

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Employment Affairs & Social Protection

11 January 2019

Dear Chairperson, Committee Members,

Thank you for the kind invitation to address the committee.

About WUERC

Since 2012 the Waterford Un/Employment Research Collaborative (WUERC) research initiative set out to develop large scale datasets around the experience of unemployment. Our work aspires to give voice to the private human experience of negotiating the labour market and social protection system. Our data set is comprised of interviews, autoethnographic accounts of social welfare offices, a large corpus of media analysis, our contribution is oriented to four themes:

- History of Labour and Welfare
- New Experiences in the Labour Market
- PEX-Understanding Unemployment in the Era of Big Data
- Welfare Conditionality and Sanctions

As well as producing a series of academic journal papers, policy papers, and media commentary, we have recently edited a special issue of the Irish Journal of Anthropology on experiences in the labour market and co-authored a book "The Sociology of Unemployment" published by Manchester University Press in 2015. We are currently in receipt of an Irish Research Council grant under the new horizons award, and recently prepared an unsuccessful EU H2020 grant with TurasNua, a Jobpath service provider.

Preamble comment

Our evidence raises concerns over the Jobpath programme, but in advance of doing this we wish to note our respect for the DEASP; more than any other department, over its 70-year history has held our society together, often through some very tough times. The forming of the department and its considerable achievements in improving poverty and building social cohesion are substantially a political achievement-achievements made against strong opposition, achievements made in Leinster House.

Joining us will be Dr Aisling Tuite an Irish Research Council post-doctoral researcher and Mr Kenny Doyle a PhD scholar.

Sincerely,

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Chairperson, Committee Members,

Thank you for the invitation to address the Joint Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection for the discussion on JobPath.

1. The general transformation in the experience of unemployment

Since 2012 our research programme has interviewed 121 unemployed individuals. Because our data has been gathered over seven years, it captures the considerable transformation of welfare services under the *Pathways to Work* policy initiative.

Since 2014 our data clearly captured a shift towards a less supportive, more conditional, less empathetic, more pressurising, welfare system, where the threat of sanctions was constant and individuals felt forced to perform as directed by Case Officers in Intreo or JobPath providers, often against their better judgement and usually without any positive outcome.

However, since 2016 many Jobseekers distinguished between their experience with the Intreo office and their referral to JobPath as a very distinct intensification of pressure upon them: They moved from a bureaucratic system which could be unsympathetic and given to autocratic direction and demands; to one which they felt actively and capriciously patronised, cajoled, threatened, manipulated and bullied them.

Many identified this service as the state deliberately attempting to lower their expectations of work, firstly in terms of their reservation wage but also interfering in their family and caring responsibilities. Long-term concerns for career development, and life-balance were notably neglected by JobPath providers. While they may be intended to support re-entry into work, many aspects of welfare services on various schemes are compounding the already negative experience of unemployment.

2. Our case data on Jobpath

In our research we have encountered 25 individuals who reported direct personal experiences with Jobpath, largely TurasNua. We did not seek positive or negative experiences, rather just authentic accounts of the contemporary experience of unemployment.

All interviewees recalled:

- Being forced to undertake futile bureaucratic routines such as mandated and monitored job search activity- sitting at a computer for a prescribed period of time

- Having their CV rewritten or 'massaged' so to speak, in order to orient to existing job openings, without reference to long-term career development, personal circumstances and responsibilities,
- Being forced to undertake coaching, personal effectiveness and confidence training, which interviewees sometimes reported was delivered by unqualified and inexperienced trainers, and worked to undermine their confidence and sense of self-worth
- Being asked for proof of jobsearch under suspicion of duplicity
- Being intimidated over technical or minor infractions of rules
- Being required to accept employment that the individual considered incompatible with their personal career ambitions and/or family responsibilities.

Elements of JobPath impacted different people in different ways: for instance, many offices had signs prohibiting entry to children, which made keeping appointments difficult for parents of young children; some people with caring commitments related that they were pressured into putting their hours of availability for work as being inclusive of evenings nights and weekends.

To give further illustration, we have encountered (more detail in appendix)

- One woman was sanctioned and was forced to rely on charity and high-interest debt, and experienced food-poverty
- A traveller was enrolled on a course that required reasonable levels of literacy despite having low levels of literacy and also had his CV amended against his wishes to conceal his ethnicity,
- An aspiring architect had her job-search micro-managed in a way that undermined her standing with local employers and was then directed to reduce her expectations and accept other work, and
- A pregnant woman was directed, under threat of sanctions to accept work at a call centre in a location some distance away which had no suitable transport options.

We did not encounter any positive experience of JobPath in our interview data.

3. On Sanctions

We should emphasise that all respondents detailed the continual threat of sanctions, which made engagement and compliance with various tasks compulsory. Thus, our data demonstrates that beyond the actual application of sanctions, that the process of activation under threat of sanction is in and of itself a negative experience; the process is the punishment, as it were.

Our qualitative data is commensurate with international experiences; so while comparing the percentage of individuals sanctioned per annum against international benchmarks JobPath is far from a harsh sanctioning regime, the ever-present threat of sanctions will nevertheless have similar negative long-term consequences on individual well-being and future earnings.

While officially sanctioning decisions are made only by the Intreo office, in practice, in the experience of jobseekers, the recommendation of a sanction by a JobPath provider was a 'fait accompli'. In other research where we have spoken to counter staff and case-officers in welfare offices, the JobPath providers are described as deciding on sanctions, with Intreo simply 'implementing' the penalty rate.

4. On reducing reservation wages

Our interviewees experience of JobPath is that when stripped to its essential features it is a scheme established to actively chip away at their personal reservation wage and labour market expectations so that they will accept any job- however unsustainable, unsuitable and precarious.

Inspired by behavioural economics and the idea of subtle 'nudges', JobPath assumes that the problem of unemployment is fecklessness, and that a 'work-first' approach will ultimately lead to sustainable, high quality employment. In practice, these measures constituted a stressful and unwelcome intervention in people's lives, even described as traumatic in some cases.

All of these interventions are made under the threat of sanction for non-compliance. This pressurises jobseekers to find any work; it is caustic to individuals subjected to it and international research has started to re-evaluate the maxims that any job is better than none, and that work is always the quickest route out of poverty.

5. Short-term outsourcing to private providers

Many of the JobPath interventions were already emerging under Intreo and were part of traditional local employment service supports to the unemployed for decades; what is distinctive here is that they have intensified, and become aggressive and punitive under JobPath. This may be due to the pay by results model or the recruitment of staff on short-term contracts without necessarily having professional careers in the welfare system.

Given what Jobpath aspires to do, the contract has an unfeasibly short-time horizon which does not facilitate the building of durable institutional resources on the awardees part. If Ireland has a perpetual need for the complex and highly contextual pastoral skills of nurturing disaffected jobseekers back to the labour market, it takes time to build such a capacity and if done correctly can be valuable. A four-year contract is an unsuitable instrument for this activity.

6. Creaming and dumping

Our interviewees mostly reported being acutely aware from their experience of JobPath of the payment by outcomes model that drives the initiative, and as each had a realistic read of their own personal labour markets- they actively encouraged and supported their JobPath caseworker in 'creaming and dumping' , but then tended to grow frustrated when asked to do things they perceived to be harmful to their career prospects or to their responsibilities. In effect they tried to shape the 'creaming and dumping' they perceived to be going on.

7. Inconsistency

Here it is also worthwhile noting that the geographical distribution of sanctions does not correspond to the level of population of the unemployed, ranging from around an 8% sanction rate in Louth or Limerick to almost nil in Mayo. This inexplicable variation is consistent with our long-held view, developed from our data that there is a significant variation in how rules and eligibility are applied and interpreted office-by-office, day-by-day and welfare officer-by-welfare officer. The thicket of schemes, their constant reform, adjustment and modification make the rights of a system user unclear and contingent to both user and front-line staff.

In Conclusion

Activation in the form of human-capital building and supported job-search can have long-term positive effects on the supply side of the labour market. We suggest that investing in training and the Back-to-Education scheme are the best tools for doing this.

Policies which emphasise welfare conditionality and sanctions are short sighted: requiring compliance under threat of being put below the minimum level of income has mainly negative consequences.

There is the significant international research on the consequences of sanctioning (from short-term poverty, to long-term health, well-being and even negative effects to employment and earnings). The knock-on effects on the economy are to foster precarious, low-wage/no-wage cycles and alienate those who are already most disadvantaged, and to unfairly pressurise those who are temporarily out of work.

Rather than using both 'sticks and carrots', we suggest removing the threat of sanctions and sanctions as a core administrative tool, because the benefits of education or a job should be sufficient motivation in themselves. Sanctions may have some part to play in the benefits system, but their current role is out of all proportion, and against the principles of natural justice. Short of this, we suggest that the sanctions should be subject to stronger regulation and oversight, and we have recommended specific measures elsewhere.

The payment-by-results and short-term orientation of the JobPath contract are unsuitable policy instruments.

The power which providers wield over the unemployed is neither appropriate nor commensurate with the vulnerability of this population.

This 'work first' approach involves market-coaxing which reduces Jobseeker's choices and expectations and reduces public faith in the social safety net, undermining the entire labour market.

The impact of JobPath on individual lives is decidedly negative, even where sanctions were not imposed. We envisage a long-term impact on overall social cohesion as a result of the experience and throughput of citizens through the initiative.

We recommend to the committee seek to discontinue this policy immediately, and to consider a more researched, longer-term view approach to building a high quality labour market through welfare policy.

Appendix: additional case detail

CASE #1: P14 WX Town February 2016

P14 is a 43-year-old woman, a mother of 3 she returned to education to train as an Architect qualifying in 2009 when opportunities were scarce, she pushed on to do a Masters and details using a combination of unpaid internships and post-graduate training to keep her career ambitions alive. She had a very strong personal vision to work as an Architect with one of the ten firms in her catchment area; and she details how her carefully honed personal marketing strategy was built around internships with the Council and approaching them once she sensed a pickup in construction. She felt TurasNua forced her to hound these potential employers, all of whom were still struggling to find work. When this failed TurasNua instructed her to 'dumb down' her CV to find other types of work. At the time of interview, she had not found work.

CASE #2: S8 at Job-Seekers home on July 2018

S8 is a 44-year-old female originally Scandinavian but moved to Ireland as a young child. She reports struggling at school initially because of the language barrier, eventually leaving school at 18 in the midst of 3rd year with low literacy levels. She signed on, and during her 20s tackled her literacy issues, took many training courses and participated in many schemes eventually enrolling in a university degree in her early 40s. She detailed being sanctioned with the complete suspension of all benefits for failure to attend a prescribed training course. She did not understand that this would be the consequence in advance. During this period, she underwent food poverty, relied on charity and took on high-interest debt. She describes being very frustrated at not finding work despite doing everything requested of her, pulling herself up by her bootstraps and encountering her lack of work history as a perpetual barrier to finding work.

CASE #3: J3 at En Education and Training Board Feb 2017

J3 is a 27-year-old male, member of the travelling community. He reports being in a dedicated class of 13 traveller children of various ages for most of his schooling, and then when in 6th class he was put into a mainstream 1st class before doing one year in the tech. Despite 9 years of full time schooling he left school with low literacy skills. He has low expectations of finding mainstream employment having applied for about 30-40 jobs in the past year. His preference is to find causal work and he is very conscious of what is appropriate work for a traveller man to do. He does not drive. TurasNua encouraged him to tackle his literacy skills and provided him confidence training. He struggled to attend meetings because of transport issues and disorganisation and discussed being sanctioned and using money lenders. TurasNua requested that he change his name so that we would not identify as a traveller, this was done against his wishes and he did not get the job in subsequent interviews.

CASE #4: I2 Wd Jan 18

I2 is a 27-year-old female and she details how she left school to work in a call centre just before her leaving certificate. From Thurles she details moving to Waterford and then Cork for various jobs in call centres and bars, with significant periods of unemployment in between. She moved back to Thurles 5 years ago and since then has been seeking work to no avail. She details how TurasNua applied for a job

for her in a remote call-centre (a 1.5 hr drive each way; no bus service) despite her objection that she had no means of travelling to work there. She was advised to make friends and car pool. At this time, she was five months pregnant. When she complained she was threatened with sanctions around this time she became homeless, staying on her parent's couch.