

FIRST WAVE FINDINGS: Jobseekers

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Jobseekers were the first social security recipient group to be subject to job seeking conditionality. Their job search requirements have since increased, as have sanctions. Little support exists for most jobseekers. The Work Programme forms the basis of long-term support. This briefing paper presents indicative findings from our research undertaken to date, based on interviews and focus groups with policy stakeholders and practitioners plus interviews with 64 jobseekers (WSUs).

Key points

- The majority of JSA interviewees found the emphasis on sanctions unnecessary and counterproductive, since they were already keen to find a job and were actively seeking work.
- The lack of contact and limited remit of

Jobcentre Plus intervention meant that services were experienced as mainly punitive in character, with frequent threats of sanctions.

- Thirty-four interviewees had been sanctioned. Sanctions had a range of negative effects including shock and confusion (for those who believed they had been compliant); financial hardship and deep poverty; debt, arrears, eviction threats and homelessness; food bank use; ill-health and severe and acute emotional effects, such as anxiety and depression.
- One interviewee reported that being sanctioned made him more active and punctual.
- Most interviewees were already keen to find work, so did not need the threat or application of sanctions to spur them on to action they were already taking.
- Effective support to balance the punitive sanctions regime was found to be largely lacking, with Jobcentre Plus services focussed on benefit claims and lack of capacity to help with jobsearch.
- Most support was online self-help via Universal Jobmatch, of which interviewees had varying experiences.
- Interviewees and practitioners had a range of views on the ethics of conditionality. Personal experiences were contrasted against anti-welfare myths. The principle of looking for work whilst claiming benefits was accepted. Sanctions were thought to be necessary in principle for a small minority, but opposed strongly in practice as too long, sudden and intense. Sanctioning procedures were thought to be unjust.



Geoffrey Robinson / Alamy Stock Photo

Introduction

Since 2012, job search requirements for unemployed people have increased and sanctions have become more easily triggered and long lasting in nature. Little support exists for the majority of jobseekers, whose main contact with services is self-help via the online Universal Jobmatch vacancy system. The Work Programme (usually mandatory) forms the basis of long-term support, sometimes involving mandatory work activity.

Policy instruments that were introduced originally for unemployed people have subsequently been applied to other groups, like ill or disabled people, lone parents and those in paid employment claiming Universal Credit (see our other first wave findings papers for more detail).

Experiences and impacts of welfare conditionality

Sanctions

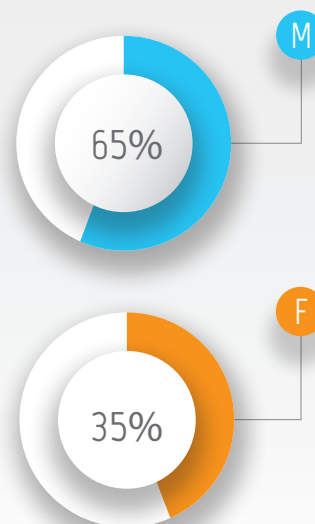
Thirty-four participants (53%) had been subject to a benefit sanction. Of those who had been sanctioned, around two thirds (21 participants) had been sanctioned once, around a third (12 participants) had been sanctioned 2-5 times and one participant had been sanctioned more than five times.

Reasons for sanctions

- Being late for or missing appointments was the most common reason for a sanction (18 sanctions). These included cases where: the claimant had not been informed of the appointment; two cases of illness (one man reported being sanctioned whilst attending a hospital appointment, despite informing Jobcentre Plus); two cases where dependants were unwell/unsafe; and one joint claim.
- Lack of job search evidence (15 sanctions), including cases where: the necessary job search had been done, but was not recorded precisely; a woman who completed her own job search, but was sanctioned on a joint claim because her partner did not.

- TOTAL WSUs / 64 -

-GENDER-



- Failure to apply to particular vacancies: one man was sanctioned multiple times for not applying for jobs that he found inappropriate.
- Not being available for work (one interviewee).
- Voluntary unemployed, which was disputed (one interviewee).
- Unknown – one interviewee did not know why they had been sanctioned.

Most interviewees who had received a sanction felt that it had been applied unfairly. However, not all of those who disputed the validity of the sanction appealed against it, which was usually because they felt disempowered or believed the process would be long, complex, uncertain and ultimately futile. Practitioners also reported that evidence they submitted was not passed on and that their clients were often unwilling to appeal sanctions that they found unfair because:

“ They have just been frustrated and haven’t believed that there will be any change, but at the same time while they are on sanctions the appeals sometimes take months. ”

(FG12, Jobseeking, England)

“ They don’t see the point. They feel helpless and if they do, you don’t hear back from them... They just feel so weary and they can’t be bothered to challenge sanctions. It’s just like they accept it and they’re resigned to their fate. ”

(FG12, Jobseeking, England)

Practitioners were concerned at the very long timescales involved in applying sanctions (sometimes months after the alleged infringement) and that mandatory reconsideration and appeals were very time-consuming, leaving their clients:

“ Without any money to find out it’s been overturned and actually you’ve not done anything wrong in the first place. That’s just so unrealistic and cruel. ”

(FG14, Jobseeking, England).

Practitioners were also concerned that their clients did not understand the implications of not appealing an initial sanction:

“ The majority of our clients they are not aware that if you got a second sanction with the 52 weeks it will be tougher. They’ve never been told. ”

(FG12, Jobseeking, England)

Seven interviewees did appeal (five appeals were successful, one ongoing and one dropped) and found the process complex, time-consuming, lengthy (taking several months) and costly (phone calls). Appeal outcomes were not necessarily communicated and reasons for decisions were

often not given. One man, who viewed his sanction as unfair, was determined to appeal, but had to abandon his action when the hearing was scheduled a long distance from his home and he could not afford the bus journey to attend:

“ It took four months for the appeal system to go through and eventually after four months the sanction had finished and I was back claiming. When the eventual final day came through it was in the city. So I gave it up. I let it go. I shouldn’t have done that, but I did. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

One participant told us that he was sanctioned because his Work Programme adviser reported that he missed a meeting (although the original sanction letter gave no reason). After six weeks the appeal was upheld (and his money was backdated), but only after the claimant persuaded the manager of the private provider to check the sign-in books for evidence that he did attend.

“ The situation was basically, [the Work Programme adviser] said one thing, and I said something different. And without even listening to what I had to say they [Jobcentre Plus decision makers] said, ‘Yes, well, this is true, then. So we will sanction you. Oh, you’re allowed to appeal against it... ‘We’ll listen to your appeal. But... what that person [private provider employee] said, who works for us, technically, what that person says is true.’ ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

Practitioners were critical of the change in appeals processes to mandatory reconsideration because their clients:

“ Cannot get any benefit unless they sign on and we see so many people who try and sign on and just say, ‘I cannot meet the conditions that they’re asking me because I’m too ill... what it does is it puts another barrier in the way of people actually getting through to an independent decision. ”

(FG12, Jobseeking, England).

Impacts of sanctions

Those who had been sanctioned reported a range of negative impacts including shock and confusion (particularly when they believed they had complied with all requirements); financial hardship and deep poverty; debt, arrears, eviction threats; hunger, missing meals and food bank use; ill-health; family tension, worsened domestic violence; and severe and acute negative emotional effects.

Sanctions had major financial impacts and the

often unexpected and sudden stop to payments meant that there was little opportunity to plan ahead to mitigate the effects of poverty and hardship for those who could not meet their basic needs:

“ It’s hindering in everything, you know, in my daily life, to feed myself, and to pay my fuel, gas, and electric bills... I’m frightened to even have a bath... I’ve got no money for food; I’ve got nothing. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

Participants had different strategies for dealing with this impact. Alongside severely cutting back or doing without food, utilities and other essential items and activities, many applied for hardship payments. However, participants usually had to wait two weeks into their sanction before they were eligible to receive this, and the payments were less than what they would normally receive.

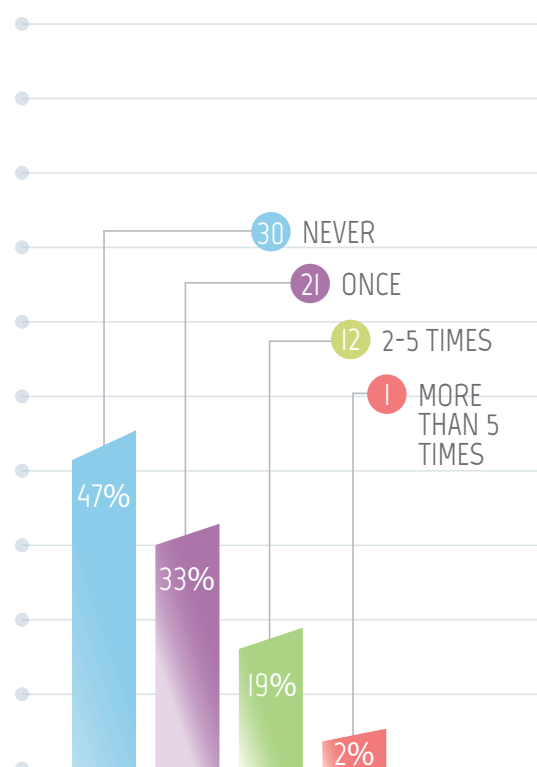
“ Eventually they gave me £4 at the Jobcentre because I just went up and said ‘Why did you sanction me? I’ve no food. I’ve no electric and I would like to claim an emergency payment’, but it’s in town which is a two hour walk with no food, no sustenance and I’m a diabetic. Oh wow that was a horrible day but I eventually got a £30 payment off them to get food which I made last. I was fuming that this had been done to me. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

Food bank use

Several participants reported having to use food banks (in some cases using a voucher provided by Jobcentre Plus), but that food bank use was rationed strictly to one or two visits per year. A minority of interviewees did not know about their local food bank.

-SANCTIONS-



Note: our purposive sampling for recruitment produces a higher than average sanction rate

“ We didn’t have any food. Nothing... I went to a food bank twice because in [local area] there’s one food bank and they’d let you go there twice and that was it. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance, female, England)

return this money back. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, female, Scotland)

Some participants also reported that being sanctioned caused their Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit to be stopped. This administrative error was usually resolved relatively quickly before arrears developed, but one participant received an eviction notice:

“ I ended up in rent arrears and actually got an eviction notice... because I couldn’t pay my rent. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance, male, England)

Debt

Receiving a sanction meant having to devote time and emotional energy to finding alternative ways to eat and pay essential bills. Many people in our study had to borrow money from friends, family or lenders. This debt was very difficult to repay afterwards.

“ Scraping by, friends, family. You know, tapping money, and then you end up in more debt. Then when your next cheque comes out you’re like, God, £84, or £86, whatever it is, and you’re immediately gone twenty, thirty quid out to family and friends you’ve tapped, and you’re even worse off. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance, male, Scotland)

Relying on relatives or friends for money or in-kind help, such as meals, could feel like a burden and implied reciprocity that could prove very difficult immediately after the sanction ended and in the longer term, even after moving into employment.

“ I get the money; they paid for me money just for the next period but I have to deal with this money because I have to retain back some money for my friend. I have to buy some because for the last period I didn’t have soap for the washing machine, I don’t have food, anything. I don’t have even money for my travelling. I don’t have money for a ticket, I don’t have anything so I took money from different people to pay these things and now I don’t know how to

Health and emotional impacts

In most cases, being sanctioned had a significant detrimental emotional impact. This was particularly the case for those who felt their sanction was unjustified, unfair or disproportionate (such as having no income for a month after being a few minutes late for an appointment). Interviewees often reported: anxiety or depression; feeling angry; low mood; powerlessness (not being listened to); feeling punished unfairly; and the perceived lack of empathy from frontline staff who they felt showed no regard for the impact the sanction would have. The initial reaction when participants first discovered they had been sanctioned was usually shock and confusion. This was particularly so when they believed they had complied with all attendance and job search requirements and had not received a letter informing them of their sanction:

“ I went to the bank and I had no money... I went to the bank thinking I’m going to have £115, excited, going to go to a shop and you go to the bank and you’ve not been paid by the Jobcentre. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance, female, Scotland)

Anxiety was widely experienced by those who had been sanctioned or threatened with being sanctioned:

“ I get ill. I get physically ill [thinking about it]. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker's Allowance recipient, male, England)

“ It puts you into panic. You've got the children, you've got the husband, but you've got to think about not just yourself but how they are as well. Without food on the table, how are they going to survive? Or without the clothes on their back, how are they meant to go to school? It all plays in your head, and it's caused me quite a few problems with depression and anxiety with my husband as well. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker's Allowance recipient, female, England)

Others felt degraded:

“ It's having to lower your standards to kind of beg for food... As I say, I feel it's really degrading, going in, and you're having to go... and stating you need help to feed yourself, and then you're going in and getting it. It's good enough that that support's now there, but at the same point in time it's really degrading. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker's Allowance recipient, male, Scotland)

Practitioners viewed sanctions as counterproductive in cases where:

“ If we've been building that person's confidence up, and it only takes one negative to knock them right back down to where they started. ”

(FG14, Jobseeking, England)

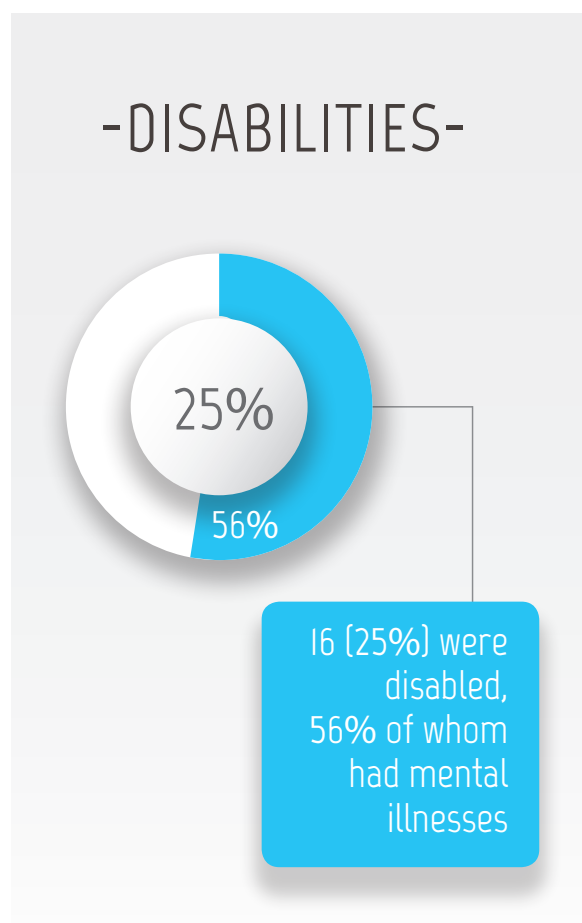
Behaviour change

Sanctions are intended to prompt behaviour change. However, in this sample, most participants who had received a sanction were already keen to find work and contested the validity of their sanction:

“ It's not in my mind to change your behaviour. My behaviour has always been to actively try and find ...a job and if I can't find a job realistically that I can get to, what pays for me to do that job? ”

(WSU, Jobseeker's Allowance recipient, male, Scotland)

One interviewee reported that being sanctioned strengthened his resolve to find work and made him more vigilant and compliant:



Note: Several of the disabled JSA claimants had been transferred from Employment and Support Allowance after failing a Work Capability Assessment

“ It makes me more active [having been sanctioned], yes... I’m always punctual. Yes, I will say those two words; made me active and made me punctual as well... Yes, and it makes you basically always not to forget your day of signing. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

However, being sanctioned had different behavioural effects for others:

“ Because they sanction me, it doesn’t make me any different. At the end of the day, I’ve said to myself that I’m looking for a job, I’m determined to get off the bru [benefits]. So the sanction has basically made it a final straw for me. I’ve given myself a certain date, and so many days to get a job. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, Scotland)

Whilst this determination to leave benefits might be in line with policy intentions, the pre-existing desire and action to find a job were not reflected in the punitive approach.

“ Why should I sit there not getting paid, getting paid £34 a week to do 20 job searches every two weeks? What’s the point? Why should I go out of my way to do something that I’m not going to get money for, it’s not going to impact me? ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

Practitioners felt that many of their clients did not understand conditionality, and thus it could not inspire behaviour change:

“ A Jobcentre Plus adviser does not explain to the clients... what the sanction means, what he or she can do after that or how to avoid that in the future. I have come across

claimants who I have found difficult to pass to them the policy of how to prevent and how to dispute and how to check the decision. ”

(FG12, Jobseeking, England)

“ Language and literacy difficulties (and limitations of interpreter services) also meant that rights, responsibilities and consequences were not understood. ”

(FG12, Jobseeking, England).

Counterproductive conditionality?

Compliance with conditionality requirements could divert attention and resources away from jobseeking. Some participants reported ‘applying for jobs that I was never ever going to get because you had to apply for jobs’ (WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance, male, Bristol), including vacancies for which they were not qualified. Others met conditionality requirements by devoting extra time and energy to ensure they kept appointments, which might otherwise be used for jobseeking or other constructive forms of employability activity:

“ You’re in a rush but you’re also panicking... constantly time watching, making sure you’re not late because if you’re late then that’s it, sanction. Then it’s a month of no money. So... there’s quite a bit of pressure on the day. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

Practitioners warned that conditionality unfairly applied could have very negative impacts on their clients:

“ For people who for all sorts of reasons are not able to work and who are prepared to fight their corner over that, they’re going to face an increasing punishment... or they will actually drop out of the system. ”

(FG12, Jobseeking, England)

“ Sanctioning is counterproductive... it marginalises people even further than they probably already are. ”

(FG14, Jobseeking, England)

The rationale of sanctioning as a tool for changing behaviour was thus undermined in several ways. Lack of information or confusion meant that three interviewees misunderstood requirements and one did not know the reason for being sanctioned (WSU, Jobseeker's Allowance, male, England); and changing expectations (such as varying adviser expectations) also made it difficult to predict appropriate action. One woman had a joint claim sanctioned because of her partner's behaviour rather than her own.

Experiences of support

Insufficient support at Jobcentres

Jobcentre Plus is the main support service for Jobseeker's Allowance claimants. However, several phases of cuts and service redesign have undermined the ability of front-line workers to provide job search support. Practitioners noted a change in organisational role to a focus on 'policing the money' and efforts to 'reduce footfall' (FG12, Jobseeking, England):

“ A long-term strategy to not have people in the Jobcentres and that's what we're seeing... they've had so many cuts and they're target driven I don't think that they've got that individual approach anymore. ”

(FG12, Jobseeking, England)

Practitioners viewed this as meaning that support often meant their clients were:

“ Pushed into applying for jobs that they've absolutely no chance of getting... I don't think they're interested in helping people find jobs... I think they're just about

restricting the money that you get and using so much stick that you yourself will use your own initiative to find whatever work or set yourself up as self-employed. ”

(FG12, Jobseeking, England)

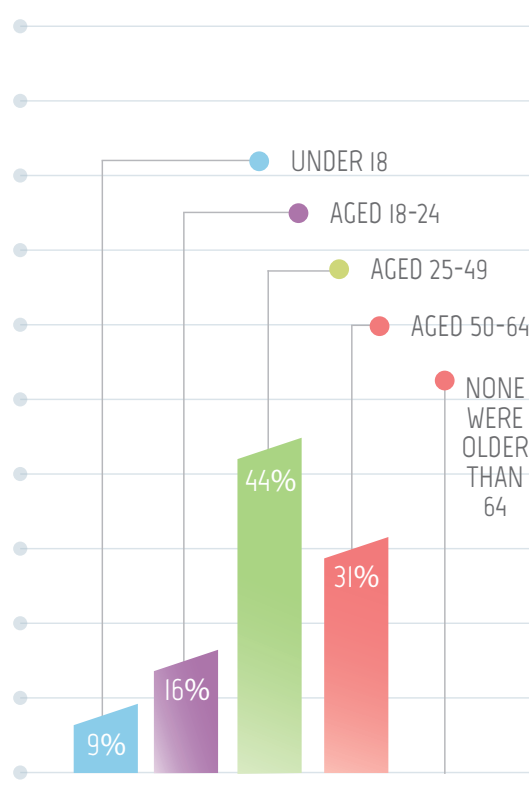
Most interviewees were required to attend on a fortnightly basis for compulsory, but cursory, appointments, which many said were not helpful in finding work or increasing their employability.

“ There's no support for me when I get there. All I do is sit there, sign and go out again. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker's Allowance recipient, England)

Those who had earlier experience of unemployment noted the removal of what had previously been key features of Jobcentre Plus offices: staff able to offer advice or help with

-AGE-



finding work or job matching; job vacancies; and telephones. Overall, there was a general sense that Jobcentre Plus was focused almost exclusively on enforcing job search requirements:

“ Well it shouldn’t be called the Jobcentre, it should be called the Benefits Centre, because that’s all they deal with, benefits. They don’t get you a job. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

Generally, jobseekers thought their Jobcentre Plus adviser’s role was to ensure they were meeting job seeking conditions, rather than to provide advice or support in finding work. This highlighted the self-help character of reformed employment services:

“ Jobcentre is not there to actually help you into work. You help yourself into work, don’t you? It’s you, it’s me who’s finding these, it’s not the Jobcentre. All they’re doing is check and see what I’m applying in. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

The lack of contact and limited remit of Jobcentre Plus advisers, meant that services were experienced as mainly punitive in character, with frequent threats of sanctions.

“ They were more helpful [five years ago]. They’d look on the computer and help you, but now they just like stand back and they’re looking for faults in you, if they don’t think you’ve done enough and it’s so easy to sanction people for ridiculous reasons. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, female, England)

Interviewees had varied opinions of the Jobcentre Plus advisers they had contact with. Interviewees often saw several different advisers, rather than having a dedicated ‘personal’ adviser. A number of participants spoke highly of particular individuals, often in contrast to other advisers. Some participants stressed the level of support offered relied on which member of staff they saw:

“ They’re rubbish [at that Jobcentre], but it genuinely depends who you get. The people in there are all different. Some of the younger ones can’t even be bothered with you do you know what I mean? It’s so frustrating because I’m like: you are just standing about talking all day. Why are you not getting us jobs? ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, female, Scotland)

Many found the atmosphere of Jobcentre Plus offices unwelcoming:

“ I just don’t feel comfy when I go into Jobcentre. I feel as though I’m on edge all the time. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

Varying job search requirements

Interviewees reported widely varying types and degrees of job search, including some very high expectations (such as applying for 25 jobs every week, WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, Glasgow). The type of measurement varied: some referred to the number of ‘steps’ to take (e.g. sending CVs or checking job sites); others had a fixed number of job applications per day/week; or a set number of hours to spend job seeking. There was considerable variation in expectations, one participant was expected to complete 15 steps, whilst another was required to complete 21. Onerous or unrealistic job search requirements

had a direct impact upon whether participants felt what was being asked of them was fair or achievable:

“ You’re supposed to look for six jobs a day and I’m not going to even look for six jobs a day because the jobs aren’t about to put down. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

“ Make sure that my job search was up to date. Apply for, I think it was at least 10 jobs per fortnight. And that was pretty much it. And turn up on time to appointments. It was clear what I had to do, and it was easily achievable. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

“ I do understand that we should be applying for as many jobs as we can, but giving us a direct number that we have to hit, that doesn’t really feel like they’re trying to help us, it feels like they’re pushing us... That doesn’t feel like a guideline, it feels like that’s a number I have to go to or I’m going to get sanctioned. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

A number of participants found the expectations to complete online job searches, such as using Universal Jobmatch (see below), particularly difficult. Some had no prior IT experience and could not afford their own smart phone/tablet/computer or network access, so had to rely on libraries, community centres, job clubs, or, where they existed, Jobcentre Plus computer facilities. However, difficulties in accessing a computer (e.g. limitations to time or availability) meant meeting online job search requirements could not be guaranteed. Language, literacy, dyslexia-

type difficulties and lack of IT skills meant that even where computer access existed, it could not always be used because the necessary support was lacking:

“ They’ve [Jobcentre Plus] got computers... not many; about I’d say five or six... Well, they’re not occupied but they’re all for you to use, but I said to them, ‘I can’t use them, I can’t read and write; have you got someone to help me?’ He said, ‘Well, if you come up someone will help you’. I’ve done it before; I went in before and nobody helped you. You’ve got to go and do it yourself and I thought, well, it’s a waste of time coming up here. They won’t help you. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

Universal Jobmatch

Interviewees were usually required to use Universal Jobmatch, the online vacancy system, as part of their mandatory job search requirements. This forms the core of support available to most job seekers and is self-help in character. There were varying views of Universal Jobmatch. Two interviewees found it ‘quite easy’ (WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, female, England) and convenient to use. Another three interviewees had difficulty using the system because of lack of computer literacy or system access problems. There were concerns about the quality and validity of vacancies advertised, one interviewee said Universal Jobmatch ‘has been proven to not work’ (WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England).

“ There’s jobs on there that are no longer... valid... jobs are duplicated and so it’s just putting people through an exercise – and I think a lot of claimants do realise that as well... it’s useless. ”

(FG14, Jobseeking, England)

“The majority of the jobs on there is for the government to see whether you are actually going on there to look for work, and the rest of them are either out of date, like jobs that have been and gone... Universal Jobmatch is just a complete joke.”

(WSU, Jobseeker's Allowance recipient, female, England)

“You're applying for the same jobs. Because they keep coming up on Universal Jobmatch, you keep applying for them, but the jobs are more likely - and I've had it happen time and time again, I'm applying for jobs and phoning up for jobs as well, and they're saying, 'Oh, that job should have been taken off the Universal Jobmatch, the closing date for that was like two months ago'. But the system isn't up-to-date, so people are applying for jobs that don't exist.”

(WSU, Jobseeker's Allowance recipient, male, England)

Universal Jobmatch is also used to assess evidence of job search and several interviewees reported being sanctioned for not logging their job search fully.

“I was sanctioned because I didn't put the job I applied for onto their Universal Jobmatch, so that didn't tie up. I thought it was petty.”

(WSU, Jobseeker's Allowance recipient, male, England)

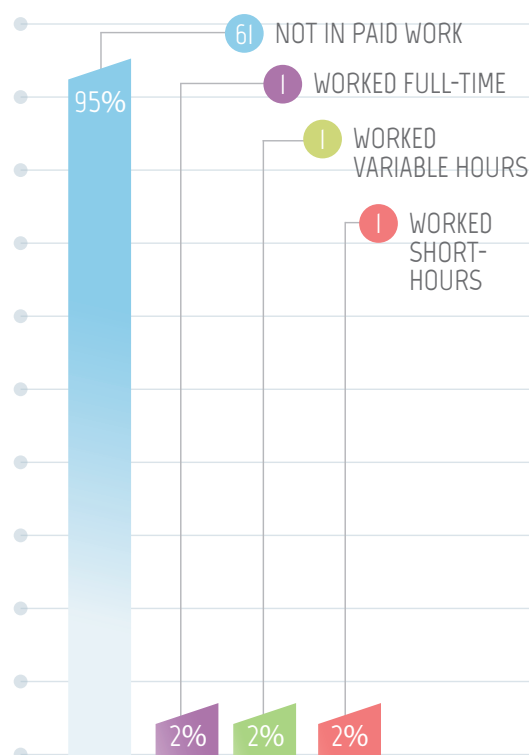
“You go onto Universal Jobmatch and do that now as well, add the criteria in the active history logs, so they can see that you're constantly looking for work. Once you do that, then you've just got to hope it's enough to not get you suspended.”

(WSU, Jobseeker's Allowance recipient, male, Scotland)

Jobcentre staff can request permission to access their client's Universal Jobmatch profile. This allows advisers to check how regularly claimants have accessed the system and to see some of the actions (including applying for a job) that they have taken. Most interviewees allowed their adviser access for surveillance, but one woman (WSU, Jobseeker's Allowance recipient, female, Scotland) did not and felt that it impacted her claim and relationship with her adviser detrimentally.

Practitioners viewed the purpose of Universal Jobmatch as 'to sanction people, simple as that' (FG12, Jobseeking, England). Another interviewee found Universal Jobmatch helpful, but noted that, in contrast to previous Jobcentre Plus experience, their adviser did not provide any job search support:

-EMPLOYMENT-



Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding

“ When I signed on a few years ago, it wasn’t like this at all, like you’d go into the Jobcentre, sit down, your appointment would be 15 minutes and they’d actually look on a computer with you for a couple of jobs and they’d give you a printout... Now, you don’t get any of that and they’re supposed to be like this Universal Jobmatch... But I’ve got no problem with doing it because it is helpful and useful, it’s just the Jobcentre don’t check it or like it makes me feel like I’m doing all this for them just to get told, ‘Oh, you’ve got to do it. If you don’t do it and we check it, you get sanctioned’, or, ‘We check it every two weeks’, and they never do. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

Another interviewee did report that their adviser checked their job search (WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, female, England).

Work Programme

Several interviewees had a range of Work Programme experiences. Most did not see the Work Programme and its associated courses and work placements as ‘support’. Practitioners said ‘I think a lot of people do come with negative attitudes to the Work Programme, because it’s not their choice; they’re being told to go, so you’re being punished’ (FG14, Jobseeking, England). Courses were seen as offering basic job searching advice. Even amongst those who felt a course had helped them with learning to use a computer or improve their CV, a minority were irritated by being sent on similar basic courses multiple times without access to more meaningful or advanced training. Work placements were, in principle, seen as potentially positive as a source of work experience. However, Mandatory Work Activity was mainly viewed negatively as a poor replacement for the training and apprenticeship schemes of the past, unfair in terms of the lack of financial

reward for doing a job, or even a risk of increasing the number who are unemployed by disingenuous firms replacing employees with claimants.

Mandatory courses were found most useful by those in need of basic help with job search, CV writing and computer literacy:

“ We are doing an employability skills course and basically, we’re going through our CVs. They’re in more depth now; my CV was two pages long, which I thought was all right, but it’s now three pages long. They’re helping you with techniques to tailor them whether you’re applying for this job or tailor it again to suit this job. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, female, England)

However, those who were already confident in using computers felt that they did not gain much from the courses.

Work Programme placements tended to be for one or two years, and tended to be viewed negatively with a smaller number of positive experiences. Of those with negative experiences their placements often consisted of set hours they had to attend to use the computers. Placements with more proactive approaches were viewed by a few as pushing them to apply and attend interviews for work in areas they were not interested or had no prior experience.

“ I think it’s just basically that there’s not enough stuff that they’re putting forward, it’s just always like, here’s a computer, do your job search, make sure your CV’s up-to-date, and then ‘that’s you, you just keep applying for the stuff you would do in your normal house, so it’s not much different. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, Scotland)

Some Work Programme experiences were indistinguishable from Jobcentre Plus experiences

in being focussed on monitoring job search requirements, rather than providing meaningful support:

“ It was just really for them to prove that I’d been looking for work. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, Scotland)

“ They used to just put me on to interviews for any random jobs like stuff I really had no experience in before and no interest in doing. They were very pushy in regards to me going to them and threats of a sanction if I didn’t go and that kind of thing. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

However, for a minority of interviewees, Work Programme placements had led directly to finding their preferred job or training:

“ I’m on it [Work Programme] for two years. It’s the first time I’ve been put on it. I’ve got so much - they’ve actually told me they’re sorting out so much more stuff for me than Jobcentre ever have done. It’s like they said they’re sending me for CSCS card and my forklift licence. I asked Jobcentre for both of them cards years ago. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

Mandatory Work Activity was seen by a few as potentially being positive in terms of providing work experience and making connections that could lead to genuine job opportunities. However, many held reservations about doing work placements for jobs they were already skilled at. There was strong objection to the principle of working unpaid alongside waged workers, which was viewed as unfairly exploitative to benefit recipients (who had no guarantee of a job) and workers (who would otherwise have more paid hours) but beneficial to employers who could have cheap labour instead of creating ‘real jobs’.

“ Because I’m not going to work for nothing, do you know what I mean? I’m not going to work for nothing. Why should I go and stack shelves, do you know what I mean? From like eight in the morning till five at night?... And somebody else is doing it and they’re getting paid and I’m not. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, Scotland)

Ethics

Jobseekers had a range of views on the ethicality of welfare conditionality. There has been a very long-standing expectation that unemployed people should seek work when claiming benefits and this principle was accepted by interviewees who wanted to ‘put some effort into it’ (WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England) in order to ‘earn’ entitlement and the monies received being ‘people’s tax money’ (WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England).

“ If you can’t be bothered to look for work, then I don’t think you should, obviously unless you’re disabled and then you’ve got the reasons for it, but other than that you should be working. It’s life: you have to work to earn a living to have all those little things that you want. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, female, England)

However, practitioners felt that for some of their clients:

“ Conditionality is unfair and not right. It’s not proper... It’s being set up to fail from the start. ”

(FG12, Jobseeking, England)

More generally, although practitioners recognised that a ‘very, very tiny minority’ (FG14, Jobseeking, England) of their clients took unfair advantage of provision (and for them sanctions could be

justified), the main thrust of conditionality was seen as politically motivated, ineffective, unethical and damaging:

“If it’s not achieving its aim and it is just used as a punishment then I cannot see how it can be of any real use in society... The idea is good, but when you put it into practice it is not working... there does seem to be a movement to undermine basic rights... It’s a whole attack on the weakest.”

(FG12, Jobseeking, England)

“Politicians make choices and these politicians have chosen to take this route with the unemployed... there is a morality there as well... morally, I think it’s wrong... Sanctioning, I don’t think is the solution.”

(FG14, Jobseeking, England)

A minority of participants felt the undeserving groups (viewed as those not looking for work, or in some cases, migrants) had put strain on the system that meant claiming benefits was tougher for everyone. Reference to stigmatising stereotypes applied to ‘others’ was common:

“A lot of people that just stay in bed all day, aren’t there? [Laughs] Can’t be bothered to do this, can’t be bothered to do that. They just go and sign on once a fortnight, and they can’t be bothered to do anything. So I think that’s made it tougher for people to be on benefit.”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, female, England)

Interviewees contrasted their own motivations and behaviour against these myths, emphasising their own desire to find work and the efforts they made towards fulfilling job seeking requirements:

“Because, well I mean for me I’d rather be out there working, doing something, rather

than sitting about doing nothing all day... I think it would be quite depressing if you were living on the money that you do get from the Jobcentre for like - like forever. Basically you’ll get people that are all right with that, they can’t be bothered to work and stuff like that, but I’m just not one like that.”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, female, Scotland)

While the broad principles and justifications for conditionality were generally accepted, conditionality in practice, particularly the length, sudden application and intensity of the conditions experienced, were opposed strongly. Many felt it was unfair that the efforts they put in to find work or previous years of contributing by working were not acknowledged or recognised:

“I worked for three years straight. I did my bit and everything... It’s not fair for me to be going to the Jobcentre every time and feeling embarrassed and going in and just feeling horrible, because you do because it’s a horrible place. So it’s not fair because I’ve worked do you know what I mean?”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, female, Scotland)

There was a general acceptance that there needed to be consequences for lack of job search, but there was disagreement about the design of the sanctions system. In a very small minority of cases, practitioners felt that sanctioning could ‘end up, in the long run making them engage with us’ (FG14, Jobseeking, England). However, practitioners also thought that ‘the whole conditionality process... sanctioning, it’s like taking a sledgehammer to crack a walnut.’ (FG14, Jobseeking, England).

For those who had been sanctioned, the fast escalation from everything being okay towards suddenly being sanctioned took them by surprise. Rather than it being a last resort after a series of warnings or other mitigating measures it was seen as too often being the first resort and one used

without proper investigation as to whether its use was warranted.

“ No, [it’s not fair] because some of them, they don’t look through all the details what’s gone on, they just make a hasty decision and they don’t read what’s all gone on. To me, I just think they just make a decision and that’s it. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, female, England)

There was a belief that while there was a need for consequences, it was those deserving people who were looking for work that bore the brunt, rather than those who were undeserving:

“ I think people should be punished if they’re just happy to claim for so long and not do anything. Especially the way the economy is, it’s easy money really for people. So I think people should be disciplined for that, but it just seems like a lot of people get disciplined when they genuinely are trying or just being unlucky for different reasons. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, England)

Yet even in situations where participants would agree it would be right to sanction there was less support for the severity of the current existing system.

“ How do they justify doing that to people because how are you supposed to live if you’re sanctioned? When the electricity runs out, your gas, your food and things, it’s terrible. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, female, Scotland)

“ No, it can never be morally right. Abandoning people because you feel that they haven’t done exactly what you want

them to do... there’s a moral question there, and that can’t be right. ”

(FG14, Jobseeking, England)

It was seen as counterproductive to encourage job search by removing the ability to pay for essentials. Rather than the complete stop of a person’s payments, participants felt a system fines, temporary reductions in payment, or mandatory courses were consequences that would be more appropriate. There was a view that the severity of sanctions was not balanced by effective support. There was a desire for a more humane and individual approach, which would not treat people as ‘a number’. *(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, female, Scotland)*

“ They’ve got to... encourage you to do this and that, but... they’ve not been encouraging anybody to do anything... All they’re doing is punishing them for things that probably is not even their fault. Is it that a lot of people don’t even understand the rules and stuff, do you know what I mean. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, male, Scotland)

A number of participants also thought that the attention given to encouraging increased job search efforts amongst claimants could all end up being in vain if it was not accompanied by support to help people retrain or an increase in efforts to increase the amount and diversity of jobs available.

“ At the end of the day, there aren’t the jobs that were there. There are no industries here, for a start; we don’t have industries, all those have gone abroad. It’s cheaper to pay somebody abroad and have it delivered here and sent here than it is to actually - what the main job roles are nowadays in this modern world in England are contact centres. ”

(WSU, Jobseeker’s Allowance recipient, female, England)

There was also an issue of procedural justice:

“ People who actually got a sanction because the Jobcentre adviser didn’t believe that they’ve done a job search. How can they stop someone’s money just for thinking they didn’t do it? ”

(FG14, Jobseeking, England)

-KEY-

PS refers to policy stakeholder
 FG refers to focus group
 WSU refers to welfare service user

Further research

Our Jobseeker’s Allowance welfare service user interviewees will be interviewed again for our research in 2015-16 and then for a third time in 2016-17. This will enable the research to capture the dynamics of change for these individuals and the role of sanctions and support within this. It will also enable a better understanding of the medium-term cumulative outcomes of interventions and the impacts of new legislation and mechanisms of sanctions and support that are currently being introduced.

Further Information

This paper was written by Dr Sharon Wright and Dr Alasdair B R Stewart from the University of Glasgow. It is one of a set of nine presenting our first wave findings on different policy areas. An overview paper sets out our findings in summary.

Further information about the project may be found at: <http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/>
 A briefing paper on the policy context and existing research evidence on jobseekers may be accessed at: <http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/publications/>

For further information about our findings, please contact communications officer Janis Bright at janis.bright@york.ac.uk

Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change is a major five-year programme of research funded under the Economic and Social Research Council’s Centres and Large Grants Scheme. The project aims to create an international and interdisciplinary focal point for social science research on welfare conditionality and brings together teams of researchers working in six English and Scottish Universities.

