



Welfare Conditionality

SANCTIONS, SUPPORT AND
BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

“I’ve always been a grafter”: Older
jobseekers’ experiences of work and
welfare.

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Presentation outline

1. Policy context
2. Sample of 'older' jobseekers
3. Findings from qualitative interviews
4. Conclusions

Policy context

- Policymakers increasingly concerned with the need to extend working lives in response to an ageing population
- However, as a group, those aged 50+ experience the longest spells of unemployment and have particularly poor outcomes on government funded welfare-to-work programmes (Ray et al, 2014).
- Changes in UK Active Labour Market Policy: New Deal 50+ , Work Programme, Work and Health programme
- Broader package of welfare reform (e.g. Universal Credit)
- Evaluations to date highlight the value of voluntary approaches, supportive relationships with advisors of a similar age, and short ‘work trials’ especially for those spending long periods out of work (Hasluck and Green, 2007).
- But limited attention has been paid to the experiences of ‘older’ unemployed people in recent years....

Sample of 'older' welfare service users

- NB: Not initially selected on basis of age
- 44 'older' people (aged 50+) (median age 56)
- Claiming Job Seekers' Allowance (26) or Universal Credit (18) (i.e. subject to 'full conditionality')
- 12 had participated/were participating in the Work Programme
- Majority male, white, British
- Most (42) lived alone, many divorced/widowed
- A small minority lived with/had caring responsibilities for (older) children
- Most (36) lived in social housing, several were impacted by the bedroom tax
- All reported struggling financially or 'just about getting by'
- Often reliant on family (including children) and friends for financial/in-kind support

Findings: Experiences of work search

- The majority of participants were unemployed and seeking work
- Unemployment durations varied considerably (2 months to 2 decades)
- Varied work histories, but most characterised by manual, low wage work
- Most had worked in physically demanding occupations (e.g. warehousing, care work etc)
- Several had experienced redundancy, and had since struggled to get a firm foothold in the labour market
- Intensive levels of work search, but limited (often no) feedback from employers.
- Increasingly losing confidence:

“You lose, start to lose your confidence when nothing’s happening...with not being in a job for a while it slips away from you” (Male, 56, JSA)

Findings: Experiences of work search

Several respondents were keen to stress their identity as a worker rather than as somebody who claims benefits:

“I haven’t been on benefits for over 20 years... I don’t care what job it is, I need to get off benefits” (Male, 54, UC)

“I’ve always been a grafter” (Male, 53, JSA).

The change in status from being in work to being unemployed was clearly a difficult one for many.

“I have been so successful in the past and because of that, I feel that I should be more successful now” (Male, 51, JSA)

Findings: Barriers to work I

Age-related barriers

“Given the choice between a 24 year old and a [59] year old like I am, people are going to take the 24 year old, one, because nine times out of ten it will cost them less money, two, there’s a chance that if the company’s still going in 20 years’ time they’re not going to have to re-hire somebody else” (Male, 59, UC)

Skills and qualifications

“Unless you’ve got this SIA badge...you can’t work in security anywhere: in a shop, on a gatehouse, you know, a factory or anything, you need this badge and although my experience is vastly more than any numpty who’s going to get one of those badges, I can’t get the jobs that they can” (Male, 52, UC)

Digital exclusion

“I’ve had no real experience with computers at all... I’ve had no reason to own one, or no reason to use one, and they’re saying to me I’ll have to go and use a computer to go onto this, and send emails, and fax to people, and read your emails, and be able to do all these different things, where to me it’s like how do I switch a computer on?” (Male, 53, JSA)

Findings: Barriers to work II

Health

“I’d love to go back to doing the work I was doing, but they won’t take me on because of health problems and that” (Female, 53, JSA)

“I hurt my back at work in '95 and I can't lift heavy objects....when I took the job ... I knew it was too heavy for me but I wanted to work so I took the job. And after about four or five months my back went again and my neck and shoulder, it goes into spasm and it's like that for about three or four months. And the work was too heavy for me so I had to, you know, I was laid off in the end” (Male, 50, UC)

Immigration

“People that haven’t got a job that come in this country, that are depriving me of a job, I’ve got quite a few things that I don’t like about them” (Female, 59, UC)”

Older people's engagement with the UK conditional welfare system

- All either claiming Job Seekers' Allowance or Universal Credit (subject to 'full conditionality')
- Variable experiences in their interactions with Job Centre Plus or Work Programme provider staff...

*"That lady helps me a lot, she's very nice. She's more like a friend really, you know what I mean, **because she's a similar age to me**, so it's nice"* (Female, 59, UC)

*"She says, 'you're very clean and very well presented'. What on earth? **I'm bloody 60 years old**. What does she expect me to turn up like? Dirty jeans, filthy or what? This sort of attitude annoys me"* (Male, 60, UC)

....and levels of conditionality applied.

"I've got a really good advisor. She knows about my depression and things. She's not actually hassling me to seek employment" (Female, 56, JSA)

- Several participated in Mandatory Work Activity (with mixed experiences)
- A number had been sanctioned (in their view, unfairly)

A lack of suitable (re-)training opportunities

A good proportion were open to retraining and gaining new skills, however several felt the opportunities for doing so were limited:

*“They’ve offered me interviewing skills, but **I’ve done all that**” (Male, 53, JSA)*

Training offered regardless of working background/future work aspirations, underpinned by threat of sanction:

I've worked mainly in offices all my life. Believe it or not they sent me on a course for construction [laughs].... I was given the choice of doing the SIA card or the CSCS card, and it was with the implied threat that if you don't do one of these courses we'll sanction you. (Male, 59, UC)

Some did not want to (or see the need to) participate in further learning:

*“**It’s too late for me now; I’m 55**, what do I want to learn more for?” (Male, 55, UC)*

Findings: Experience of benefits/employment support

Limited personalisation of support

“If they’re treating me the same as a 19 year old, they’re either letting the 19 year old down or me down, because we don’t need the same things” (Male, 59, JSA)

“I’m a builder; I’ve been in the building trade 40 years and he wanted me to apply for administration in a library... anybody would laugh at you, wouldn’t they?...I don’t think I’d be able to do the job and I don’t think any manager or supervisor would’ve employed me... that’s a bit silly really, isn’t it?” (Male, 55, UC)

Changes in level of support from welfare system

“It used to be years ago. You could go, discuss a job with an advisor. They’re not there anymore to do that. They’re there to get your signature” (Male, 52, JSA)

The Work Programme: an 'innovative solution' for older jobseekers?

Participants (marginally) more positive about their experiences with the Work Programme, valuing practical support (e.g. support to cover transport costs, access to computers/printing facilities)

However, most described negative experiences characterised by a lack of support:

"They farm you out, basically. You still go and sign on at the Jobcentre, but you're farmed out to [Work Programme provider] who are supposed to help you find a job. The operative word there is supposed. They don't give you any help.... Well, you turn up, and they just say, 'What jobs have you applied for?' So you show them, exactly the same as you show when you go to sign on, it's exactly the same.... You just turn up and it's almost as if it's another signing on (Male, 59, UC)

It seems to me to be seen to be doing rather than to be doing, you know. It's sort of like pretending to help you, you know, phone you up, how can we help? But then you ask for help and you don't get help. (Male, 50, UC)

5 had 'completed' the Work Programme

But my job adviser always has this threat that ... because I'd completed the Work Programme she says, 'Well, I can call you in for daily singings' (Male, 59, UC)

Conclusions

- Older unemployed people face considerable barriers to work entry
- Successive UK governments have altered active labour market provision, resulting in undifferentiated support and increasing levels of conditionality.
- A lack of personalisation results in an ineffective employment support system that neither recognises the skills and attributes of an ageing workforce nor provides appropriate support to help them to overcome common barriers to older people's labour market participation.
- This is a major shortcoming, particularly where extending working lives is a key policy goal.

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