

# Transitions from school to sheltered employment in Norway – Experiences of people with intellectual disabilities

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## Accessible summary

- We interviewed people with intellectual disabilities about their experiences of finding a job.
- Some of the people we interviewed made decisions about their future job, while others were not part of meetings, planning and decision-making.
- Parents and teachers were important in the planning process.
- The people we interviewed advise students to be bold and take chances when searching for a job.
- It is important that people with intellectual disabilities are in charge when they go from school to work.

## Abstract

**Background:** Nordic welfare models are characterised by emphasising both social security and labour market participation. Nevertheless, most people with intellectual disability either receive a disability pension or work in sheltered workshops. While transitions into integrated employment have been studied, transitions from school to sheltered employment have received less attention. We therefore explore the views of people with intellectual disabilities, transitioning from school to a sheltered employment programme.

**Methods:** We interviewed nine adults with intellectual disabilities that had made the transition into a service centre that provides both competitive employment with support, and employment in sheltered workshops. The interviews were analysed thematically.

**Findings:** The thematic analysis revealed two main themes: *involvement during the transition* and *adapting to a new role*. Most participants described transitions where they had been involved, in varying degrees, in identifying their work preferences, participated in transition activities and made personal choices. Some participants, however, shared experiences where they had not participated in activities, where personal choices were restricted to predefined options, or decisions were made by someone

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else. The participants further shared experiences of navigating into new contexts, characterised by new situations and new interactions. To navigate successfully in such environment, the support network was important. The participants advised future “transitioners” to be brave and utilise opportunities to find suitable employment even in challenging situations.

**Conclusions:** Our study emphasises the importance of tailoring the transition to individual preferences and perspectives rather than aiming for a uniform, one size fits all type of transition. It is important to build on the positive aspects of sheltered employment as well as to further develop innovative ways of transitioning into integrated employment.

#### KEYWORDS

employment, Intellectual disability, self-determination, transition

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The transition from school to employment has been highlighted as important for young people with intellectual disabilities. While employment generally represents opportunities for financial autonomy, social inclusion and social status (Jahoda et al., 2008), the majority of people with intellectual disabilities are on the periphery of the labour market (Garrels & Sigstad, 2021). Even if nordic welfare models are characterised by emphasising social security and labour market participation, including people with intellectual disability in the labour market is more of an intention than a reality (Frøyland et al., 2018; Garrels & Sigstad, 2021).<sup>1</sup> It is indicated that 81% of young adults with intellectual disability in Norway receive a disability pension as their main income, and that their working capacity is seldom assessed by the Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration (NAV)<sup>2</sup> (Wendelborg et al., 2017). Even if integrated employment is a political goal, approximately 10% of adults with intellectual disabilities in Norway work in sheltered workshops (Norwegian White Paper 17, 2016). One important aspect of sheltered employment in Norway is their obligation to provide transitional employment training programmes (Norwegian White Paper 17, 2016) preparing employees for integrated or competitive employment.

Prior studies show that employees working in competitive settings with support and in sheltered settings experience a sense of self-efficacy, relatedness (Garrels & Sigstad, 2019) and find that sheltered employment can be satisfying (Rustad & Kassah, 2020). Sheltered employment may contribute to inclusion in social networks, provide daily structure (Carter et al., 2018; Olsen, 2009),

safety, individualised attention (Carter et al., 2018) and a sense of meaningfulness (Olsen, 2009). However, people with intellectual disabilities desire to work in integrated settings (Rustad & Kassah, 2020). The experience of self-determination in sheltered employment has been described as limited (Garrels & Sigstad, 2019). While transitions into integrated employment have been studied, transitions from school to sheltered employment settings seem to have received less attention. Therefore, the aim of this study was to *explore the views of people with intellectual disabilities, transitioning from school to a sheltered employment programme*. We seek to answer the following research question: How do adults with intellectual disabilities experience and view their transition from high school to sheltered employment?

Decision-making, mutual engagement and self-determination of people with intellectual disabilities are important aspects during transitions into employment (Papay & Bambara, 2014; Shogren et al., 2015). Levels of self-determination of people with intellectual disabilities have been linked to positive outcomes such as employment, social integration, community access and financial independence (Nota et al., 2007; Shogren et al., 2015; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). Prior studies have discussed and shown the complexity of self-determination and outcomes (Shogren et al., 2015). While we do not study levels of self-determination, we draw on the perspective of self-determination to discuss the experiences of transitioning from high school to a sheltered employment programme. The essence of self-determination can be described as “*I am because I will to choose, to decide, to be responsible for, a cause of, the consequences that follow on my actions*” (Perلمان, 1965 p. 410). People with intellectual disabilities have described self-determination as voicing one's preferences, being in charge, setting and pursuing goals, making decisions and having control over activities (Nonnemacher & Bambara, 2011; Shogren & Broussard, 2011). Causal agency theory characterises self-determination by volitional action, agentic action and action-control beliefs. Volitional action refers to making conscious choices based on one's preferences and to engage in actions that contribute to

<sup>1</sup>It is estimated that only 5.6% of people with intellectual disabilities in Norway are employed (Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2018). 2% are in competitive employment, and approximately 10% attend sheltered workshops (Norwegian White Paper 17, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>NAV is responsible for providing social services such as unemployment benefit, work assessment allowance, sickness benefit, pensions, child benefit and cash-for-care benefit. NAV has the responsibility to support people with disabilities from 18 years onwards either through pension, through suitable work placement or through a combination of these two approaches.

autonomy. Agentic action is the process of directing actions within the environment to reach certain ends. These actions are driven by capabilities such as choice and decision making, goal setting, problem solving, planning, self-management and self-advocacy, that is action-control. While causal action can be hindered, it can also be enabled through technology, social network and support (Shogren et al., 2017). Self-determination can be learned and promoted through environmental support and is not only determined by intellectual capacity (Wehmeyer & Garner, 2003). However, people with intellectual disabilities tend to require more support than others to become self-determined. Lacking such support might result in less opportunities for decision-making (Curryer et al., 2015).

In Section 2, we describe the context of the study and in Section 3 the methodology used. Section 4 presents the experiences and views of people with intellectual disabilities transitioning from school to work. In Section 5, we discuss these experiences, concluding the study in Section 6.

## 2 | TRANSITIONS FROM SCHOOL TO WORK – A NORWEGIAN CONTEXT

This study grew out of an investigation conducted in Norway with the aim of understanding the views of practitioners<sup>3</sup> supporting young adults with intellectual disabilities in their transition into work. The practitioners stressed the importance of understanding the individual preferences of people with intellectual disabilities and tailoring the transition to these preferences through continuous mapping, both in school and in work situations, resulting in flexibility in timing of trainee placements and type of public social support. Challenges in the transition included navigating in an environment of complexity with unclear or blurred responsibilities where teachers, colleagues and parents collaborated outside of their professional or personal role, and where informal relational bonds resulted in employment positions. Other environmental challenges were lack of resources in school, coordination of public services, limited numbers of sheltered workplaces and unclear economic support to employers of people with intellectual disabilities. Positive social attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities were mentioned as an important enabler for work inclusion.

## 3 | METHODS

We collected data through qualitative interviews. Qualitative interviews are suitable when the aim is to access people's subjective experiences (Beail & Williams, 2014). However, for people with

<sup>3</sup>The data from practitioners included six focus groups interviews and six interviews with representatives from community-based housing, day care centres, work-training centres, employers, secondary schools, NAV and a pool of parents (in total 27 practitioners). All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the research team and later analysed following the inductive process (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) focusing on understanding barriers and/or enablers for the transition.

intellectual disabilities, it may be necessary to facilitate the interview to help the participants to provide rich descriptions. We used Sigstad and Garrels' (2018) communication strategies and recommendations for conducting interviews with participants who have verbal communication difficulties, including rephrasing questions, paraphrasing, follow-up questions, silence to give the participants time to think, repeating questions and summarising responses.

### 3.1 | Participants

To recruit participants for our study, we contacted a service centre<sup>4</sup> that provides both competitive employment with support and employment in sheltered workshops. We selected participants that had made a transition during the last 5 years. Potential participants were invited by their manager to participate in the study. Those interested attended a meeting where the second author informed about the study. A consent form and three overarching interview questions were sent to the manager who furthered the information to the participants. The questions intended to help the participants to prepare and reflect on their transition from school to work before the interview. Nine participants, 20–44 years old, five male and four females participated. An overview of the participants' profiles is presented in Table 1.

### 3.2 | Data collection

During the interviews, the participants were invited to talk about their transition from high school to their current work placement and their involvement in and throughout the transition, opportunities to make decisions and to have their say on matters related to the transition. Based on the insights gathered from practitioners (see Section 2), we asked specific questions about areas such as individual preferences and navigating the environment. Examples of questions include the following: *How did you experience it to graduate from school and to start working? Who did you collaborate with or who assisted you when you applied for a job? What were your hopes when you started working? What recommendations do you have for others searching for a job?* The interviews took place at the participants' workplace and all participants were given the opportunity to have a proxy present, but none chose to have so. All participants communicated verbally. The interview was supported by visual material (a process showing potential activities and involved actors in a transition) to ease the reflection on their individual transition. The interviews lasted on average approximately 20 min, the shortest interview lasting 10 min and the longest 41 min. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

<sup>4</sup>Employees at the service centre carry out work tasks like folding, packaging, assembling and labelling of products. The centre runs an ordinary café with work tasks such as customer service and preparation of food, snacks and beverages. Employees also work at the reception desk as well as delivering products and mail to ordinary companies outside the centre.

TABLE 1 Overview of participants, their transition and current work tasks

| Name   | Age   | Gender | Type of transition <sup>a</sup> | Steps in the transition after high school                                   | Work tasks   |
|--------|-------|--------|---------------------------------|---|--|
| Nina   | 20–24 | Female | Anticipated                     | Apprentice – sheltered employment   | Kitchen and ordinary cafe  |
| Bente  | 30–34 | Female | Anticipated                     | Folk high school – company – living and life village – sheltered employment | Kitchen and front desk   |
| Simen  | 20–24 | Male   | Anticipated                     | Sheltered employment  | Packing, assembling, deliveries                                  |
| Håvard | 25–29 | Male   | Unanticipated                   | Sheltered employment  | Packing, assembling, deliveries                                  |
| Tobias | 30–34 | Male   | Anticipated                     | Year off – sheltered employment   | Packing, assembling, deliveries (without support)                |
| Malin  | 40–44 | Female | Anticipated                     | Kindergarten – sheltered employment   | Front desk, kitchen and ordinary cafe                            |
| Julia  | 25–29 | Female | Anticipated                     | Relocation of dogs – sheltered employment                                   | Packing, assembling, deliveries                                  |
| Ali    | 25–29 | Male   | Anticipated                     | Sheltered employment – ordinary food store                                  | Put out groceries, clean and wash the store and customer service |
| Tom    | 25–29 | Male   | Unanticipated                   | Public employer – sheltered employment                                      | Packing, assembling, deliveries                                  |

<sup>a</sup>Research shows three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated and nonevents. We found the two first in our data. An anticipated transition can be planned from the start of secondary school and succeed. An unanticipated transition is one that is not expected or scheduled (Goodman et al., 2006).

TABLE 2 Example of a structured thematic analysis

| Data extract  | Coded for   | Subtheme                              | Overarching theme                 |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| “One difficult thing was that I was not going to school anymore. I had to work. It was difficult to learn the work tasks because I had never worked before. There were a lot of things I had to get used to.” | New work tasks, challenging work tasks, a new context | New environment and new relationships | Adapting to a new role            |
| “I decided with my teacher. [...] I was asked by my teacher, what do you think, which one of these workshops do you want to work at? And I said [company], and that is where I ended up working.”             | Choices and decisions, personal choice                | In charge of decision-making          | Involvement during the transition |

### 3.3 | Data analysis

The data were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the data were read and reread several times by the first and second author. Second, the data were coded individually by the two authors using open coding. Third, through a discussion, themes and sub-themes were identified and grouped together. Forth, all authors clarified themes and sub-themes through discussions following a reflexive thematic analysis approach. The coding process of reflexive thematic analysis is open, unstructured and organic compared to a “coding reliability” and “codebook” thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Table 2 presents an example of the thematic analysis.

Research that seeks to affect the life of a particular group is recommended to involve the participants on the academic side of the research process (Lewis et al., 2020). While this was not the case in our study, the second author presented the findings to the

participants individually to clarify, correct and validate the findings of our analysis. Five participants attended these sessions. Most participants gave positive feedback on the results of the analysis and confirmed that some of the results reflected their individual transition, while other results did not reflect their individual experience in the same way.

### 3.4 | Ethical considerations

This research was approved by the National Centre for Research Data [269019]. All participants gave their consent to participate in the study and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. To account for safeguarding and autonomy, the second author, a learning disability nurse, adapted his way of communicating to suit each participant.

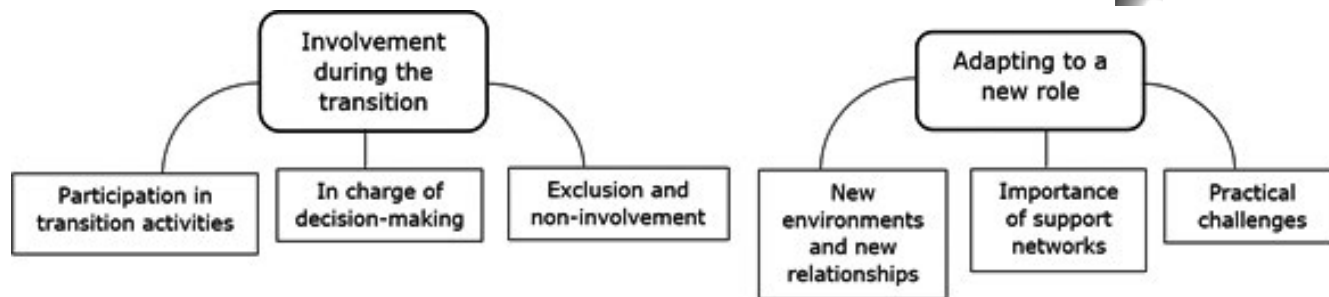


FIGURE 1 Overview of themes and sub-themes

## 4 | FINDINGS

Overall, the participants reported a positive view of the transition from school to work. Four of the participants had transitioned directly from school, four had previously experienced an integrated work setting, and one participant was about to transition from a current sheltered employment to an integrated work setting (a food and retail shop). The thematic analysis revealed two main themes *involvement during the transition* and *adapting to a new role* (overview presented in Figure 1).

### 4.1 | Involvement during the transition

The majority of the participants described transitions where they had, in varying degrees, been involved in identifying their preferences, participated in transition activities and made personal choices. Some participants shared experiences from their transitions where they had not participated in activities and where their personal choice had been restricted to given options or decided by someone else.

#### 4.1.1 | Participation in transition activities

Several participants shared experiences of participating in activities such as attending meetings with support services, visiting potential employers, sharing their point of view and being listened to. They said that gaining work experiences while still in school made them better prepared for working life. Bente talked about her meetings with NAV: “We talked about how we would apply for work and like how we could adjust it, so that I and mum and dad could go and visit all the companies and so.”

Julia, who transitioned from high school to integrated employment (relocation of dogs) and then to her current position, reported that she was satisfied with her transition. Weekly work training at a company while in high school made the transition more predictable and she said that the experience made it easier for her to adapt to the new environment.

*Julia: I think that it was really good, because then I felt more confident that, comfortable with this going well. Because when I am finishing school, then it is directly into work, then I knew kind of what I was going towards, so that the transition did not get too big....*

*Researcher: So, you feel that to be able to try out different work tasks are really important?*

*Julia: Yes. I mean that you already in high school are allowed to try out different possible work tasks.*

When asked about the opportunities to have a say, most participants reported positive experiences. While Malin, who transitioned from integrated work (kindergarten), stressed the importance of participating in the process and to have a say, she also described her participation as “granted”/given by someone, not something that came naturally.

*Malin: ... I was and of course, was given the permission to have my say and participate throughout the entire process. And it helps me a lot when I am allowed to be part of the process so that nothing is done ‘over my head’.*

*Researcher: You think that it is important?*

*Malin: Yes, it is very important that you can be part of the entire process and that you are allowed to take part in decision-making.*

#### 4.1.2 | In charge of decision-making

Most participants emphasised that they had decided, themselves, to apply for education, trainee placements or work placements based on personal preferences and interests. Some participants said that their choice of employment was motivated by the distance from work to their family or that they had friends who worked there. For instance, Bente who transitioned from a living and life village, described the reasons behind her current placement: “I chose [name of company] because I thought that the two positions that they offered were the most interesting at the moment.”

Several participants mentioned the importance and appreciation of being able to voice one's abilities, interests, and wishes through the transition. Nina, who was an apprentice before transitioning to sheltered employment, was one of several participants that recommended others to develop a CV as a way of identifying their preferences.

*Nina: I feel that I even have been...able to speak my mind and I have been listened to. And then I was even allowed to... I have told what I wish to work with, and I did say what I wished to do in the future kind of at work and so in the future... The most important thing to remember if someone is to start a work or apply for a position, is that it is important to write a CV.*

Tom, who transitioned from integrated employment (nursing home), emphasised that it is important to aim for a position that you want and to try a position instead of ending up in some employment that you dislike. "Because if you are an ordinary working person that knows that you can manage the job you want, then it is better to try and fail and to go to another job that you think you can manage better than not to try the job you want to have and then go to a job that you in the end hate a lot and... So try what you want first, before you try something that some other persons want you to try."

#### 4.1.3 | Exclusion and noninvolvement

Some participants gave examples of situations where they had not participated in meetings and/or voiced their wishes and therefore had little or no influence over the outcome of the processes. Examples were also aired of how choices were restricted and had been made based on few options or were not based on personal preferences.

*Researcher: How important were the teachers in school for your employment?*

*Håvard: I do not think that they said anything...I believe that my teachers did not say anything about it.*

*Researcher: But you took part in writing a CV?*

*Håvard: No.*

*Researcher: Were you ever attending any meetings with teachers, [name of employer] and NAV?*

*Håvard: No, I was in a meeting with the school....*

*Researcher: Were you able to talk about things you wished or similar at that meeting?*

*Håvard: No because I did not participate in the meeting, it was only my dad who took part in the meeting.*

Tom described that his employment decision was made by others. He mentioned that he had personal challenges that he was hiding for others making it difficult to observe or map the challenges during the transition process.

*Researcher: Were you able to participate and be part of deciding when you were to start work or something like that?*

*Tom: Not really.*

*Researcher: So, you were able to say what you wanted but you do not really feel that you were able to decide on your own?*

*Tom: No. My mother... or she... she did really... she did really most of my things. She has always assisted me a lot with things. She has always been a very supportive person, and that is what I thought, that I had a very supportive person in life that could help me with things. Since I got this, I have not been able to manage so much on my own. And even if I appear to be rather capable, so even if I can do a lot of things independently, it is a lot... I still have a lot of challenges. I am only very good at hiding it.*

One participant expressed dissatisfaction in retrospect, leaving him with a feeling of not been given the chance to consider competitive work as an option. Tobias, who before the transition to sheltered employment had a year of after high school, stated:

*Tobias: ...well I thought that I could also discuss if there after some time were opportunities to get a competitive employment position so kind of...*

*Researcher: Is that what you are most interested in?*

*Tobias: Yes, and that is what I and [employer] fight for a little bit at the moment, to put me up on something like that... Because I would really like to try to work in a reception with service and... I do not really see anything wrong in this job here at all, but I would give a lot to be in your shoes so to speak.*

## 4.2 | Adapting to a new role

The participants described transitions where they had navigated into a new context, characterised by new situations and new interactions. To navigate successfully in such environment, the participants said that support from family and friends, teachers and NAV was important.

### 4.2.1 | New environments and new relationships

While the participants received support from staff at the workplace and their teachers, several participants mentioned that learning new skills at work were different from school assignments. Julia mentioned how she had to learn how to carry out work tasks and socialise.

*Julia: Things that were difficult were that I would not continue to go to school but to start working, I found it difficult to learn how to carry out the work tasks. Because I had never worked previously. And that it was a lot to get a grip of and get to know many new colleagues that I did not know from before.*

Most participants mentioned that meeting new colleagues could be daunting at first but that they now enjoyed the work environment and their colleagues. In this way, the participants did not only experience a transition but also a process of learning during the transition from school to work. Malin stressed that previous experiences eased later transitions. *“That one was a bit tougher than the transition from the employment at the kindergarden to [sheltered employment], it was probably tougher. Because I struggle with anxiety and new people and new places and such things, were extremely scary for me in the beginning. But as I have grown older and so, it has become much easier with these transitions.”*

#### 4.2.2 | Importance of support networks

Several participants said that their support network, including family and friends, teachers and NAV had been important during the transition. Teachers had assisted them to write CVs, to find potential employers and had arranged meetings with parents. NAV had supported them to find work placements. One participant recommended future “transitioners” to ask for assistance from valuable persons in ones' support network.

*Julia: ... I would have said that it will be fine with the transition from school to work because you will get assistance by someone who knows you will and you will be listened to, in a way you can say what you think, what you want to work with, so they will listen to you, so that they can help you further on. It makes it easier to find a job that you enjoy then.*

*Researcher: So, you think that the most important is that one gets...*

*Julia: ...that you get assistance, good support that helps you with the transition from school to work.*

When Malin was asked whom supported her in applying for an employment, she mentioned the importance of NAV.

*Malin: No, it was my job coach at NAV that helped me with CV and things.*

*Researcher: And how was that?*

*Malin: It was really nice, because I had probably not managed on my own. So, it is nice to have [someone] in the back who can help you with CV and explain what you should write and so. It helped very much.*

#### 4.2.3 | Practical challenges during the transition

Some participants emphasised that their current employment was affected by the availability of state-funded support and support for sheltered employment. Ali, who was currently in the process of transitioning from sheltered employment to integrated work, decided for a less suitable work placement when he earlier transitioned into sheltered work because of long waiting lists for the preferred position.

*Ali: I could choose among three places, but there was a long waiting time. But the shortest waiting time was here at [name], so I took it.*

*Researcher: Did you wish to work here, or could you really consider working at another place when you applied to this one?*

*Ali: Well, I could have done that, but then I would have had to wait longer before I got a position.*

## 5 | DISCUSSION

Prior studies point to the importance of successful transitions into employment. In this study, we widen the scope and present how people with intellectual disabilities reflect on their views and experiences when transitioning into sheltered employment. We found that the participants in the study emphasised the importance of being involved in the transition. They advised other young people to try out different work positions and search for positions based on their abilities, interests and personality. This finding is consistent with the findings in prior research on transitions and self-determination (e.g. Papay & Bambara, 2014; Shogren et al., 2015). Our participants highlighted the importance of support and to draw on parents, teachers, possible employers and other support services for assistance. In the following paragraphs, we elaborate on these aspects.

One important experience for the participants during their transitions was to identify and voice their preferences. A well-developed CV seemed to be a start for identifying and communicating abilities, interests, personality and preferences. Practitioners that supported young adults during similar transitions did stress the need for continuous mapping of the young adults' needs and abilities throughout transitions. Implicitly, this mapping of preferences should support *individuality and flexibility* in the transition. This is in line with Carter et al. (2018) who found that reasons behind sheltered employment are highly individual from a family member perspective and that there is no single explanation for seeking sheltered employment. One vital prerequisite for reflecting on preferences seems to be the opportunity to try out different work placements. In fact, our participants recommended others to be brave and take the opportunity to find suitable employment even if it could be challenging. A basis for this *individuality and flexibility* is a self-determined approach where youths themselves are given the opportunity to experience and decide the limits of their capacity, when to be brave and what chances to take as they carve out their own path. Our findings follow a general change in modern society, where transitions to adulthood are characterised by youths' own individual trajectories (Mørch, 2003), indicating a need for self-determined actions based on one's preferences and abilities, and where conscious choices are made (Shogren et al., 2017).

However, in line with Byhlin and Käckér (2018), there were some paradoxes in the participants' choice of words when retelling their experiences – signalling a lack of self-determination and a limited overview over the transition. For instance, the participants

used wordings like “being allowed to” and “given permission to participate” in activities. Some participants viewed the transition to sheltered employment as unanticipated, indicating a lack of control of activities, and experienced being left out from the decision-making process. These participants reported feeling excluded and experienced that others had made decisions concerning their future. The experience of being left out in transition planning and decisions is not uncommon for people with intellectual disabilities (Hetherington et al., 2010). A support network can both enable and hinder self-determination (Shogren et al., 2017). Our study suggests that due to the context-dependent practices of transitioning into sheltered employment, the support network impacts the outcome of the transition to a higher extent than in during transition into integrated or competitive employment. Negative examples of context-dependent practices are meetings that parents or legal guardians attend without the involvement of the young adult with intellectual disability. Research indicates that integrated employment has a stronger influence on independence, self-esteem and self-confidence, than sheltered employment (Almalky, 2020).

Most participants mentioned the importance of support networks, including parents, teachers, and employment services. To pursue the actions or activities towards employment the participants had to navigate their environment (Shogren et al., 2017) including practical challenges such as access to public support, new situations and new interactions. For instance, participants reported that they had waited for employment due to lack of availability of supported employment. As people with intellectual disabilities are largely excluded from competitive employment (Norwegian White Paper, 2016), sheltered employment is often the only possibility to gain work training and tailored employment. However, in Norway, the capacity for sheltered employment is insufficient and has long waiting lists (Wendelborg et al., 2017). Parents were especially described as facilitators for participation, decision-making, and gaining access to the limited available positions in sheltered employment. This is in line with research indicating that family involvement is needed, crucial and something that adolescents want (Francis et al., 2020; Shogren & Wehmeyer, 2020).

The individual and flexible understanding of transitions described above contrasts the standard unified practice of how people with intellectual disabilities are assessed on their work abilities. Previous research shows that the working capacity of young adults with intellectual disability in Norway is seldom assessed (Wendelborg et al., 2017). Consequently, they are not regarded as job seekers (Wendelborg et al., 2017) in spite of their individuality and not given the opportunity or support for an individualised transition where they can explore integrated work settings and make personal decisions on employment. The participants reported that it was important to participate actively in activities, have a say and be partakers in making choices and taking decisions about their own future. Some participants described decision made on their own preferences, for instance selecting a placement close to family. However, despite that the intention of sheltered employment

in Norway is to provide transitional employment programmes (Norwegian White Paper 17, 2016), few elaborated on opportunities or aspirations for integrated or competitive employment. One participant indicated that competitive work was not highlighted as an option during the transition. All in all, while being self-determined rests on skills and knowledge (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2013), earlier studies report that the transition from school to sheltered work is often someone else's decision (Byhlin & Käckér, 2018). While self-determination has proved to be important for successful transitions into employment, future research is needed to explore how availability of different employment options impact elements of self-determination.

## 5.1 | Limitations

This study has some potential limitations. While we discuss the participants' experiences from the perspective of self-determination, we did not measure levels of self-determination or examples of support in developing self-determination. The number of participants, and that all are currently working at the same workplace may have contributed to similar experiences of the transitions. The study does not include, for instance, experiences of integrated work. However, efforts were made to include a diverse group of participants. There was diversity among the participants in terms of gender, background, transition path and type of work tasks. Employees that had not experienced a recent transition (more than 5 years ago) were excluded due to challenges of recalling experiences. The study was tailored to participants with abilities to consent and that were able to articulate their experience. Therefore, the experiences of people with severe and profound disabilities are not reflected. The study took place in Norway with a national welfare system that is different from other national contexts (see Rustad and Kassah (2020) for a description of the national welfare system).

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Our study shows that regardless of the positive aspects of sheltered employment (Garrels & Sigstad, 2019; Rustad & Kassah, 2020) and competitive employment (Almalky, 2020), it is important that the individual transition rests on informed choices and actions. Our findings emphasise the importance of involving young adults with intellectual disabilities in all aspects of the transition, and to tailor the transition according to their preferences and perspectives rather than aiming for a uniform, “one size fits all” type of transition. With different alternatives of employment, it is important to build on the positive aspects of sheltered employment and establish transitions from sheltered employment into integrated employment. Our study highlights that support networks are crucial during transitions into sheltered employment. However, the support network can both enhance and limit decision-making and involvement of the individual. Our study calls for an individual and flexible approach where young



adults themselves decide the limits of their capacity, when to be brave and what chances to take during transitions.

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