

Re-connecting with ‘what unemployment means’ – key issues for welfare to work in the UK

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Draft – please do not quote

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of research with unemployed job seekers, in order to inform a critical analysis of the rationale for current ‘Work First’ active labour market policies in the UK. The paper particularly focuses on the findings of 220 interviews with unemployed people in the city of Glasgow. Deploying broad-ranging ‘framework for analysing employability’, the paper reports how long-term unemployed people in particular face a complex range of barriers to work. UK government policy often characterises barriers to work mainly in terms of gaps in motivation and basic skills. But long-term unemployed people were also significantly more likely to live in poverty, experience social isolation, report health problems, and face problems associated with a benefits system that too often raises additional barriers to work. Finally, reflecting on Sinfield’s (1981) work of the early 80s – which was authored as the UK entered a previous period of recession and high unemployment – the paper argues for a renewed effort to re-connect with ‘what unemployment means’. This will require a commitment on the part of policy makers to develop spatially responsive solutions that promote employability while also stimulating demand in local labour markets; and a benefits system that empowers, rather than impoverishes, the unemployed. Work First active labour market programmes alone are not equal to the task.

INTRODUCTION

“...To plan for a society that involves all its members and actively promotes their participation in its work, we have to recognise more fully what unemployment means and how it affects not only those who are forced to waste substantial parts of their working lives, but also the great majority of the population. Until we do, the heaviest costs are borne by many of the poorest members of society, and that whole society is diminished.”

Adrian Sinfield (1981) *What unemployment means*, Oxford: Martin Robertson.

“In the old days, the problem may have been unemployment, but in the next decades it will be employability. If in the old days lack of jobs demanded priority action, in the new world it is lack of skills.”

Remarks by the Prime Minister, Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP, 2nd January 2008.

Despite relatively high rates of employment in the UK in recent years, many disadvantaged people have continued to experience periods of long-term unemployment and the resulting risk of poverty and social exclusion. The heaviest and most profound costs of unemployment have – in the words of Sinfield (1981), writing at a time of much higher levels of worklessness – continued to be borne by many of the poorest and most vulnerable people in society. As the UK faces the prospect of a new, prolonged period of recession and high levels of joblessness, there has been a renewed interest in the range of experiences and barriers to work encountered by unemployed people. The research reported in this paper sought to consider how best to conceptualise, understand and address the barriers to work faced by long-term unemployed people and other job seekers. The research took as its starting point the concept of employability. In doing so, it deployed a framework for analysing employability as a means of structuring 220 interviews with job seekers in a relatively high unemployment urban labour market (the city of Glasgow). Interviews explored the barriers to work faced by unemployed people, and the analysis below seeks to identify particular barriers faced by the long-term unemployed (using the ILO definition of ‘unemployed for one year or more’) compared to other job seekers.

An additional over-arching concern was to critically assess the appropriateness of current ‘Work First’ policies for promoting employability and combating unemployment, and to identify areas for further research and policy action. Following this introduction, the next

section discusses the concept of employability and its deployment within UK labour market policy and outlines a framework for analysing employability. A methodology section then describes the sample and approach taken in conducting interviews with unemployed job seekers. Findings from these interviews are then reported. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of implications for policy.

THE CONCEPT OF EMPLOYABILITY AND LABOUR MARKET POLICY

Employability and labour market policy

The concept of employability has been around for more than a century, but was relatively obscure in the social and labour market policy literature until just over a decade ago (see McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005, for a review of the concept's development and use). Yet since the late 1990s, employability has emerged as one of the intellectual pillars of social and labour market policies in the UK; and for some time it was (and less explicitly remains) *the* key element in the European Employment Strategy (Serrano Pascual and Magnusson, 2007). But how employability is understood and operationalised remains contested territory. For the UK government, employability often continues to be defined narrowly, informing a policy agenda around Work First active labour market programmes, which are short-term and focus on improving the individual's motivation, job search effort and 'generic skills' (often also called 'employability skills') (Daguerre, 2007). Work First programmes also tend to be characterised by stronger compulsion than is typically found in 'human capital'-oriented interventions, which conversely prioritise more gradual progress towards employment and long-term skills development (Lindsay *et al.*, 2007).

The emergence of such Work First programmes has led some to question whether the language of employability can be usefully deployed by those seeking a more holistic understanding of the barriers to work faced by unemployed people. Peck and Theodore (2000: 729) suggest that while the concept of employability may seem relatively new, "the kind of supply side fundamentalism that it signifies most certainly is not". Serrano Pascual and Magnusson (2007) see the concept as part of an attempt to 'individualise a collective problem'. Similarly, for Haughton *et al.* (2000: 670): "[The government's] rendering of the employability agenda taps into the orthodox strain of economic thinking which has it that both the underlying causes of, and the appropriate remedies to, unemployment essentially lie on the supply-side of the labour market."

There is apparent agreement amongst such critics that: “employability-based approaches, which locate both the problems and the solutions in labour market policy on the supply-side of the economy, are not sufficient to the task of tackling unemployment” (Peck and Theodore, 2000: 731), so that there is a need to move ‘beyond employability’ in seeking to conceptualise labour market disadvantage. Nevertheless, others who have sought to use the concept of employability as a means of analysing barriers to work among the unemployed have stressed the need to avoid policies that offer solely narrowly defined supply-side solutions (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Evans *et al.*, 1999; Barrett *et al.*, 2001; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). For example, Kleinman and West (1998) accept that attempts to address employability with reference to supply-side measures alone risk being ‘swamped’ by rising unemployment in times of recession. The ‘lack of employability’ is thus viewed as a complex problem: “It is the outcome of a complex of different factors, located in the labour market, in schools, in the recruitment procedures of businesses and in the economic policies implemented by government” (Kleinman and West, 1998: 174).

Employability and long-term unemployment

A similar dynamic defines debates around the specific issue of long-term unemployment. Some labour economists have argued that ‘duration dependency’ – the increased likelihood of continued unemployment among the long-term jobless due to the deterioration of skills, work habits and commitment over time – has a major role to play in explaining high levels of structural unemployment. This approach reflects the broader analysis at the heart of much orthodox supply-side labour market economics. For De Koning *et al.* (2004: 4) “The starting point is that, if we increase the supply of labour, we will increase employment”. This analysis has been popular with recent UK governments, as have been the fundamentally supply-side policies that it has informed, from keeping benefit replacement rates relatively low (Nickell, 2001) to increasing compulsion upon the unemployed to re-engage in the labour market, for example through Work First programmes (Layard, 2000).

As noted above, those criticising such supply-side approaches to employability have pointed to the structural labour market problems (for example, limited demand following recession) that appear to contribute to the tenacity of unemployment in some areas. For MacNicol (2008: 587) “supply-side optimism cannot obscure some very real underlying

structural problems... to be sure, more people working is associated with an expanding economy; but is likely that economic growth is the cause of employment growth, rather than the other way around. An economy cannot grow without a supply of labour, but labour supply does not of itself guarantee economic growth". Nevertheless, even if we do not subscribe to the duration dependency thesis, there remain concerns that long-term unemployed people (like members of other severely disadvantaged groups) are more likely to face multiple barriers to work that will affect their future employability, including low levels of occupational and technical skills; limited recent and relevant work experience; a lack of formal qualifications; a lack of awareness of, and connection to, growing sectors of the economy; and limited geographical mobility (Payne *et al.*, 1996; Hasluck *et al.*, 1997; Dean, 2003; Green and Owen, 2006). As general unemployment increases in the UK, it is therefore timely to reconsider the range of issues and barriers encountered by long-term unemployed people.

Towards a framework for analysing employability

The primary research reported below draws on a framework for analysing employability presented by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005). The McQuaid-Lindsay framework for analysing employability builds upon a number of previous 'holistic' employability models (see above). Perhaps its defining feature is the manner in which it seeks to clarify and acknowledge the status of **individual factors**, which can be addressed through supply-side policies targeted at job seekers, from **personal circumstances** that may require different policy interventions or may inherently limit individuals' labour market participation. Both of these groups of factors are in turn distinguished from **external factors**. More specifically, the McQuaid-Lindsay framework draws on a number of previous studies to suggest that employability can be affected by **individual factors**, including:

- essential attributes such as 'self-efficacy' (the individual's belief in their own capacity to find work – see James (2007) for discussion);
- a range of skills sets, from basic/literacy skills (Machin *et al.*, 2001) to 'key' skills, such as basic competence in IT (Johnson and Burden, 2003), to general work-related skills (Devins and Hogarth, 2005) and interview/presentation skills (an area where long-term unemployed people can lack confidence – see Lindsay *et al.*, 2003);
- level of qualification – reflecting evidence that the unemployment rate among people without qualifications is consistently higher (Berthoud, 2007); and that even for

vacancies where qualifications are irrelevant, employers often use formal educational attainment as a means of judging 'trainability' and skills (Gasteen and Houston, 2005);

- labour market attachment – reflecting evidence that individuals' employment record and more general sense of attachment to the world of work can affect future prospects (see for example, Gershuny and Hannan, 1999).

The employability framework also covers **personal circumstances** that can affect individuals' progress in the labour market, including:

- household circumstances, including issues related to the concentration of disadvantaged job seekers in low quality public sector housing (Sanderson, 2006);
- family structure – people with caring responsibilities can find their ability to travel and pursue certain opportunities limited (Arksey and Glendinning, 2008), but those living alone may also be disadvantaged through a lack of alternative sources of support;
- health – reflecting evidence that those reporting health problems are more likely to experience repeated (Carpenter, 2007) or long-term (Green and Owen, 2006) periods of unemployment;
- access to social capital, in the form of support and job search networks that can help unemployed people towards work (Hannan, 1999; Levesque and White, 2001);
- access to financial and household resources (such as a telephone and transport) that can shape individuals' ability to cope with the experience of unemployment and undertake effective job seeking (Clasen *et al.*, 1997).

Finally, the **external factors** covered by the employability framework include:

- the location, nature and level of labour demand – reflecting evidence that strong local labour demand increases the likelihood of exits from unemployment, especially for the lower skilled (Green and Owen, 2006);
- employer discrimination/attitudes towards the unemployed (Devins and Hogarth, 2005);
- employment/social policy factors, ranging from the effectiveness of active labour market programmes to incentives/barriers within tax-benefits systems (see, for example, Sinfield (2001) for a critique of punitive measures within the UK benefits system).

The McQuaid-Lindsay framework is more broad-ranging – for example, these authors note the importance of a range of other external factors related to job vacancies (i.e. pay and conditions) and employers' recruitment methods; and in relation to individual factors they highlight how job seekers' flexibility (in terms of wage demands or willingness to travel to

work and job seeking across different sectors) can set the parameters for the range of opportunities that are available to them. However, in order to provide a manageable focus for a discussion of research findings, the analysis of data that follows concentrates on the elements of the framework discussed above.

METHODOLOGY

In order to explore the barriers faced by the long-term unemployed and other job seekers, structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted by the author with a sample of 220 unemployed people. All had made a claim for Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) – the main UK benefit for those actively seeking work. The fieldwork was concentrated in two disadvantaged localities within a single urban labour market – the city of Glasgow. At the time of the research, claimant unemployment was 4.8% in Glasgow, compared to Scottish and UK figures of 3.2% and 2.6% respectively; the figure for those out of work, available and wanting to work (the so-called 'ILO definition') was 8%, again well above the Scottish and UK averages of 5.9% and 5.1%. Interviews were undertaken in two Jobcentre Plus offices, and conducted in quiet areas well away from Jobcentre Plus staff, to ensure that interviewees felt confident when discussing sensitive issues.

The sample accurately reflected the gender balance within the claimant unemployed population in Glasgow (80% men and 20% women). The age profile of the sample also reflected the wider claimant unemployed population reasonably accurately. Approximately 27% of the sample were in the 17-24 age group (compared to 24% of the Glasgow claimant count), 60% were in the 'core' job seeker age group of 25-49 (compared to 59% of the claimant count), and 13% were aged 50 and over (compared to 17%). The long-term unemployed were deliberately over-represented, to ensure a usable sample for comparing the barriers faced by these and more recently unemployed job seekers – so almost one-third of interviewees had been unemployed for one year or more, compared to 16% of Glasgow's claimant count.

The structured nature of the interviews and data presented below clearly limits the potential to draw more qualitative insights from job seekers' experiences. However, given the central aims of the research – to deploy a framework for analysing employability in order to identify and compare the barriers to work faced by unemployed job seekers; and especially to identify associations between specific barriers/issues and the experience of

long-term unemployment – an approach was selected that would allow for the gathering of a wide range of consistent, quantifiable and comparable data at the individual level.

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH JOB SEEKERS

Individual factors and employability

Level of qualification

It is first important to recognise that members of the sample of job seekers were generally relatively low-qualified. Almost two-fifths essentially held no qualifications (or at least held no qualifications recognised by the Labour Force Survey at the time of the research, a definition which will be used throughout) – only one quarter of the Scottish labour force were similarly unqualified, suggesting that these job seekers may be disadvantaged when competing in the labour market against their better-qualified peers. However, the long-term unemployed were significantly¹ more likely to report holding no qualifications, with 60% of these job seekers unqualified, compared to only 26% of those who had been out of work for less than one year. Older long-term unemployed people were particularly likely to be completely unqualified, with two-thirds of the long-term unemployed over 50s holding no qualifications; but substantial proportions of all age categories among the long-term unemployed group were also unqualified.

Skills sets

As noted above, research with long-term unemployed people has also consistently pointed to low levels of occupational skills as a major barrier to work (Hasluck *et al.*, 1997; Sanderson, 2006). In this case, the skills profile of the sample in general, and long-term unemployed people in particular, was relatively low. When asked about their regular occupation, 30% of all job seekers described unskilled manual/other elementary occupations (27%), or had never worked (3%). However, long-term unemployed people were significantly more likely to report such 'non-skilled' regular occupational status (40% of those unemployed for one year fell into these categories, compared to only 25% of other job seekers). Long-term unemployed people were also significantly less likely to consider their work skills, defined in relation to the occupation that they were seeking, to be 'good' (57%, compared to 81% of other job seekers).

¹ All 'significant' differences/associations were at least at 0.05 level using chi squared test.

In terms of 'key skills', long-term unemployed people were significantly less likely to consider their basic IT skills to be 'good'. The employability framework outlined above also suggests that 'basic skills' such as literacy can be important to employability. Long-term unemployed people were significantly less likely to consider their literacy to be generally 'good' (60%, compared to 81% of other job seekers), with similar differences reported on perceptions of numeracy.

There is also evidence that effective presentation at interview is both valued by employers and used by them as an indicator of other forms of human capital (Newton *et al.*, 2005). While long-term unemployed interviewees were slightly (but not significantly) more likely to consider their interview skills to be 'good', they were also significantly more likely to rate their skills in this area as 'poor' (25%, compared to only 7% of other job seekers and 13% for the total sample).

Self-efficacy and labour market attachment

It is clear that the experience of long-term unemployment can affect job seekers' self-efficacy, in terms of their belief in their own capacity to find work. When asked to rate their chances of finding work within six months, 77% of job seekers described their prospects as 'good' or 'very good'. But this masked significant differences between the long-term unemployed (only 57% of whom were optimistic about their prospects) and other job seekers (87%).

Finally, many employers particularly emphasise evidence of experience and a stable work history when selecting new recruits (Devins and Hogarth, 2005; Newton *et al.*, 2005). Accordingly, job seekers' work records and more general sense of attachment to the labour market may be important in shaping how they are seen by employers and therefore future job outcomes. Interviewees were asked about their labour market status immediately prior to the current spell claiming JSA. In total, 72% of the sample had been in work prior to their current spell of unemployment, but there were again clear differences between short-term and long-term unemployed people. Those unemployed for less than one year were significantly more likely to have been in employment prior to their current period of JSA (82%, compared to only 51% of the long-term unemployed). There did not appear to be clear gender or age-related differences in job seekers' labour market status immediately prior to unemployment, other than in relation to full-time education, a previous activity more often reported by young people.

Interviewees were also asked about their 'working life, in general, terms, since leaving school'. In total, 109 of the 220 interviewees (49.5%) described experiences that could be classified as involving 'mostly stable employment'. A further 15.5% reported 'a number of jobs but with only short/occasional periods out of work', and the remaining 35% of interviewees had not enjoyed stable periods of employment. However, only 43% of long-term unemployed interviewees, compared to 76% of those who had been unemployed for less than one year, described histories defined by 'mostly stable employment' or 'with only short/occasional periods out of work'. Older, male job seekers were generally more likely to report stable work histories.

Personal circumstances and employability

Household and family circumstances

The McQuaid-Lindsay employability framework points to the potential importance of personal/household circumstances in shaping experiences in the labour market. Asked about personal circumstances, there were again clear differences between long-term unemployed people and other job seekers. In total, 51% of those unemployed for one year or more lived alone, compared to 31% of other job seekers. Single occupancy in Glasgow is higher than the Scottish average (41% and 33% of the households respectively)², and the above shows that while the profile of those unemployed for less than one year was similar to the national average, long-term unemployed people were significantly more likely to live alone. The relatively high proportion of long-term unemployed people with no partner within this sample means that some were less able to tap the 'social resources' and economic support that are available from a partner who is working. Relatively few interviewees reported caring for children at home – a symptom of the disproportionately male and single-dominated nature of the sample (which reflects the general claimant unemployed population).

Those job seekers living alone were significantly more likely to live in local authority housing or other public sector rented accommodation (over 80%, compared to only 57% of those not living alone). More generally, job seekers' housing tenure is of interest. In the UK, housing policy has also been seen as playing an important role in shaping the spatial elements of urban unemployment problems, with some local authorities' housing strategies

² Source: Census 2001.

arguably resulting in the concentration of disadvantaged groups in certain localities (Watt, 2003). Mixed housing development has therefore been seen as a way of addressing the emergence of 'workless communities' in some areas (Ritchie *et al.*, 2005). Evidence regarding the impact of such measures is mixed, but it is clear that in areas where undesirable public sector housing dominates, there remain higher than average rates of economic inactivity (Adams and Thomas, 2007). Among those job seekers participating in this research, long-term unemployed people were significantly more likely to reside in public sector housing (73%, compared to 61% of other job seekers).

Health

Health problems contribute to the tenacity of concentrations of worklessness in many cities in the UK, including Glasgow – a problem reflected in high levels of claiming incapacity benefits (Fothergill and Wilson, 2007). Even among the population of 'official' unemployed job seekers, ill health is a significant predictor of repeated and/or long-term benefit claiming (Carpenter, 2007). Among those interviewed for this research, only 15% of the total sample thought that their health represented a barrier to work. But this was one of the clearest issues that divided long-term unemployed people and other job seekers. Long-term unemployed people were significantly more likely to identify health problems as a barrier (29%, compared to only 9% of those unemployed for less than one year). Furthermore, 29% of long-term unemployed people had been out of work due to ill health immediately prior to their current JSA claim, compared to only 3% of those unemployed for less than one year (and 11% of the total sample). Women and older job seekers were also significantly more likely to see health as a barrier.

Access to financial and household resources

Access to financial capital (whether through welfare benefits or other sources of income) can be a key factor influencing job seekers' experiences of unemployment, and shaping their attitudes and activities around looking for work. Interviews with job seekers quickly demonstrated that most were living on relatively low household incomes. More than half of the total sample (53%) reported a household income of less than £100 per week. Long-term unemployed people were slightly, but not significantly, more likely to report incomes below £100. The Scottish Household Survey carried out at the time of the research sampled on the basis that only 8% of households in Glasgow had weekly incomes of less than approximately £115 – it is therefore clear that most unemployed people within the

sample, by relying on JSA payments of less than £70 per week, were among Glasgow's poorest residents.

When asked about a range of other household resources, long-term unemployed people were significantly disadvantaged. For example, while most job seekers had access to both mobile and home telephones, long-term unemployed people were significantly less likely to have these benefits (only 56% had a landline at home compared to 75% of those unemployed for less than one year; 61% had a mobile compared to 78%). The long-term unemployed were also significantly less likely to have access to their own motor vehicle (17% compared to 30% of those unemployed for less than one year).

Access to social capital

There is some evidence that social networks can facilitate effective job seeking (see above). However, it is clear that the long-term unemployed among the sample were significantly less connected with former colleagues and other work-related social network ties. Only 29% of those unemployed for one year or more used such 'work-related social networks' for job seeking on a regular basis, compared to more than 45% of those unemployed for less than a year. Furthermore, long-term unemployed people were significantly less likely to have contacts in the 'same type of work' (i.e. sector and/or occupation) that they were pursuing. Of greater concern is that more than one-fifth of the long-term unemployed (21%) said that their main job search network contacts were themselves unemployed, compared to less than 5% of job seekers unemployed for less than one year.

External factors and employability

Perceptions of labour demand and employer factors

Just over half of all interviewees (53%) thought that 'a lack of appropriate jobs' was a barrier to work. There were no significant differences between job seekers according to unemployment duration. Nor were there significant differences related to previous work record, age or gender. Job seekers looking for higher weekly wage rates were somewhat, but not significantly, more likely to view the labour market as offering few appropriate job opportunities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, unemployment duration was significantly associated with the belief that employers discriminated against job seekers because they were unemployed. Half of all interviewees thought that the time that they had spent unemployed

would lead employers to discriminate against them, but long-term unemployed people were significantly more likely to express such beliefs (60%, compared to 45% of those unemployed for less than one year).

Perceptions of employment/social policy factors

Finally, another area where there were clear differences between short-term and long-term unemployed people related to perceptions around the benefits system and the cost of starting work. In total, 37% of all interviewees said that 'concerns around losing benefits' were a barrier to work, but the long-term unemployed were significantly more likely to raise such concerns (61%, compared to only 26% of those unemployed for less than one year). There were not significant differences according to age or gender, but young people were significantly less likely to express concerns around the loss of benefits.

We have seen above that many interviewees were living on very low incomes, yet some (especially long-term) unemployed people clearly feared the financial consequences of starting work and losing benefits. These findings show that long-term unemployed people and others who have spent prolonged or repeated spells living on benefits can lack confidence in their ability to make ends meet immediately following the transition to work. The reason for such attitudes probably lies within a benefits system that offers the unemployed relatively low disposable incomes (along with means-tested housing-related benefits) combined with the low pay that characterises many entry-level opportunities in cities like Glasgow (almost half of interviewees identified low pay as a barrier to work).

The financial impacts on long-term unemployed people and other vulnerable groups of removing 'passported' housing-related benefits (namely Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit) when they start work have long been identified as key financial barrier to work (Social Security Committee, 1997; Marsh *et al.*, 1997; Work and Pensions Committee, 2008). Policy makers have acknowledged the need to continuing reform – recent UK government policy documents have acknowledged the problems around housing benefits: "Delays in processing, and the uncertainty that claimants have about the level of support that they can receive, can act as barriers to work...(DWP, 2006: 82). This research supports the case for further change.

Modelling employability and long-term unemployment

Finally, in order to further test the association between the individual, personal-circumstantial and external factors of employability and the experience of long-term unemployment, a binary logistic regression model was developed. In order to minimise problems of multi-collinearity, SPSS was used to create a two new variables.³ First, a new variable was constructed combining key significant 'individual factor' variables that were most strongly associated with long-term unemployment and strongly, significantly inter-correlated (namely holding qualifications; perceptions of work/occupational, literacy, IT and interview skills; measures of labour market attachment – being in work immediately prior to current JSA claim and reporting a stable work history; and a measure of self-efficacy – considering job prospects good/very good). Individuals' identification of health as being/not being a barrier to work (an issue discussed under 'personal circumstances' above) was also strongly and significantly correlated with these variables and so was included in the newly constructed variable combining these factors.

A second combined variable was constructed bringing together significantly correlated variables in relation to personal circumstances, namely: whether individuals lived alone; and whether living in public sector housing. These factors were in turn significantly correlated with an external factor potentially affecting employability, namely concerns over the benefits system (reflected in the financial consequences of losing benefits being seen as a barrier to work). A single social capital variable was retained in the regression model (reflecting 'whether individuals' social network ties used for job search were themselves' mostly unemployed'). Finally, individuals' views of whether employer discrimination against unemployed acted as a barrier to work was retained as an additional external factor. The binary dependent variable had values representing 'being long-term unemployed' and 'not being long-term unemployed'. The results are presented in Table 1.

The new 'individual and health factors' variable was shown to be significantly associated with the experience of long-term unemployment. The negative *beta* co-efficient value suggests that those reporting no health barriers combined with holding some level of

³ SPSS for Windows offers a computation function that allows for the creation of a new variable based on the response values within a number of existing variables. This allows for a number of variables to be combined. In the case of both of these combined variables, a Cronbach's Alpha test of reliability was used to assess whether variables were sufficiently inter-related to justify their combination, with positive results.

qualification, reporting a stronger work record and having greater confidence in their skills and job prospects, were significantly less likely to be long-term unemployed.

Table 1 Interviewees probability of being long-term unemployed, by selected employability framework factors

	β	<i>p</i> -value	Exp(B)
Individual and health factors	- 0.578	0.000**	0.561
– ‘Held a qualification’			
– ‘Considered work skills good’			
– ‘Considered literacy skills good or adequate’			
– ‘Considered IT skills good’			
– ‘Considered job prospects good/very good’			
– ‘Considered interview skills good’			
– ‘In work immediately prior to JSA claim’			
– ‘Stable work history’			
– ‘Health not a barrier to work’			
Personal circumstances and benefits system	0.423	0.030*	1.527
– ‘Lived alone’			
– ‘Lived in public sector housing’			
– ‘Considered loss of benefits a barrier to work’			
Social capital	1.720	0.047*	5.585
– ‘Individuals’ social network ties used for job search were mainly unemployed themselves’			
Constant	0.989	0.145	2.689

The new ‘personal circumstances and benefits system’ variable (combining information on whether interviewees’ lived alone, in public sector housing and if they saw the loss of benefits as a barrier to work) was similarly significantly associated with long-term unemployment. The positive *beta* co-efficient value suggests that those reporting living alone in public sector housing and expressing concerns regarding the loss of benefits were significantly more likely to be long-term unemployed. The odds ratio of 1.527 means that the odds of being long-term unemployed were one and a half times higher for people reporting these personal circumstances and external barriers, compared to those not reporting such issues.

The selected measure of social capital was also significantly associated with being long-term unemployed, with a positive *beta* co-efficient. The odds of being long-term

unemployed was more than five and a half times higher for people reporting these using mostly unemployed social network ties used for job search, than for those who reported networking with people in work. The variable measuring whether individuals' views of whether employer discrimination against the unemployed acted as a barrier to work (an external factor) was eliminated from the equation as not being significant. Most importantly, the model demonstrates the complexity of the barriers to work faced by long-term unemployed people, and that these factors remain significant even when controlling for their effects upon each other. The lesson for policy, discussed in more detail below, would appear to be that holistic, multi-dimensional solutions are needed if the complex barriers faced by the most disadvantaged job seekers are to be addressed.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Implications for policy

We should acknowledge the limitations of the research described above. A relatively small study, located within a single urban labour market and focusing on the experiences of one group of working age benefit claimants (those claiming JSA) is limited in the generalisability of its findings. Nevertheless, the breadth of the issues covered in interviews with job seekers does allow us to begin to reconsider how the concept of employability can help us to understand the experience of (especially long-term) unemployment; and what might be needed in terms of policy responses. The evidence suggests that long-term unemployed people can face a complex combination of barriers to work; and that many face more (and more severe) barriers than other job seekers. Targeted programmes seeking to address the needs of long-term unemployed people (or those at risk of long-term unemployment) may be justified. But they need to be the right kind of programmes. Work First active labour market programmes, which focus on increasing motivation, generic skills and job search effort, will not be able to address the range of barriers faced by the most disadvantaged (see also Dean, 2003). Nor can such programmes (which tend to be rolled out nationally with relatively little regard for local issues) begin to engage with problems such as the concentration of disadvantaged long-term unemployed people in certain neighbourhoods dominated by public sector housing.

Rather, long-term unemployed people need to be able to access high quality training options addressing, for example, the literacy and numeracy problems that have

consistently been shown to limit employability, as well as gaps in occupational and other skills. Some long-term unemployed people can lack confidence and self-efficacy, and may therefore benefit from an intensification of personalised support services. Qualitative evaluation evidence has confirmed that the emphasis within some employability programmes on the role of Personal Advisers has had positive impacts (Ley *et al.*, 2001), and it is important that the quality of such interventions is maintained, especially if these services are contracted-out to for-profit providers.

These individual-focused, supply-side solutions are likely to be more effective where complemented by other targeted interventions that recognise barriers in relation to personal circumstances. Such interventions may involve anything from improving access to transport to signposting people with health problems to appropriate services. Indeed, the evidence presented above suggests a link between 'human capital' and health-related barriers faced by many long-term unemployed people, so there may be benefits in offering JSA claimants the kind of health-focused interventions currently open to those receiving Employment and Support Allowance/other incapacity benefits (Lindsay *et al.*, 2007). Given the apparent decline in social capital experienced by some long-term unemployed people, there may also be a case to be made for local services that provide a focal point for community activities and employability services alongside opportunities to access social networks and peer support (for a discussion of such innovative local services in Glasgow, see Turok, 2007).

One of the most significant differences between the long-term unemployed and those out of work for shorter periods related to their perceptions of what losing benefits would mean to them. For most long-term unemployed people, the negative financial consequences of the loss of benefits was seen as an important barrier to work. These findings highlight the legacy of a disempowering benefits system that provides little by way of disposable income (so that, as noted above, single unemployed people reside in some of the UK's poorest households) while meeting housing costs through passported, means-tested benefits. It is a system that undermines financial management skills and confidence among job seekers, discourages them from 'taking a risk' on temporary employment, and limits the range and geographical focus of their search activities – "poverty is an isolating experience" for unemployed people (Sinfield, 1981: 54) and living in poverty does not make for effective job seeking. There is a need to fundamentally review how unemployment and housing benefits are paid and administered. In order to arrive at more

effective policies in this area, we need to move beyond the false dichotomy of debates on balancing rights to 'passive' benefits and responsibilities to participate in 'active' labour market programmes (Sinfield, 2001). The reality is that an effective benefits system that lifts claimants out of poverty while directing them towards support and training is in itself activating and empowering.

Finally, many long-term unemployed and other job seekers expressed concerns about the number and quality of opportunities within the local labour market. These findings again remind us that strategies to improve the employability of individuals cannot be separated from policies to promote the growth of decent quality jobs in inner cities. Nor is it reasonable to increase 'active' requirements and compulsory job seeking responsibilities for the unemployed without also challenging employers to provide in-work support and training, thus ensuring progression and advancement wherever possible for those entering relatively low-paid, entry-level employment. The research discussed above was undertaken in a single urban labour market, so that we cannot factor in how different levels of demand might affect job seekers' attitudes and experiences, but there is ample evidence that the impact of supply-side labour market programmes is severely limited where there is inadequate and/or inappropriate demand (Webster, 2005; Beatty *et al.*, 2007; Fothergill and Wilson, 2007). As MacNicol (2008: 592) succinctly summarises: "improving employability does not by itself create jobs".

Concluding remarks

It has been more than forty years since Sinfield's (1968: 13) seminal cross-national study highlighted the social and economic costs of long-term unemployment – the "national and individual misfortune" of "lost productivity and a life wasted". Writing at a time when long-term unemployment was generally low in OECD countries, he was then sharply critical of policy makers' lack of concern over the less acknowledged socio-psychological consequences of labour market exclusion. While economists were able to estimate the cost in lost taxation revenue of rising joblessness, Sinfield noted that the social and psychological impacts of long-term unemployment on individuals appeared to be of less concern – "it is easier to discover that a man's income has dropped by fifty percent... than what it means to him to be unemployed after fifteen years of regular work" (ibid.: 52).

Writing some years later, as the UK entered a period of deep recession and high unemployment in the early 1980s, the same author returned to the theme of how we need to “understand more fully what unemployment means” and attack the full range of causes and consequences, supply-side and demand-side factors linked to long-term unemployment (Sinfield, 1981: 157). So it is not by accident that this paper opened with the closing words of Sinfield’s (1981) work – in the face of a deepening unemployment crisis he clearly saw the need for active labour market policies, but also that it was important to consider *all* aspects of employability and the experience of unemployment. Crucially, Sinfield also laid out how the unequal distribution of unemployment places the lower skilled, the low-qualified, those in disadvantaged regions and localities, and other vulnerable groups at greater social risk; and how long-term unemployment feeds into poverty and social isolation for the individual and undermines communities.

There are also political parallels with the unemployment crisis of the early 1980s – at that time the UK’s capacity to respond to the crisis seemed comparatively weak “given a government that denies the desirability of bringing about fuller employment... let alone its responsibility or ability to achieve this” (Sinfield and Showler, 1981: 5). The UK’s next government is likely to be of the same political colour as that which oversaw the crisis of the 1980s, and while David Cameron’s rhetoric now rejects the idea that unemployment is a ‘price worth paying’ (Dorling, 2009), the Conservative Party’s proposals in the field of employability and labour market policy make for grim reading. Centrepieces of the future policy agenda are likely to include: time limits on JSA; compulsory workfare for long-term unemployed people (who will be required to ‘work for benefit’ on community programmes); and benefit suspensions of three years for those refusing a reasonable job offer (Conservative Party, 2008). There is also a commitment to follow the US experiment in privatised workfare despite “little evidence to suggest the utility of contracting as a strategy for building service capacity or promoting accountability” from American employability programmes (Brodkin, 2005: 94). It is also unclear as to what impact promised cuts in public expenditure will have, given that much of the UK’s jobs growth during the 1997-2007 period was driven by increased investment in public services.

As the UK again faces the possibility of a period of prolonged recession, and cities like Glasgow grapple with the consequences of increasing job losses, there is a need to renew our efforts to understand what unemployment means, map out issues affecting employability, and offer advice on what works in supporting long-term unemployed people.

Long-term unemployed people and many other job seekers face a range of complex issues and barriers affecting their employability. Work First active labour market programmes are unlikely to be equal to the task of addressing these barriers. Instead, there is a need for holistic, flexible and locally-responsive employability services that can be tailored to individual needs. It is not that all job seekers, or even all long-term unemployed people, will need access to all of the potential interventions discussed above, but it is important that we are able to provide a menu of options that can be combined to address the range of issues affecting employability.

And what of the concept of employability? Critics of how employability is used by UK policy makers have fallen into two camps. Some argue that the concept has become so tainted that we must move 'beyond employability' and find new ways of thinking and talking about the problem of unemployment (Peck and Theodore, 2000). Others have sought to reclaim the language of employability by developing multi-dimensional models for analysis (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). The research reported above sought to demonstrate that 'employability' – deployed as a holistic concept and framework for analysis – can help us to more fully understand the problems faced by unemployed people, and consider what's needed in terms of policy solutions. It is hoped that this research will feed into on-going debates on the need for policies that reflect the complex and multi-dimensional nature of both employability and labour market disadvantage. This debate is necessary, now more than ever, if we are to arrive at policies that deliver substantial and lasting improvements in individuals' employability, and so alleviate the social, economic and psychological damage that can often result from the experience of long-term unemployment.

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