 per cent of all young service users receiving AAP have a registered diagnosis).

In Chapter 5, we take a closer look at the content and instruments in the intensified youth initiative. The term ‘instruments’ is used in a broad sense, and covers general measures as well as other areas such as relational work.

We find that young people are given priority in the provision of support at NAV and that the support is provided quickly. The NAV offices meet the eight-week deadline for providing support by a large margin. In many cases, young adults are offered support within a week, and sometimes on the same day.

Income maintenance is not part of the intensified youth initiative, but is nevertheless an important part of the follow-up work, and as such is also relevant to the content of the initiative. The most common income maintenance schemes for young adults are economic social assistance and AAP, both of which were changed at the time of implementation of NAV’s intensified youth initiative. Activity requirements were introduced for young recipients of social assistance and the maximum period they could receive AAP was reduced from four to three years.

The advisors consider the activity requirement to be a useful measure for getting more social assistance recipients into work. With regard to the changes to AAP, opinions among the advisors are more diffuse; some believe that reducing the period on AAP will expedite any extra assistance needed to test young adults’ work capabilities, while others believe that the time limit prevents proper follow-up of those with a reduced capacity for work.

We also find that important instruments in the intensified youth initiative were the establishment of job clubs for new users, motivating young adults to return to education (complete upper secondary school), building a relationship with young service users, and recruiting employment specialists whose work is based on the Supported Employment model. The advisors considered building a good relationship with the young service users to be just as important as many of the employment schemes. More traditional employment initiatives were also used in the support for young adults.

The NAV advisors felt that the lack of time available to follow up the young service users represented a major barrier to providing effective support. A further barrier was the lack of access to relevant work experience placements. Based on the information in this evaluation, it is not possible to conclude with any certainty whether the different instruments are sufficient to break down these barriers. What we can say is that trying to find enough time to closely follow up both the service user and the employer and being able to provide enough employment opportunities for young adults through working actively with the labour market are obstacles in NAV’s youth initiative.

In Chapter 5, we consider various aspects of the implementation of the intensified youth initiative. We look at the prioritising of young adults, organisation, cooperation and competence. Findings from the online survey show that the NAV advisors believe that young adults are given a high priority in employment-ori-

ted support, and that the support for young adults has changed since the initiative was implemented. Most of the advisors perceive the organisation of the support work at their office to have improved. Low-threshold measures that were previously outsourced are largely carried out separately in the form of local job clubs. This generates a synergy effect internally in the NAV offices and gives staff ownership of the measures, better knowledge of the young service users and their situation, and strengthens cohesion internally. Consequently, scope is created for better cooperation and closer follow-up between the NAV staff involved in supporting young service users. This finding is also confirmed in qualitative interviews with NAV personnel. The interviews have also shown that there have been changes in the organisation of the support provided for new NAV service users, while the support for long-term service users has not changed to the same degree.

In Chapter 6, we examine how the intensified youth initiative is implemented and organised. We have considered three different factors; the organisation of the initiative in NAV, cooperation with others and matters concerning competence and specialisation, i.e. what competence is needed to provide successful support. The chapter is based on data from the case study, interviews at NAV Working Life Centre and the online survey of NAV advisors working with young adults.

A large majority of the NAV offices carry out their work with young adults in youth teams, many of which had been formed before the intensified youth initiative was introduced. Many offices have set up local job clubs for young adults who contact NAV. Overall, we find that the organisation of the support for young service users who register with NAV has improved since the initiative was implemented. We found no evidence to suggest that similar changes have taken place in the organisation of the support work aimed at young unemployed adults who are long-term service users in NAV. The exception is the recruitment of employment specialists (see also Chapter 5).

The advisors reported in the online survey that they were most satisfied with the cooperation with employers, employment training providers, the follow-up service and the primary healthcare service. The qualitative interviews with NAV advisors and managers provided more insight into the collaborative relationship with various actors, and also identified several problematic aspects of these efforts.

The cooperation with the follow-up service, the schools and the educational and psychological counselling service worked well on the whole. The cooperation with the health sector was highlighted as the most problematic in the qualitative interviews. The NAV personnel pointed out that there was room for improvement in the cooperation with various municipal services, particularly those aimed at service users who were considered to be the most vulnerable and in greatest need of help. This included the cooperation with the housing office, child welfare service and other municipal services.

The Working Life Centres did not seem to be included to any extent in NAV's youth initiative. Differences in organisation and mandates meant that these centres and the NAV offices did not necessarily consider the youth initiative to be a natural area for a close cooperation.

We also looked at the competence held by those working with young adults in NAV, and what competence is needed to activate young adults. NAV advisors who work with young adults tend to have a high level of education. We believe that the competence necessary to activate young adults consists of four components: social skills/relationship competence, labour market expertise, drive and personal suitability. We wonder whether a more defined activation specialisation is being formed among the youth advisors in NAV. This specialisation is juxtaposed between relationship-oriented work on the one hand and initiative-oriented work on the other. There seems to be little targeted and conscious recruitment when it comes to securing expertise that combines the needs we have identified.

A key factor in an evaluation of activation measures aimed at young service users is whether the young adults themselves perceive the policy to be relevant and useful to them. In Chapter 7, we have therefore examined adolescents' experiences with the employment-oriented support they have received from NAV. Understanding the service user's perspective can help us assess the usefulness and quality of NAV's support work, and in doing so aid the development and improvement of the services. We interviewed a total of nine young adults. In addition, we have received feedback from young adults through service user representatives from the mental health organisation for adolescents and the Change Factory. The feedback largely confirms the findings from the interviews with the young NAV service users.

The young adults are generally satisfied with the help they receive when they first come to NAV's offices. This indicates that the support NAV provides is perceived as relevant and useful for the young adults. However, this group is far less satisfied with the income maintenance arrangement. Several of the young adults we interviewed had received support over long periods and had experienced interruptions in their income maintenance arrangements, which they stated had serious repercussions for them, either in the form of having to be financially dependent on their parents or having to move house. Inadequate income maintenance is perceived as a major additional burden by many of the young adults and can kill motivation and shift the focus from searching for work to needing healthcare support. However, lack of income motivated other NAV users to get a job.

The young adults state that their relationship with their advisor is crucial for finding a job. Almost all the young adults we interviewed pointed out that relatively 'small' problems were major barriers to the labour market, such as not wanting to apply for a job in a neighbouring municipality where they did not know anyone, or problems getting to work using public transport. Many also stated that

they had mental health issues that made it difficult for them to work. All the young adults wanted to be financially independent and to find a job. Motivation levels to find employment varied, from highly motivated to very unmotivated. The least motivated service users considered it more realistic to take part in education initiatives than employment schemes. Young adults with children experienced additional challenges in taking up employment as their hours of work had to coincide with nursery opening hours. Several of the young adults stated that they had received useful help from NAV and that their success in finding employment or an apprenticeship/trainee position was solely down to NAV.

In Chapter 8, we examine whether the intensified youth initiative has pushed up the numbers transitioning to work or formal education. Through regression analyses of registry data from NAV and Statistics Norway, we find that the initiative has not had any impact on the transition to work, but that it has had a significant, positive effect on the transition to education. This positive effect took place after three and six months, and thereby counteracted the reduction in the transition to education at these points in time.

We find that the transition to education has increased among those who had been NAV service users for a short period of time (1 month), but this cannot necessarily be directly linked to the introduction of the intensified youth initiative. Meanwhile, there has been a reduction in the numbers transitioning to education at later points in time.

The goal of NAV's intensified youth initiative was to increase the number of young unemployed adults who were economically active, either in the form of employment, education or other appropriate activity. Our analyses suggest that this goal has been partially achieved, as the initiative has increased the probability of young unemployed adults transitioning to education. This can be interpreted as a strengthening of the education strategy in NAV.

Chapter 9 summarises the main findings from the evaluations. The report concludes that NAV's intensified youth initiative has had a positive impact. The NAV offices prioritise young adults and are quick to provide support. Although we have not identified any quantifiable effects on young unemployed adults' transition to employment as a result of the initiative, it seems that the goal of increased activity has been partially achieved in the form of an increased transition to formal education following introduction of the initiative. We also find that systematic efforts are being made in NAV to activate young adults – a target group that often faces major challenges and has complex needs. These efforts may, over time, provide a good basis for improving the support offered to young adults. Activating young adults more effectively requires good cooperation between NAV and other agencies, and this work should therefore be further developed. Based on this evaluation, it is recommended that the work on NAV's intensified youth initiative should be continued.