



English summary  
of Fafo-rapport 2021:04

---

## Competence development for persons on sick leave

## Competence development for persons on sick leave

---

This Fafo report was commissioned by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) and is part of a pilot project for competence development for persons on sick leave. The main research question in the pilot project is: How can competence development measures facilitate labour market attachment in persons on long-term sick leave and employees with long/frequent periods of absence? The pilot project was originally scheduled to last from early autumn 2019 until summer 2020 and involves five counties: NAV Innlandet, NAV Øst-Viken, NAV Troms og Finnmark, NAV Nordland and NAV Agder (referred to in this report as the trial counties). Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the end date was postponed until year-end 2020. Fafo's remit was to review existing research and analyse the target group for the competence development measures, i.e. persons on long-term sick leave.

The report consists of two main parts: a review of existing research on such measures and an analysis of the target group for the measure in question. Reviewing existing research will provide insight into the effectiveness of such measures for different groups. Comparing these findings with an analysis of the target group will reveal to some extent whether the measure meets their needs. We also wanted to conduct a survey in the five trial counties to explore the target group's motivations and preferences for competence development. This survey was removed from the project at the client's request. In hindsight, we see that this has considerably reduced our ability to answer the research question.

The review of existing research showed that there was little evidence-based knowledge on experiences with this particular competence development measure for the target group in question. Only very few studies have investigated the association between competence development measures and job mobility among persons on long-term sick leave. The review shows that studies in which education and training are found to have a positive effect on employment also find lock-in effects, especially where the training period extends beyond the period of sick leave and the period of entitlement to Work Assessment Allowance (AAP). In this context, the lock-in effect refers to the negative effect of the programme participant not being able to take up employment during the programme period. However, several studies find a positive long term effect on employment.

A number of studies show that for those who are at risk of dropping out of the labour market, many different factors play a role when it comes to returning to work. Such factors can include individual characteristics such as age and gender,

English summary of Fafo-rapport 2021:04  
Competence development for persons on sick leave  
Anne Inga Hilsen, Lise Lien and Torill Tveito

© Fafo 2021

level of education and health impairments, or occupation/industry or workplace-related issues. Support, guidance and information appear to be essential factors to induce people to consider job mobility/competence development as an option. Moreover, individual motivation to obtain new skills is also a key factor for successful mobility.

The analysis of the target group identifies the characteristics of the persons concerned, but not their capacity, preferences or motivations for learning new skills. As could be expected, we find that musculoskeletal and mental health issues are the most common diagnostic groups, but the review of existing research provides no indication of how competence development measures can promote job mobility in this group of persons on long-term sick leave. Approximately one-fifth of the target group are from the healthcare sector, with nursing associates and nurses as the largest occupational groups. Retail trade and services account for approximately 30 per cent of the target group, with shop assistants as the largest occupational group.

Comparisons of AAP recipients who have attended NAV's training programmes with those who have not undertaken such programmes, show little variation in the proportion who find employment. This is consistent with the literature review, which shows that longer credit-bearing courses offer the best employment prospects in the long term, while shorter courses have less effect.

However, experiences in the trial counties show that short-term competence development measures do exist that qualify participants for other kinds of work and lead to certifications or other formal qualifications for new work tasks or positions. This can range from the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) to a driving licence for heavy goods vehicles. This trial scheme is too recent to draw any conclusions regarding its long-term effects, but certifications, the ECDL and similar appear to be able to help some people in the target group find new work.

The review of existing research shows that the pilot project for competence development measures for persons on long-term sick leave is an innovation in the Norwegian context, and there is little experience from other countries to draw on. Combining sick pay with competence development is a relatively new approach, as is the systematic intervention of NAV advisors at an early stage of the sickness absence period with an offer of competence development and training for other work. Inviting persons on sick leave to consider what other kinds of work might be relevant and what this will require in terms of competence development, will serve to support and guide them in readapting to the labour market.