

CAREER-FIRST



**PETE ROBERTSON
WRITES ABOUT
A NEW WAY OF
THINKING ABOUT
WELFARE-TO-WORK
PROGRAMMES
FROM A NEW
REPORT, WRITTEN IN
CONJUNCTION WITH
VANESA FUERTES
AND RON MCQUAID**



In the UK, career guidance services are deeply involved with supporting students and young people. Their involvement with unemployed adults and jobseekers has been patchier and more limited in scope. It has often been Job Centres or agencies with DWP contracts that fulfil this function. This is, perhaps, an historical accident. It means career guidance work with unemployed adults is underdeveloped, and often not professionalised. In this article we will introduce a new way of thinking about these services.

We looked at welfare-to-work from the perspective of three academic literatures that are more or less separate: labour market studies, career development and the Capability Approach. Each brings some insight but has limitations; together they suggest a new approach.

Labour market studies

Labour market specialists have drawn a useful distinction between ‘work-first’ and ‘human capital development’ approaches to welfare-to-work programmes.

Work-first approaches are based on the principle that benefit claimants should enter work as rapidly as possible. Any necessary learning is done on the job, and it is seen as easier to get another job when you are in work rather than when unemployed. The nature of the job is not important. The occupation, pay or job security are not the main concern. Encouragement to enter the labour market is often in the form of benefit sanctions for refusal to accept work opportunities deemed appropriate.

Human capital development approaches focus on getting job seekers to acquire vocational skills that are in demand from employers, or to develop employability skills before job seeking. This is normally done through short or moderate length training programmes. The subsequent job search may be channelled towards skills shortage occupations.

The main concerns in both work-first and human capital development are to reduce the burden on the state of welfare benefit claims, to provide employers with a pool of skilled labour to draw on and to support the unemployed. However, the holistic life and household needs of the person undergoing a welfare-to-work programme are not a central consideration. This is no accident. These approaches are shaped by macro-economic drivers, combined with social narratives which sometimes characterise unemployment as the consequence of moral deficit or individual lifestyle choices. As a result, those unemployed become an object of labour policies aimed to ‘activate’ them, and their humanity, individuality and right to make choices are lost in the process.

In reality unemployed adults often have complicated lives. They may face multiple barriers to work, including issues with lack of confidence, health, caring responsibilities, access to transport, lack of skills or qualifications or suitable local employment opportunities. They also have preferences, aspirations, hopes and fears. An effective support programme cannot ignore these issues.

Career development

This literature addresses career development experiences, occupational choice, decision making, and transitions from education to work. It also addresses techniques for helping, including counselling, assessment and educational methods, some of which are sophisticated.

But it does have blind spots. Services to unemployed adults are neglected in this literature. There are exceptions, including Douglas (2014), Nunn (2019) and Sultana & Watts (2006), and they point to potential tensions when career guidance is embedded in welfare-to-work programmes, or into public employment services. The professional values of guidance may be compromised by the ideology of labour activation.

The Capability Approach

The Capability Approach originates in the work of economist Amartya Sen, and it has been applied to career guidance (Robertson & Egdell, 2018). It offers a way of thinking about social justice. In the Capability Approach it is not enough for people to possess 'resources' e.g. a skill, or the right to make a career choice. There can be barriers that prevent people from converting their resources into the lifestyles and careers they desire. A person should have genuine freedom to choose the life that they have reason to value. Freedom in theory is not good enough, it needs to be freedom in practice.

Welfare-to-work programmes have tended to be structured in a way that takes little account of the values of the participants – what matters to them. Also their voice does not usually feature significantly in the design or implementation of programmes.

The Capability Approach gives a fresh perspective on freedom and justice for workless adults. But it is quite abstract – it offers no detail on how to apply these ideas to employment support work.

Career-First

In a forthcoming publication (Fuertes, McQuaid & Robertson, 2021) we outline an alternative approach in contrast to work-first and human capital development. It is not adequate to bolt career guidance onto welfare-to-work. Instead the entire philosophy of these programmes needs to be re-imagined in line with the social justice perspective of the Capability Approach, and the values and methods of career development. 'Career-First' means developing a more person-centred approach:

- Relationships with service users based on respect for individual autonomy and values
- Working with an individual's motivations and priorities, which may include exploring alternatives to paid work
- Identifying strengths and resources, and how they can be built on
- Recognising constraints, barriers and concerns
- Focussing on long-term, sustainable outcomes in healthy, decent work
- Promoting skills development to achieve longer-term aims
- Staff trained to the standards expected by the career

development profession

- Stable, well-funded services that consult and involve service users.

Conclusion

It will come as no surprise to CDI members that there is value in bringing a career development perspective to support for unemployed adults. But this is not going to happen unless the profession develops a language for talking to policymakers about this proposition, and can back it up with a sound philosophy, and literacy in labour market policy. 'Career-First' offers a way to do this, and a banner under which to marshal these arguments.

References

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Dr Pete Robertson, Edinburgh Napier University, Dr Vanesa Fuertes, University of the West of Scotland and Professor Ron McQuaid, University of Stirling