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Rewarding responsibility? Long-term unemployed men and the welfare-to-work agenda

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Abstract. In this paper we explore the responses of a group of long-term unemployed men to chronic labour market insecurity and 'active' labour market policies promoting individual responsibility for employability. We draw from an evaluation of a recent pilot scheme: the UK Employment Retention and Advancement Demonstration. We identify a range of responses, shaped through experiences which reflect gender, class, and age divisions. Despite significant labour market disadvantage, some of the men responded by proactively engaging with the employability agenda. Drawing on qualitative longitudinal data, we follow the trajectories of the men in work, examining how they fared in insecure, precarious labour markets. We conclude by looking at the strengths and limitations of the current policy agenda, suggesting that more creative ways need to be found to engage some of the most disadvantaged in the reskilling agenda and that employers are currently a 'weak link' in the package of support provided.

1 Introduction

In July 2008 the UK government published, "No one written off: reforming welfare to reward responsibility" (DWP, 2008a), a consultation document proposing changes to the welfare system, later finalised in the white paper published later that year (DWP, 2008b). In addition to committing greater investment to deal with the higher number of benefit claimants as a result of the current recession, reforms also included increasing 'conditionality' for benefit recipients—including plans for the long-term unemployed to 'work for their benefit'—as well as greater integration of training and skills provision into employment programmes. This continues the trend set by previous policies which have increased the conditions placed upon benefit claimants in order to promote the idea of individual responsibility for employability. Alongside this, there has been a growing emphasis on encouraging sustainable employment through retraining, reskilling, and measures to encourage work 'advancement'.

In this paper we consider the responses to this agenda of a group of long-term unemployed men—those destined to work for their benefits in current government plans. These are men facing a range of labour market disadvantages, including low education levels, lack of or outdated skills, poor employment records, health problems, a lack of suitable jobs, and employer prejudices regarding age and work history (Miller et al, 2008). In today's postindustrial economy their prospects are unpromising. We draw on qualitative data from an evaluation of the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) Demonstration, a labour market programme recently trialled in

Box 1. The ERA programme and evaluation.
ERA is a demonstration project that began in 2003 in six Jobcentre Plus districts, in London, Wales, the East Midlands, the North West, the North East, and Scotland. It was conceived as a 'next step' in welfare-to-work policy, designed to help break the 'low-pay, no-pay cycle' by helping participants to retain work and advance. Three groups of customers were eligible:

- New Deal 25+ (ND25+) customers (those mandated to join the ND25+ programme, who were unemployed for 18 months, and over 25 years of age);
- New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) customers (lone parents who volunteered to join NDLP because they wished to look for work);
- Working Tax Credit (WTC) lone parents (lone parents who were working between 16 and 29 hours a week and were in receipt of WTC).

Customers were assigned randomly to a programme group that was offered ERA services, or to a control group that remained entitled only to the usual Jobcentre Plus or other services that they were normally eligible for.
ERA customers were offered:

- employment-related assistance from an Advancement Support Adviser for 33 months to help them find suitable work, solve work-related problems, and advance in their jobs;
- a tax-free work-retention bonus of £400 every 17 weeks for working 30 hours a week or more, up to a maximum of £2400 over their time in ERA;
- financial support for training, including payment of training fees up to £1000, and bonus payment for the time spent in training, paid at £8 an hour, payable on successful completion of the course;
- a fund to help with emergencies that might compromise customers' ability to stay in work.

The evaluation research aims to determine whether people in the three target groups that received ERA services remained in paid work for longer, received better pay and conditions, and experienced improvements in other life outcomes compared with their counterparts in the control group. For more details about the programme and its evaluation see Dorsett et al (2007), Miller et al (2008), and Riccio et al (2008).

the UK, which offered support and financial incentives to encourage individuals to stay in work and move on to better jobs. The programme thus reflects the current policy emphasis on increasing individual responsibility for employability, reskilling, and advancement. Further detail on the scheme is given in box 1.[1]

We explore the range of responses of the men and what shaped them, showing that, despite much policy rhetoric questioning the work ethic among the long-term unemployed, a significant number of the men responded by proactively engaging with the employability agenda, although their aspirations and goals were not always realised. An exploration of their responses, and how they were translated into labour market outcomes, can shed important light on the challenges facing welfare-to-work programmes for long-term unemployed men.

After discussing in sections 2 and 3 the current policy context and the labour market prospects for working-class men in today's economy, we briefly describe our research methods and sample in section 4, and then turn in section 5 to examine the men's responses to the current welfare-to-work agenda. In section 6 we use qualitative longitudinal data to examine how different responses were translated into differing tactics and strategies for securing and sustaining work, and how the men fared over time in labour markets characterised by insecurity. We conclude by considering the strengths and limitations of current policies promoting work sustainability for working-class men.

[1] This paper is not part of the ERA evaluation, although it draws on analysis of data undertaken for the evaluation. The interpretation and views expressed in the paper are the authors' and are not necessarily those of the wider consortium involved in the evaluation of ERA.

2 Active labour market policies: rewarding individual responsibility

Over the last twenty years governments in many countries have looked towards increasing employment participation as a solution to problems of both social exclusion and economic competitiveness (McDowell, 2003). Resulting policies have had a supply-side focus, encouraging individuals to develop transferable skills in order to operate successfully within flexible and insecure labour markets (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2002). As such, policies promote and try to support individual responsibility for adapting to labour market conditions. This has sometimes been accompanied by a discourse questioning the 'work ethic' of the unemployed (Crisp, 2008; Theodore, 2007): for example, in references to "cultures of worklessness" and a "poverty of aspirations" (HM Treasury and DWP, 2003), or more recently to individuals "playing the system" or "sitting at home" (DWP, 2008a). This policy agenda has shifted the basis of entitlement to welfare from one of a citizenship right, to one conditional on certain behavioural norms (Crisp, 2008; Fletcher, 2008; McDowell, 2003).

In the UK this agenda has been implemented in a series of 'New Deal' programmes, introducing greater conditionality (the requirements placed on benefit recipients as a condition of claiming). This approach was captured in comments by Tony Blair (then Prime Minister) in 1999:

> "Individuals ... have a responsibility to accept work, train themselves for jobs, be flexible in the jobs they take and avoid dependency where they can" (*The Daily Mail* 10 February 1999; cited in Theodore, 2007, page 927).

Most recently, the concept of 'personalised conditionality' (Gregg, 2008) has reinforced the focus on individual responsibility to improve skills and qualifications in order to ensure employability. When people remain unemployed for more than two years, they will soon be expected to work for their benefits, alongside receiving support to address employment barriers: for example, by undertaking training (DWP, 2009). The focus on skills acquisition represents, potentially, a move away from a strictly 'work-first' approach (Lindsay et al, 2007), stimulated by Lord Leitch's Review of Skills (Leitch, 2006), which called for the UK to commit to becoming a 'world leader' in skills by 2020.

Following Leitch, the government's 'skills agenda' emphasises shared responsibility between employers and individuals (DWP and DIUS, 2008a). Employers are to have the opportunity to identify the skills they need, whilst also being expected to take a greater role in training the workforce, albeit with government funding. Responsibilities are not shared equally, however, and the principal focus is on improving the capabilities of individual job seekers, now expected to take greater responsibility for their own training trajectories. This is reflected in the comments of the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, in the foreword to a recent consultation paper on skills:

> "When people sign on for benefits they sign up for skills as well. We want everyone with skills needs to address them as a condition of receiving out-of-work benefits" (DWP and DIUS, 2008b, page 3).

Thus, not only active job searching, but also taking up training to increase skills, is now a key element in the responsibilities required by job seekers in exchange for receiving benefits.

Finally, recent policy documents also emphasise the importance of retention and progression in work: "Not just jobs, but jobs that pay and offer opportunities for progression" (DWP, 2007, page 11). Policies to promote advancement, however, are still in their infancy, with the proposed adult careers service not fully operational until 2010 – 11 (DIUS and DWP, 2007). Moreover, the effectiveness of policies that promote personal responsibility for progression at work is largely unknown. If it was difficult for disadvantaged men to attain employment stability, progression, and success in a time of economic prosperity (see Adebowale, 2004), the economic downturn poses

a considerable threat to this agenda. As numerous commentators have suggested, labour market conditions have considerable implications for work entry, retention, and progression opportunities for the disadvantaged (Beatty and Fothergill, 2005; Erdem and Glynn, 2001; Fletcher, 2008; Theodore, 2007). It is to these conditions, and men's responses to the welfare to work agenda in this context, that we turn to next.

3 Achieving sustainable employment? Routes to advancement for working-class men

With the fundamental restructuring of labour markets over recent decades, entailing a shift from manufacturing to services and a greater polarisation between the highest and lowest paid, prospects for sustainable employment among working-class men have looked increasingly uncertain (Fletcher, 2008; McDowell, 2003). The deindustrialisation of the 1970s and 1980s decimated the traditional stable career paths in manual work which many skilled working-class men had formerly enjoyed. Unlike previous generations, educational qualifications are today key to labour market success (Erdem and Glynn, 2001; McDowell, 2003; McIntosh, 2004). Entry-level jobs requiring few qualifications are increasingly dominated by service sector work—often part-time, insecure jobs with few routes to career progression. This is reflected in recurring spells of unemployment which are now a dominant feature of the UK labour market (Carpenter, 2006; Kalwij, 2004). Research shows that it is those with the lowest qualifications who find it most difficult to avoid 'cycling' between unemployment and low-paid, insecure work (Golsch, 2006; Kalwij, 2004). The dismantling of working-class career paths within industries has also resulted in the individualisation of careers, with the responsibility for career planning and progression shifted from employers to employees (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2002). One US longitudinal study, for example, found that low earners who remained with one employer tended to stagnate, while the best route for wage progression was to change employers (Andersson et al, 2005).

Although the recent skills agenda aims to address some of these problems, existing evidence on the effects of acquiring vocational qualifications *after* leaving compulsory schooling is inconclusive. McIntosh (2004) shows that acquiring level-2 or level-3 vocational qualifications[(2)] after leaving school increased employment rates for unqualified school leavers, although it had a lesser effect on wages. Blanden et al (2008), reviewing the evidence on returns to lifelong learning, report a mixed picture from previous studies, with results depending on gender, qualification level, and subgroup. Their analysis of longitudinal data also shows the long-term nature of the returns to postschool qualifications, which come into effect only after 3–5 years, while effects were also clearest for higher level qualifications. Hence there are questions about the extent to which reskilling through acquiring new qualifications can achieve the desired effect of protecting disadvantaged job seekers from the low-pay, no-pay cycle, even assuming that their engagement with the reskilling agenda can be secured. The latter is also far from certain as we examine next.

3.1 Taking responsibility? Engaging in the employability agenda

A number of studies have suggested resistances to the government's employability agenda among working-class men, although this may take a variety of different forms, shaped by gender, class, age, and locality. A study by McQuaid and Lindsay (2002), of pockets of long-term unemployment in buoyant labour markets, found that job seekers were selective—restricting their search to their former occupations—or to jobs that offered more stability and better pay—hence resisting the policy injunction for the

[(2)] The National Qualifications Framework sets out the levels against which a qualification can be recognised in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Level-2 qualifications are equivalent to ordinary level grades A*–C, and level-3 to advanced levels.

unemployed to "be flexible in the jobs they take". Partly, the authors suggest, this was due to concerns about the marginal costs of starting work and the desire to avoid cycling back onto benefits or facing in-work poverty. Concern about wage levels and 'decent jobs', though, also has a gendered dimension, as studies showing the continued resonance of the idea of a 'family wage' and a 'breadwinner' identity amongst working-class men reveal (Charles and James, 2005; Willott and Griffin, 2004). Fletcher's (2008) study of the employment experiences of ex-offenders—a group of men facing not only personal work barriers, such as drug abuse, but also substantial employer discrimination—found resistance to the idea of engaging with official employment services at all, and a reliance instead on the informal economy and social contacts for obtaining work. While in one sense this approach might be seen as exercising adaptability and flexibility, it was also combined with a hostility towards labour market activation policies and the increased 'policing' of benefit entitlements.

A range of studies have also shown that service sector jobs, now dominating the lower reaches of the labour market, are often perceived (by both job seekers and employers) to require attributes typically thought of as 'feminine', such as care, deference, and sensitivity, leading to their rejection among working-class men who remain wedded to traditional understandings of what constitutes 'men's work' (Lindsay and McQuaid, 2004; Nixon, 2006). Beatty et al's recent work (2007), tracing the gender balance of employment in former coalfield areas following the redundancies of the 1980s, has shown that, while men's employment initially dropped relative to women's, more recently men have regained their advantage in the labour market, thus suggesting that a new generation of younger men might be more open to the 'opportunities' apparent in postindustrial labour markets. Both McDowell (2003) and Nayak (2003), however, in studies of young people growing up in postindustrial towns and cities in the UK, show that identication with an industrial heritage and pride in manual 'craft' labour remain embedded in male subcultures long after the industrial reality under which they were forged has disappeared. Both studies show a commitment among young white men to 'masculine' manual work and an antipathy to schooling and qualifications. They also show, however, at the individual level, a range of different responses to negotiating chronic labour market insecurity, resulting in "biographical contingency" despite shared experiences of gender, class, and ethnicity (Nayak, 2003, page 14). McDowell (2003), for example, uncovers a range of dispositions towards employment among the young men in the study—including "the committed worker", "the committed worker/reluctant learner", and "the accidental worker"—shaped through material circumstances, local economic opportunities and cultural milieus, and social contacts.

In the remaining sections of the paper we explore dispositions towards employability, reskilling, and advancement through our analysis of the narratives of the men interviewed for the ERA evaluation. We show how these were shaped by a range of processes reflecting gender, class, and age divisions, but were not reducible in a simple way to socioeconomic characteristics. First, though, we briefly outline our study and research methods.

4 The study and sample

The data we draw on are part of a wider evaluation of the ERA Demonstration project. The qualitative research involved in-depth interviews with participants,[3] exploring their work histories, employment circumstances, orientations and dispositions

[3] Participant contact details were obtained from the Department for Work and Pensions, from among those who had consented to involvement in the research. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

towards work, future plans and aspirations, as well as views and experiences of Jobcentre Plus and the ERA programme. Longitudinal interviews provided an insight into how participants fared in work over time, how they responded to the ERA services, and how this may have influenced their work pathways.

Here we use data from interviews with forty-seven New Deal 25+ (ND25+) male participants, seventeen of whom were followed up with either one or two longitudinal interviews.[4] Table 1 shows the characteristic of this group. As can be seen, the men ranged in age, but were mostly in their thirties and forties; around three quarters were from a white British ethnic background, while the remainder were mostly black or black British. The majority were single, and the rest were split between those who were married or living with a partner and those who were divorced or separated.

Table 1. Sample characteristics (source: Basic Information Form completed on entry to the Employment Retention and Advancement programme).

Characteristics	Column percentages
Age	
25–35	40
36–45	34
46–55	19
56–65	6
Ethnicity	
White	83
Nonwhite	13
Prefer not to say/unknown	4
Marital status	
Married/cohabitating	23
Separated/divorced/widowed	17
Single, never married	60
Dependent children in household	
No	81
Yes	19
Highest educational qualification	
None	26
Level 1 [National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) 1, General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs)/ Ordinary (O) levels grades D–G]	9
Level 2 (NVQ 2), GCSEs/O levels grades A*–C)	26
Level 3 (NVQ 3, Advanced levels, Higher National Certificate	13
Level 4+ (diploma, degree)	11
Other	17
Work history	
Manual stable	21
Manual unstable	53
Services	9
Managerial/professional	4
Mixed	4
Limited work experience	9
Total sample	47

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

[4] Thirteen had one additional interview and four had two additional interviews. Given the aims of this part of the evaluation, to explore engagement with ERA services, respondents were selected on the basis of experiences of paid work while on ERA and take-up of ERA services.

Only a small number had dependant children living with them (although a larger number had nonresident children). The men were mainly, but not exclusively, low qualified. While over a quarter had no qualifications at all, a quarter had level-2 qualifications (the level which the government wants 90% of the population to achieve by 2020) and a further quarter had level-3 or higher qualifications.

A snapshot of the men's work histories is provided by the last set of figures in table 1. The majority of men had histories of manual work, many of which were characterised as 'unstable', composed of repeated periods of insecure work punctuated by benefits, or longer-term unemployment or casual work following a redundancy.[5] Those classed as 'stable' had experienced longer periods in work, often in more skilled jobs, but had then entered the ND25+ programme after being made redundant and struggling to get back to their former occupation. A smaller number of the men had service sector or mixed work trajectories, including a few who had experienced self-employment, managerial, professional, or creative occupations, while a few had very little paid work experience, due to issues such as drug abuse, criminal convictions, learning difficulties, or refugee status.

These employment, personal, and household characteristics played an important role in shaping the responses of the men when faced with long-term unemployment and participation in active welfare-to-work programmes. In the next section we describe these responses in more detail.

5 Resisting, engaging, or drifting: responses to labour market uncertainty

While the majority of the men were disadvantaged in the labour market, and all had a lengthy period out of work before participating in ERA, like other studies we found that their responses to this situation varied considerably. From discussions with the men about their work plans and aspirations we identify three types of response to the challenge of overcoming long-term unemployment and securing and retaining work in an insecure labour market: 'resisting', 'drifting', and 'engaging'. Resisting entailed rejecting the reality of insecure, casualised labour markets and the policy injunction to adapt to them; drifting meant responding to what life threw at you, making few plans and exercising little active choice; while engaging entailed taking active steps to improve employability, be it through retraining, taking a sideways move into a related area of work, or persistently chasing and hanging onto jobs in order to build up work experience and skills.

These three responses are 'ideal types'; in reality the men's complex and sometimes contradictory accounts of their work plans and aspirations could overlap these categories, both in response to changing circumstances over time and over the course of an interview. Hence they should be seen as distinct 'responses', which individuals adopt and voice in variable ways, rather than mutually exclusive groups of people. Nonetheless, patterns were also evident. The men's responses were shaped by past experiences: of working in particular industries and jobs and in particular local labour markets with their own traditions and characteristics, which shaped identities and orientations

[5] Previous studies have found significant reliance on the informal economy among men on the margins of the labour market (Fletcher, 2008; Smith, 2005). Whilst a few people in this study referred to undertaking 'casual' work that may have been 'cash in hand' (ie not declared for tax or benefits purposes), it was not a significant element of the men's work narratives. Respondents may have chosen not to declare such work in research interviews, despite assurances of confidentiality, given that the study was commissioned by government. However, it is also likely that many of those engaging in informal work have chosen not to engage with official employment services, perhaps because of the greater conditionality that has been introduced through activation programmes like the New Deals, in which case they would not appear in our sample.

towards work; as well as experiences of education and training (often negative or absent), and of redundancies, periods of unemployment, and claiming benefits. Responses were also shaped by current circumstances: by age and life stage and family and household circumstances, which entwined to create distinct gendered identities, sometimes expressed in narratives of 'providing' and 'breadwinning'. We describe the three responses in more detail below.

5.1 Resisting

Men responding with resistance were highly critical of the realities of low pay and temporary, insecure, or casual work, as well as government attempts to encourage them to adapt to these conditions by increasing their employability and compromising on their former experience, status, and pay. Many were older men, often those with a relatively long history of stable, skilled manual work, but who in recent times had experienced redundancy, followed by unemployment. They often viewed age discrimination as a major barrier to their success in reentering or securing stable work. One 48-year-old man who had had a series of semiskilled jobs over the years believed that employers turned him down because of his age. Another 59-year-old with a long history of unemployment compounded by a criminal record simply viewed himself as unemployable and was therefore resigned to remaining on unemployment benefits until he reached state pension age.

Others who resisted the welfare-to-work agenda had secured jobs that they hoped would "tide them over", but without hope of recovering the (relatively) well-paid work they had been used to in the past. Many spoke with bitterness about their inability to find the types of jobs that they were used to and rejected the perceived work-first ethos of Jobcentre Plus. One 51-year old who had previously worked for nineteen years in the armaments industry had recently become a taxi driver, but had struggled to come to terms with the reality of how little he could earn:

> "There's so many people going for jobs these days, and probably the age I am as well, I'm 51 year old, it's harder to get a job ... it's all like wee short term jobs, ... that is all that's really out there now is agency work ... and the first thing the Jobcentre asks you is, What would you be prepared to work for? How much are you looking to earn an hour? ... I was earning more than £8 an hour, but after a while you find out that it's not feasible, it's not there. It was a bit of a shock to be honest."

Other men also voiced criticism of what they saw as government attempts to encourage them to take low-paid work. One 57-year old, who formerly worked as a heavy goods vehicle driver but had been unemployed for many years after losing his job due to a hearing problem, had found seasonal work as a gardener, and felt that he deserved some "slack" from Jobcentre Plus during the six-month periods when he was out of work since he "worked hard" the rest of the year: "If a job comes along I'll take it, [but] I'm entitled to a bit of give and take." He added:

> "These people larking about since they left school, I says, they are the ones you ought to get hold of, you know who they are!"

This sense of entitlement, reflecting the Beveridgean narrative of a right to state support for a lifetime of hard work and payment of taxes, as well as a resentment at the lack of "respect" from Jobcentre Plus staff for their history as skilled labourers, was typical of the attitude of many of those voicing resistance to the welfare-to-work agenda.

5.2 Drifting

Another response to labour market uncertainty was to drift between periods of work and unemployment, reacting to labour market conditions. Drifters tended not to make plans or employ any strategies to improve their situation. They were similar in

orientation to the men described by Fletcher (2008) as exhibiting 'radical pragmatism' in the face of chronic insecurity.[6] Men responding this way tended to be younger, in their late twenties or thirties. Most had left school at the earliest opportunity and had low levels of educational attainment, two describing themselves as dyslexic and one struggling with basic literacy and numeracy. Unlike the resisters they tended not to have experience of skilled manual work in old industries; most had a history of low-paid, unskilled contract work, as labourers, gardeners, driver's mates, security staff, or on production lines. They regularly cycled between work and benefits and had several experiences of redundancy. This group also shared similar household and family situations. All were single or separated/divorced, although some had partners living elsewhere. Some had children but all were nonresident and none provided significant financial or other support. Several were also reducing their costs by living with family members, either their parents or siblings. This lack of financial responsibility meant there was less pressure on them to provide a stable income.

While they prioritised regular work over unemployment and emphasised the financial necessity of work, many drifters were used to moving between work and benefits. Whilst resisters tended to be bitter or frustrated, the drifters took their insecurity for granted, viewing it as a fact of life. When in work their goal was to "do the job" and when out of work it was to try and get back into work. This "one day at a time" response precluded active planning or strategising for achieving labour market stability in the longer term, as one of the men explained:

> "I'm just like a cobweb, I just get pushed around by the wind, and if .. somebody says. Do you want to do a labouring job? I just say, How much? you know, I don't really, I still haven't got a plan, ... I still don't particularly know what I want to do."

Few had ambitions or aspirations for the future. When asked where he wanted to be in a year's time, one man said "I'm just hoping for better luck, I cannae really predict the future"; another explained that:

> "At the moment I am just looking for a job where I will be kept on ... there isn't an ideal job [for me] I don't think. A job for me's, get out, do it, and get paid at the end of the week."

They were also realistic about the nature of the work that they were in and the lack of scope for advancement. This was not necessarily regarded as a problem, though. Indeed, what several of them liked about the work they did was the lack of responsibility; they talked about looking for an "easy job" or a "toddling along" job. One, talking about a job as a driver's mate, said:

> "I would love to do that kind of thing ... you're carrying goods in, you're carrying goods out, you have no great responsibilities, no sort of burdens and responsibilities, you just get the goods from A to B, and making sure they're all right."

Despite this, a few were able to identify small changes such as getting a driving licence, a forklift licence, or an indoor rather than an outdoor labouring job that would improve things. Yet most of the men struggled to initiate and achieve these small steps. This contrasts to the final group of men who were more proactive in responding to their employment situation.

5.3 Engaging

The final response we have characterised as engaging, an approach that might be viewed as the desired response to the government's welfare-to-work agenda. These men had responded to labour market uncertainty and insecurity by taking proactive steps to improve their employability. This was a wide-ranging group, and their engagement took a number of different forms. Some took the step to retrain and acquire

[6] The term is borrowed from Connell (2005).

new skills, occasionally in new areas of service sector work, but more commonly in traditional manual 'skilled trades'. Others were uninterested in training but adopted a proactive 'flexible' approach to opportunities, seeking and taking available jobs—despite low pay—in the hope of moving on to something better. Some in this group were positive towards the rationale of ERA, and talked about a desire to advance at work, although equally many remained wedded to "shop floor work", but spoke of a commitment to achieving work "stability" and permanency.[7] These men had a wide range of employment histories and circumstances. Unlike the drifters, they often had families to support and, in the main, were in their thirties and forties and less likely than the resisters to see their age as a major barrier to their employment prospects.

Like the resisters, some of the engaged men had experienced a stable work history and had then been made redundant, but they expressed a determination to stay in work and an openness to the idea of retraining, or trying something different. They embraced the government's rhetoric of taking responsibility for one's own employability through being flexible and adaptable. An archetypal example was one 46-year-old man who had lost his job as a bus driver due to eyesight deterioration, and had found only low-paid and casual security work since. While on New Deal he retrained as a plant machinery operative, hoping that the acquisition of new skills would better equip him to compete for jobs:

> "These days, you cannae get job where you can turn around and say I'm going to work here for the rest of my life, like me dad did and grandad did and all that, you know, you can't even do a trade now ... you've got to be versatile, ... you've got to have a multitude of skills ... if you're not multi-skilled, you'll come a cropper in the end won't you?"

While a number of the men who responded proactively were relatively more advantaged and better able to take up employability opportunities, others with significant work barriers, such as criminal records or histories of substance abuse, also adopted a proactive attitude and were keen to try and make "a new start". One 37-year old, for example, recounted how he had been expelled from school at age 13, had a history of drug abuse, and had recently spent seven years in prison. However, he was keen to take advantage of welfare-to-work services to find "a way forward" and, following a spell in subsidised employment through a scheme for ex-convicts, had proactively sought, and gained, work with another company because of its structured opportunities for promotion. Another man, with a history of unskilled casual labour, lack of educational qualifications, and a criminal record also saw ERA and New Deal as an opportunity to gain a "trade" and hence to improve his future employability:

> "All I want to do is to get a certificate, qualified painter and decorator. That's one of the main reasons that I'm going to college, right, because if someone hires you as a painter or decorator from a big company, they are going to want to see a qualification."

Self-employment was also a route that seemed to promise a new start for some, but also required considerable determination to succeed. Some had a particular interest to pursue, and saw retraining and self-employment as a way to access that kind of work. Others turned to self-employment to maintain an income when fed up with struggling to find work. For example, one 48-year old man who had worked in the steel industry had eventually decided to become self-employed after finding that the companies he was working for were going bust one after another.

In the next section of the paper we follow the journeys of some of these men over time to examine how they fared in the labour market, how they tried to overcome difficulties, and what more policy needs to do to improve their prospects.

[7] See Hoggart et al (2006) for more discussion of ERA participants' understandings of advancement.

6 Work journeys and strategies over time

In this section we use the longitudinal data to explore the trajectories of participants over time. We use a comparison of the diverging trajectories of three men to highlight the complexity of factors governing the outcomes of welfare-to-work programmes like ERA.[8] The first case, Tom,[9] is an example of a drifter who, while keen to work, is resistant to the idea of reskilling or advancing. Although his goal is permanent employment, his trajectory shows the difficulty of acquiring this for those with few skills or qualifications. The second case, Kevin, is an example of someone who is actively engaged with the welfare-to-work agenda, who is aware of the poor conditions of his employment but nonetheless clings tenaciously to his job and gradually acquires new skills, despite facing considerable difficulties. Finally, Kieran provides an example of another active engager who utilises ERA support to undertake training but faces difficulties translating this into labour market success. Together, their stories reveal how programme outcomes emerged from the intersection of individual responses to work and unemployment, the demands of active labour market programmes, and the constraints and opportunities apparent in local labour markets.

6.1 Tom: drifting on the margins of employment

Tom was in his forties, separated, with a teenage child who lived with his ex-partner. He left school with no qualifications and had a history of unskilled work, in gardening, driving, factory, and warehouse work, as well as a long period of unemployment. Through the New Deal he had secured a six-month work placement as a labourer, but following this was unemployed at the time of his first interview. He expressed a strong commitment to working and earning a wage, driven by his desire to "provide for" his daughter—whom he hoped would eventually come and live with him—but also a dislike of short-term contracts, despite recognising their prevalence:

> "I don't want to sign off books for a couple of weeks, because it's a waste of time in my book. It's got to be at least six months, so I get benefits that I'm entitled to."

Despite this, at the second interview Tom was again out of work, following two temporary contracts (of two and three month durations) and then a permanent job which he was laid off from after becoming ill. He was now desperately keen to find work, but had few plans for achieving this.

Tom had an ambivalent approach to reskilling. When asked if his adviser had talked to him about training, he replied "She tries to, but I'm not on for it!" He went on to say that he felt training was not appropriate for him because of his age:

> "I've had enough of it. I just want to get stuck in to a job. I'm 45, ... all these kids are leaving school now, they want to train them up ... that's why they're not setting old 'uns up who haven't got any skills. I've been slogging all my life, but I've never been one for, well, not education, but learning a skill. I just like getting stuck in on a job, earning a wage at end of week, and that's it, looking after my family."

Despite this, later on in the interview Tom also said that he would be willing to train if it was "on the job" rather than in a classroom situation:

> "I've got grey cells, you know what I mean, but I'm not bright, bright. ... But if I ... can get into a job and up a ladder, I would do, with training at a place where I've got a job. Say I've got a job as a labourer, and they wanted somebody to take this group of lads out and tell them do it that way, I'm on for that. But if you said it was in a classroom .... If I have to do it for my job, to step up, I'll have

[8] The longitudinal data do not allow us to systematically compare outcomes for men with different responses, since only seventeen respondents were followed up and, owing to sample selection (see footnote 3), the majority of these were men who responded with active engagement. Hence we use case studies as illustrative examples to illuminate key issues.

[9] The names are pseudonyms used to protect individuals' identities.

a go, but otherwise I'm a back-burner, just slog my week out, get paid, go home, that's it."

So while potentially receptive to the idea of acquiring new skills, Tom had not been successfully engaged in the reskilling agenda by his adviser and saw training as something that came with the job—the employer's responsibility rather than his. As his work journey showed, such jobs are hard to come by for the unskilled, and he remained on the margins, cycling between low-skilled, insecure work and unemployment.

6.2 Kevin: embracing employability—trying to make a go of agency work

Kevin was also in his forties, a single man who had left school without qualifications and worked in engineering for ten years until he was made redundant. He then had a series of temporary jobs, followed by a long period of unemployment, during which time he did voluntary work. He had a strong commitment to paid work, both to "pay the bills" and for his "self-respect": "not having anyone looking down at me". Like Tom, his main goal was employment stability that would enable him to "settle down properly". However, unlike Tom he was more receptive to the idea of temporary contracts and at the first interview had managed to secure paid work through an agency doing gardening work for a local authority. Kevin was aware that it had poor pay and conditions (no sick pay or holiday pay), but his strategy was to keep the job while applying for a post on the permanent staff:

"The pay ain't too good at the moment because it's agency but once you become permanent you get bonus, you get everything else on top of that as well. ... At the end of the day ... the wages I think will go up a third more."

Despite struggling with basic literacy and numeracy, Kevin was also open to the possibility of taking up workplace-based training, in order to build his skills and become more employable:

"That's why I want to use machines because it's getting more responsibility, ... I get another step up the ladder, so if they wanted to sack me they might not, because they would have to find another driver."

At the second interview Kevin recounted how, after over a year of employment via the agency, he was laid off after taking time off work to convalesce following an operation. However, he maintained his strategy and found new work for another local authority, again via the agency. The work was seasonal but he managed to maintain year-round employment by alternating between a summer and a winter job. Still keen to increase his employability, he utilised the ERA incentives to pursue a training course in chainsaw use. However, he failed the course and, as well as using up his ERA training entitlement, and forfeiting the bonus payments (since these were dependent on successful completion), he also lost a week's pay. In retrospect he wished that he had pursued a series of smaller and easier courses that would have represented more gradual progression for him. Throughout Kevin's period on ERA he remained in continual employment but this was characterised by a series of temporary contracts, with poor conditions. He maintained his commitment to finding stable employment, but despite his proactive approach and attempts to improve his work situation he was no nearer to achieving this by the end of the study.

6.3 Kieran: translating qualifications into work advancement

Kieran was in his twenties and lived alone, although he had a partner who lived nearby and a baby on the way. He had worked in various factory jobs after leaving school, but after finding himself being made repeatedly redundant as factories closed down, he decided to get himself "a trade" and had started studying to be an electrician. At his first interview he was studying while working full time in the college stores.

Like Kevin, he was keen to be in work after a period of unemployment: "I just cannae get me head around just sitting here, I just got depressed", even though his current job was low pay and he felt that he was "only just scraping by". He was also applying for jobs as an electrician's mate to build up experience for when he finished his course. However, there were few jobs around and his limited experience was keeping him from getting the jobs he did apply for.

At the second interview Kieran had completed the course and was a qualified electrician, and had started another course, but was no nearer to finding work in his chosen field. He was also more limited in his options because he now had a new baby to provide for. He felt trapped in a vicious circle: while there were short-term agency jobs available, he was unwilling to give up a permanent job to take contract work, but was unsuccessful at securing permanent work with a lack of experience under his belt:

> "To be honest I don't think it's worth giving up a permanent job ... especially when I need the money now. If they can guarantee it's going to be permanent, even if it's a six month trial, you know, if you do the work properly you are guaranteed permanent, I'd go for it. But it's all agencies basically, so there's no guarantees."

While his employer was supporting him to do the higher level course, it was not directly related to the field he wanted to go into—moreover, he was also finding it hard going: "The steam starts coming out and you think ... you get stressed out!" So while Kieran had actively engaged with the employability agenda and ethos of ERA by taking a low-paid job and pursuing training in order to secure advancement, he had not been able to translate this into progression in the workplace. The prevalence of temporary jobs also became increasingly untenable once he had a baby to help support.

The three cases reveal the ways in which individuals with similar circumstances adopted distinct responses to their situation, and how the shape of their journeys in work were often determined by factors beyond their control There was a tension in Tom's narrative between his desire to support his child with the attendant need for him to be proactive and achieve work stability, and his rejection of the reskilling agenda and tendency to drift in and out of temporary contract work. Kevin, in contrast, showed a dogged determination to pursue stable work, taking low-paid, insecure work as a first step, and was willing to take advantage of training opportunities in order to reach his goal. Kieran adopted a similar strategy, taking low-paid work and pursuing training to gain "a trade" with the presumed advantages of more stable employment. In neither case, though, had this been achieved by the end of the ERA programme. The cases illustrate how the uncertainty and insecurity in labour markets for men with few skills and qualifications mean that advancement in any form is likely to be on a modest scale and over a far more extended timeframe than a three-year welfare-to-work programme such as ERA.

7 Conclusions

In the paper we have explored the responses of a group of long-term unemployed men to the uncertain and insecure labour market conditions they face and the increased 'responsibilisation' embedded in welfare-to-work programmes. Despite their overwhelming labour market disadvantages, the men exhibited a diverse range of responses. While some were resistant to the idea of adapting to changed conditions and modifying their expectations of pay and status, and others were unable or unwilling to develop forward-looking strategies or plans, there were also many who embraced the idea of individual responsibility for employability and took proactive steps to improve their prospects. These men either embraced the ERA idea of advancing to 'better work' through the incremental accumulation of skills, or redefined advancement as achieving stability of employment in an increasingly insecure labour market. These attitudes and

efforts belie the assertions in much policy debate about deficient work attitudes among the long-term unemployed.

Like previous studies, we have shown how varied dispositions towards employment were distinctively shaped by the men's 'resources'—albeit they were not reducible to socioeconomic characteristics in any simple way. Skills and qualifications, personal and family circumstances, and past experiences of work shape distinctive work identities, orientations, and aspirations, and combine to fashion distinct and complex responses. The men's responses and aspirations were also modified and revised over time in the context of experiences either in or out of work, and in response to changing household and family circumstances. It was clear, however, that there were a number of barriers to the men successfully achieving their strategies. The study illustrates the profound influence of current labour market conditions in restricting or enabling the men's employment plans. The relatively humble aspiration for employment stability was thwarted for many due to short-term, seasonal, or casualised employment with few rights or promotion opportunities attached.

The increased emphasis on training and skills acquisition in current welfare-to-work policies is potentially a welcome evolution from work-first approaches that have placed rapid job entry over and above the quality of jobs obtained. However, this analysis shows how activation programmes need to employ a range of types of support and 'coaching' depending upon individual circumstances. If the agenda is to be successful, some participants clearly need to be convinced that it is in their interests to reskill. There is a considerable challenge in engaging the most disadvantaged, who are most in need of this support, with the reskilling agenda. Some of the men in the study expressed a resistance towards individualised advancement as embodied in ERA, expressing a strong antipathy towards pursuing training or progressing to supervisory or managerial positions. Indeed, a number of them, as we saw, had very low levels of education, negative experiences of schooling, and some were struggling with basic skills. This presents a challenge to the current skills agenda and suggests that more creative and supportive ways need to be found to encourage such participants to engage. It is possible, for example, that some participants, who were resistant to the idea of undertaking "training" and were more comfortable with the idea of the gradual accumulation of skills on the job, might be more successfully engaged in the advancement agenda if this was approached in partnership with employers. Others would seemingly have benefited from greater personalised support in undertaking training, while incentive structures that recognised and rewarded participation or 'soft' outcomes, and not only successful completion, might have generated greater engagement.

Others needed less encouragement to actively engage with the employability agenda, but their experiences suggest that there is a need for more help in translating that into employment gains. The difficulties they faced reveal the drawbacks of exclusively supply-side welfare-to-work programmes that fail to engage with employers. The ERA programme relied on supporting individuals to undertake training which was independently sourced and undertaken outside of work time. This recognised the fact that the type of employment obtained by participants was unlikely to offer training opportunities in-house. Indeed, the very training that might help secure the men permanent employment was often unavailable to them because they were on temporary contracts, often for extended periods. However, after taking the step to acquire additional skills or qualifications outside of work, some were not able to find the jobs that would enable them to utilise these skills. Working in partnership with employers to provide training opportunities that are supported within the workplace and linked to promotion possibilities is essential to the success of reskilling strategies. Finally, if there is to be real commitment to improving the prospects for the most disadvantaged

in the labour market there needs to be not only support and exhortations to advance and 'move up' from the jobs on the bottom rungs, but also attention paid to improving the employment conditions for the large numbers who are likely to remain in these jobs for the foreseeable future.

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