A Different Deal?
Welfare-to-work for people with multiple problems and needs

End of Award Report

This report relates to an investigation funded by the Economic and Social Research Council under Award Ref: R000223536 and conducted between 1 July 2001 and 31 August 2002 at the Universities of Luton and Nottingham. The Principal Award Holder was Dr. Hartley Dean (now based at the London School of Economics) who supervised the fieldwork and initial data analysis for the investigation and was responsible for the final data analysis. His Co-Award Holder, Ms. Margaret Melrose (University of Luton), assisted with elements of the research design and writing up. The fieldwork and preliminary analysis was undertaken by Dr. Virginia MacNeill who was employed on the project by the University of Luton from 4 July 2001 to 12 April 2002.

Background

The British government’s commitment to ‘welfare-to-work’ is premised on the ideal of social inclusion through paid employment (DSS 1998). The development of New Deal programmes, targeted at different social groups, and the ONE service pilots has culminated in the creation of Jobcentre Plus, an agency that administers all kinds of benefits for claimants of working age, but also seeks to promote the labour market engagement of claimants in all kinds of circumstance – whether they be unemployed, lone parents or disabled people.

Although the original New Deal pilot initiatives were hailed a modest success, they have been criticised for being ‘less good at dealing with people with multiple problems and needs’ (Millar 2000: vi). The established pitfalls of work-welfare programmes are that the people most likely to benefit are those who could have found jobs without intervention, while the assistance that is given enables some to secure jobs at the expense of others who are less advantaged or more vulnerable (Theodore and Peck 1999). Work-welfare measures can serve to increase competition for scarce and often uncongenial job opportunities and may even add to people’s feelings of insecurity (Dean and Shah 2002).

The British approach to welfare-to-work represents something of a compromise between a ‘work first’ approach that seeks to influence the behaviour of potential job-seekers and to move them quickly into jobs, and a ‘human capital’ approach that seeks to enhance people’s employability and develop their capacity to overcome obstacles to labour market participation (Lodemel and Trickey 2001). A ‘human capital’ approach is resource intensive and it is not clear that Jobcentre Plus will be able to sustain, let alone develop, this element of the welfare-to-work strategy. There are some ‘hard to help’ individuals who require more creative and holistic forms of support. There are already local projects that assist homeless people with employment problems, innovative supported employment projects for disabled people, national schemes that support ex-offenders seeking employment, and the government itself is committed to developing ‘progress2work’ pilot projects for people with substance misuse problems. However, the most disadvantaged social groups experience multiple problems and needs that tend to be interconnected and cannot necessarily be addressed in isolation from one another.

Objectives

The original objectives of this investigation, therefore, were to:

- Use qualitative methods to investigate the labour market experiences of a sample of people with multiple problems or needs, including people who not only lack jobs, but who are also homeless, who have health or substance dependency problems, who have literacy or learning
difficulties, who have experienced public care or custody, or who may be disadvantaged because they belong to a minority ethnic group – and who have experienced a combination of at least three such problems.

- Explore the extent to which obstacles to labour market participation by members of the sample relate to their attitudes and aspirations (for example, to their lack of motivation on the one hand, or their unrealistic expectations on the other); and/or to the prejudices and intolerance of employers (for example, to overtly discriminatory practice on the one hand, or an unwillingness or inability to accommodate special needs on the other); and/or, alternatively, to obstacles of a more fundamental nature relating to the particular problems or needs experienced by the people concerned.

- Assess the effectiveness of those existing services or interventions that have been experienced by members of the sample that are intended or designed to assist their entry to the labour market. In particular the study will seek to determine which interventions might (potentially) have had beneficial effects and in what circumstances.

- Evaluate the ways it might be possible to develop multi-faceted interventions that are both flexible and holistic; the scope of such a task; the practicality of such intervention in relation to the dynamics of the multiple problems and needs experienced by members of the sample; and the acceptability of such hypothetical interventions by members of the sample.

This was not so much an evaluation of policy as an exploration of the context in which current policies are functioning. The focus on the experiences and perspectives of people with multiple problems needs necessarily limited the investigators’ ability fully to appraise the conduct of employers or the interventions of the relevant statutory and voluntary sector agencies. Additionally, within the modest compass of the project it was not possible – except on a very limited basis – to follow up the people who were interviewed and obtain a longitudinal perspective. None the less, the objectives as originally cast have been met.

**Methods**

The investigation was based on in-depth interviews with 50 participants, of whom 38 were drawn from amongst the users of the Luton Foyer project, 6 from the Sheffield Foyer Project and 6 from the Noah Project, a day centre for older homeless people in Luton. The three voluntary sector projects in question all specialise in assisting people with multiple needs and problems and their assistance was sought in identifying and approaching suitable people to be interviewed. The interviews at the Noah Project were negotiated in order to extend the number of older people in the sample. Interviews were conducted, in private, on the premises of the projects concerned and participants were offered ‘thank you’ payment of £5 each in recognition of their contribution. Interviews ranged in length from around 40 minutes to nearly an hour and a half. In all 53 interviews were conducted, but three of these were discarded, because the nature of the interviews had been unsatisfactory, because participants – who were often exhausted, distressed and, possibly, intoxicated – had been unable to cope with the interview.

The composition of the sample is summarised in Table 1.
Table 1  Composition of sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Male Age</th>
<th></th>
<th>Male Total</th>
<th>Female Age</th>
<th></th>
<th>Female Total</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;25</td>
<td>25-39</td>
<td>&gt;40</td>
<td>all ages</td>
<td>&lt;25</td>
<td>25-39</td>
<td>&gt;40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of minority ethnic status</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number having experience of:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 unemployment</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 homelessness</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 ill health or disability</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 mental health problems</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 substance abuse problems</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 criminal justice system</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 disruptive family/relationships</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It may be seen that all members of the sample had experience of unemployment, though five had obtained jobs and were working at the time of the interviews. All but 12 were in receipt of a social security benefit at the time of the interview, and some of these may have had an entitlement that they had not claimed. In addition to the problem of unemployment, all members of the sample had experienced or were experiencing at least two of the following six additional problems: homelessness, ill health or disability, mental health problems, substance abuse, exposure to the criminal justice system, family disruption. Four participants had experienced two of these problems, 12 had experienced three, 19 had experienced four, 7 had experienced five, and 8 had experienced six. Figure 1 illustrates aspects of the ways in which these additional problems overlapped.

Figure 1  Overlapping problems/needs
(a partial illustration)

Numbers in sample having experiences of:

It emerged that 8 members of the sample additionally had experience of learning difficulties, either because this was openly discussed during the interviews or in so far that they had at some stage received special educational needs provision. It is possible that there were other members of the sample who had experienced learning difficulties, but, even in the context of a sympathetically informal and highly confidential interview, this was not always an easy subject to explore. Additionally, 3 members of the sample were refugees, whose experiences raise a distinctive set of issues could not be very fully explored within the scope of this particular
investigation.

The interviews explored the life and employment histories of each participant focusing on their principal life-events, their experiences of education and paid work, and interventions intended to assist them into the labour market. Additionally, respondents were asked about their future aspirations, the kinds of interventions that might assist them, and the priorities they attach to the solution of the different problems and needs to which they are subject. All participants were promised complete confidentiality and were allowed to take the interview at their own pace, dealing with the issues raised by the interviewer (from a carefully designed schedule or topic guide) in whichever order they preferred, sometimes pausing for breaks. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The resulting transcripts, amounting to some 1500 pages, included some exceptionally rich narratives. A preliminary analysis was conducted, based on the open coding of participants’ responses, in order to establish the parameters of the data and to identify key themes and issues, followed by a thematic analysis of the discourses contained within the transcripts.

Results

The principal findings were as follows:

- The nature of the sample was such that all the participants had complex, often chaotic, biographies, and the stories they told were usually harrowing, sometimes distressingly so. Although some had had no employment since leaving school, most had a history of intermittent or temporary jobs; in some instances, employment histories were of such bewildering complexity that participants themselves had difficulty recalling the details. A few had had spells of stable employment in the past, albeit with interruptions, and a couple had been in stable employment until quite recently. Most participants had experience of applying for a great many jobs and much of the employment they had undertaken had been part-time, temporary or seasonal, or had entailed unsociable hours.

- Participants were by and large well motivated to work and their aspirations with regard to work, housing and family relationships were quite conventional (cf. Dean and Taylor-Gooby 1992). The evidence suggested that those with physical and mental health problems and/or who were disabled may well have experienced discrimination in relation to employment (cf. Bunt et al. 2001) while participants with criminal convictions almost certainly experienced discrimination (cf. Metcalf et al. 2001). It appeared that the discrimination suffered by the members of minority ethnic groups may have been quite subtle in nature. It was clear that, under present circumstances, several participants needed to resolve problems in relation to housing, medical treatment and/or health care before they could realistically engage with the labour market. Additionally, it could be seen that participants’ problems and needs were intimately bound up with the troubled nature of the familial and social milieus that had shaped their lives. It was striking that, for example, the lives of three-quarters of the participants had been touched – sometimes repeatedly – by violence, whether at home during childhood, at school, in the course of adult relationships, or in some other way. The long-term emotional or temperamental problems experienced by some participants meant it was unlikely that they would sustain stable employment without appropriate support and a considerable measure of tolerance on the part of employers.

- In terms of accessing the labour market, help from family and friends and the services of voluntary sector agencies were often preferred to interventions by statutory agencies. Interventions – including those under the New Deal – had often failed to accommodate the unsettled lifestyles and fragile health status of the participants. The role of personal advisers was appreciated, but not the limited options to which they gave access (cf.
Legard et al. 1998). Certain kinds of training course were regarded as interesting and worthwhile, but it was not always possible for participants to complete these and they seldom led on to relevant employment.

- Considering the relevance of welfare-to-work to this sample it emerged that most participants were adopting either one, or a combination, of two discursive strategies or ways of coming to terms with life. One, the self-assertion strategy, was driven by participants’ anger and impatience. It was, in a paradoxical sense, consistent with a work-first policy approach. The people concerned had ‘attitude’ and rather than endure the ministrations of the Job Centre they would if necessary take work in the informal economy or, for example, in the kind of unstable and exploitative labour markets that are served by private employment agencies. This locked them in to the chronic insecurity of the low-pay/no-pay cycle. The other strategy, the self-development strategy, was more compliant: it aspired to notions of personal or ‘human capital’ development, and was preoccupied, for example, with the confessional process of producing CVs (cf. Metcalf 1992). However, because this strategy focused attention on the many failures participants had experienced, it tended to nourish a debilitating and counterproductive culture of self-blame. It was striking that many participants blamed themselves for the failures of their families, for educational failures and for their failure in the labour market. We do not need to characterise them as blameless victims (some themselves were guilty of quite serious crimes) to acknowledge that many of the factors that had objectively shaped their lives had been beyond their control. Allowing or encouraging people with such complex problems and needs to blame themselves is de-motivating and counterproductive, and can often constrain their ability to assess whether they are ready – physically, mentally and emotionally – to work.

- The two strategies described above represented the dominant discursive repertoires on which participants drew – in different ways and to varying extents. There were other less dominant strategies which were drawn upon partially by a few participants: a religious destiny strategy by which participants entrusted their future to God; and a philosophical resistance strategy by which participants would pit their own alternative view of the world against the established orthodoxy. Interestingly, there was little, if any, discernible pattern to the distribution of any of the identified discursive strategies by age, gender or ethnicity. These various overlapping strategies could be understood as part of a struggle by the participants to sustain their sense of ‘ontological identity’ (Taylor 1998).

- The overwhelming impression was that participants were not being allowed the space in which to sort out their lives: to attend to their ontological well-being. What they needed was not a work-first or a human capital approach, but a ‘life-first’ approach to welfare-to-work; a holistic approach that would prioritise their life needs, including their need to work. In conjunction with its approach to welfare-to-work the British government has declared a commitment to the promotion of ‘work-life balance’ (DTI 2001). There has been a tendency, so far, for ‘flexible’ working arrangements promoted in the name of work-life balance to favour business rather than workers’ interests (see Dean 2002), but a broader understanding of what work-life balance might entail (e.g. Williams 2001) would be consistent with a re-conceptualisation of welfare-to-work to encompass a life-first approach. It would mean re-thinking what is meant by ‘work-readiness’. And it would mean identifying the kinds of continuing support that might sustain people with multiple problems and needs in permanent paid jobs. The nature of the evidence from this study was not such that it is possible to specify one particular form of intervention, but it does enable the investigators first, generally to endorse in relation to a much wider age group the recommendations of studies that have concentrated only on young people with multiple disadvantages (e.g. Lakey et al. 2001; second, to distil the essential criteria that must be met if interventions are to be acceptable to people with multiple problems and
needs. In particular, support mechanisms need to be long-term, expert, independently provided and flexible in nature.

Activities, outputs and impacts

Following the preliminary analysis stage of the project an extensive (13000 word) preliminary findings report (Dean and MacNeill 2002) was prepared and presented at a national seminar held in Luton on 8 April 2002. The event was attended by representatives of the Department for Work and Pensions, local government social services, and voluntary sector organisations. The preliminary findings report was also circulated to a number of people and organisations whom we had invited to the seminar, but who had indicated they could not attend or be represented.

Additionally, four of the participants in the study – all of whom had been invited to the seminar – also attended, and a fifth who could not in fact attend got in touch and spoke with a member of the project team. The opportunity of speaking to the participants at this time was taken with a view to bringing a very limited longitudinal element to the study. In the event, brief conversations with only five participants could provide little in the way of additional insights, not least because so little time had elapsed since the interviews themselves. Of the five spoken to, one had taken up a place at college and, so far, was enjoying her course; one had found a job but complained of feeling isolated from the people he was working with and in need of support. There had been no change in the circumstances of the other three participants, save that one had broken off a short-lived relationship with a partner.

An article based on the preliminary findings report was prepared for the journal Benefits (for a specially commissioned issue on administrative reorganisation affecting people of working age) (Dean et al. 2003). The results of the additional analysis by the Principal Ward Holder were incorporated in an additional article (Dean, forthcoming) that is currently being refereed for an academic journal. Dr. Dean will be presenting a paper based on the findings at a seminar at the University of Nottingham and, he hopes, at other seminars and conferences, including the Social Policy Association's annual conference in 2003. He has submitted short articles relating to the project to The Guardian newspaper and the New Review of the Low Pay Unit but, at the time of writing, it is unclear if or when either will appear.

The Principal Award Holder also has the opportunity to communicate the findings of the project through his membership of the European Union COST A15 research network on ‘Globalisation and Welfare Reform’. Dr. Dean is, specifically, a member of the COST A15 Working Group 4, dealing with welfare and employment issues and is currently collaborating (with colleagues from Belgium, France and Switzerland) to prepare a paper that will offer a critical analysis of the European Employment Strategy from both a rights and a capabilities perspective (i.e. that will draw both upon Dr. Dean’s own recent work concerning human rights and Amyarta Sen’s celebrated account of human capabilities: both of which, potentially, have special pertinence for labour market engagement by people with multiple problems and needs). This will initially be presented at a Working Group meeting in Amsterdam in October 2002, but it is intended that more developed versions of the analysis will be presented at future COST A15 conferences. It is intended that insights based on findings from the project that is the subject of this report will be incorporated into the analysis for the COST A15 network and will feature strongly in subsequent publications.

At this early stage it is difficult to anticipate what impact the findings from the study may eventually have. A member of the Working Age Evaluation Division at the Department for Work and Pensions has indicated (in an e-mail, dated 18 April 2002) in response to the preliminary findings report that this she regarded as ‘An incredibly useful piece of research which provides a really good insight into this “group” of people. We’ll certainly be using it to help inform evaluations of policies which are aimed at this client group.’ Copies of the article based on the Principal Award Holder’s additional data analysis (Dean, forthcoming) were also circulated to the Department of Work and Pensions Social Research and Working-Age Evaluation Divisions.

Future Research Priorities
This project was modest in scope and its findings need to be situated in the context of a wide range of policy evaluation work – much of it sponsored by the Department for Work and Pensions. None the less, there is a need for further research relating to those people who are ‘hard-to-help’ with regard to their labour market attachment. There are two priorities here. One is for more comparative research critically to investigate the full range of policy frameworks and administrative techniques that have been introduced in different countries around the world. The object of such a study should not be crudely to evaluate ‘what works’ in terms of labour participation rates, but to what extent interventions that have been tried elsewhere might measure up to a ‘life-first’ approach to welfare-to-work.

Second, there is very clearly a need for longitudinal research on the labour market experiences of people with multiple problems and needs. This would necessarily be resource intensive research since the objective would be to track people over a period of years in order to build up a precise but nuanced interpretation of their experiences and of the role played by different kinds of employers and different kinds of statutory and voluntary sector agencies.

References