

# **The impact of Active Labour Market Programmes: evidence of deactivation**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose** - This paper explores the experience(s) of participants in Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs) in Ireland. The paper utilizes narrative structuring to provide an enhanced understanding of the experience of participants.

**Design Methodology** – Maynard (1993) and Hujer *et al.* (2009) explain that most of the empirical studies on the effects of ALMPs are econometric in nature. The studies draw on individual data in order to evaluate whether participation in a programme increases the individual probability of leaving unemployment. This paper adopts a qualitative approach to study the impact that ALMPs have on participants.

**Findings** - The data collected during depth interviews indicate a mixed experience for participants. Participants found the experience of completing the ALMPs positive in the main. However, the impact on the outlook and job prospects of participants is not encouraging. Too often the respondents relate a view that the ALMPs were a *short-term fix* with the prospect of secure employment unlikely.

**Practical Implications** – Tentative recommendations are made which will aid the future delivery of similar programmes. This paper proposes that evaluation using *hard* measures will typically produce a positive image of ALMPs. However, the use of *soft* measures highlights a greater complexity of impacts on the participants.

**Originality/value** - The understanding of the experience of participants in ALMPs is enriched through the use of narrative structuring which facilitates a deeper exploration of the experience of participants. Furthermore, this paper proposes the potential problem of deactivation in addition to the problems of: deadweight loss; substitution and displacement reported by Fraser (1999).

**Keywords:** Active Labour Market Programmes, unemployment, narrative structuring, Ireland

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Skedinger (1995, p. 137) explains that the basic aim of employment policies is to either preserve or create jobs, often with disadvantaged groups in mind. Opinions differ regarding the merits of such policies. Collectively these initiatives are referred to as Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs). Kluge (2006, p. 2) explains that ALMPs include measures such as job search assistance, labor market training, wage subsidies, and direct job creation in the public sector. ALMPs are an important element of government strategies to combat unemployment. Maynard (1993) and Hujer *et al.* (2009) explain that most of the empirical studies on the effects of ALMP are econometric in nature. They draw on individual data in order to evaluate whether participation in a programme increases the individual probability of finding a job and leaving unemployment. However, this paper adopts a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach is adopted for two primary reasons: first, is the limited availability of data on ALMPs in Ireland. Second, is the enhanced understanding of the participant experience that emerges from the use of a qualitative approach. There are three main participants in ALMPs. The three are: the public bodies providing the programme, employers and the participants. This paper explores the experience of the participants. This approach facilitates narrative structuring (Kvale, 1996). The findings which emerge offer insights leading to recommendations that will aid the design of future activities and similar programmes.

## 2. The labour market and graduates

Hegarty and Johnston (2008) explain that a review of the literature points towards a *gap* between education and the working environment. Learning in higher education involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organizing knowledge (Lee and Street 1998, p. 158). In the past there has been a high turnover of graduates which was blamed on graduates having expectations that are too high and not having a clear view of their skill set. O'Brien and Deans (1995) report that thirty four per cent of graduates expected to be working in managerial roles within their organization and that employers believed that graduates did not have the capabilities for these positions. Stephens *et al.* (2010) explain that a graduate's perception of the skills and competencies they will use in the workplace are significantly different to the reality of work. Furthermore, McDermott *et al.* (2006) propose that graduates are being brought into the organization in a manner which does not benefit the graduate or the organization. This highlights the need for a complete graduate development plan to be in place.

The improved employability of graduates has become the focus of much higher education policy and writing. However, no matter how successfully a higher education institution is in providing training and education tailored to the needs of industry, the absence of work based learning will undermine the rationale behind any manpower planning initiatives Stephens and Onofrei (2009, p. 438). Kogan and

Brennan (1993, p. 19) propose that the spectrum of skills that academics should promote include generic study skills, intellectual skills, experimental and technical skills, and general work skills. Yorke (2004, p. 11) reports that the English Higher education funding council re-iterated similar notions when they defined employability as:

*achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupation, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy*

Zepke *et al.* (2011) suggest that governments increasingly expect institutions, educators and students in higher education to contribute to economic development. Yorke (2006) reports that this creates the challenge of achieving student and subsequently graduate success. In some European countries, higher education is seen as preparation for employment in a variety of specific professional contexts, whereas in others there is a much looser linkage. Arthur *et al.* (2007) note that differences in the traditions and purposes of higher education will impact on the nature and extent of a graduate's development once in employment. Geers (1992, p. 65) reports that strategies aimed at helping the unemployed graduates are characterised by a combined approach of guidance, counseling, education, training and employment, based on the needs of the unemployed. Agell (1995) explains that an emphasis on the quantity of people engaged in ALMPs instead of quality may be necessary in a deep recession with high unemployment, but may also render a policy less effective. Furthermore,

Fraser (1999, p. 153) reports that demand side job creation policies are subject to three potential problems:

1. deadweight loss effects which are witnessed when the jobs created would have been created anyway without the aid of ALMP;
2. substitution effects are applicable when participants in an ALMP become substitutes for others in search of jobs; and
3. displacement effects which arise when an ALMP reduces job creation in enterprises as a consequence of competitive advantage accruing to companies which benefited from an ALMP.

Wolf (2002, p. 255) wonders if we really believe that economic relevance is the only justification and that a universities future should be justified entirely by the rates of return, particularly by job-placement rates for graduates. Murphy (1994) proposes that we should consider issue of graduate employment in the context of mass higher education provision. He tells us that the greater number of degree holders the greater the challenges for graduates in the labour market. Bradley and Nguyen (2004, p. 485) explain that a bad start in a person's working life, or an unsuccessful transition from study can have dire consequences. Furthermore, Gray (2000) examines the effect of unemployment, which he explains can leave permanent scars on future employability and general well-being. One impact is longer-term state dependency which was investigated by Gregg (2004) who reports evidence that the effects of youth unemployment can persist until a person's mid-thirties.

Therefore, Bradley and Nguyen (2004, p. 484) explain that the early part of an individual's career is the optimal time to invest in education and training. Sihto (2001, p. 700) argues that manpower is heterogeneous and one precondition for the success of ALMPS and labour market stimuli is that they are adapted selectively i.e. that the target of the action – the individual, with his or her qualities and weaknesses – is properly taken into consideration. These weaknesses are often increased by the emotional bruises of unemployment. Holden *et al.* (2007) explain that organisations in all sectors and of all sizes can prosper through the greater use of graduate labour. However, creating a sustainable range of graduate opportunities in the labour market is complex. In practice both the supply of and demand for graduate labour is subject to considerable fluctuations as the demands of the labour market change and higher education tries to adjust provision accordingly.

## **2.1 ALMPs in Ireland**

The HEA (2010) report that 54,371 learners graduated from Irish higher education institutions in 2009 (38,399 undergraduates and 15,972 postgraduates). This contrasts with a total student body of 18,200 across all the higher education institutions in 1960. Stephens *et al.* (2007) explain that these rapid advances reflect the success of retention strategies at the second level resulting in higher transfer rates into higher education. Clancy and Wall (2000) and O'Donnell *et al.* (2001) explain that the ability of educators, policy makers and business people to

persuade students of the value of a higher-level education has significantly contributed to economic success. However, EGFSN (2010) explain that one-in-ten graduates of higher education in 2009 are unable to find employment. This understates the true extent of the crisis, as record numbers are pursuing further study after getting their first degree. And unfortunately a substantive number of graduates are emigrating (65,300 people emigrated from Ireland in 2010) and the unemployment rate is 14.7 percent (CSO, 2010; CSO, 2011). FÁS (National Training and Employment Authority, 2010) reported a sixty percent year-on-year increase in the number of graduates seeking employment or further training and a fifty four percent rise in the number of graduates signing on, compared with an increase of thirty percent generally. Furthermore, graduates now make up a quarter of all FÁS clients who are looking for training or participation in labour market initiatives.

The ALMPs in this research can be classified into three groups: pre-employment programmes; *general* work placements; and *specialist* work placements. The pre-employment programmes typically involved intensive CV, interview and presentation skills development. The pre-employment ALMPs aimed to support people into employment. Participants engaged in an intensive six week training programme which focused on attitudes to work and practical skills for employment. This programme aimed to change participants' outlook and motivation. This is achieved by helping participants to learn about the skills and behaviour required, and expected, in the workplace. It is strongly focused on developing practical work

skills. The *general* work placements involved graduates gaining workplace experience through an unpaid placement in a company for a period of one to six months. The target audience was graduates who were unemployed and unable to secure work. The programme provides an opportunity for participants to apply skills and gain experience in a workplace setting. This placement experience is intended to activate participants in the labour market. The *specialist* work placements involved the graduates responding to a recruitment call by employers to fulfill a short-term contract for a once off project. For example, a new product launch requiring the recruitment of a marketing graduate. Typically, these placements were supported by the government who facilitated access to social welfare payments for participants and reduced social contributions for the participating company.

### **3. Method**

There are a number of studies which examine graduates' working or career experiences during the first few years of employment after graduation (Lau and Pong, 2000; Stephens *et al.* 2010). This research involved collecting participant accounts using depth interviews. Narrative structuring (Kvale, 1996) was used with participants facilitated to tell their stories as freely and unguided as possible (Benford and Gough 2006). This method is designed to enable participants to provide highly contextualized accounts, which render the meaning and relevance of their stories clear. Also, an attempt was made not to offer interpretations,



judgments or otherwise impose on the interviewee's account, but to facilitate stories (Hollway and Jefferson, 1997). The interviewees participated in an ALMP during 2009/10. A list of graduates who had participated in an ALMP in the northwest of Ireland was acquired. The list totaled thirty seven people. A sample was selected to reflect the age distribution, academic background and employment experience of participants. Four members of the original sample were unavailable for interview as they had emigrated. The sample was adjusted and twelve people were recruited and interviewed. Participants were between the ages of twenty five and thirty five. Participants were given an information sheet, explaining the purpose of the study and the nature of the interview, and a consent form, outlining anonymity, the right to withdraw and confidentiality. Interviews lasted circa forty five minutes and all participants reported enjoying their participation in the ALMP. The interview schedule involved exploring three issues: first, participants were asked about their experience of looking for employment after graduation. Second, the participants were asked about their experience during the ALMP. Third, and finally, the participants were asked about their expectations when applying for employment after they had completed the ALMP. The schedule/questions were tested in a pilot interview, found to be successful and were employed in subsequent interviews. The interviews were taped, transcribed, and superfluous material removed such as digressions and repetitions to assist the analysis. Analysis was guided by Weick (1995); Kvale (1996); and Parker (1999).

## 4. Analysis

The following quote links to a pattern which emerged in all the interviews. The participant's initial positivity was damaged by the ALMP creating a *false dawn*. The impact of the end of the ALMP was significant for all the participants.

*The only way really to learn properly is practical experience. During the placement I learned to emphasize the outcome of my ideas Caroline [the employer] wanted to maximize the impact I was having ... I thought this was great, but it was so that she could get lots done before the placement finished. After six months I was told they couldn't keep me and that was it (Participant 6, MSc graduate, employed for 2 yrs after graduation before travelling, now unemployed after participation in a six month placement).*

Unfortunately, respondent 6 lost the impetus from the placement because there was no next step prescribed. In a challenging labour market it is imperative that employment support agencies explore all options with employers to facilitate progression from ALMP to sustained employment.

*I thought I would be working on planning and strategy ... but I had to help with lots of tasks. I never really got to work on stuff I was good at. I spent a whole week updating a map archive ... maybe if things weren't so hectic I could have established myself (Respondent 2, BBS graduate, whose first experience of the work environment was the placement).*

Participant 2 had expectations that the placement would deliver the opportunity to establish themselves in an organization leading to employment. However, the nature of the ALMP meant that the participants were used for a range of tasks. The

participant was disappointed that the placement had not brought employment and/or improved the prospect of employment. This negative impact is also reflected in the responses of the following two participants:

*I had worked weekends for my sister's boss so he took me on pretty much straight after I finished college because he had applied to have the grant (from the Irish government) to pay my wages – I liked the work but it was never going to last once the grant stopped ... I still help out every now and then but not that much (Participant 9, MA Accountancy graduate, went straight into the ALMP, now in receipt of social welfare).*

and

*The programme placed me two days a week and I had loads of work to do but still there was no way they were going to take me on full-time. In the end I just got fed up the long days for no money (Participant 12, BSc Engineering graduate, unemployed for 14 months before starting the placement, subsequently immigrated).*

If a quantitative evaluation using *hard* measures was used to evaluate the ALMP experience of participant 9 and 12 the evaluation would indicate a positive outcome. The participants both secured and completed a relevant placement. Their employers were satisfied with their performance and as such the ALMP was a success. However, this paper proposes that *softer* measures help identify the psychological impact on participants. The evidence from the interviews conducted in this research that the psychological impact on participants is not positive and in some cases *deactivates* participants.

The experience of participant 12 highlights an additional challenge of ALMPs which provide placement opportunities. In the absence of an approach that incorporates social welfare provision the absence of remuneration will impact significantly on the attitude of participants. This is further highlighted by the next response:

*The placement was okay but they were never going to start paying me decent money so after [the] twelve weeks I left and started looking for work. I don't think there is much point doing the programme; I know you get experience but you have no more money and if there are no jobs whats the point* (Participant 8, Graphic Design graduate, now travelling prior to working in construction in the USA).

It is interesting to note that participant 8 didn't perceive the placement as work. Is this because of the absence of *decent money*? The placement programme this respondent participated in allowed them to continue to receive full social welfare payments. Typically, ALMPs aim to provide employment opportunities at a subsidized wage rate below the industrial norm. The purpose of these ALMPs is not to ensure an enhanced financial position but to improve prospects in the labour market. Although improved job prospects didn't materialize for participant 8 they did for a fellow ALMP participant:

*I put the placement on my CV but it didn't get me an interview. I got asked loads about my placement in an interview and that's why I think I got the job* (Participant 4, BSc in Architecture, currently working a three week with an industrial design company).

Participants in non-placement ALMPs also experienced a sense of disappointment when reflecting on their post ALMP experience. Of course it is important to note

that the interviews indicated that in the main the participants enjoyed the pre-employment programmes. The significant problem which emerged from the interviews was the absence of post-programme employment and support. The first response indicates that the pre-employment programme didn't address a number of issues relating to overcrowding in the labour market and participant confidence.

*When I finished the course I felt better about doing an interview but I wasn't sure if I could really do some of the jobs I saw advertised ... maybe if I got to the interview stage I then could have done a presentation and Q&A like we did with Suzie (HR expert). (Participant 4, BSc in Science, currently working on a short-term research project).*

The next comment captures the positivity that emerges from participation in a pre-employment ALMP but alas also the negativity post ALMP:

*Everyone had good fun doing the training and the body language session was really funny but I don't think I am any closer to getting a job. There are too many people going for the jobs and you don't even get an interview ... so whats the point (Participant 1, MBS graduate, working 20 hours week for a pharmacy chain).*

This view is replicated in the response of participant 5 who reflects on an enjoyable ALMP experience, but also the realization post ALMP that their position (or lack of position) in the labour market had not changed significantly.

*The programme offer lots of us a happy outlook on our careers but it didn't last when we finished ... when you are in the class and everyone is in good form then you start to forget about how hard it is to get a job (Participant 5, BSc Computing graduate, now in receipt of social welfare, planning to follow family in immigrating to Australia).*

Of course unemployment is a significant and puzzling challenge for policymakers. But the evidence in this paper argues that ALMPs can have a detrimental effect on participants in the absence of post ALMP support(s). The final quote presents a more positive outcome:

*The training helped with getting me into the mindset of getting a job; using my degree; and being a manager. Before I didn't know how I would get away from bar work. I still haven't got to be manager but work (a sporting goods retailer) is sending me on training and we can do things to put ourselves forward for a chance at running the store (Respondent 11, BBS graduate, currently in full-time employment).*

For this participant the progression to a different employer and one who offers progression routes and importantly support helps to maintain the impetus from the ALMP. Therefore, although difficult, ALMPs providers must engage and reengage if necessary with employers to ensure that employment opportunities are afforded to participants on the completion of the ALMP.

## **5. Discussion and recommendations**

Based on the evidence collected during this research project I make the following five recommendations in relation to ALMPs: first, the ALMP and associated policy instruments must be proofed so that they do not create negative outcomes. In many cases the ALMP led to regression for the participant. Although the ALMP provisions were beneficial to the participant the failure of the programmes to secure employment for participants leads to *deactivation*. That is, the participants

are less motivated and disengage from the labour market. Second, there is a need to focus placement opportunities in undergraduate programmes as evidence from this research indicates that a placement programme after graduation that does not lead to secure employment can have a negative impact. The provision of additional placement opportunities at undergraduate level would reduce the need for graduates to engage in placements post graduation to obtain experience. Acknowledging that the tasks/roles assigned in *specialist* placements may be significantly different to those reasonably achievable in a generic undergraduate placement; extra placement opportunities at undergraduate level would help activate graduates. Third, pre-employment programmes need to establish a link to a recruitment initiative. Otherwise the participants don't get to test their new skills. In fact the absence of recruitment opportunities can lead to a reduction in the confidence of participants. One initiative that I have observed involved a large multi-national corporation committing to taking on three participants from a pre-employment programme. In this case the company held intensive selection tests and interviews in the week after the completion of a six week pre-employment programme. Of course not all the participants secured employment but the impetus from the ALMP was not lost. Fourth, special placements incorporating a pre-employment programme offer a real opportunity for *activation* especially if policymakers are creative in their approach to finance via social welfare provision and contributions. The need to incorporate the provision of social welfare incentives for both participants and employers is crucial. Participants must be

remunerated as this creates a sense of purpose and places a value on their work. The employers must also receive a financial incentive to support the provision of remuneration. This support will facilitate the payment of a wage to participants that is above the unemployment benefit and below the industrial norm. This compromise is crucial. This payment creates incentive for the participant and proposes a sustainable wage rate to the employer without creating a perceived barrier to employment. Fifth, and finally, the period immediately after the completion of the ALMP must see focused support to maintain the confidence of participants and where possible facilitate progression in the labour market. To achieve this policy makers must work to secure support from employers and to create the maximum possible opportunities for ALMP participants to be activated in the labour market.

## **6. Conclusion**

Bensimon *et al.* (2004) proposes that to ensure an appropriate link between research and practice there is a need to study problems that are of greater relevance to policy-makers and practitioners. Therefore, this paper presents research which enhances understanding of the experience of participants in ALMPs. The recommendations presented in this paper will aid the future delivery of similar programmes. This paper proposes that evaluation using *hard* measures will typically produce a positive image of ALMPs. However, the use of *soft* measures highlights a greater complexity of impacts on the participants. The responses



collected during the interviews indicate a mixed experience for participants. Respondents found the experience of participating in the ALMPs positive in the main. However, the impact on their outlook and job prospects is not encouraging. Too often the respondents relate a view that the ALMPs were just a *short-term fix* with a limited prospect of securing employment. A criticism of ALMPs (Sihto, 2001) is that they are an opportunity for a government to reduce the employment rate by *moving* people to a different labour market classification. This creates a lower unemployment rate but fails to address the challenge of unemployment. As such the policy does not *activate* the labour market and may as indicated by the interviews *deactivate* the labour market. How? Participants receive a short-term boost to their expectations and outlook. But the anticlimax of the end of the ALMP results in a step backwards. The participants feel let down, disappointed and carry what Gray (2000) calls the *scars* of unemployment. This paper proposes the potential problem of deactivation in addition to the problems of: deadweight loss; substitution and displacement reported by Fraser (1999).

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