

Against this background, “learning from the best”, i.e. benchmarking that is both analytical and practice-driven, is both promising and urgently required. In the public sector, however, this method borrowed from business management comes up against many unsolved problems. This is particularly true of methodological issues around the comparability of units of inquiry, the criteria for comparison and assessment and the efficiency-improving feedback of information. To date, there has been little academic research into how targeted organisational learning might be put into practice. Thus the aim of this project is to uncover the evidence that will help to identify the organisational factors that drive best practice and will ensure a sustained improvement in the efficiency and learning capacities of the employment service.

The project will proceed in three phases. In the first phase, a DEA-based technical efficiency analysis will provide some initial starting points for estimating the potential for modernisation. This stage of the analysis will be supplemented by exploratory case studies of up to 8 employment offices, which will be selected on the basis of the technical efficiency analysis and of expert opinion by the employment service itself. In both stages of the analysis, account will be taken of international know-how, and in particular of the expertise of our Finnish partners. In the second phase, the technical efficiency analysis will be supplemented by general and policy area specific performance analyses. Multivariate methods will be used to analyse the rankings of employment offices drawn up on the basis of the efficiency and performance analyses in order to identify patterns that might explain the differences in efficiency and performance. The main aim of this process is to isolate the objective factors that influence the outcome of action strategies. Thirdly, these performance and efficiency analyses will be supplemented by a representative survey of implementation regimes at the PES district level, which will be analysed by means of various evaluation procedures. Additional, systematically selected case studies will be drawn on to validate, through procedures based on dialogue and field observations, the results achieved by analytical methods. The aim of this stage of the analysis is to identify those points of interface at which controlled processes of change might be set in motion.

1. Finland Emulating Denmark

From the Finnish perspective Denmark constitutes an interesting benchmark as it has acted as one of the most important starting points for the Finnish labour market policy reform, carried out since 1998 (Skog & Räsänen 1997). At the EU level Denmark is often – along with the Netherlands – seen as one of the most successful labour market policy systems. Madsen (1999) has labelled it as “The Danish miracle”. The present article has its main focus on the Danish labour market policy system, particularly its “activating labour market policy”. Trampusch (1999) makes a distinction between the “activating labour market policy” – where the main goal for the labour administration is to advance labour market functionality by focusing activating measures mainly on job-seekers – and the traditional “active labour market policy”.

The main data for the present article consists of the authors’ observations on their two visits to Denmark and the analysis of other data plus the analysis of the Finnish case. The visits in Denmark and Finland included interviews of the central, regional, local level policy makers and front-line workers (Spangar & Arnkil 2000a; 2000b, also Naschold & Arnkil 1997). The comparison of Finland and Denmark benefited also from the evaluation study on the Finnish labour market policy reform (Arnkil, Spangar & Nieminen 2000). The interviewees in Denmark were representatives of the Danish Labour Market Board (AMS), the regional offices of Storstroem, placed in Nykoebing Falster, and Ringkoebing as well as the local offices of Hilleroed, Helsingor, and Herning. In the “sample” Ringkoebing acts as an example of the good labour market situation (high demand of labour) and Nykoebing Falster of more difficult labour market situation. Rinkoebing represents also a top performer in Denmark, since it has won both the national and European quality awards.

Likewise, in Finland the interviews cover central, regional and local levels. From the local level the offices of Tampere, Vammala, Nokia, Salo, Joensuu, Lieksa and Espoo were studied, where Espoo and Salo represent high demand environments, Tampere, Vammala and Nokia 'in between' environments and Joensuu and Lieksa more difficult labour market situations.

1.1. The Danish labour market policy reform

The Danish labour market reform was launched in 1994. The reform was preceded by economic recession with record high unemployment and high share of long-term unemployment, compared to the average EU level (Arbejdsministeriet 1999).

The overall development of the Danish and Finnish unemployment and employment rates during the 1990s, in comparison to Sweden, can be summarised as follows:

Figure 1. Employment and unemployment rates in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden 1990, 1994-1999(%) (OECD, Employment Outlook 1999;2000)

	1990		1994		1995		1996		1997		1998		1999	
	UR	ER	UR	ER	UR	ER	UR	ER	UR	ER	UR	ER	UR	ER
DK	7.7	75.4	8.2	67.1	7.3	67.0	6.8	67.4	5.6	69.4	5.1	70.2	5.2	76.5
FIN	3.2	74.1	16.8	60.7	15.3	61.9	14.6	62.8	12.7	63.6	11.4	64.8	10.3	66.0
SWE	1.7	83.1	9.4	83.1	8.8	72.2	9.6	71.6	9.9	70.7	8.3	71.5	7.2	72.9

The Danish unemployment rate has later on nearly halved, being in January 2000 4.8 %. The figure is the lowest for the 24 last years. The Finnish unemployment rate has decreased by one third, being in January 2000 10.6 %.

The Danish labour market reforms started when the unemployment figures already had started to improve. In 1993 the unemployment rate was 10.1 % (OECD Employment Outlook). The improving labour market situation resulted in swift “reforms of the reform” in order to meet the quickly rising bottleneck problems. Thus, it is noteworthy that the Danish labour market reform has been modified several times since its beginning. From 1999 on the third phase of the reform has been in operation (Arbejdsministeriet 1999).

While Denmark was known as a country of high unemployment level at the European level before the 1990s, Finland could pride on the lower unemployment level than the rest of Europe on the average. The situation turned into the opposite in 1990s. Today Denmark has done well in the EU comparison regarding unemployment and employment rates, the share of the long-term unemployed, and the rate of youth unemployment. In all these indicators Denmark beats the average EU level (Arbejdsministeriet 1999). Particularly the simultaneous rise of employment and the decrease of unemployment has given a good cause for talking about “The Danish Miracle”, mentioned above.

Regarding unemployment and labour force supply the main content the Danish reform has been the tightening of the unemployment benefit policy (e.g. job-seeker’s right to earnings-related benefits was 9 years at the end of 1980s while today it is 4 years) and retirement as well as sabbatical leave schemes, activation measures, adopting the obligations – rights principle, and the reforms of the labour market administration.

1.2. The Finnish labour Market policy reform

The Finnish reform was prepared between December 1996 and May 1997. The first phase entered into force in January 1998. The reform gained full strength by the end of 1999. The key motives of the reform were the weak functioning of the labour

market, to too high reliance on subsidies and the dwindling effectiveness of the labour policy measures.

The matching of the various elements of the labour market policy system was also weak. The rights and obligations of the unemployed job-seekers had, in fact, never been defined in Finland before. The labour market system was also difficult to understand, because it had so many different elements and regulations. The labour market policy reform aimed on one hand at creating a better functioning and more easily understandable “aggregate” system, on the other hand at improving the labour market dynamics themselves (Räisänen et al 1999).

At the end of the day, the reform had two main purposes:

- 1) Better functioning of the labour market
- 2) Prevention of exclusion from the labour market

The first purpose was to be realised by the reforms of employment services and active measures and the other one by *targeting* the services and active measures better and besides these, by introducing some totally new measures, like job-seeking in groups.

A common feature with the Danish reform is that they both started when the unemployment figures had turned into better. It is crucial to note, however, that Denmark started its reform under the unemployment rate of 8.2 % while Finland launched its reform under the unemployment rate of more than 11 % preceded by nearly the level of 17 % during the most difficult recession years in 1993 – 1994. Thus, Denmark’s activation policy started under the circumstances of quickly rising labour demand while Finland started her reform under the conditions of high unemployment and only slowly recovering labour demand. In this respect Finland and Denmark are quite different from each other regarding their starting points. In Denmark the emphasis has quite early moved to meeting the challenges of labour market *demand* while in Finland the emphasis has (so far) remained on the labour market *(over)supply*. Thus, it may be argued on sound grounds that as an action environment for any labour market policy the current Danish situation of less than 5 %’s (even less than 2 % in some regions) unemployment rate constitutes a rather different environment than the Finnish one, where unemployment still is double compared with Denmark. There are naturally also important factors in the macro-economic and financial policy strategies pursued to be considered as explanatory factors, but these aspects are not treated in this article.

The main measures taken in the Finnish reform can be grouped into five:

- 1) Improvement of the employment service process
- 2) Activation of the passive labour market support for the purpose of employment
- 3) Reforms of active labour market policy measures
- 4) Measures helping recruitment

5) Definition of the rights and obligations of the unemployed job-seekers

Individual employment services of job-seekers in PES

The aim of these reforms was to shorten the duration of the unemployment periods, to increase labour market dynamics and to target the job-seekers' own activities and their services into open labour market job search.

The reforms defined for all the employment offices the same elements of the service process, and they are implemented according to local circumstances. Regular fixed-term interviews, job-seeking plans, skill-mapping, job-seeking manuals and job-seeking training were taken into use. The aim of the reform was to increase the job-seeking activity of the unemployed job-seekers, to shorten the duration of the unemployment periods and to target the job-seeker's activity effectively into re-employment in the open labour market.

The fixed-term interview is a one hour service where the client's situation and aims are covered while a job-seeking plan is drawn up. Use of active measures in improving the person's employability is considered in the interview. Part of the job-seeking plan is charting the real skills of the job-seeker, not only formal educational qualifications.

In order to work out these skill-mappings, some forms have been created in cooperation with the social partners so as to better describe the skills. The information is saved in the computerised information system. The job-seeking plan is written on the employment officer's computer, printed and the plan was that both the job-seeker and the employment office officer sign the plan. In fact this part of the action was never realised in a covering way. The job-seeking plan corresponds to the individual action plan defined also in the EU employment guidelines.

The job-seeker can use a job-seeking manual to support his own job-seeking. It consists of brochures of the job-seeker's employment office and of a job-search notebook where the job-seeker can make notes on job-seeking activities, what happened, how active the job-seeking is and how it proceeds. Job-seeking training is given either on a job-club basis (job-seekers' group) organised by the employment officers themselves or as a part of labour market training courses. The aim is to increase knowledge on the labour market, job vacancies and job-seeking methods and besides these, to practice writing applications and contacting employers. One element in reforming the employment service process was recruiting 160 high-level specialists into the employment offices of the main cities and towns. About two thirds have university-level diplomas.

Activation of the passive labour market support into job creation

The aim of these reforms is to prevent exclusion, to find re-entry into work for part of the most difficult to employ and to create new demand for labour within this target group.

Hard structural unemployment was developed in Finland during the recession. The maximum duration of the earnings-related unemployment insurance benefit is 500 days. Besides this, a flat-rate unemployment benefit, the labour market support, exist, which is of a lower level than the earnings related one. It is payable for those unemployed persons who do not meet the time-at-work condition of six months in the insurance system or who have received unemployment benefits for the maximum of 500 days. At the moment more than half of all unemployed receive labour market support. It is payable also when a benefit recipient enters labour market training or practical training. During these active measures a person is not counted as unemployed.

While preparing the reform, it became evident that the most difficult structural unemployment was not alleviated by active measures. Long-term unemployed persons receiving labour market support, were only rarely offered any active measures or employment services. To prevent exclusion, a *"combined subsidy"* was created. It consists of the labour market support of the unemployed and of an employment subsidy. When an employer hires a person who has received unemployment benefit for over 500 days, the employer can receive the unemployed persons' labour market support and besides this, an employment subsidy. This means activation of the passive unemployment benefit for employment and job-creating purposes. This kind of subsidised employment is payable in the private sector (organisations, households and companies) and in the municipal sector. It is especially aimed at creating new job opportunities in the non-profit sector of the economy (the so called third sector or social economy).

Reform of active measures

The aim of these reforms is to target the active programmes into re-employment in the open labour market and into improving the qualifications of the job-seekers and by these means to decrease dependence of subsidies.

The volume of labour market training and subsidised employment has been lowered by the labour administration, with the intention to secure better quality and effectiveness. In the labour market training system, the share of vocational training proper was increased and the share of preparatory training (orientation to labour market) decreased.

Measures helping recruitment

The aim of recruitment reforms has been to help recruitment targeted to the unemployed. A new measure helping recruitment was introduced for SMEs: on-the-job training in order to improve the quality of subsidised employment. This means that a company receiving an employment subsidy while hiring an unemployed job-seeker is obliged to improve the skills of the person placed into the company and to write a plan describing this procedure. The employment office approves the plan. This reform means more obligations in return for the subsidy from the companies part. Monitoring and analysis of recruitment problems have been developed as a part of the reform.

The rights and obligations of the unemployed job-seekers

The aim of these reforms has been to reach better transparency of the labour policy system and to make the relationship between the employment office and unemployed job-seekers clearer. The rights and obligations were defined in relation to constitutional rights, social security systems, employment services and active LMP programmes and the reforms taken.

As a consequence of the reform an unemployed job-seeker has a right to a job-seeking plan and at the same time an obligation to participate in working out his plan. Persons having received unemployment benefits for over 500 days have now a right to certain individual services and active measures. The legal procedures of the reform mean a clearer judicial basis for the relation between the employment office and the unemployed job-seeker. The idea of these definitions was to make the labour policy system more understandable and transparent.

2. A Thematic Analysis of the Danish Labour Market Reform

The Danish Public Employment Service is organised into 14 regional offices directing the local offices. The operative body at the national level is the National Labour Market authority (AMS) working under the Ministry of Labour. At the ministry level LAR – The National Labour Market Council - acts as an advisory body. At the regional level RARs – the Regional Labour Market Councils – “ ... are responsible for the management of regional labour market policy within the framework laid down at the central level.” (Ringkoebing 1999, 2).

High demand of labour – emphasis on employers and ‘new encounter’

The good situation on the Danish labour market manifests itself in a strong emphasis on employer services in the Labour Administration action policy. The employer services are one of the core processes in the European Foundation Quality Management system. The Ringkoebing region, for example, has set a goal of 90 % satisfaction regarding the employer customers (Ringkoebing, *ibid.*).

Also at the local employment agencies the strong emphasis on the employer services is evident. Approximately 30 – 40 % of staff are directed to keeping continuously up contacts with the employers. High quality criteria are set for the employer visits and the quality criteria are also followed up systematically. The goal of the employer contacts is to gain local knowledge of the local labour market and a systematic use of that information (Ringkoebing, *ibid.*).

The Public Employment Service tries to get employers as customers, also in business areas where they are not necessarily used to it, like in the IT sector and, more generally, in academic occupations. By implication, in order to enable the services of these employers, job-seekers in those fields, including also currently employed, are tried to be recruited as clients of PES. One of goals of this two-sided recruitment of new clients is to raise the image and market share of the PES (Spangar & Arnkil 2000a; 2000b).

The basic function of the Public Employment services – to advance labour market functionality and matching of the labour demand and supply – has always to be resolved in new ways in the conditions of societal transition phases. Today we face ‘post-industrial’, ‘postmodern’, ‘information society’, or the ‘second modern’ labour market issues where the demand and the supply gain new forms in quite a short period of time (Beck 2000). ‘First modern’ was characterised by the strong role of national state, corporatism, ‘collective’ life trajectories, covering welfare state, distinct occupations and occupational fields. Correspondingly, the ‘encounter’ of the labour demand and supply was clear and predictable.

The ‘second modern’, now breaking through, is characterised by the breaking up “the densely woven institutional structure”, the decline of the national state in relation to the global and regional-local development, fuzzy boundaries. By implication, the encounter of the labour demand and supply becomes more complex, new problems of the prediction of the future and ambivalence arise.

In Finland, like in Denmark, the new situation has caused the labour administration a pressure of matching the new demand and the job-seekers’ ‘soft’ qualifications (like team work skills) in a new way. One of the efforts in Denmark in this respect has been developing the national electronic data processing system (‘Amanda’) in a direction of picking up from the job-seekers’ files ‘soft qualifications’ like motivation, work orientation, and descriptions of their personality dispositions. Finally, in the spring of 2000 Amanda was ready having been late from its original

schedule several years and having exceeded its total budget of 400 Million DKK. Finally, towards the end of the year, it became operational.

The difficulties of Amanda reflect in an interesting way the problems of communicating the interactional knowledge of the official-client encounter through the computer system. Thus it also reflects the on-going societal and labour market change and the challenges they cause on organising the public employment services. It is more generally doubtful to what extent human interactional knowledge can be communicated except in structures which are analogically based on the face-to-face contacts by the actors (cf. Shotter 1993; Vähämöttönen 1998). Building the new kind of encounter is not purely a technical matter. From this point of view the solution of a local agency of the Ringkøbing region appeared successful. Every member of the office teams was continuously in contact both with employers and job-seekers. The 'matching process' was thus integrated in an individual official's head, everyday conversations between the team members, and in the meetings with the other teams (Spangar & Arnkil 2000b). The solution was going back to the old, to the times before computerised information system when matching took place in each employment counsellor's mind based on his or her personal knowledge of both the job-seekers and the employers. However, the current team structure of the local office was an effort to re-solve today the problem of matching the demand and supply.

Developing organisational skills and quality work

The labour market changes and the labour administration reforms have radically changed the operative basis of the local level. Instead of only acting on the orders and rules from the top individual officers now have to find solutions for the clients' employment problems based on a case-by-case customisation. The Danish reforms have also contained structural reforms supporting the individualisation of the services. More power and resources have been delegated to the individual officers. The officers have their own individual action budgets on which he or she can decide autonomously within the frameworks and upper limits set by the regional and local offices. The frameworks and the limits, however, are negotiable, not strictly determined (Spangar & Arnkil, *ibid.*). It is obvious that this now requires new knowledge and skills from the officers as well as new kinds of relationships between the different administrative levels.

Developing the staff's knowledge and skill base at the different levels of the Danish labour administration has been carried out, in addition to the ordinary in-work training, through the quality work. It seemed to us that a typical feature of the Danish quality work that it is systematic, covering, and negotiable. The first quality handbook was published in 1995. The basic approach to quality work is the EFQM/Business Excellence model (Jensen & Bak 2000). The regions are allowed to set their own quality criteria in addition to the core processes and their estimation set by AMS. The follow-up of the quality criteria are carried out by self-evaluations and different forms of surveys to the different client groups. The goal is a systematic benchlearning

process, that is, analysing and transferring good practices into the operation of all the administration. Regarding the questionnaires Denmark has faced the “satisfaction trap”. For example, according to the interviewed quality specialist of AMS, the employer surveys at the national level indicate a 90 % level satisfaction while only some 30 % of the employers use public employment services. The Danish labour market experts are now seeking for new follow-up designs and methods as the average satisfaction level of 90 % do not yield the necessary information the labour administration needs for its further development (Spangar & Arnkil, *ibid.*).

The quality work in Denmark has developed from the national quality handbooks to leaner regional and local handbooks. Later on, the quality handbooks have been removed on bookshelves or they are used to tutoring the newcomers. The quality handbooks have been replaced by ‘self’ and ‘colleague’ evaluations by which the agencies’ staffs evaluate themselves how the operations have developed. Quality meetings have replaced quality handbooks:

One of the Ringkoebing local agencies organise a staff meeting once a month where the quality question is formulated as ‘what have done well or badly?’ For example, for the evaluation of the quality of the individual action plans the director chose a case example and interviewed first the client’s ‘personal advisor’ and then the client him-/herself. Thus the director was able to gain ‘soft’ data in addition to the statistical or other forms of ‘hard’ data. The director’s observations were then dealt with in the quality meeting in a discursive manner. (Spangar & Arnkil, *ibid.*).

From the Finnish perspective it is interesting to note that in Denmark there is a goal for the job-seekers’ action plans that 85 % of them should include a plan of finding a job in the local labour market. The plan to the local employment should be made visible in the action plans. ‘Good’ action plans contain in a systematic manner information on when it was launched, its revisions and follow-up procedures, information on who took the initiative (the client/office), a contract of who is responsible for the different actions taken (e.g. the training costs), a free description of how the plan has proceeded, and a contract signed by the official and the client. While systematic by its format, the action plan contains a description of how the job-seeker’s plan has developed taking flexibly into account the changes in the client’s plans and in his/her life situation as a whole. (These observations are based on ten examples of ‘good’ action plans give to the authors by Herning employment agency).

In comparison to Finland our interpretation is that Denmark is ahead of Finland in the quality work. The ‘Danish story of quality work’ is the development from centralised and standardised approach to more local, leaner, and flexible approaches. The Danish quality work seems to be soundly focused on the content of the administration operations and it has become an integral part of the regional and local activities. This is not currently the case in Finland where the local offices have not adopted quality work as an essential part of their developmental strategy (Arnkil, Spangar & Nieminen 2000).

The Finnish quality work seems currently to rest on a few pioneer actors. In general, it is typical of the quality work applications that a “second wave” is often needed where the original quality standards are developed in a direction of more flexibility and new emphasis is put on its local aspects (Nashold & Arnkil 19979).

A central and critical criterion for any social policy reform is how it is internalised and adopted amongst the ‘front-line’ workers who has the responsibility to ‘sell’ the reform to the citizens (Meyers & al. 1998). The Danish interviewees emphasised that the labour market reforms have had the impact of the individualisation of the client service as well as a decrease in controlling the unemployed.

However, our question “does the client really, in a visible and concrete way, feel that the labour administration has changed its course” was met with hesitation and even silence. The question inspired comments that there may be citizens and client who are dissatisfied with the reforms as they now really have to look for jobs and training. Furthermore, the question was followed by debate on whether all the activation measures have been meaningful for the clients or even for the administration itself. This issue has still grown in its importance as the demand of labour has kept growing. The problem of whether a client/citizen should now be really met on an equal ground, seemed still unsolved:

Olesen (1999) studied Danish official-client conversations on producing client action plans. He analysed officials’ knowledge and skill base as well as work orientation based on the theoretically driven hypothesis that in order to reach successful activation the official-client encounters should now be more equal than before (cf. Vähämöttönen 1999). In the discussions about the Olesen-study the regional managers emphasised that, in fact, the ‘activation legislation’ or the reform itself does not necessarily indicate an equal client encounter. The ‘spirit’ of the legislation, it was argued, is that during the first year of unemployment a job-seeker may act relatively autonomously but when he/she comes to the activation period of the following three years, more and more pressure is put on him/her. Thus, the Olesen – study was not seen valid regarding its basic hypothesis. (Arnkil & Spangar 200b).

In all, it seems that the Danish labour market reforms have individualised and customised the client service and also created structural innovations to support it, in the form of officials’ individual action budgets, for example. The basic attitude towards the unemployed, however, has remained ambivalent. On the other hand, the unemployed are labour market policy’s targets and objects who should now be activated. On the other hand, they constitute the potential labour force reserve and should thus be treated ‘softly’ due to the high demand of labour. (Spangar & Arnkil, *ibid.*).

The Danish authorities emphasise a need to raise the officials’ knowledge and skill base. The continuous reforms, the activation of the clients, making the individual action plans and the employer contacts require new skills. Our observations support

this interpretation. The front-line workers had difficulties in describing their work orientation or working methods. The client encounter did not seem to have changed in a direction of innovativeness in the context of the labour market reforms. Due to our observations, it is our evaluation that regarding re-conceptualisation of the client work, its new nature and the required new working methods the Danish reform has taken only its first steps (Spangar & Arnkil, *ibid.*) and not, so far, reached the level of 'paradigm shift' (cf. Cox 1998).

Regions – the foci of the Danish labour market system

The most central and most interesting feature about the Danish system is its strong emphasis on the regional level in its labour market policy. The central steering bodies in this respect are the Regional Labour Market Boards (RARs):

The Ringkoebing region has been in the vanguard of the development regarding the RARs in Denmark. The Ringkoebing region consists of 18 municipalities, which together with the county, have 7 representatives at the board. Also the employer and employee organisations have 7 representatives, respectively. The regional manager of the labour administration and the labour market secretariat make the necessary preparations for the board meetings taking place on a monthly basis. The secretariat is an interdisciplinary 'collective' of researchers ranging from economists to sociologists. The regional board has an executive committee of 7 members that meet between the board general meetings.

At the beginning of Denmark's activating labour market policy legislation was amended so that the RARs got now real decision power while they earlier were in an advisory role. The RARs prepare regional labour market strategy according to national guidelines. The RARs decide autonomously on the regions' 'activation budgets' that make 5/6 of all the labour administration funding to the regions. The RARs are responsible for defining the region's target groups and working methods for the activating measures. (Spangar & Arnkil, *ibid.*)

The Danes emphasised that it is a necessary pre-condition for the good operation of the RARs that they have real power remaining not only in the advisory role. The experience has proved that real power is a strong motivating incentive to the 'blocks' in the board. They send to the board their 'first line' actors which naturally is vitally important for the board's strategic influence.

One of the labour administration regional managers described his relationship with the RAR by stating that in case he should disagree on a board decision he still would put that decision into practice. Although there had not been such a case so far the manager's statement is illustrative of the strong position of the RARs, The statement also reflects the change taken place even in the position of the top-level civil servants of the labour administration as result of the 'rise' of RARs. (Spangar & Arnkil, *ibid.*)

What the RARs for the most part are about is the inclusion of social partners to decision making. In general, this corporatist (Auer 1999) system has been about gaining support to low wage raise policy, the cuts of the public sector, and tightening the rules of unemployment benefits. On the other hand, it has been about taking into account the specific characters of the regions, differing from each other also in a such a small country like Denmark, in planning and carrying out national labour market policy. The interviewees stated that the significance of the local and the regional seems to be rising rather than decreasing in a perspective at sight.

Denmark is furthest along in Europe in its emphasis on regionality and the RARs. RARs may be seen as Denmark's most original innovation and input in the European activating labour market policy. The national policy steered by AMS is genuinely modified by the RARs to regional strategies that constitute a basis for negotiations between the regional and local levels as well as between the local level and the front-line. Thus it seems that Denmark has succeeded in creating structural pre-conditions for strategically unified but regionally and locally differentiated labour market policy.

It should, however, be emphasised at the same time that not Denmark is "Alice's wonderland". The struggle amongst the social partners and the different interest groups over power has not ceased. Also in Denmark there is a continuous struggle about who really has the decisive role – politicians, AMS, regional level, RARs, or municipalities? The regional and local level, for example, would like to have more power in their relationship with AMS:

The regional representatives saw in the interviews that it is AMS that has the final say. They criticised AMS for setting too many simultaneous result targets (for the year 2000 AMS had set 11 targets) giving the regions little autonomy. They wanted to send a message to AMS that it should move away from 'instrument steering' to 'effect or outcome steering' by giving the regions still more autonomy in deciding, for example, how to raise the share of employed job-seekers who have participated in labour market training. One of the regions was now chosen as one of two pilot regions seeking more flexibility to the '75 % rule', a rule which says that a client has to be activated 75 % of the three-year activation period. The regional and local level saw this rule as mechanistic and leading also for the clients' part to 'pseudo activation'. The pilot regions were now allowed to ignore the '75 % rule'.

In any public employment service the relationships between the 'centre', 'region', and 'local' have to be continuously, like the problem of demand and supply, revised. It is especially pivotal during the ongoing rapid times of changes as today. The Danish solution has been to develop activating labour market policy and meeting the high demand by putting the emphasis on the regional level. Thus it goes elegantly along the lines of the EU's current guidelines (and the EU likewise elegantly resonates with Denmark) (EU Commission 2000).

In Denmark the emphasis on the regional level has had its implications on all the strategic and operative management. Auer (2000) calls the Danish way of the labour

market policy management 'corporatist management' and 'social dialogue'. 'Corporatism' indicates social partners' participation in the activities at all levels of administration and operations. Inside the administration a parallel to this 'external dialogue' is 'inner dialogue'.

It is obvious that in order to develop into a credible labour market actor also the labour administration must resonate with the reality 'out there'. In Denmark 'inner dialogue' has resulted in 'contract management' through the earlier phases of management by results and rules, and later by 'value management' and 'quality management'. 'Contract management' is visible in the highly developed negotiation process between the different administrative levels. For example, it is the regional level that makes an initiative to AMS of the result targets for the next budget year. During the fall a mutual negotiation process is being carried out resulting in contracts between AMS and the different regions (Spangar & Arnkil, *ibid.*).

3. Sweden At a New Phase – "Activation Guarantee"

Taking a look into Sweden it may now be observed that the economic recovery taken place in the EU during the 1990s as well as the European employment policy of raising the employment level, decreasing the unemployment level, and fighting the rising bottleneck problems in growth areas have resulted also in Sweden in reforming labour market policy and modernising the PES services. In Sweden the imminent national reasons for the reforms have been at least two-fold. First, while the population grew steadily all the 1990s, the share of labour force has been in decline since 1992, turning upwards only since 1998. Today, the Swedish government has now adopted the target of re-reaching the 80 % employment rate. The last time Sweden had that high employment rate was in 1994 (see table 1).

The second reason for the current Swedish reform lies in the government's decision of lowering the unemployment rate to less than 4 %. Today Sweden has achieved that goal but the political decision has had direct implications on the current reform itself, on how it was launched and how it has been carried out so far.

In order to reach the employment rate and unemployment rate targets Sweden has now adopted a new service model for the labour administration and its clients. The new labour market policy reform is called "activation guarantee" ("aktivitetsgaranti").

The goals of the "activation guarantee" are reducing long-term unemployment and reducing the "skills gap" among the job-seekers who have a shortage of skills needed in the jobs currently available in Sweden as well as break up the job-seeker's recurrent move from unemployment benefits to labour market measures and back. Furthermore, one of the goals of the "activation guarantee" programme is to clarify

and unify the use of the different labour market measures as it acts also as an “umbrella” for all other existing labour market programmes.

The “activation guarantee’s” target groups are job-seekers over 20 years of age and registered in the PES for more than 24 months or job-seekers over 20 who are at risk of becoming “long-term registered”. The “guarantee” means that the programme does not last a fixed pre-defined period of time. The programme goes on at individual level, individual action plans as one of its main methods, as long as an individual finds a job (other than subsidised work) or training (other than labour market training). The participants in the programme are not registered as *unemployed* job-seekers although they may go on as registered as job-seekers. The job-seekers entitled to “aktivitetsgaranti” are invited to groups of 25 – 35 job-seekers by the local PES (AF). They are provided with personal counselling all through the programme. The plan has been that the local PES officials should act as “counsellors”. The activation programmes should not be outsourced. The activation guarantee has now been in effect since August 2000.

The preliminary results of the activation guarantee seem promising. Despite the difficult target group (ageing job-seekers, long-term unemployed, school drop-outs etc) according to the AMS follow-up (based on a sample of 6300 participants) altogether 28.6 % had found a new solution in their lives by February 2001. The figures show also a continuous cumulative rise in the share of positive solutions.

As the reform has been underway for such a short period of time it is all too early to jump into conclusions about its successfulness. There are some question marks indicating themes that should be addressed adequately in order to keep up the positive trend.

First, it seems that the reform was launched very fast, in a top-down manner despite a short piloting project. There are some indicators that the local PESs find it difficult to meet the challenges of the reform. According to the interviews carried out at the local level, the PES officials did not actually have time for supervising the “guarantee groups” on a full-time basis. At least at one of the local offices interviewed the programme activities were purchased from the local labour market training institute. This is in contrast of the central authority’s (AMS) plans to keep the service within AF speciality and carried out by the AF staff itself. The outsourcing of the programme may also threaten the reform’s basic idea of providing the participants with personal counselling, as it is obvious that the contact with the clients may either break up or become discontinuous.

Second, it seems that, due to the rapid launch of the programme, the Swedes are only now addressing the crucial issue of the new counselling skills needed in supervising the activation groups. Working with the challenging target groups of the programme requires staff development where counselling methods could be adopted in a professional way. In this respect, the “solution-focused” methods now as the key approach seem vitally important. As the reform unfolds it also becomes more possible to evaluate the new division of the staff roles into ‘information officer’

(informatör), 'advisor' (rådgivare), and 'counsellor' (handledare). It seems now that the reform puts a strong emphasis on the 'counsellor' role of the employment officers.

The preliminary conclusion of the activation guarantee is that it is a promising effort in its ambitious goal of counselling the difficult clients of PES as long as they are in need of counselling in order to end up with a positive solution. It is also promising in that it emphasises individualised services. However, despite these promising visions we will predict that Sweden has to adjust its reforms later on in a direction of more local flexibility and more professionally individualised client services. This will have a clear message for the AMS also. For example, one of the underlying ideas of a kind of "dual segmentation strategy" – emphasising both Internet and other self-service methods and activating measures - has been that strengthening the Internet services for both job-seekers and employers enables the PES to get more resources for the client service. However, our preliminary observation at the local level of the PES indicate that it is doubtful whether the hypothesis of getting more resources to client service through Internet will actually prove "true". It may turn out that the Internet does not result in getting more time for the client service, or the extent it does that may turn out lower than expected.

Sweden has also her national characteristics differing from both the Finnish as well as the Danish experiences. First, while inclusion of social partner in shaping labour market policies is a cornerstone of the Danish labour market reform, the social partners are almost non-existent in the Swedish Labour Administration. For example, the employers' organisation withdrew in 1993 from all the tri-partite bodies. The activation guarantee is, however, carried out in close local partnerships with municipalities and businesses at the local level. Thus, the Swedes have to find their own ways for contacting social partners. In this respect, Swede comes closer to Finland than Denmark.

Second, Sweden seems only at the beginning of the road taking more fully into account the increased regional differences. Currently some preliminary explorations on the regional and local labour market policies are underway. It is highly probable that also Sweden in the future has to address the issue of balanced regional development more profoundly. It seems that the Swedish reform is characterised relatively strong emphasis on nation-wide political targets with relatively high local autonomy but with less emphasis on regional and local differences.

Third, while proceeding with the activation guarantee programme the target groups will predictably become more and more difficult to find new jobs or educational solutions with. Thus, one may ask (also on the basis of the interviewees carried out at the local level) where the most difficult clients will find themselves after all the activation they have got. Will the vision, after all, be subsidised work at the municipality level? If so, it could mean a step backwards to the times when Sweden had large municipality sector taking care of the unemployed that could not be taken care by the PES.

Fourth, it is noteworthy that while Denmark has focused on meeting the labour market demand, emphasising employer services throughout the service process, Sweden has found its role as working primarily on the supply side, with activating labour market reserves and leaving the other sectors of the labour markets to the markets themselves, interfering only when necessary or when asked to do so. In this respect, Finland with its second wave seems to be taking steps in the direction of Denmark rather than that of Sweden.

Finally, Sweden seems a little bit in contradiction with herself having both the target of activating the most difficult client groups and decreasing the service network simultaneously. In the near future it could be predicted that Sweden has to reconsider its goal of decreasing the number of local offices to some 80 (reflecting the number of detected 'natural labour market areas') from the current more than 500 as it is obvious that a big share of the activation guarantee target groups live in remote areas requiring also personalised services.

4. Reflecting on the Danish, Finnish and Swedish labour market policy and service reforms

In reflecting on the Danish, Finnish and Swedish labour market policy and service reforms we use the Danish reform as a reference point, and then comment on the similarities and differences of Finland and Sweden in relation to it. It must be noted, however, that the Swedish observations are tentative, and will be elaborated further as our work progresses.

4.1. Overview of Some Key Themes

Regionality and the new balance

Compared with the Finnish and Swedish system the Danish one clearly puts more emphasis on the regional level. The regional offices have, through the RARs, organic links with social partners. The RARs and the regional offices are well-resourced. The social partners have also real, not only advisory, power.

In Finland particularly the regional level as an autonomous actor is weaker. The status of the regional level has become even more ambivalent with the Finnish reform in the late 1990s of establishing 15 Employment and Economic Development Centres (EEDCs). The fragmented regional level of the Regional Councils, Environmental Centres and the EEDCs and the other regional level actors have not been capable of taking the role of a new level actor in regional labour market policies. Tri-partite cooperation is strong in Denmark on all levels, whereas in Finland it plays

a medium role on the national level, and a very limited role on regional and local levels. In Sweden, the employers withdrew 1993 from the tripartite bodies.

'Corporatism' à la Denmark as well as the regionality contains also conflicts between the different actors and does not cease conflicts between the different levels. It is also a well-grounded question how the corporatist system, as strong as in Denmark, will be, in a long run, able to meet the challenges of the post-industrial, "post-modern" or information society, regarding particularly the activation of the citizens. The social partner's organisations do not necessarily reach the citizens and interest groups that are not members of those organisations. It seems today obvious that the share of unorganised citizens is now increasing rather than decreasing. Furthermore, compared to Finland, and also Sweden the Danish local agencies seem relatively un-independent while the regional offices are in a dominating role. The independence of the local agencies as well as their high knowledge and skill level in Finland could indeed constitute the crucial elements of the "Finnish way". The same holds true for the *independence* of the Swedish local level, whereas the development and integration of skills seems to be at the moment still in the making.

However, notwithstanding its contradictory elements, the advanced Danish regionality puts the issue of *'what is the new balance between 'national', 'regional', and 'local' in an 'post-industrial' or information society?'* clearly on the reform agenda of all the countries considered.

The increasing demand of labour and the 'action mode' of the public employment services

It understandable that Denmark puts, due to the high demand having existed longer than in Finland, more emphasis on managing the demand. The Danish basic question now is where they can find the necessary labour force to the employers, and this is reflected strongly in the orientation of services. Also in Finland this question has been on the rise in growth regions and in certain occupational fields. However, many oversupply problems remain in traditional occupational fields, and in the remote regions, that have not been able to catch their share of the IT society. Here the basic question in Finland still is where to find jobs for the job-seekers. Nevertheless, Finland is emphasising demand questions and employer contacts quite strongly in its "second wave" of the labour market reform. The question of integrating the demand services and skills in a flexible way with dealing with supply seems to be highest on the agenda in Finland.

In these questions Sweden is pursuing a different emphasis. Although demand has picked up strongly in the growth areas, and there are bottlenecks, Sweden is emphasising IT-services and self-services, also for employers, more than Denmark and Finland, and has clearly shifted focus on the supply side, where, through the "activation guarantee" and other service process developments, strong emphasis is put on individualisation of services. This is not to say that demand is underestimated, but personal employer contacts and skills were not as high on the agenda as in the

other two countries. Sweden also has, as Finland, a more persistent LTU-problem and remote-area problem than Denmark, and also this calls for individualised services for those with problems in the labour market.

Thus, in the light of these experiences, the thematic question of “how does the public employment service deal with new phenomena in demand and supply and how does it integrate the matching the demand and supply in a new, more progressive, flexible, ‘post-industrial’ way?” is put on the reform agenda of employment services.

The flexibility of the labour administration reform policy.

The Danish experience seems to reflect a story of developing into more flexible, regionally and locally more sensitive ways of acting. ‘Flexibilisation’, however, has not yet been fully completed and the regions are only piloting it in certain respects. Also in Denmark, like in Finland, the guidelines and action rules change, seen from local level, often too hastily. The basic message that comes from Denmark, however, is that there is a need for more regional and local flexibility. This message is parallel to the observations we have made on the Finnish local agencies (Arnkil, Spangar & Nieminen 2000). At the same time in both countries it is realised that the ‘centre’ and ‘national level’ are needed in order to develop labour market policy as one whole.

Sweden seems to have pursued in the last couple of years a strong top-down political goal and operation of lowering unemployment and rising the employment rate. Although “re-centralisation” tendencies and political goals have played an important part in also Denmark and Finland in pursuing activation a lower level of unemployment, the top-down character of the reform is clearest in Sweden. The flexibilisation and bottom-up initiative of the reform is emerging and on the rise, for instance in the form of rise of regional strategies and local implementations, however.

Thus, the comparison of the countries puts the question: “How can local and regional flexibility be increased in the context of national labour market policy?” on the agenda.

New steering and management approaches

In accordance with customisation and personal contacts more airy and porous relationships between the different action levels, starting from the front-line, seem to be needed and emerge lending them each more degree of freedom. In Denmark this is obvious in the increased action power of the individual officers and in *the new forms of management*. The local management makes a contract with each employee or team about annual resources and targets. The regional offices make an annual contract with the local offices and the regional offices make annual contracts with the AMS. Thus, the current phase in Denmark is *contract management*, coupled with *quality benchmarking*. In this respect, reforming the steering methods seems to be

strongest in Denmark, whereas in Finland and Sweden, as yet, no major initiatives seem to be on the agenda. In Finland, management of the administration is a combination of management by results coupled with quality development, with still a need to integrate these better. In Sweden, as it was already mentioned, management has been taking strong tasks from political steering, but no major initiatives in the actual methodology seem to be on the agenda.

From these experiences, the question arises of how can management practices be developed to support the relative autonomy of the different level actors and keep up with the demands for new management approaches in a post-industrial or information society?

Competence development and quality work

The labour market changes in the IT and global economy together with debates on different welfare policy solutions in the western countries, in the US and Europe in particular, poses the labour administrations everywhere new challenges. A new level of competencies is now needed at all levels, ranging from more competent strategic thinking all the way to the front-line where an individual official meets an individual citizen. Denmark seems to have succeeded in developing her labour market *strategy* and in reforming the labour administration. However, the development has not necessarily been as successful on the local level, at the employee-citizen *encounters*. In this respect Finland could make most of its more autonomous local level and also use the advantage of being a “the second mover” in reforming.

On the other hand, Denmark seems to be ahead of Finland in grounding its quality work on real content issues and not only on formal aspects. It is also interesting to note that the development in Denmark has developed in the direction of locality and non-formality after the phases of centrality and standardisation.

Sweden has also pursued a strong emphasis on renewing its strategy and also renewing its service model to a “dual segmentation” of IT-and self services on the one hand and activation guarantee on the other. In terms of staff skills Sweden is pursuing a new kind of division (and interaction) of three main skills (or tasks/functions): information officer (informatör), advisor (rådgivare) and counsellor (handledare). The logic is to, by investing in IT and self-service, coupled with information officer input, to win resources to deal with more complex and individual problems. The development of skills to accommodate and support these strong goals seems to be rather late in developing and somewhat out of synch at the moment, however.

These experiences put the question of how to develop the different level staff's theoretical, practical and methodological competencies in order to meet the challenges of the ‘post-industrial’ labour markets quite clearly on the reform agenda of PES.

4.2. Synoptic View of the Trends and Debate in Denmark, Finland and Sweden

The reforms in the three countries have a number of similarities, but also differences in emphasis and implementation. All have a risen demand as a backdrop for development. One can also, in a tentative assessment, detect some strengths and weaknesses in the respective countries in pursuing their aims.

In figure 2 a synoptic view is presented as a summary of the observations made in the article. It seems to us that the main strength of Finland is in the local capability and the emphasis of contact skills, whereas its weakness is mainly in regional capability. In Denmark, by contrast, the picture seems to be somewhat inverted, with strong emphasis of regionality, and a relatively un-autonomous local level. In Sweden the overall strategy, with its “dual segmentation”, seems to be clearest and pursued most vigorously. One key weakness seems to be an under-investment and un-synchronised staff skill development.

Figure 2. Recent Trends and Debate in Labour Market Policy Reform and The Modernisation of PES in Finland, Denmark and Sweden

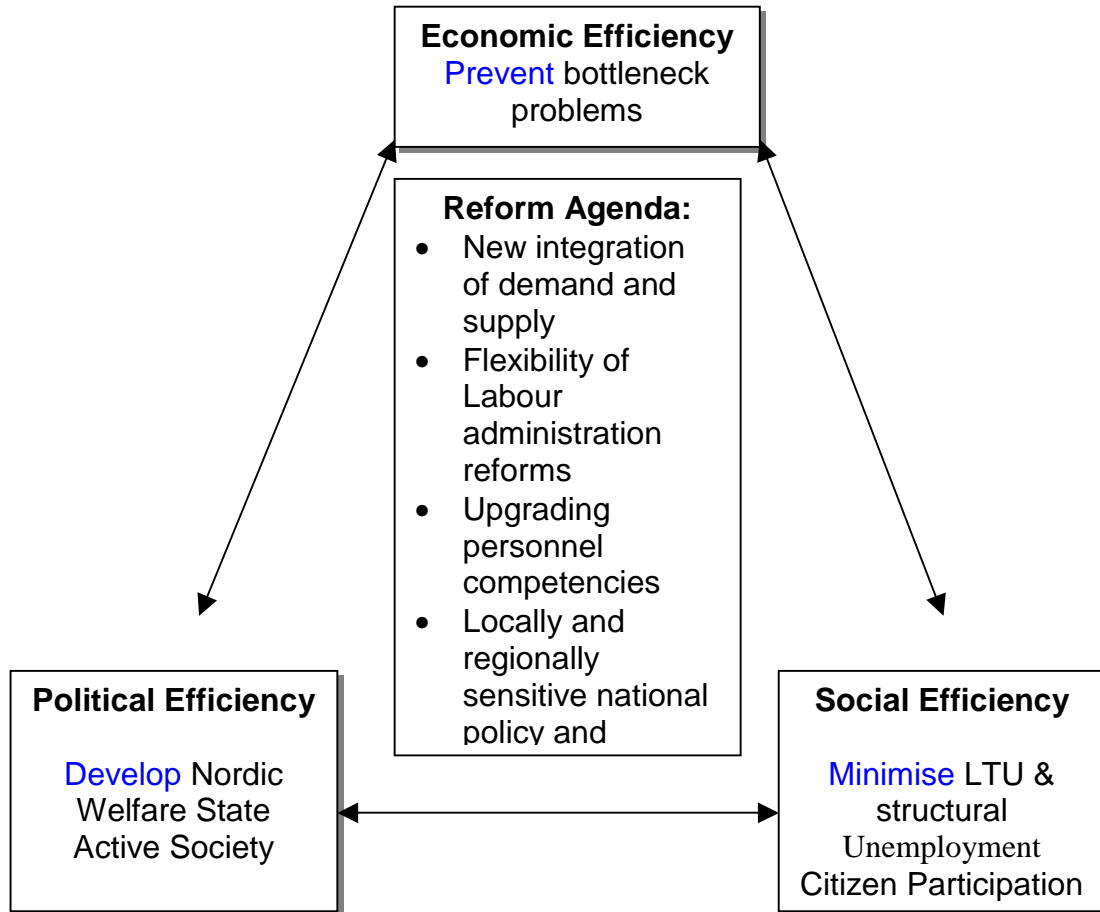
	Finland	Denmark	Sweden
1. Changes in Demand	Rapid uneven recovery	Long period of high (uneven) demand	High demand in growth areas
2. Changes in Supply	LTU but also shortage, ageing+qualification gaps	Shortage, LTU, ageing+qualification gaps	Shortage (in growth areas), LTU, ageing+qualification gaps
3. Contact to Employers	Recently emphasised	Strong emphasis	Normal emphasis, IT services and self-service
4. Contact to Job-seekers	Group job-seeking, job-clubs, segmentation, self-service, individual action plans, skill-mapping	Individual action plans, skill mapping, "headhunting",	According to need: "dual segmentation": IT + activation guarantee
5. Service model	Flexible cooperation of demand and supply services Moving towards "guarantor", using segmentation, outsourcing, self-service	Self service + activation	Strong emphasis on IT and self service + individualised service
6. Staff competence development	Interaction of different skills, contact skills, employer service skills	Emphasis on demand and employer service	Division and interaction of tasks of information officer (informatör), advisor (rådgivare) and counsellor (handledare)
7. Steering of administration, trends	Management by Results + Quality development	Quality Benchmarking (EFQM)	Strong emphasis on political targets (unemployment below 4%, employment 80%)
8. Role of central, regional and local levels	National strategy recently emphasised, regions weak, local offices strong in autonomy	Strong emphasis on regional strategies, local offices medium autonomy	Strong emphasis on national strategy, rising on regions, rather strong autonomy on local level
9. Role of tripartite partnerships	Medium on national level, weak on regional and local	Strong on national and regional levels	Employers do not participate
Main strengths	Local capability, development of contact services	Regional steering and strategy, quality work	Strong emphasis on both IT and individualised services
Main weaknesses	Regional fragmentation	Local capability	Securing staff skills
Current debate	"Second wave" of labour market policy reform" -Employer contacts -IT and self service -Segmentation -Outsourcing	"Third wave" of labour market policy reform in the pipeline -Dealing with high demand -Next step in regions	"Activity guarantee" -Individualised services for those in need -Strong emphasis on IT and self service

4.3. Efficiency Factors of Nordic Labour Market Policies?

What seem to be the underlying efficiency factors of the Nordic labour market policies, in the light of the issues and experiences reflected in the article? At this point we can only make a preliminary suggestion. Koistinen (1999) asserts that 'economical efficiency', 'political efficiency', and 'social efficiency' constitute a welfare policy 'triangle' where each 'angle' as well as their interrelations determine how successful the policy carried out will be. Today the economic efficiency of the labour market policy seems to rest on the concern of the bottleneck problems. Resolving the bottleneck problems is now regarded as a pre-condition for the economic growth and national competitiveness. It may be argued that the modernisation of the Nordic welfare state and developing it further as well as merely preserving it under the pressure of the neo-liberalism prevailing especially in USA and to some extent also in England (cf. Larsson 2000) constitutes now the 'political efficiency' of the labour market policy. In the EU this has been operationalised as 'active society'. The labour market policy 'social efficiency', for its part, will be maintained and developed further by taking care of the labour force reserves, fighting long-term and structural unemployment in particular, and a balanced development of the different regions. In operational terms this is crystallised in Giddens's (1998) concept of 'participatory society'.

In all, the above analysis may now be integrated into an 'efficiency triangle' of the labour market policy illustrating the themes raised by the Danish, Finnish and Swedish experiences.

Figure 3. The 'efficiency triangle' an the reform agenda of labour administration reforms



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