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Opening the black box of implementing activation in Ireland

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Ireland's 'activation turn' and the roll-out of the *Pathways to Work* policy, contextualising these reforms within recent international developments in activation. Using a qualitative approach, the study explores the perceptions of a range of key stakeholders – jobseekers, employment guidance practitioners, employment service managers, ancillary services and policymakers – offering some important insights into Ireland's move towards activation and the implementation of *Pathways to Work*. Three overarching themes were identified: depersonalisation, the missing 'how to' of implementation, and the reform agenda. These findings, although tentative, provide a new understanding of the perceptions of key stakeholders, described as 'insiders' and 'outsiders', and their views about both implementation and perceived effectiveness.

Keywords: Activation, labour market policy reform, implementation, Ireland, effectiveness

Introduction

Unemployment is a persistent global problem attracting considerable interest from governments, policymakers, researchers and practitioners. Its effects can be serious and all-pervasive, reducing economic output while increasing social welfare costs for the state (Goldsmith et al., 1997). At an individual level it results in a loss of

income as well as in declining job-related skills, psychological distress and life dissatisfaction (Paul & Moser, 2009). The Great Recession (2008–12) and subsequent high levels of unemployment led to a greater focus on the importance of effective labour market policy (LMP) and job-seeking behaviour (Manroop & Richardson, 2016) as ways to ameliorate some of these negative impacts. Active labour market programmes (ALMPs) are the most commonly used means of tackling unemployment, broadly aiming to increase employability, support people to re-access the labour market, and reduce the risk of future unemployment (Coutts et al., 2014). However, during the last three decades or so, there has been a significant shift in international LMP and its implementation toward activation, to help, or push, the unemployed more quickly into employment. Governments use this so-called activation 'approach' in ALMP design, where benefit rules, and employment and training services are designed to encourage the unemployed, particularly those in receipt of an income support, to progress into work (Lødemel & Moreira, 2014). This accepted 'activation turn' has become central to international welfare systems, varying with regard to its emphasis on conditionality, job placement and supply-side employability interventions (Bonoli, 2010; Whitworth & Carter, 2020).

Despite the international shift towards activation, Ireland was a latecomer, entering the Great Recession with a relatively underdeveloped activation strategy (Köppe & O'Connell, 2016). With a rapid rise in unemployment from 4.4 per cent in early 2008 to 15.1 per cent in 2012 (Martin, 2014), the Irish government's policy was proving insufficient in responding to the needs of jobseekers, described as 'under-examined, fragmented and lacking in ambition … passive and low intensity in character' (National Economic and Social Council (NESC), 2011, p. xv). Responding to this and wider criticisms, significant restructuring of Ireland's Public Employment Services (PES) and the income support system was undertaken in 2011 and a newly designed labour market activation strategy, called *Pathways to Work* (PTW), was rolled out nationally. This large-scale institutional reform and new LMP changed the way in which services were accessed and delivered, and the target PES clientele were authorised to access these services.

The present article, by exploring the perceptions of a range of key stakeholders, offers some important insights into Irelands 'activation turn' and the implementation of the PTW policy. First, the paper prepares the ground by describing recent international developments

in activation and Ireland's move in this direction. Next, it provides insights into the perceptions of key stakeholders, described as 'insiders' and 'outsiders', presenting their views about both implementation and perceived effectiveness.

Activation

Activation policies have become a 'buzzword' (Martin, 2014) in LMP with a global movement toward this more regulatory form of welfare, whereby established welfare rights become more conditional on job-seeking efforts (Clasen & Clegg, 2011). However, despite its popularity, there remains ambiguity around the fundamental purpose of activation and what it means for policy and practice. Much of this uncertainty arises from ambiguous terminology and descriptions (for example, 'workfare', 'work-first', 'labour market activation', 'welfare to work') (Brodkin, 2013), and from variation in the orientation and implementation of policies (Bonoli, 2010; O'Connell, 2017). Bonoli (2010) proposes that much of the existing variation across countries can be explained by the interaction between changing economic contexts and existing LMPs, and as understood by those who are tasked with the design and implementation of these policies. Behind the various terms and tweaked approaches lie often diverging views of unemployment, from the dominant 'deficit' model that sees the unemployed as a 'dutiful but defeated' (Mead, 1992, p. 133) 'underclass' (Murray 1990, p. 1994), requiring state support to enable them to move from welfare to work, to a more socio-economic and structural understanding which highlights the structural conditions faced by many and the lack of decent jobs (Dwyer, 2004; Taulbut & Robinson, 2015).

Justification for their use centres on public savings through increased numbers in paid employment, while also emphasising the best interests of individuals receiving welfare in terms of health, well-being and financial benefits (Deeming, 2016; Wright & Patrick, 2019). As an approach, activation requires jobseekers to participate in a range of ALMPs, including education, training and job-search, leading to more long-term, sustainable employment options (Lødemel & Moreria, 2014). However, as noted by Thomsen (2009), these programmes tend to problematise the individual, focusing on reducing the impact of particular barriers, including lack of motivation (e.g. by utilising sanctions), lack of job-search skills (e.g. by providing job-search assistance), lack of work experience (e.g. by providing wage

subsidies) and lack of relevant skills (e.g. training programmes). In addition, activation increasingly emphasises individual responsibility and behaviour change, reducing entitlements through conditionality and sanctions, and downplaying the structural causes of unemployment (Deeming, 2016; Fletcher & Wright, 2018; Staines, 2021). Its critics argue that activation paternalism, which sees those overpowered by unemployment as requiring state intervention, has shifted the balance between sanctions and support increasingly towards the former (Fletcher & Wright, 2018). This 'global workfare project' (Brodkin, 2015) is seen as diminishing social rights and pushing the unemployed toward poor-quality employment and low pay (Wacquant, 2009). These policy measures use a 'tough love' approach to encourage people to seek employment rather than remain on welfare payments (Dunn, 2014), thus redefining the aims and purposes of the welfare state towards discipline and order rather than towards human need (Fletcher & Wright, 2018).

While international trends in LMP have been towards activation (Martin, 2014), strategies vary across countries, with employment services offering specific sets of activation options, often applying 'a specific set of rules and sanctions' (Lødemel & Moreira, 2014, p. 9) such as mutual obligations and work availability to progress the unemployed into work. Brodkin (2013) argues that the type of activation strategy designed is determined by the extent to which enabling, regulatory and compensation policies are utilised. For example, enabling policies are those which increase human capital and include education, training and employment supports that enable the individual to access suitable employment. Compensation policies assist the individual through in-work income support to participate in paid and rewarding employment, whilst regulatory aspects are those that enforce participation in paid employment through the use of sanctions or the withdrawal of welfare. Brodkin (2013) observes that increasingly the enabling aspects of activation are being de-emphasised in policies while the more regulatory and disciplinary aspects are being reinforced. An intensification of active LMPs has been seen in the increasingly punitive workfare policy approaches in the UK, Australia and New Zealand (Fletcher & Wright, 2018; Staines, 2021), and even countries which pursued 'flexicurity' policies, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, have seen recent reforms 'driven more by austerity and "work first" demands' than by the needs of citizens (Bekker & Mailand, 2019, p. 153). Nonetheless, all activation policies, despite differing labels, orientations and

underlying conceptualisations, share a common aim of promoting participation in the labour market and reducing welfare payments (Murphy, 2017).

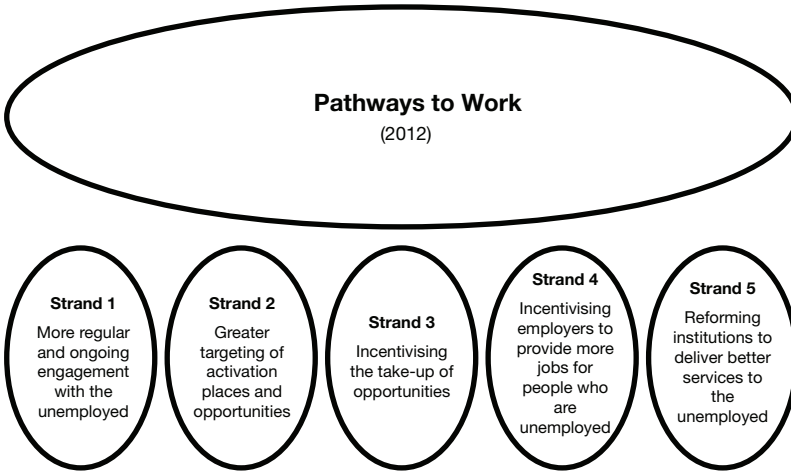
Ireland's 'activation turn'

As Ireland entered the Great Recession, the existing PES system had little capacity to deal with the high levels of unemployment brought about by the economic crisis and, in some cases, the system was counterproductive, as those who engaged in the services were less likely to move into work than those who did not (O'Connell, 2017). The frailty of the Irish system, along with other weaknesses highlighted by an OECD review of Irish activation (Grubb et al., 2009), combined with other subsequent influential and timely reports (e.g. NESC, 2011; EU peer review and benchmarking exercises), led to a momentum for change. Therefore, as a consequence of the economic crisis, the significant job losses (329,000 jobs lost during 2008–12) and considerable pressure from the troika – the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Commission and the European Central Bank – the Irish government committed not only to the implementation of activation but to reform of the institutions responsible for its delivery. Coincidentally, internal corporate governance failures within the existing PES, the now defunct FÁS, and a loss of public confidence in the organisation (Martin, 2014), led to its disbandment in 2011, and organisations which had previously been responsible for welfare payments, and PES, were amalgamated.

The reforming PTW policy (Department of Social Protection (DSP), 2012) was swiftly implemented as part of a wider institutional reform strategy setting out a fifty-point action plan across five strands (see Figure 1), outlining the government's intention to ensure that for every unemployed person 'their first day out of work is also their first step on the pathway back to work' (p. 5).

In practice, Strand 5, 'Reforming institutions to deliver better services to the unemployed', was implemented through a new PES called Intreo – a 'one-stop shop' or single point of contact for all jobseekers – while the vocational training function of FÁS moved to a new national agency called SOLAS, and to the new regional education and training boards. Roll-out of Intreo involved the establishment of sixty-one Intreo offices nationwide (2013–16) and the provision of not only income support but also assistance for jobseekers in both

Figure 1: Pathways to Work



Source: Department of Social Protection (2012).

preparing for and accessing employment. A pre-existing, smaller community-based service, with offices in twenty-two local disadvantaged areas, the Local Employment Service (LES), was incorporated into PTW to provide back-up capacity to Intreo as well as employment services for the long-term unemployed (LTU). Originally designed to support the LTU (under contract to FÁS) through the provision of a specialised guidance service over a time frame of one to two years, the LES focused on employment-related challenges, accessing additional supports, improving soft and hard employability skills, and supporting its clients to move closer to the labour market. Its ethos facilitated a friendly, supportive and informal environment where people seeking employment could discuss their personal relationship with the world of work and their specific labour market challenges. As a result of the PTW reforms, the LES came under statutory direction of the DSP and was subject to performance management and contractual compliance, and its original conception as a guidance-led service for those more distant from the labour market was considerably restricted and diluted. The shift toward activation meant that the LES's relationship with both government and service users was radically changed, with emphasis now on personal progression plans, compulsory meetings and active case management.

One of the most noticeable policy measures introduced as part of PTW was the range of sanctions that could be applied to reduce jobseekers' benefits should they refuse to participate in meetings, training or ALMPs, reflecting the shift from passive to more active participation and the strengthening of conditionality (Cousins, 2019). This is comparable in approach, but not in scale, with the 'work-first' approaches in other liberal welfare regimes (e.g. Australia, the UK). In particular, there are notable similarities between the Irish model and UK welfare reforms, principally in relation to: the redesign of welfare services, such as Jobcentre Plus in the UK and the Intreo service in Ireland; the implementation of conditionality; and the subcontracting of re-employment services to private providers on the basis of performance-related results (Boland & Griffin, 2015; Martin, 2014). In 2015 the DSP contracted two private sector companies to provide JobPath, an employment service to LTU jobseekers, using a Payment-by-Results model, similar to services implemented in the UK and Australia (O'Connell, 2017). While similarities exist, Wiggan (2015) argues that the Irish government has been more cautious in its adoption of employment service marketisation, indicating a more socially democratic approach, and thus maintaining greater state regulation and influence.

Whilst this reform has been critiqued as a highly managerial work-first policy using the threat of sanctions and conditionality to control the behaviour of the unemployed (Boland & Griffin, 2015), many have recognised the scale of institutional reform and greater capacity for engagement with unemployed people (O'Connell, 2017), leading to what the OECD (2015, p. 16) has described as a 'much improved labour market activation regime'. Ultimately, this approach has significantly changed the delivery of services to the unemployed and impacted in mixed ways on the capacity of the Irish welfare state to deliver a modernised activation policy that is, in theory, more consistent with the OECD's and EU member states' principles. However, NESC (2011) maintains that activating people misses the point and ignores the real barriers to work, which for many people, particularly vulnerable workers, are often a complex mix of issues that require longer-term engagement and support, as well as decent jobs. PTW and how it is implemented, therefore, seem at odds with the traditional view of the welfare state and social welfare provision, which has its origins in poverty prevention. As NESC (2005) argues, social policy should aim to support and facilitate the development of each individual in achieving their potential and enable them to take more risks than they may have taken in the past. This type of supportive

approach, as emphasised more recently by the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOU) (2019), requires trust between jobseekers and employment services, a culture based on care and respect, and a longer-term intervention which aims to support each individual in identifying their distinct capabilities and future potential.

Against this background, the study which is the focus of the remainder of this paper set out to capture the perceptions of key stakeholders involved in the reform process and its implementation. The next section outlines the methodology used, followed by a brief description of key themes and sub-themes emanating from analysis of the data, and conceptualised using an 'insider versus outsider' perspective. Next the collective findings are discussed within the context of the perceived impact of the 'activation turn' and implementation of PTW.

Method

This exploratory study adopted a qualitative approach to explore stakeholder views of how PTW was working in the early stages of implementation. Participants were identified through an NGO in North Dublin and the study was conducted over a six-month period in 2015.

Participants and settings

A total of twenty-one stakeholders – comprising fourteen females and seven males – were recruited through purposive sampling, based on their direct role with regard to policy implementation: policymakers (n=2), service managers (n=3), practitioners (n=6), other stakeholders (n=4) and jobseekers (n=6). The small number of participants across all groups should be considered when interpreting the results of this exploratory study. This is most notable in the policy group, and while five policymakers were invited to participate, only two agreed. Nevertheless, these participants were key policymakers involved in the daily roll-out of PTW and therefore provided timely, relevant implementation detail that may not have been gained otherwise. Thus, the results should be regarded as tentative, but they provide a basis for further investigation on the emergence of activation in Ireland.

At the time of the study, practitioner and manager participants worked in Dublin-based organisations contracted by the DSP to

deliver the LES and were thus influential in the daily implementation of the policy.

Measures and approaches

A number of data-gathering measures and approaches were used, including semi-structured interviews and observations at relevant seminars.

Interview schedules were designed to elicit stakeholders' views and attitudes on PTW and how it was perceived to be working. All interviews were semi-structured and used open-ended questions to explore, amongst other things, practitioners' experiences of implementing the new policy, how it differed from previous approaches and how they perceived its effectiveness. Similar topics were explored with jobseekers, service managers, other stakeholders and policymakers.

Observations at relevant LMP seminars organised by a range of actors, including policy actors, within the PES sphere aimed to gain a broader understanding of how the policy was perceived at a wider stakeholder level (i.e. practice, policy, academic and political levels). This was especially important due to the small number of policymakers who agreed to participate (n=2) in interviews as seminars were both attended by policymakers and included presentations by policy actors on current policy thinking. The seminars provided additional insights into the challenges and issues raised by the various stakeholder groups whilst also enhancing understanding of the wider impact of the policy implementation with regard to, for example, education, housing, disability and various social protection payments. Field notes taken throughout these seminars aimed to capture key points of interest as well as the mood of the wider stakeholder population.

Analysis

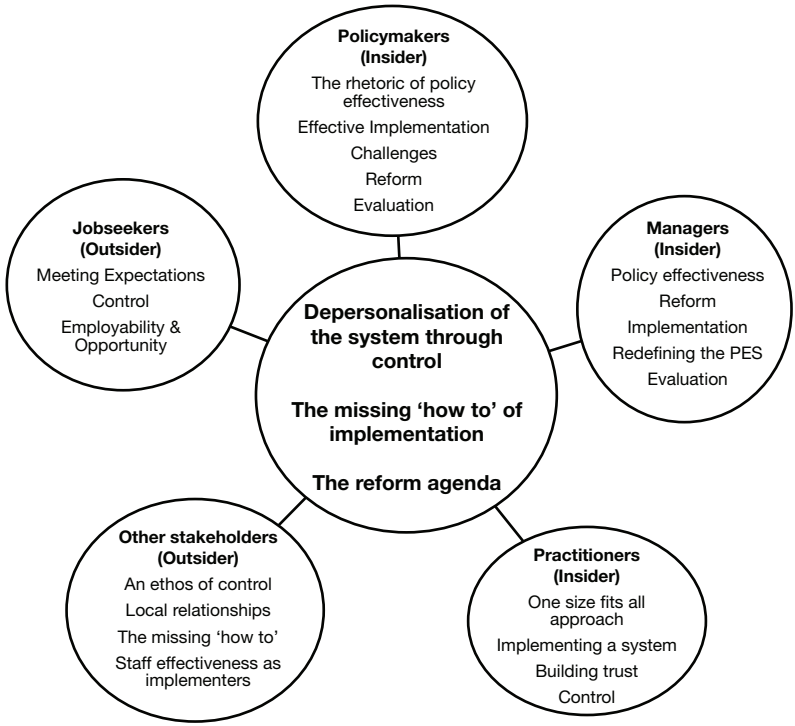
All data (i.e. from transcribed interviews and observations) were analysed using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) in order to categorise key themes by stakeholder group and across stakeholder groups. Constructivist grounded theory was chosen due to its inductive and data-driven nature and its use of a bottom-up approach, resulting in categories linked strongly to the data. The analysis was guided first by an understanding of the extent to which each stakeholder regarded the policy (i.e. useful or helpful) in terms of achieving outcomes at micro, meso and macro levels. Second, the

implementation of PTW was explored by focusing on stakeholders' perceptions at practice level.

Results

An analysis of the data emanating from the series of one-to-one interviews (as well as, in the case of the policymakers, the LMP seminars) revealed a number of key themes and sub-themes (see Figure 2). The results are presented in two sections. First, stakeholder interviews are conceptualised and presented from an 'insider versus outsider' perspective, with a selection of the sub-themes described briefly below. Insiders are those who work within and who can directly influence or be influenced by the policy 'system', including policymakers, managers and practitioners. Outsiders refer to those outside the system who use services or support individuals using those services, including jobseekers and other stakeholders.

Figure 2: Overarching themes and key themes per stakeholder group



Next, collective findings were synthesised to provide a sense of the overall perceptions and views of PTW amongst the various stakeholders. To this end, three overarching themes were identified – depersonalisation, the missing 'how to' of implementation, and the reform agenda – each of which is described below.

Insiders

Insiders focused predominately on the 'reform process' and its implementation effectiveness. Policymakers emphasised the 'massive change from a policy and operational perspective' with the establishment of Intreo while delivering a continuous service to jobseekers. They spoke about the 'enormous complexity' of the Intreo restructuring, emphasising the need 'to change a culture and a mindset', describing the reform as a 'hearts and minds job'. However, interviewees attributed 'a more successful implementation than may have otherwise been achieved' to the timing of PTW alongside the troika presence. For example, one key policymaker said:

> We had the IMF breathing down our necks … and the government scrambling around saying, you know, we [have] got to do something.

On the ground, services managers, while agreeing in principle with the reforms, disagreed with the roll-out and were concerned that jobseekers were forced to participate in a process without meaningful outcomes. They expressed unease about the policy choice to relocate the PES into a government department dominated by its function of control of public money, arguing that this leads to a narrow view of the PES as linked to controlling payments and reducing live register costs:

> Has a Public Employment Service only got to do with payments and people who are in receipt of payment and controlling and regulating that payment, or is it broader? … you could argue it is not a Public Employment Service at all … it's an add-on. (Service manager)

Frontline practitioners emphasised that effective services should meet client need, and expressed concern that PTW was system driven, with all jobseekers receiving the same service, towards the sole objective of job placement. They referred to this as a 'one size fits all approach', where eligibility based on unemployment payment type and duration created barriers to accessing appropriate needs-based supports and interventions. Reflecting on their own role, practitioners disclosed

conflicting professional difficulties between the need to build trust versus the system's aim to control behaviour, citing distressing incidents of 'pushing [him] in a direction' or 'bullying them into something'.

Outsiders

Outsiders identified an 'ethos of control' underpinning PTW, which was directed by the assumption that jobseekers predominately did not want to work. Thus, engagement started from a position of distrust with the primary cause of unemployment viewed as lying with the individual. For instance, one stakeholder explained her concerns:

> The scary bit for me is the underlying assumption that the fundamental problem is the person, who is the client, and therefore we have to harangue, bully, harass, pressure them to be motivated to do something … and test them consistently to see if they are prepared to do it.

They also perceived implementation as negatively impacting inter-agency working, ignoring 'local informal protocols' which enable needs-based approaches. Stakeholders agreed that while the principles of the policy were progressive, the difficulty lay in how the department chose to implement it – 'the "how to" is missing'.

Some jobseekers expressed positive expectations of the new system and gratitude towards the guidance practitioners; for example, one interviewee said:

> If it wasn't for [the guidance practitioner] … God knows what I would be doing.

Others expressed dissatisfaction with the control approach, using phrases such as 'they pulled me in', 'prove you're job-seeking' and 'there's nothing I can do about it' to describe their interaction with the PES, which they perceived as emphasising a preferred jobseeker behaviour, and ultimately impacting their relationship with the service.

Depersonalisation

All jobseekers described unemployment as a 'dehumanising experience'. One mid-career jobseeker explained, 'I don't want to be unemployed, I don't want to be a statistic'. The importance of a person-centred approach to facilitate access to employment was consistently referred to by both jobseekers and practitioners. The

former expressed how a connection with the practitioner, based on trust, enhances self-esteem and employability, leading to their rejuvenation as a person – 'you feel like a human being'. Practitioners explained that a trusting client–practitioner relationship facilitates disclosure of complex needs and the real issues preventing re-employment:

> When you have time to invest in people you really get down to what their needs are, the things that they maybe struggle with all their lives, figure out what they want to do … it may be the first time in their lives that someone is helping them figure that out.

However, both jobseekers and practitioners reported that implementation of the PTW system and control-driven approach inhibited re-humanisation. Rules and regulations had taken precedence over improved employability. Practitioners' time was spent completing administrative tasks, ensuring eligibility, monitoring job-seeking behaviour, and regulation, all of which were viewed as antithetical to offering meaningful support to the unemployed.

> At the start it was hard to get used to it, the admin was the biggest part, remembering to do it all the time because the clients would be penalised if we don't. (LES practitioner)

The primary purpose of client-practitioner meetings had shifted from support, in terms of enhancing employability and career development, to job placement, with effectiveness gauged solely on employment metrics. One LES practitioner explained, 'It's horrible, it's very hard, because you are trying to do a job, trying to encourage the client, but you have this at the back of your mind.'

The missing 'how to' of implementation

Managers and other stakeholders maintained that depersonalisation resulted from deficiencies in the 'how to' of the policy. PTW clearly outlined the tasks and actions to be achieved (i.e. 'the what') but lacked detail on the 'how to' of implementation. One stakeholder explained that there was a sense of 'we will roll it out and then we will sort it out'. This was reflected in how top-down directives shaped service delivery, which was now primarily focused on ensuring adherence to rules and regulations. For example, one manager explained that the culture had shifted from negotiation and discussion to directives:

> They just see it [LES] as a contracted service, that they can tell it what to do, even though they have no sense of what to do, and there is no expertise or understanding of it.

Managers and practitioners believed that the system of implementation considers the unemployed as a homogeneous group, and that 'lack of implementation know-how' limits the service in the extent to which it can provide a person-centred approach. Frontline practitioners, including ex-FÁS and LES staff, were skilled and experienced in delivery of person-centred approaches using adult guidance methods, and occupational and labour market knowledge. Despite this, implementation focused on adhering to rules, including time-bound engagement, at the expense of utilising available skills. One LES practitioner explained:

> Some people are more ready than others … it's not a case of one size fits all but that's what's happening … it stops us carrying out a proper guidance process because you are trying to boot them out the door – get out, it's been four months!

Managers and stakeholders questioned whether PTW and Intreo constituted a PES when services 'excluded much of the working age population' due to its overwhelming focus on the live register. Thus, whilst there was general agreement, in principle, with the actual change in policy, its implementation and roll-out was widely viewed as uninformed and under-evaluated.

The reform agenda

Policymakers, other stakeholders and managers placed significant focus on the actual reform process itself. Policymakers understood effectiveness and implementation of PTW in terms of the reform agenda and how successful (or not) it had been. It was praised as 'a very good framework document setting out reasonably achievable and precise actions for what needs to be done and when'. At LMP seminars, policymakers spoke about it largely from an organisational change perspective, referring to the 'physical reform' and the 'establishment of Intreo', 'staff mergers' and 'changes within the department'. They described this change process with precedence over a PES reform which sought to improve outcomes for jobseekers. They explained that linking payments and benefits to activation enabled Intreo to work with clients 'to help them help themselves', and this

new approach aimed to reduce reliance and prevented any sense that clients could 'settle on the income they receive'.

Managers and stakeholders questioned the level of consultation, arguing that there was a 'missed opportunity' to utilise the extensive experience of those on the ground. At the frontline, reform appeared to focus on increasing productivity and numbers processed, rather than on the quality of the support provided. One LES manager asked:

> Is the principle of activation that every client gets a meeting or is it that every client is helped on a pathway to a defined outcome?

They sceptically questioned the degree to which policy and reforms had been driven by financial constraints rather than a public policy based on ideology or a philosophy around citizens. There was a sense that everyone was working for the department, following new rules and, where possible, adjusting their own systems to fit with the new model.

Concluding discussion

The views and experiences explored in this article cover a broad landscape of the perceived impact of Ireland's 'activation turn'. While this is an exploratory study with a small number of participants, it offers a valuable qualitative perspective on the implementation of activation policy reforms in Ireland, which is missing from the broader evaluation literature. Evaluations of activation-focused LMPs are mostly conducted using gold standard econometric impact evaluations (Card et al., 2010), focused on measuring programme outputs and fiscal savings with little appreciation or understanding of what works and why. This study offers an additional perspective based on the insights and experiences of key stakeholders. Based on this analysis, three main themes emerged which resonate with wider international qualitative research and therefore merit further investigation.

First, the findings reported suggest that while the activation reforms progressed in Ireland, there was limited perceived effectiveness with regard to promoting outcomes such as overall well-being, career efficacy, perceived employability and employment opportunities. These findings resonate with Brodkin's (2013) observation of the shift towards more regulatory and disciplinary aspects of activation policies at the expense of more enabling aspects. Emphasis on individual responsibility and behaviour change,

reduction of entitlements through conditionality and sanctions, and downplaying the structural causes of unemployment, as found in the activation policies of other liberal welfare regimes, e.g. the UK and Australia (Wright, 2016), has been highlighted here through the depersonalising and dehumanising experiences of jobseekers.

The notion of personalised or individualised services (e.g. having trust in the service, and having a connection with the practitioner) was identified as critical in enhancing jobseekers' self-esteem, employability and engagement with the service, enabling appropriate disclosure of the real barriers to employment. This mirrors research by the INOU (2016) which noted LTU respondents feeling 'human' again after interactions with LES mediators. Illustrating this further, Van Parys & Struyven (2017) found that practitioner interaction styles which enable jobseekers' choice and potential within the labour market were deemed more meaningful and influenced intrinsic motivation. By contrast, practitioners who (deliberately or subconsciously), as part of the activation process, exerted psychological pressure in the form of threatening sanctions and encouraging feelings of guilt and/or shame negatively affected the quality of the client–practitioner relationship and the client's motivation to engage meaningfully in the process. Similarly, research in the UK found that jobseekers' experiences of conditionality prompted fear and behaviour change relating to compliance rather than more meaningful efforts to improve job prospects (Stewart & Wright, 2018), while policies focused on increased targets and monitoring reduced opportunities for discretion in terms of service delivery (Grant, 2013). These studies illustrate the need to reassess the relationship between the regulatory aspects of activation and meaningful interactions which improve employability.

Second, the missing 'how to' highlighted clear deficiencies in policy implementation despite clear policy goals. This was attributed to the vertical and administrative reform process, which lacked detail and specifics at the frontline level, and which may have led to depersonalised services, as discussed in the previous section. Notably, Brodkin (2013) describes this as the 'missing middle' and advises that the practices of activation that take shape on the ground should be more systematically examined. Existing approaches tend to focus on inputs (i.e. the policy) and outcomes, with very little, if any, investigation of processes which occur in between. The 'missing middle' cannot be understood by typical evaluations of policy programmes which use quantitative benchmarks (e.g. the number of

hours or sessions), but rather by conducting qualitative studies to explore exactly what practitioners do, and how they do it.

Third, the significant focus on 'the success of the reform agenda' meant that effectiveness was articulated in terms of organisational change, with references to the achievement of the broad goals of the reform process (e.g. new offices, merging of staff), rather than effectiveness with regard to the increased employability of jobseekers. The success of the reform agenda is undeniable and is broadly consistent with findings by Köppe & O'Connell (2016), who identified successful institutional reform of the Irish PES. However, policymakers focused on implementation of Strand 5 of PTW with little or no reference to the remaining four strands, or the specific services for the unemployed.

This vertical reform was driven by a skilled change management team which left much of the detail of the reform to the local offices (Köppe & O'Connell, 2016). This raises questions as to why the reform was not based on an evidence-informed process, with a thorough policy analysis and clear policy goals. The lack of local or national consultation with an experienced NGO sector and with multiple external statutory and local-level actors led to what was perceived by some insiders to be an uninformed process. Murphy (2017) suggests that the context of crisis and the sense of urgency presented by the troika presence may have impacted its execution in this way. The new administrative approach and lack of detail on implementation have led to the loss of many important aspects of a fully effective PES, such as employment services for all jobseekers, including job changers and people outside of the labour market who want to work, as well as the administration of labour market programmes (e.g. placement, employment guidance and job-search courses).

Collectively, these findings suggest that vertical implementation and control of activation reform has led to a highly administrative and work-focused activation approach; jobseekers are viewed as labour market units rather than citizens in need of appropriate and effective support to improve the quality of their lives. Köppe & MacCarthaigh (2019) refer to a 'revived Celtic tiger complacency', which slowed down pre-Covid-19 reforms. Clearly, more work is needed in terms of opening the black box of implementing activation in Ireland and providing, through a process of co-production or co-creation, more appropriate direction and support to staff on the ground, allowing them to develop and fully utilise their wide range of skills and

competencies to address all aspects of employability, particularly for more vulnerable subgroups of the unemployed.

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