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# **Higher vocational education for health care workers**





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There will be a substantial and growing demand for labour and specialized skills in the health sector in the years ahead, and this report examines continuing education in higher vocational education for health care workers. The aim of this report is to identify how employers facilitate continuing education and the consequences of completing higher vocational education.

We have explored this through interviews with health care workers, managers, union representatives, and others with extensive knowledge of skill development. The data collection was conducted in municipalities and hospitals in different parts of Norway. In addition, we conducted a survey targeting health care workers in order to obtain a broader picture of the conditions surrounding continuing education. This has provided insight into both opportunities and barriers related to increasing employees' skills.

The findings suggest limited change for health care workers who pursue continuing education, despite ongoing organisational restructuring in several municipalities intended to address challenges in recruiting qualified personnel. Many managers are aware of the need to increase employees' skills, but other factors also influence health care workers' choices and opportunities with regard to continuing education. Although the need to strengthen the skills of health care workers is widely recognised, there is considerable variation in how continuing education is facilitated and in the extent to which employees are motivated to pursue further education. Among the participants in the study, approximately one third have completed or are currently undertaking continuing education, and many others express a desire to further develop their skills. Motivation to pursue continuing education also varies by age and by the field of study individuals wish to undertake. Several participants encountered barriers such as financial costs, limited access to information, and insufficient support from employers, which made it challenging to undertake education alongside their work.

Decisions regarding continuing education can also be understood in relation to access to information about higher vocational colleges. There is variation in the extent to which health care workers are familiar with available programmes, and managers also differ in their knowledge of continuing education at the higher vocational college level and of employees' rights related to further education. In addition, employers vary in their practices for disseminating information, and in some cases the information provided is inadequate.

The report also reveals considerable differences in the support employers provide to health care workers who pursue continuing education. Access to study leave, leave for examinations, and financial support is crucial for many health care workers, yet such provisions are not available to everyone. There is variation in support both between institutions within the same municipality and among employees at the same institution, which creates frustration among staff. To shed light on the underlying causes of these differences, we examine them in relation to local government finances and other factors that influence employers' capacity to support further education.

Despite the substantial need for highly qualified labour in the health sector, we find that increased skills acquired through vocational college education does not necessarily lead to changes in health care workers' daily work. Many report that the knowledge

they acquire is relevant to their work and contributes to greater confidence in their role, but completion of continuing education does not necessarily result in increased responsibility or new tasks. Health care workers who experience that their skills are not utilised often continue to perform the same tasks as colleagues who have not undertaken continuing education.

Continuing education at higher vocational colleges is an important tool for providing health care workers with professional development and skills that may contribute to addressing some of the challenges facing the health sector. At the same time, the report highlights the need for better information about higher vocational college programmes and more predictable support schemes for health care workers. In addition, there is significant potential to develop better ways of utilizing the skills acquired through higher vocational college education.

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