

Future Working Life Research Programme

Programme Memorandum

Background of the Programme

A well-functioning working life is central to the development of society, as it creates the conditions for economic growth and for the funding of welfare systems. It is also key for individuals and families, since working life often creates opportunities for personal development. In addition, it is a means of becoming established within society and gives access to many welfare systems. In a time of rapid societal changes, working life must be shaped in such a way that it is sustainable, irrespective of challenges such as demographic and structural changes; that it promotes good health and wellbeing of employees; and that it is inclusive and creates opportunities for inclusion. Research and innovation are core factors in bringing this about.

The NordForsk Board decided at its meeting on 13 October 2021 to implement the Future Working Life initiative based on the Expression of Interest submitted by the The Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare – Forte – with support from the Research Council of Norway, The Icelandic Centre for Research Rannis, the Research Council of Lithuania and the Government of Åland, Department of Trade and Industry.

The following research funding organisations (hereafter jointly called the Funding Partners) participate in the joint funding of the programme:

- The Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (Forte)
- The Research Council of Norway
- Rannis, The Icelandic Centre for Research
- The Research Council of Lithuania
- Government of Åland, Department of Trade and Industry
- NordForsk

The Funding Partners are represented in the Programme Committee.

Economic Framework

The total budget of the programme is approximately NOK 49 million. The programme is funded through a virtual common pot.

NOK 1 million of the programme budget will be allocated for administrative costs connected to the review process and annual monitoring.

The programme committee will reserve funding in the programme budget for further development of the funded projects and joint programme activities such as conferences, seminars, workshops, and other dissemination activities. The funded projects have the main responsibility for planning and budgeting for communication and dissemination of project results.

Overarching Aims and Objectives of the Programme

A well-functioning working life is the very foundation of the welfare state. Globalisation, digitalisation and technical developments, demographic changes and the need for a green transition affect societies and working life. Workplaces and businesses need to adapt to the new preconditions and requirements, and to be successful, the processes must be just, effective, and inclusive.

There are many different, but also inter-connected challenges that need to be met. There is a need to secure relevant and essential skills, ensure inclusion and jobs for all parts of the population, and provide working conditions that promote health and wellbeing. At the same time, innovative approaches in working life are necessary to meet and handle the effects of the climate crisis. Furthermore, the consequences from crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, political upheaval, and war in Europe, are uncertain. COVID -19, for example, put pressure on cross-border collaboration, both within and beyond the Nordic region. It led to significant changes in the way we work and increased the pace of the ongoing digital development.

To ensure sustainable labour participation and healthy work environments, current and future challenges must be addressed with research-based knowledge. A joint Nordic-Lithuanian approach for research on future working life can provide great benefits for the participating countries. The Future Working Life research programme provides a unique and much needed arena for Nordic and Lithuanian researchers to investigate current and future challenges in working life. Through joint endeavours the programme can provide new important understandings of the development of working life in the region and generate knowledge and solutions for a sustainable and inclusive future working life. By building on similar structures, cultures and values and addressing common challenges, the cross-border research cooperation can create new insights and provide evidence-based knowledge for both policy and practice, helping equip all the societies to meet the social changes and challenges more successfully.

Sustainable Development and Vision 2030

The Nordic Council of Ministers' Vision 2030 heads towards developing the Nordic region as the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030. [The action plan](#) (2021-2024) describes how the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) will work to achieve the objectives of the vision through a series of initiatives linked to the vision's three strategic priorities: a green Nordic Region, a competitive Nordic Region, and a socially sustainable Nordic Region. New research initiatives under NordForsk should support Vision 2030, and the Future Working Life research programme clearly relates to all three strategic areas. According to objective 7 in action plan, the Nordic Council of Ministers "will develop skills and well-functioning labour markets that match the requirements of the green transition and digital developments and that support freedom of movement in the Nordic Region".

The action plan highlights that new requirements are arising as part of the green transition and digital development and raises the importance of promoting lifelong learning and increased labour participation. Furthermore, to be successful, the processes towards a greener, more competitive, and socially sustainable region must be just and inclusive, involving all levels and sectors of society (objective 10). By targeting the areas "Sustainable labour force participation" and "Green transition of working life", the Future Working Life research programme can add important knowledge to these objectives. The third focus area under the programme, research on working environment and

wellbeing, can provide new insights on how to meet challenges in working life related to opportunities for and rights of vulnerable, marginalised or underrepresented groups (relevant for objective 9). Experiences of the Nordic labour markets of the COVID-19 crisis is another prioritized area under the NCM where the Future Working Life programme can contribute with unique new knowledge.

Added value of the research collaboration

The Nordic countries have similar progressive welfare systems. Working life in the region is based on high levels of equality, social security, and dialogue between labour market partners as well as cross-border mobility. But even though one often speaks of a Nordic working life model, there are differences in organisation and governance between the Nordic countries, as well as in comparison to countries close to the Nordic such as Lithuania, to learn from. A context of both distinct similarities and differences in the welfare system, working life and culture across the Nordic-Baltic region, provides a good foundation for comparative studies and practical application of the results in all the participating countries. Through collaboration on a regional scale the research communities would get access to more data and larger samples compared to national initiatives. Furthermore, comprehensive register data opens unique research possibilities, allowing for comparative and interdisciplinary research, as well as intersectional approaches and longitudinal studies. This context provides an opportunity to study a rapidly changing working life from a Nordic or Nordic-Lithuanian perspective.

The Nordic countries have a long, shared history of successful and distinguished working life research to build on. A Nordic and Lithuanian research programme will strengthen the exchange of experiences, perspectives, methods, and outcomes of the working life research across the region. Advanced cross-border research cooperation can improve both the focus and efficiency of funding, as well as the quality of the research and its potential for impact. This could again increase the potential for the researchers to secure new collaborations and contacts within this field of research and to attract research funding from EU programmes and initiatives.

Programme aims and objectives

The overall aim of the Programme is to generate knowledge and solutions for a sustainable and inclusive future working life in a Nordic and/or Nordic-Lithuanian context. The Programme seeks to support innovative research to increase our understanding of how we can create a well-functioning working life with a competitive labour force, healthy work conditions and a working life supporting a green transition. It promotes an inclusive working life which provides equal opportunities for all and acknowledges the knowledge and potential that exists in the entire population regardless of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, health, faith, religion, and sexual orientation. The programme welcomes research considering the opportunities, concerns, and capacities of all parts of the population.

The Programme aims to enhance Nordic and Nordic-Lithuanian research collaboration within working life research, provide support for solid research environments, and fund excellent research with impact both within and beyond academia. It encourages interdisciplinary and comparative approaches. Comparisons of effects and measures to improve working life conditions across the countries and regions, for example on improving working life conditions, can contribute to strengthening the potential for evidence-informed development of policy, law and practice.

Research can also provide new knowledge to developing or improving welfare regulations and structures, and about innovative ways of work beneficial for the individual. The impact can be made at different levels, from international to local, from organisational to individual, and on shorter or longer term. Research aiming to contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and national policy strategies is encouraged. To build future capacity in the area, the Programme welcomes collaboration between established and early career researchers¹.

Active engagement with stakeholders is encouraged both to ensure the relevance of the proposed research and to facilitate future implementation of research results. Applicants should plan for dissemination of research findings to key stakeholders, such as the social partners and trade unions, civil society, workplaces, municipalities, regions, employment services, social insurance agencies, education establishments, politicians, interest groups and other researchers.

Thematic Framework

A description of the thematic framework for the Programme

The ongoing structural changes with digitalisation, automation and electrification, and the green transition demand adjustments in working life. In addition, crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, political upheaval, and war in Europe, can have uncertain consequences adding to the ongoing challenges that many societies face regarding working life. The Programme Committee has identified three crucial and inter-linked areas that would particularly benefit from Nordic and Nordic-Lithuanian research collaboration and that the Future Working Life research programme will prioritise:

- **Sustainable labour force participation**
More knowledge is needed about how our societies can adapt to rapid social, demographic, and technological changes and how to ensure an inclusive, competent, and sustainable future labour force. Research on how developments such as digitalisation, automation and longer working life are affecting the labour market, on how companies, organisations and individuals can respond to a more fluid labour market and demands for new skills, and on how the labour force can capitalise on the resources existing in all parts of the population, can help equip different actors on the way to securing sustainable participation in working life. Research-based knowledge is also important to understand how the transformation of working life in largely gender-segregated labour markets affect men and women differently and the consequences of this.
- **Work environment and wellbeing**
Research is needed to better understand how to create healthy work environments that promote wellbeing and work-life balance in a time of hybrid working environments, flexible contracts/new employment forms and longer working life. International research collaboration can increase our understanding of how societal changes and transformations and new risk factors in working life affect different occupational groups as well as different parts of the working population. Research-based knowledge is needed to ensure inclusive

¹ An early career researcher is here considered as someone who is either within eight years of their PhD award or equivalent professional training.

work environments that provide healthy working conditions, taking into consideration different occupational groups as well as under-represented or marginalised groups.

- **Green transition of working life**

A green transition of working life is a crucial part of the path towards a green and sustainable Nordic and Baltic region. All parts of the labour markets must not only adapt to but should also contribute to the ongoing transition for it to succeed and be green, efficient, and just. Research is crucial to create a better understanding of how the green transition will affect working life and how different actors in the labour market can contribute to a greener working life.

These categories should not be seen as isolated, there are interlinkages and effects across categories. Gender equality and diversity is a cross-cutting objective that should be considered in relation to all the categories.

Evaluation Procedure and Programme Activities

A call for proposals will be announced under the Programme in March 2022. Approximately 5 research projects with a budget of maximum NOK 9 million each are expected to be funded. In each funded project, the consortium must consist of researchers from research institutions in at least three of the countries or autonomous regions financing the call: Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Åland Islands and Lithuania. The call will be implemented as a one-phase call. The proposals will be submitted for scientific peer review where an international panel of experts will assess the proposals. The NordForsk administration coordinates the review process. Based on the scientific assessment from the expert panel, an assessment of the potential for added value for the participating countries and the contribution to the overall aims of the call, the Programme Committee recommends projects for funding. The NordForsk Board will take the final funding decision on the NordForsk share of the budget, based on the recommendation from the Programme Committee. The national funding agencies will take the final funding decision on the national contributions, based on the recommendation of the Programme Committee.

The Programme Committee will communicate information about the Programme and its objectives, aims, and call for proposals to a broad range of researchers working in the area, as well as to citizens, stakeholders and policymakers. The programme will use communication channels of both NordForsk and the funding partners.

NordForsk will administer the call for proposals and peer review process, as well as the annual monitoring of funded projects, in dialogue with the Programme committee.

A significant amount of the total Programme budget will be used for further development of the funded projects and joint Programme activities such as conferences, seminars and workshops. The NordForsk administration will, in close dialogue with the Programme committee and the funded projects, organise a kick-off meeting, a mid-term meeting, and a final event. Annual programme

meetings between the Programme committee and the funded projects should be considered organised digitally taking into consideration environmental as well as financial aspects.

Timeline:

- Call publication – 21 March 2022
- Submission deadline – 21 June 2022
- Panel meeting – Early October
- Programme Committee meeting – Mid November
- Funding decision – December (NordForsk Board)
- Project start – By Q2 2023