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Work Activation Regimes and Well-being of Unemployed People: Rhetoric, Risk and Reality of Quasi-Marketization in the UK Work Programme

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Abstract

Well-being and employment activation have become central and intertwined policy priorities across advanced economies, with the mandation of unemployed claimants towards employability interventions (e.g. curriculum vitae preparation and interview skills). Compelled job search and job transitions are in part justified by the well-being gains that resulting employment is said to deliver. However, this dominant focus within the activation field on outcome well-being – the well-being improvement triggered by a transition to paid work – neglects how participation in activation schemes can itself affect well-being levels for unemployed people – what we term ‘process well-being’ effects. Combining theoretical literature with empirical work on the UK’s large-scale quasi-marketized Work Programme activation scheme, we develop the limited existing academic discussion of process well-being effects, considering whether and how activation participation mediates the negative well-being effects of unemployment, irrespective of any employment outcomes. We further relate variation in such process well-being effects to the literature on activation typologies, in which ‘thinner’ work-first activation interventions are linked to weaker process well-being effects for participants compared to ‘thicker’ human capital development interventions. Confirming these expectations, our empirical work shows that Work Programme participants have, to date, experienced a largely ‘thin’ activation regime in which participants are both expected to, and empirically demonstrate, similar if not lower levels of process well-being than those who are openly unemployed. These concerning findings speak to all nations seeking to promote the well-being of unemployed people and particularly those pursuing ‘black box’ activation schemes based around quasi-marketization, devolution and New Public Management.

Keywords

Well-being; Employment activation; Quasi-marketization; Work Programme

Introduction

Stimulated by an increasing acknowledgement that gross domestic product is no longer an adequate proxy of societal development (Stiglitz *et al.* 2009), the past decade has seen well-being move to the centre of policy agendas of the United Nations, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

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Development (OECD), the European Commission and various national governments (Deeming 2013). In the UK context the creation in 2010 of the Office for National Statistics' Measuring National Well-being project by the Conservative-led coalition Government chimes with this mainstreaming of well-being within the policy process (Tomlinson and Kelly 2013), and Prime Minister David Cameron has been explicit in the importance of well-being as a key policy outcome (Cameron 2010). Both enabling and responding to the increased policy salience of well-being, there has been considerable progress within academia in recent years both in the theorization and measurement of well-being as a multi-dimensional latent concept (Dolan *et al.* 2008; Diener 2009; Stiglitz *et al.* 2009; Dolan and Metcalfe 2012) as well as in the identification of key factors shaping well-being outcomes – relationships, income, employment, health, demographics and attitudes (Layard 2005; Blanchflower and Oswald 2008; Dolan *et al.* 2008; Ballas and Tranmer 2012; Deeming 2013).

Amongst these factors, unemployment is consistently found to be detrimental to well-being (Clark and Oswald 1994; Layard 2005; Waddell and Burton 2006; Dolan *et al.* 2008), with nearly a century of empirical research linking unemployment to psychological distress, shame, depression and life dissatisfaction (Paul and Moser 2009). Indeed, longitudinal studies have moved closer towards establishing a direct causal relationship between work and well-being both in the UK context (Thomas *et al.* 2005) and internationally (Paul and Moser 2009). This association between work and well-being has become critical in policy thinking with the positive well-being benefits of employment taking position as a core justification for the shift towards a range of 'activating' welfare-to-work (WTW) interventions. Much less is known, however, about the relationship between well-being and activation policies – interventions to promote the effective reintegration into employment of working-age benefit recipients (OECD 2014) – themselves, and in seeking to unpack this association we make the distinction between two alternative logics for, and understandings of, the relationship between activation and well-being.

The first and more prominent of these logics is an instrumental argument advanced by government and policymakers. Rhetorically, Iain Duncan Smith, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, frequently weaves a narrative on the transformative power of work for well-being outcomes through speeches, stressing 'it is about self-esteem, self-confidence and self-worth' (Duncan Smith 2015). Here, the justification for activation interventions flows in three steps: work enhances well-being, activation schemes support transitions into paid work, *ergo* activation schemes are justified by policymakers as good for well-being and hence part of benevolent policymaking, to the extent that they facilitate transitions to employment. Policymakers do not argue *directly* that activation itself is good for well-being and there is very much an instrumental focus on ends rather than means. Given the pervasive use of such paternalistic justifications for mandatory WTW interventions, it is concerning that there is a dearth of empirical findings on the nature of well-being effects from conditionality-driven employment transitions. Where such evidence is available there are mixed findings

(Arni *et al.* 2009; Harkness 2013), raising significant questions about the widespread trend across developed economy contexts for increasingly demanding mandatory WTW requirements, justified via confident paternalistic arguments around well-being gains resulting from work transitions irrespective of their quality or stability.

The second set of logics emanates from an academic rather than policy-oriented field, and emerges from an understanding that there is something about the status and experience of unemployment that is psychologically and socially detrimental above and beyond any deleterious financial consequences. Proponents of this argument suggest that 'if it is this environment of unemployment that is so harmful, then changing it – via interventions such as welfare-to-work – can potentially mitigate the negative outcomes' (Sage 2013: 6). In this way, the *process* of participation in activation schemes can affect claimants' well-being *in and of itself*, aside from any impacts through resultant employment outcomes (Strandh 2001; Coutts 2009; Sage 2013, 2014a, 2014b).

Considering these alternative logics alongside one another, the implication of the first, government-advanced rationale is that vis-à-vis time spent in unemployment, once a transition has been made into paid work, well-being will improve – i.e. that what claimants think about their lives, as captured for example through life satisfaction indicators and how they feel – the registering of positive emotions day to day will improve *once they have returned to paid work*. We term this rationale the logic of 'outcome' well-being. By contrast, under the second and relatively neglected logic, it is the *process* of participation in activation schemes that is understood to affect claimant well-being. In what Sage (2013) refers to as the 'bright side of welfare-to-work', those who remain unemployed and who are participants in activation programmes are expected to experience elevated levels of well-being when compared to those in 'open' or unsupported unemployment. We introduce this second rationale as the logic of 'process' well-being and situate this as an alternative course through which WTW interventions might mediate participant well-being levels, quite aside from any employment transition.

Process well-being concerns have not been an area of emphasis for UK policymakers in recent years in the field of activation. Indeed, there has been a move instead towards a tightening in focus around outcomes (i.e. job transitions) above all else, a focus reinforced by a payment-by-results financing model and 'black box' contracts that offer outsourced providers considerable flexibilities around intervention type and intensity. Despite this policy sidelining, we argue for two reasons that process concerns remain key and are unduly neglected at present within both policy and academic thinking. First, and as outlined in greater detail below, at an instrumental level, the nature and quality of employment support experienced by activation participants can be linked to their chances of leaving benefits and entering paid work and thus ought to be of central interest to policymakers on these grounds. Indeed, such process concerns now feature in the UK policy discussion following disappointing, and inevitably interlinked, evidence around both job outcome performance and participant experiences within the country's main Work Programme quasi-marketized activation scheme for those who are

long-term unemployed. Second, there are also important ethical reasons why these process concerns do – and ought to – matter. Activation regimes can be understood to represent contractual relationships of rights and responsibilities between state and claimant. These are, however, dangerous relationships in the sense of being mandatory, embedded in marked power imbalances, and with limited options for unemployed participants to refuse the terms and conditions handed down to them (however draconian) given their reliance on this income source. In this context, claimants are vulnerable to being mandated to participate in ‘activating’ policies that may potentially damage their well-being, but with only minimal recourse to refuse these potential harms. The extent to which this is true or not is an empirical question yet its ethical relevance is clear, particularly in the context of seemingly ever-increasing conditionality requirements in the UK activation context.

In this article we respond both theoretically and empirically to the neglect within the research literature of the potential *process well-being* effects of activation interventions. In addition to highlighting the importance of the distinction between process and outcome well-being for both policy and academic audiences, and elevating the currently neglected dimensions of process well-being within the activation literature, the article contributes in two key ways to this emerging field. First, the article advances the conceptual debate – building on Strandh’s (2001) analyses – in emphasizing the need to contextualize analyses of process well-being within a clear understanding of the heterogeneity of different types of activation regime and a clear recognition of their differing expected effects on participants’ process well-being. Second, in seeking to test these conceptual foundations, the article exploits both secondary evidence and primary analysis of large-scale survey data on the process well-being effects of the Work Programme. The Work Programme is a particularly pertinent case study as it currently sits at the vanguard of broader international trends in WTW governance towards quasi-marketization, provider flexibility and payment-by-results (van Berkel 2010).

Activation and Well-being across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development: The Paternalistic Neglect of Process

In common with other developed economies, since the mid-1990s the UK has been pursuing an ‘activation turn’ in which entitlements to social security have been tied increasingly to mandatory participation in active labour market programmes (ALMPs). Following the US scholarship of Lawrence Mead in particular (Mead 1986), this ‘creeping conditionality’ (Dwyer 2004) has in significant part been justified paternalistically by policymakers on the grounds of enhancing claimants’ well-being. In the UK context, there has been a dramatic expansion of such programmes since Tony Blair’s Labour administration created the New Deal activation schemes in the late 1990s, as well as the gradual ratcheting up and rolling out of these schemes during the 2000s in terms of their requirements, reach to new claimant groups (e.g. people with a disability and single parents) and sanctions for non-compliance (Whitworth and Griggs 2013). This has been accompanied by governmental

rhetoric that such increasing mandation helps unemployed people to ‘concentrate on *their* longer term goals’ (DWP 2005: 96; emphasis added).

Since 2010 under the coalition Government, there has been a continuation and intensification of previous Labour trends (Lister and Bennett 2010). In the area of ALMPs, New Labour’s now seemingly modest flirtations with outsourcing, quasi-marketization and payment-by-results in the Employment Zones, Pathways to Work and Flexible New Deals have been implemented wholesale in the coalition’s flagship Work Programme activation scheme for the long-term unemployed. As with the previous Labour Government, the Department for Work and Pensions’ (DWP) discourse under the coalition Government expounds a paternalistic belief in the ‘intrinsic benefits of work’ (Duncan Smith 2012) for people, their families and their communities and that whilst it ‘is difficult to quantify these effects precisely ... their existence is not in doubt’ (DWP 2010a: 5). Prime Minister David Cameron has also emphasized the importance of non-financial and broader well-being gains from paid work, and has positioned the Work Programme as a key policy vehicle to realize these gains, ‘We have an instinct that having the purpose of a job is as important to the soul as it is to the bank balance, and it’s there in our hugely ambitious Work Programme to get people off welfare’ (Cameron 2010).

The constellation of these three policy agendas – paternalism, activation and well-being – over the past 15 years has generated general agreement from policymakers around a widely accepted activation orthodoxy involving significant, if nationally varying, mandatory requirements and corresponding sanctions for non-compliance. The nature of these activation requirements can vary widely, from compulsory interviews with caseworkers, to mandatory participation in training or job interviews, to mandatory community activity, through to mandatory participation in work without pay in order to retain eligibility for out-of-work benefits (workfare). In thinking about paternalistic justifications for such activation endeavours, however, both policymakers and the academic literature have focussed almost exclusively on the well-being effects of *transitions into paid work* achieved through activation schemes – the logic of outcome well-being outlined above. Although this logic of outcome well-being is contestable empirically, this article’s focus is instead to shift the analytical frame of reference to the more neglected issue of how participation in activation schemes *in and of itself* might mediate participant well-being – what we term ‘process well-being’. Such process well-being is of heightened interest, given the extensive contact period (up to two years) over which Work Programme providers work with unemployed claimants and given that the majority of Work Programme participants fail to achieve an employment outcome within this period and hence remain with those providers ‘unsuccessfully’ for the full two-year period (DWP 2010b; CESI 2013).

As a first step, however, it is important to set out the hypothesized theory of change in terms of how participation in activation schemes might be expected to affect process well-being. Following on from this, it is also illuminating to discern whether such well-being effects will necessarily be positive or whether they might be expected to vary depending on the nature of the activation scheme (its aims, resourcing, personalization, degree of mandation and

sanctions, etc.). The literature identifies two broad causal pathways through which unemployment affects well-being and, as a result, how WTW schemes might seek to mimic paid work and to mediate the generally damaging effects of unemployment on well-being. In the material pathway, unemployment is detrimental to well-being through its negative impacts on income, making people less financially secure and less able to meet their material needs and wants (Warr 1987). In addition, however, unemployment is also argued to be harmful due to its damaging psychological effects, irrespective of its material impacts (Sage 2014a, 2014b). Expanding on these psycho-social pathways, Jahoda's (1982) concept of latent deprivation proposes five beneficial functions offered by employment – time structure, social contacts, participation in collective purposes, status and identity, and regular activity – and it is the absence of these psycho-social functions which is argued to harm well-being amongst those who are unemployed. Related, Fryer (1986) focuses on agency, and highlights ways in which unemployment reduces individuals' control over their life situation and life direction with detrimental well-being implications. Along these lines, therefore, the very act of participating in activation schemes might be hypothesized to affect the process well-being of unemployed people through the extent that such schemes provide them with the types of beneficial latent psycho-social functions of employment outlined by Jahoda and Fryer. If such employment-like psycho-social facets are available to activation programme participants, then it is argued that activation can to some extent mediate (and so lessen) the evidenced negative links between unemployment and well-being.

Activation Typologies and Process Well-being: A Neglected Evidence Base

Evidence of the links between activation schemes and claimants' process well-being is both limited and mixed in its findings (see Coutts 2009 for a review). Studies from Australia, Germany and the UK have found positive effects of activation interventions on participant well-being, whilst other research from Denmark and Sweden provides mixed results, and in some cases finds no association between participation and subjective well-being (Sage 2013), leaving us with a mixed and ambiguous international picture. Of particular relevance to the present article, Sage (2013, 2014a) finds that participants in UK activation schemes do, on average, report higher levels of well-being than the openly unemployed, controlling for a range of other factors, leading him to the conclusion that these activation schemes can offer a form of intermediate labour market status between open unemployment and paid work. Importantly, however, although hampered by small sample size, Sage's (2014b) findings further suggest variation in process well-being effects across different types of activation programme. Specifically, interventions oriented around training and work experience show positive (and statistically significant) well-being effects compared to the openly unemployed, whilst schemes built more narrowly around job search and employment-assistance show no significant well-being effects compared to the openly unemployed.

The present article extends these conceptual and empirical foundations, and takes a specific focus on the Work Programme, an exemplar of international trends towards quasi-marketization and provider flexibility. In the Work Programme, job outcomes and not interventions are the target specified by central government commissioners, and the hope from policymakers is that the 'black box' will give providers the freedom they need to deliver flexible, innovative, tailored and specialized support to different claimants in order to achieve results. As a result, however, the Work Programme leaves considerable uncertainty, variability and potential vulnerability as to the type, quality and intensity of interventions being delivered and, as summarized below, what type of activation regime the scheme relates to in terms of the typologies of activation interventions. In this context, it is both intriguing and uncertain what the process well-being effects of the Work Programme will be.

A Framework for Understanding Variation in Active Labour Market Programmes

It is widely acknowledged that ALMPs do not represent a homogenous set of policies but, rather, reflect a diverse array of potential approaches encompassing varying possible aims, actors, instruments and consequences (Theodore and Peck 2000; Levy 2004; Barbier 2005; Lindsay *et al.* 2007; Bonoli 2010). In seeking to summarize this variability, the literature typically distinguishes between two stylized ideal types that are described as 'human capital development' and 'work first' approaches (Theodore and Peck 2000; Lindsay *et al.* 2007), and that Levy (2004), with similar meaning, respectively describes as 'thick' and 'thin'. Table I summarizes the key, and somewhat caricatured, qualitative distinctions between these two ideal type activation regimes.

Sitting within this potential policy variability, the ways in which activation schemes affect unemployed participants' process well-being can be expected to depend on the qualitative nature of the intervention and, in particular, on the extent to which the scheme mimics the latent psychological benefits of paid work outlined in the theoretical work of Jahoda and Fryer.

Whilst there is much *general* empirical support for these theories (Creed and Klisch 2005; Paul and Batinic 2010; Wulfgramm 2011; Selenko *et al.* 2011), there has however been remarkably little empirical attention specifically on the question of how variation in the type of activation policies links to variation in well-being effects amongst unemployed people (see Sage 2014a for a review). Strandh's (2001) investigation into ALMPs in the Swedish context offers a notable exception in its comparison of the process well-being effects of three different types of activation measures:

Workplace participation: full-time, self-directed work experience in the regular labour market with participants themselves finding an employer to take them on.

High-quality training and education: high-quality theoretical and vocational training courses delivered by specialist or mainstream education providers and leading to formal qualifications.

Table 1

Key features of activation ideal types

Dimension	Thin – ‘work first’	Thick – ‘human capital development’
Aims	Quick return to labour market	Greater focus on employability (i.e. up-skilling), job quality and in-work progression
Programme targets	Job transitions	Sustained employment transitions; reducing distance to labour market for the ‘harder to help’
Intervention model	Job-search, basic skills training and focus on rapid transitions into jobs	More intensive, longer-term and personalized training and supports
Relationship to labour market	Demand-side focus on inserting jobseekers into available opportunities quickly. Work experience limited, often mandatory and typically unpaid where exists	Supply-side focus on up-skilling jobseekers to improve their short and long-term labour market prospects. Work experience likely to be available, claimants having greater choice and often paid (whether by employers or government subsidies)
Relationship with individuals	Emphasis on pushing claimants into rapid job transitions largely irrespective of quality or suitability	Greater emphasis on pulling claimants into employment via building employability and higher quality job opportunities (in terms of pay, conditions, progression, etc.)

Informal employment-preparation tasks: light touch employability-type activities involving only unemployed people, taking place outside of the normal labour market, intended simply to keep unemployed participants busy and engaged and viewed as a last resort where no other preferable alternatives could be found.

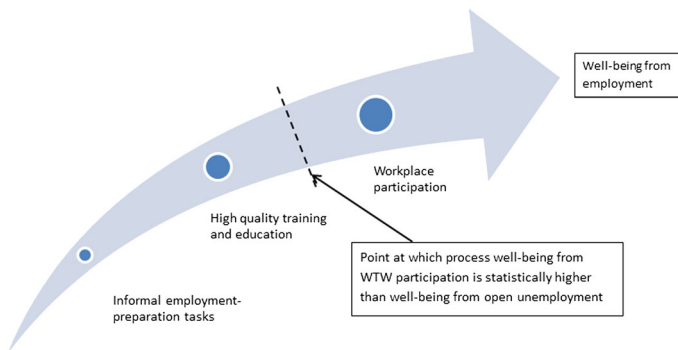
Although clearly contextually specific, the findings are nonetheless informative in terms of seemingly beneficial process well-being characteristics for some, but not all, of these WTW interventions. Of these distinct, qualitatively different activation approaches, only workplace participation and high-quality training and education were associated with positive process well-being effects for the long-term unemployed compared with the openly unemployed (receiving no employment support), once controls were taken into account. Only workplace participation showed statistically significant positive effects. Lower quality interventions built around informal quasi-work tasks, in contrast, showed barely any difference in well-being for the long-term unemployed compared to those in open unemployment, again controlling for other factors. Summarizing these varying results, Strandh highlights the process well-being benefits to unemployed participants of ‘thicker’ activation interventions that offer a connection to roles and employed individuals in the real world of work as well as to substantive interventions that offer meaningful improvements to a

sense of control and viable future progression. More directly relevant to the UK context, recent UK findings by Sage (2014b) discussed above also broadly support the idea that ‘thicker’ activation interventions offer well-being gains over the openly unemployed, whilst ‘thinner’ activation interventions do not. However, in distilling the full gamut of UK activation policies into two broad categories, it remains unclear within Sage’s work how different UK activation programmes have been classified and how meaningful and internally coherent are the two broad groupings that result.

Clearly, the evidence base remains patchy; it is largely theoretical, but with (albeit piecemeal) empirical findings supporting the intuitive suggestion that the type of activation scheme shapes and mediates the nature of process well-being for unemployed participants. Drawing current literature together, the heuristic device presented in figure 1 sets out a hypothesized continuum of process well-being effects across different types of activation regime and progressing through to paid employment at the far right (proposed here as most beneficial to well-being). As one moves from left to right across the figure, the activation supports become thicker in nature and furnish activation participants with more substantive and/or a greater number of the latent psycho-social benefits identified by Jahoda and Fryer (time structure, social contacts, collective purpose, status and identity, regular activity, control over life situation, agency in determining life course). Moreover, the suggestion in figure 1 is not simply that process well-being effects vary in a systematic way across qualitatively different types of activation regime but, more strongly, that not all types of activation intervention are expected to enhance the process well-being of their unemployed participants relative to those in open unemployment. Indeed, some activation policies may actually be harmful to the process well-being of the unemployed participants relative to open unemployment.

Figure 1

Mapping welfare-to-work regimes and process well-being effects



Analysis

In this context, the two central and interrelated questions that concern the remainder of this article are, ‘What type of activation scheme is the Work Programme?’, and, relatedly, ‘What kinds of process well-being effects is the programme delivering for its unemployed participants?’. To examine these questions, the empirical work combines qualitative evidence of participants’ experiences from policy and evaluation documents with statistical analysis of the UK Annual Population Survey (APS) data in order to offer two empirical perspectives as to whether Work Programme participation can be said to enhance the process well-being of its unemployed participants.

Three waves of the APS are combined to provide the statistical analyses with sufficient sample size to disaggregate the various activation schemes coded within the data, overcoming the ambiguities of Sage’s groupings noted above by allowing us to focus exclusively on the 886 Work Programme participants in these data.

A review of qualitative findings to date: the Work Programme and participants’ process well-being

This first empirical strand makes use of a wide range of policy and evaluation material relating to the Work Programme – policy reports, tender documents, evaluation reports, academic literature – to examine qualitatively how the scheme operates in terms of its activation ‘type’ and, in turn, how it appears to affect the process well-being of its long-term unemployed participants.

The Work Programme, introduced in 2011, replaced virtually all existing UK activation schemes and at a stroke transformed the landscape of UK employment policies. Yet whilst it is acknowledged as a radical and ambitious reform, the Work Programme also represents a continuation and intensification of pre-existing New Labour trends towards a marketized, work-first activation paradigm rather than any fundamentally new approach (Lister and Bennett 2010). In line with trends across the advanced economies (van Berkel 2010), delivery within the Work Programme is outsourced via competitive tender to large, mainly private sector ‘Prime providers’ (Primes) which can both deliver services themselves and/or sub-contract to other organizations within their supply chains. As noted above, the Work Programme operates a ‘black box’ delivery model whereby organizations have almost complete discretion over the nature and extent of their intervention, with no core minimum set by the DWP and only a variable (and frequently vague) set of minimum service guarantees set out by the Prime providers themselves (Finn 2012).

The Work Programme is a leading international exponent of a payment-by-results model, and payments to Primes have since April 2014 been based entirely on the achievement of job outcomes (meaning a transition to paid work that is sustained for either three or six months depending on the claimant) and on continued job sustainment. Given that the Work Programme takes in an enormous diversity of claimants, from the job-ready to those with complex needs and barriers, the scheme separates claimants into nine payment groups according to previous benefit receipt. These payment groups

are important because the DWP ties different payment levels, payment durations and entry criteria to these nine groups according to a broad notion of claimant distance to labour market (DWP 2010b). Although known to be highly imperfect (WPSC 2011; Newton *et al.* 2012; Carter and Whitworth 2015), these differential payments have a key role in attempting to calibrate Primes' incentives to invest time, resources and energy into 'harder to help' claimants who would be at clear risk of being 'parked' (i.e. given lesser or minimal support from providers) if payment levels were equal across all claimants irrespective of their support needs.

In terms of the activation typology presented in table I, therefore, the design of the Work Programme in principle offers the potential to deliver the DWP's intention of a flexible and variegated WTW regime in which job-ready participants potentially receive relatively minimal 'thin' support, whilst 'harder to help' claimants receive deeper, longer, more resource-intensive 'thick' supports. In practice, however, the evaluation evidence to date suggests that the Work Programme has so far been more 'thin' than 'thick' and that it is failing to live up to its potential as a personalized, variegated and, where required, intensive activation programme (Newton *et al.* 2012; Lane *et al.* 2013; PAC 2013; WPSC 2013).

At its core, the Work Programme is built around a 'thin' activation model in which job outcomes are everything, job quality is irrelevant for payments to be triggered, and participants deemed non-compliant can be referred for severe sanctions, each acting as strong push factors for providers to move claimants quickly into any form of paid work. At the same time, the differential payment levels in theory allow additional resources for more intensive 'thick' supports where claimants require this, and the existence of sustainment payments (payments made to providers for each additional month that a participant remains in paid work) should in principle encourage a greater focus on job retention than would otherwise be the case. Nevertheless, whilst payment-by-results may be rhetorically appealing – government only 'pays for success' – the extreme payment weighting towards outcomes means that (potentially expensive) interventions must be funded up-front, whilst income is back-ended to successful job outcomes. Although always something of an inherent tension, the risks associated with temporal mismatches in the financing mechanism have been exacerbated by the extremely challenging economic climate in which the scheme has been operating and in which the outcomes-based income stream has not yielded financial returns for providers as initially expected. Indeed, in the first two years of the programme operation, Prime providers generally failed to meet the minimum performance targets across the three largest payment groups, and although performance has begun to show signs of improvement, job outcomes remain particularly poor for participants with a disability or health condition. Whilst some argue that those minimum performance targets are ambiguously designed and unrealistically high (WPSC 2013; CESI 2013), failure to meet them nevertheless has serious ramifications for Primes in terms of potential contract termination, as the Newcastle College Group learned to its cost in early 2014. The consequence for the programme is that largely private sector Prime providers have been operating under considerable performance pressure from the DWP at

the same time as experiencing intense cost-pressures as outcomes-based income streams have failed to materialize as expected (Newton *et al.* 2012; Lane *et al.* 2013; WPSC 2013).

More fundamentally, recent DWP select committee reports question whether current payment levels adequately reflect the cost of supporting those with more severe needs and, consequently, whether they provide sufficient incentive for providers to work intensively with those claimants (WPSC 2013). Lastly, the variability, vagueness and poor communication of Primes' minimum service guarantees means that there is little effective, enforced minimum floor for service quality within the programme (Finn 2012; Whitworth 2013). Downward flexibility is coupled with downward cost pressures to create significant risks that provision will be minimal and patchy. From the Work Programme inception, commentators have suggested that 'harder to help' claimants may be systematically neglected ('parked' in the technical parlance) due to their relatively expensive support needs combined with their relatively low(er) likelihood of successfully moving into paid work and hence triggering outcome payments.

What is known about participant experiences of Work Programme services?

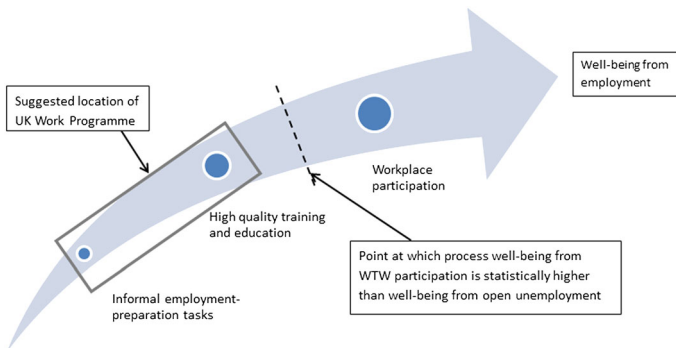
Whilst variation inevitably – indeed intentionally – exists across Work Programme provision, the general response from providers to this highly performance-pressurized and financially constrained operating environment has been somewhat predictable. In contrast to the policy promises of innovation, personalization and intensity within the 'black box' model, Primes have tended to retreat to the same standardized and low-cost basic interventions, offering a combination of relatively generic services (e.g. curriculum vitae and covering letter drafting, interview techniques) and basic skills training (e.g. numeracy, literacy, information technology) of the sort that also dominates the public sector Jobcentre Plus provision that most claimants have 'progressed' to the Work Programme from (Newton *et al.* 2012; Lane *et al.* 2013). The official Work Programme evaluation states explicitly of claimants' barriers to work that 'advisers did not always feel able to provide adequate support to address them' (Newton *et al.* 2012: 94). With intense pressures to drive down costs, minimal use has been made of paid-for specialist 'spot' provision offering more tailored and/or more intensive employment support (Newton *et al.* 2012: 4). Rather, where 'spot' provision has been used, this has tended to be free provision, raising concerns that cost rather than quality or appropriateness may be driving decision making over some sub-contracted provision (Newton *et al.* 2012). There is some evidence of minimal employment support being delivered, with some claimants reporting brief monthly telephone calls as their only contact with their Primes (Newton *et al.* 2012). Concerningly, evidence shows practices consistent with the 'parking' of 'harder to help' claimants, although evaluations make clear that it is still too early to state conclusively whether these practices are indeed a deliberate strategy from providers or merely consistent with such practices. Providers are, however, explicit in outlining the various profiling mechanisms that they are using to triage caseloads, and there is some small-scale qualitative evidence from interviews with providers suggesting that such profiling tools are, at least in

some cases, being used to ‘cream’ and ‘park’ claimants with differing levels of job readiness (Rees *et al.* 2014). Lastly, given the observed well-being gains of claimant-directed employment experience in Strandh’s work, it is particularly concerning that Prime providers are generally offering very little in terms of work placements or, indeed, even employer engagement: Ingold and Stuart (2013) find in a survey of 643 employers that only 5 per cent had ever knowingly recruited staff from the Work Programme.

Such participation experiences could be anticipated to have significant implications for unemployed participants’ process well-being. Figure 2 reproduces the earlier figure in light of the discussion above, and suggests where the Work Programme might currently be expected to fall within the heuristic map. Although inevitably highly variable, it is suggested that Work Programme activities tend to fall around Strandh’s ‘high-quality training and education’ marker, though generally below that mark given the propensity for cheaper, shorter, more basic and more generic training and education provision in the Work Programme compared to those in Strandh’s study. Indeed, for some Work Programme participants, the risk of being ‘parked’ and receiving relatively little in the way of meaningful contact at all seems to be an unfortunate reality. Disappointingly, there also seems to be relatively minimal engagement with employers or with real workplace activity through work placements. Strandh summarized two key benefits from interventions offering real workplace activity: first, connections to employed individuals; and, second, activities offering meaningful improvements to participants’ sense of control and viable future progress; these features seem, sadly, like the exception rather than the norm within the Work Programme. Crucially, the overall result is that the Work Programme is suggested to fall some way short of the point at which either Strandh (2001) or Sage (2014b) finds reliable evidence of process well-being gains from activation participation relative to being openly unemployed.

Figure 2

Suggested position of the Work Programme and process well-being



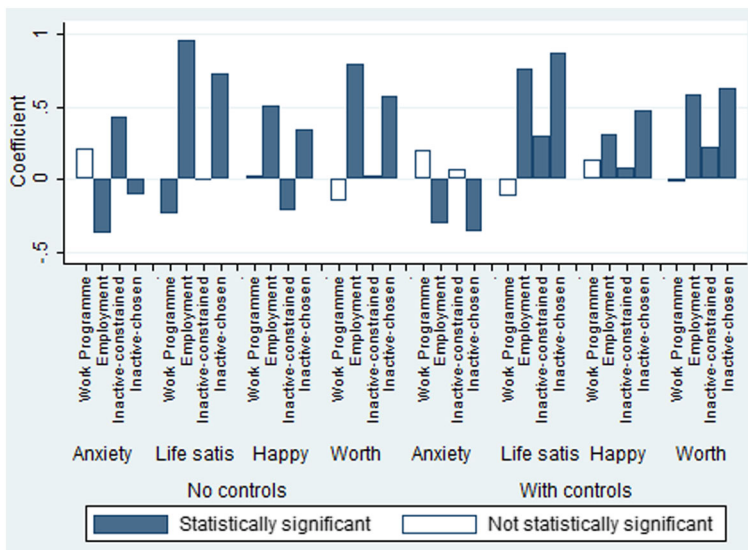
Quantitative Findings: Multivariate Analysis of the Impact of Work Programme Participation on Process Well-being in the Annual Population Survey

Turning now to the quantitative analysis, we are able to test the veracity of the positioning of the Work Programme within the heuristic map in figure 2 via multivariate analyses of a pooled dataset of waves spanning 2011–14 of the UK’s large-scale APS. Four well-being indicators are included in the APS – life satisfaction, life worth, happiness and anxiety – which together offer a holistic perspective encompassing the distinct evaluative, hedonic and eudemonic theoretical strands underpinning the latent well-being concept (Deeming 2013). Each well-being outcome is measured on a continuous scale from zero to 10. Informed by the OECD guidance on reporting subjective well-being (OECD 2013) and an aspiration to retain maximum information, we explore variation in well-being outcomes through linear regression models. For life satisfaction, happiness and sense that life is worthwhile, low scores mean low well-being, with high numerical scores for high well-being; conversely, for the anxiety variable, higher scores record higher levels of anxiety (lower well-being). All analyses are conducted in Stata 12 and are weighted using the APS well-being weights.

Figure 3 presents coefficients from linear regression models for Work Programme participants as well as for a series of comparator employment groups: employed individuals; those who are inactive and would like paid work (‘inactive – constrained’); and those who are inactive by choice and who

Figure 3

The Work Programme’s impact on participant’s process well-being



would not like to be in paid work currently ('inactive – chosen'). All of these groups are compared against those who are openly unemployed (the reference category not shown) and engaged only in standard regular attendance at the public sector Jobcentre Plus. Effects from simple bivariate models without any controls are shown in the first four blocks to the left of figure 3, and effects from multivariate models with controls included are shown to the right of figure 3. Statistically significant results (at $p < 0.05$) are shown in solid bars, and statistically insignificant results are indicated with hollow bars.

Looking first at the findings of the simple bivariate models, compared to the well-being of openly unemployed people the results for Work Programme participants is somewhat alarming. Compared to the openly unemployed, Work Programme participants are on average more anxious, less satisfied with their lives and less likely to feel that their life is worthwhile, although there is a slight positive effect for happiness (though the size of this effect is close to zero). Only the effects relating to life satisfaction and happiness are statistically significant, whilst the effects relating to anxiety and feeling that life is worthwhile cannot be separated with statistical confidence from those of the openly unemployed group. Employment and chosen inactivity show consistent and statistically significant beneficial effects on well-being compared to the openly unemployed, whilst the opposite is generally the case for those who are inactive but would rather be in paid work.

Clearly, some of these bivariate effects may be due to compositional differences between the groups. The four right-hand blocks of figure 3 repeat the same regression models, but add a range of explanatory factors to control for these compositional differences: whether the individual is in good health or not; ethnicity; highest educational qualification; gender; marital status; and region. In these multivariate models, Work Programme participants on average continue to express greater levels of anxiety, less life satisfaction and less sense that life is worthwhile compared to the openly unemployed group, but may be happier (although this finding is non-significant). As might be expected, the size of the effects associated with the Work Programme tends to fall once controls are incorporated and only one of these outcomes (Work Programme participants showing lesser sense that life is worthwhile compared to those in open unemployment) remains statistically significant, although the effect is small. The overall direction and message, however, is not substantively altered: the Work Programme consistently seems at least as harmful to process well-being as open unemployment and, indeed, there are risks of the Work Programme being potentially more harmful than open unemployment, given that three of the four Work Programme effects are negative (in well-being terms) even if not statistically significant.

Discussion

The past 15 years have seen a confluence of trends towards activation, paternalism and well-being across both academic debate and policy-making in the advanced economies. Against this backdrop, mandatory activation schemes have become universally accepted as the cornerstone of reformed social security systems that present citizens with an entirely new set of expectations

around their rights and responsibilities of citizenship in relation to paid work and employment activation. Policymakers have relied in significant part on paternalistically informed normative justifications of mandatory activation schemes on the grounds that paid work is beneficial to well-being and hence so too must be activation schemes that promote paid work. Such argumentation is empirically contestable (Whitworth and Griggs 2013) but, more fundamentally, misses the emerging need to shift and broaden the focus of current research and policy thinking on activation and well-being to more fully address issues of *process well-being* from participation in such activation schemes alongside the dominant emphasis on *outcome well-being* from any employment transitions that may result. Theoretically, Jahoda's (1982) latent deprivation theory and Fryer's (1986) agency approach give different accounts of the non-pecuniary benefits of paid work that offer important insights into ways in which employment activation has the *potential* to substitute for these employment effects and hence affect the process well-being of the unemployed programme participants. Extending these insights via the literature on typologies of activation regimes, we have argued that one would further expect variation in the process well-being effects of qualitatively different types of activation scheme depending upon the extent to which those interventions are able to deliver the sorts of psychological gains from paid work outlined by Jahoda and Fryer.

The analyses of the Work Programme presented above explore these issues empirically for what is a flagship WTW scheme not only for the UK coalition Government, and now the majority Conservative Government, but also for advocates of activation schemes built around principles of quasi-marketization, New Public Management, outsourcing and payment-by-results. Although the flexibility of the Work Programme design provides the scheme with the *potential* to boost participants' process well-being through delivering appropriately tailored and substantive employment support, our empirical analyses present a fairly bleak picture of the process well-being effects of the Work Programme for its unemployed participants. Whilst recognizing the inevitable variability across such a large and deliberately flexible scheme, the qualitative analysis highlights concerns around minimal, generic and patchy provision, with low-cost provision dominating over considerations of appropriateness, intensity or specialization, all acting to reduce the extent to which the Work Programme is able to meet participants' needs and deliver the latent benefits of employment that Jahoda and Fryer highlight. The statistical analyses of the APS survey data triangulate these results and suggest, alarmingly, that Work Programme participants are no better off than openly unemployed people in terms of their process well-being, and are quite possibly worse off.

There are important lessons here for policymakers seeking to enhance the well-being of those who are unemployed, and it is possible from the above discussion to use existing theoretical and empirical literature to create 'good' – or at least better – WTW schemes in terms of their impacts on process well-being. What would be the key characteristics of such a WTW scheme? The following elements emerge as priorities:

- *A progressive programme of change*: activation should offer all participants a structured programme of regular, meaningful and developmental contacts,

activities, supports and events with others in order to mimic Jahoda's latent benefits of time structure and purpose.

- *Substantive*: providers need to have the tools at their disposal to tackle effectively key barriers to employment and, where required, the support offer needs to be sufficient in terms of its depth and quality to offer real movement towards desired employment.
- *Personalised*: the unemployed participants are a highly heterogeneous group and provision should be personalised so that it remains appropriate and effective to their wide diversity of support needs.
- *Agency*: following Fryer, participants' agency is central to process well-being in terms of enabling unemployed people both to feel in control over their current life position and to design and move towards a desired future life course. Unemployed participants should have a meaningful role in co-producing the nature of their support and the type of employment trajectory that they are building towards.
- *Work experience/subsidised employment*: employment-based work placements can offer a structured, fulfilling and concrete way to build and demonstrate skills, experience, belief and ability. This can be a positive and, for some, even essential route towards employment, but is not adequately developed or embedded in the UK activation context. The recent UK activity around work placements that has occurred (e.g. Mandatory Work Activity) is oriented towards mandatory, almost punitive, tasks allocated down from caseworkers. This is, however, at odds with the stated desires of unemployed people to gain work and take part in meaningful work experience, as well as with Strandh's (2001) findings of positive results where such work experience is self-directed, meaningful and relevant. Wulfgramm (2011) similarly finds strong positive well-being effects from work placements if participants perceive this as matching their personal skills and increasing future employment chances, but that this effect vanishes if participants perceive it as degrading. Work experience is an important area of development in UK WTW activity, but needs to be rooted in claimants' agency such that participants play a key role in identifying relevant and desired sectors and roles.

In emphasizing the neglected area of process well-being, the analyses raise important lessons to other nations which are also seeking to enhance the well-being of those who are unemployed. More instrumentally, greater knowledge of potential links between process well-being and job outcomes performance is also needed, given that enhanced process well-being might for various reasons be hypothesized to link to an improved likelihood of moving into paid work. The current evidence base around the links between different types of activation and their effects on process well-being is small but growing and there is a clear need for further knowledge in this area across alternative national and local contexts.

The analyses raise particular questions for the many countries like the UK which are following the international trend towards activation regimes built around principles and practices of quasi-marketization, New Public Management, provider flexibility and payment-by-results. Alongside the potential

advantages to such design arrangements for the process well-being of its participants, these analyses highlight the difficulties that such designs face in converting this potential into reality. The suggestion from the UK is that the Work Programme is so far failing to make this step, with important lessons for all those countries which are paying close attention to the performance of this activation pioneer.

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