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Front-line work in activation and targeting of re-qualification programmes: lessons from the Czech Republic

Prímá práce s klienty v oblasti aktivace a cílenost rekvalifikačních programů - poučení z České republiky

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ABSTRACT

A paradigmatic policy change towards activation, together with currently very low rates of unemployment, made the most disadvantaged groups of unemployed people the focus of active labour market policy in the Czech Republic. The aim of including people with multiple and/or severe disadvantages in the labour market represents a new challenge for front-line workers at employment offices, as they are expected to provide their hard-to-place clients with individualised, tailored services, including well-targeted active labour market policy measures. In this paper, we analyse how successful front-line workers are in targeting re-qualification programmes at the most disadvantaged groups and which factors shape front-line work. Our findings are based on recent empirical (quantitative as well as qualitative) research in Czech active labour market policy in which we took part and on in-depth interviews on the topic that we carried out with front-line employment-office employees. We demonstrate failures in personalised front-line activation work and in targeting re-qualification programmes at disadvantaged groups and examine the underlying factors (e.g. governance reforms in activation, insufficient personnel resources, emphasis on coercion and standardisation of front-line work).

ABSTRAKT

V důsledku paradigmatické změny politiky směrem k aktivaci a současné nízké míry nezaměstnanosti se do centra pozornosti aktivní politiky trhu práce v České republice dostaly nejvíce znevýhodněné skupiny nezaměstnaných. Cíl začlenit skupiny s četnými a/nebo závažnými znevýhodněními na trh práce představuje pro pracovníky Úřadu práce, kteří jsou s klienty v přímém styku, novou výzvu. Očekává se od nich totiž, že svým těžko umístitelným klientům poskytnou individualizované, na míru šité služby, a to včetně dobrého zacílení nástrojů aktivní politiky trhu práce. V textu se zabýváme otázkou, nakolik se těmto pracovníkům daří cílit rekvalifikační programy k nejvíce znevýhodněným skupinám, a také faktory, jež ovlivňují podobu přímé práce s nezaměstnanými. Naše zjištění vycházejí z nedávno uskutečněných empirických (kvantitativních i kvalitativních) šetření české aktivní politiky trhu práce, na nichž jsme se podíleli, a z hloubkových rozhovorů provedených s pracovníky Úřadu práce, kteří jsou v přímém kontaktu s uchazeči o zaměstnání. Poukazujeme na selhání v oblasti poskytování

KEYWORDS

Activation; front-line work; targeting; re-qualification programmes; Czech Republic

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Aktivace; přímá práce s klienty; cílenost; rekvalifikační programy; Česká republika

individuálně přizpůsobených aktivačních služeb i v oblasti cílenosti rekvalifikačních programů na znevýhodněné skupiny a rozebíráme přitom faktory, jež za těmito selháními stojí (např. změny řízení ve sféře aktivity, nedostatečné personální zdroje, důraz na donucení a standardizace přímé práce s nezaměstnanými).

Introduction

With an 'activation turn' in employment policies that has been initiated since the 1990s (Bonoli, 2012), the target groups of activation and active labour market policies (ALMPs) became more heterogeneous and often include people with multiple disadvantages that make their labour market inclusion difficult: in addition to low qualifications and lack of work experience, these include health, psychical and social problems, addictions, debt, living in socially excluded communities etc. (Caswell et al., 2017; Van Berkel et al., 2017).

Addressing such complex issues requires appropriate policy adaptations like individualisation of the service and a complex approach that includes support for the personal involvement and motivation of the clients, building the relationship of trust between them and front-line activation workers and, better targeting ALMP measures at these disadvantaged groups.

In this paper we explore two closely related questions. The first one is how policy context, including the governance of activation, has influenced the quality of front-line work with disadvantaged groups of the unemployed in the Czech Republic. The second one is how appropriately front-line work addresses the needs of the unemployed through targeted ALMP measures, in this case re-qualifications/vocational training programmes. More generally, this study contributes to better understanding of the links between individual case work and targeted approach to training and how these are affected by the governance context.

The Czech Republic represents an interesting case. There was a relatively late development of activation policies which still remain rather modest. In recent years there has been considerable improvement in labour market performance evidenced, and the unemployment rate dropped to one of the lowest level in Europe: General unemployment rate dropped from 7.0% in 2013 to 2.2% in 2018 (CZSO, 2019). In this context, some of the long-standing difficulties in implementing individual case work, such as lack of personal resources and high workload, become less significant, while other complex issues, such as the challenge of dealing with unemployed people with multiple barriers, grow more important. The text is structured as follows: in the next section we discuss theoretical assumptions about the shifts in activation policies and their governance and the implications for front-line activation work. Next, we explain the methodology of our study. In the following section we provide empirical evidence on developments and dilemmas in front-line work with the unemployed in the Czech Republic and how this influences, among others, distribution/targeting of re-qualification programmes. In the last section we conclude and discuss policy implications.

Theoretical assumptions

Increasing role of activation at the front line

The three overlapping shifts in ALMP accompany the increasing role of individual work in activation policies. The first one is the growing emphasis on targeting ALMPs at the most disadvantaged groups (Brown & Koettl, 2015; Caswell et al., 2017). Targeted measures are expected to be more effective because of minimising the deadweight loss effects (e.g. Brown & Koettl, 2015; Calmfors et al., 2002). Next, providing access to jobs for those who are in some way disadvantaged and reducing social exclusion of vulnerable groups are desirable objectives: participation in a programme can lead to enhancing, transition or springboard effects (Brown, 2015; Brown & Koettl, 2015). Such effects

could be particularly strong thanks to the re-qualification/vocational training programmes that may improve employability in the long run.

Second, activation measures targeted at those detached from the labour market presuppose an individual approach at the front-line level, in order to meet the heterogeneous individual needs of the disadvantaged groups and provide them with well-tailored measures (e.g. Lødemel & Moreira, 2014; Van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007). Through a complex approach, typically with the use of wrap-around social services and social work. When possible, individual case work is a preferable method of activation that – among other – aims to change attitudes and behaviour (e.g. Andersen et al., 2017; Van Berkel et al., 2017). Third, there is a shift in governance of activation that includes decentralisation (shifting responsibility to the local level), marketisation and competition (contracting out the services), new public management methods (goal setting, incentivising and monitoring) and networking (involving multiple actors and their cooperation); this is all expected to ensure tailored measures, adjusted to the individual needs of the clients, provided at reasonable costs (e.g. Sirovátka et al., 2019; Van Berkel et al., 2011). Because of these reforms, the front-line level of policy making is not only the distribution point of the programmes, but more importantly the point of enacting the programme logic. Central to this logic is the aim to tailor services to the individual needs of job-seekers and employers, with respect to the contexts in which the interventions are enacted (Considine & Lewis, 2010; Van Berkel et al., 2017).

Pitfalls in individual work in activation

Lipsky (2010) distinguished various types of problems arising in providing public services at the front-line level that may lead to failures in servicing the individual clients and their needs appropriately. The first problem is inadequacy of the resources: the ratio of the clients to front-line workers (high caseloads), lack of time, competencies and training. Another reason for inadequacy in work targeting individuals is organisational goals and performance measures that may go against client-centred goals.

Faced with inadequate resources and inadequacy of the organisational goals, the front-line workers develop specific patterns of practice, routines that enable them to solve the excess of demand for services. For example, they ration services by providing incomplete information, raise costs of service for clients (economic, psychological) or have clients line up in an imaginary queue to receive the service. Assessing clients' eligibility, monitoring clients' conduct and using different forms of screening to help to reduce the caseloads is an associated routine; one widespread strategy is rationing scarce resources by referring clients to other agencies if they need more complex services.

The above obstacles and practices make it more difficult to adjust programmes to the needs of the target group and also affect the mechanisms of ascribing the unemployed into the ALMP programmes (targeting); unemployed people who are better equipped with human and social capital are thus more likely to enter ALMPs than those who are less equipped. In addition, front-line workers differentiate between clients and 'choose for service those who seem most likely to succeed in terms of bureaucratic success criteria' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 61). The reasons for this practice are manifold: they intend to make the public employment agency look more credible to employers or are a strategy to overcome recruitment difficulties with the long-term unemployed and people with multiple disadvantages (Nicaise et al., 1995).

The studies on front-line work that arose as a reflection of the recent developments in activation policies emphasise some specific aspects of activation front-line work, in particular the interaction between individualised activation work and the governance/organisational contexts. Policy reforms in the area of activation implemented the more disciplinary and regulatory approach formerly used for the easier-to-place unemployed to the harder-to-place and vulnerable unemployed (Andersen et al., 2017). With the focus on disciplining the unemployed seen in many countries (use of coercive and punitive elements), the policies contain both 'people-processing and people-changing

technologies' that are rather standardised and not highly compatible with a genuinely individualised approach responsive to the needs of clients (Caswell et al., 2017).

This controversy between the genuinely individualised and the coercive approaches raises difficult choices for front-line workers that are very much influenced by different country contexts (Bredgaard, 2015; Caswell et al., 2017; Considine & Lewis, 2010; Van Berkel et al., 2018). The creaming off practices do represent a strategy that enables front-line workers to meet strict assessment criteria; this is attaining the required success rate within the strict timeframe (Van Berkel et al., 2018).

Linked to the above trend contradictory demands emerge for standardised administrative work processes and individual counselling, efficiency and service quality within customer-oriented bureaucracies (Korczyński in Penz et al., 2017). In New Public Management (NPM)-managed bureaucracies in particular, the role of the indicators for internal performance is increasing, typically with pure focus on targets which completely neglect the sustainability aspects of labour market placements (e.g. Jantz et al., 2015, p. 975).

Demands and failures of professionalism

In order to meet the complex demands on individual case work, space is increasing for professional competencies to be involved at the front-line level (e.g. Van Berkel & Knies, 2018; Van Berkel et al., 2018). These professional competencies for individualised intervention based on effective use of discretion involve: (i) belief system (beliefs, values, ethical standards), (ii) service technology (needs and behaviour assessment, choice of adequate intervention, communicative and affective competences such as empathy, motivation and conflict solving), (iii) staff-client cooperative relations based on mutual trust (Andersen et al., 2017; Nothdurfter, 2016; Van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012 with a reference to Hassenfeld).

The above components are interrelated. The individual treatment/service involves interventions aimed at ensuring or changing individual attitudes and compliance, based on evaluation of individual behaviour: discretion is thus more important (Van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012) which necessarily involves moral judgements on clients and consequently categorising and classification them as deserving and undeserving of services (e.g. Caswell et al., 2017, p. 16).

The interventions aimed at changing motivations, attitudes and behaviour resulted in a growing demand for communicative skills and creativity on the part of state officials at the front. Front-line workers are also required to engage in intersubjective service work that involve affective competencies. 'They have to motivate, to feel empathy, but also to be demanding and to resolve conflicts' (Korczyński and Bishop in Penz et al., 2017).

On top of that, in order to change the attitudes and behaviour of the unemployed, it is important to make the 'customer' feel comfortable, to reduce anxieties, to establish an atmosphere of mutual trust (Penz et al., 2017). Citizens' trust in the solutions chosen and the client's involvement in the decision-making, trust and empowerment can be decisive elements for success (Andersen et al., 2017). However, people-processing practices associated with work-first-oriented activation work make it difficult to establish an atmosphere of mutual trust, to gain trust, commitment and the genuine cooperation of the clients.

In particular, the work-first approach involves categorising the clients based on employability and moral criteria and treating differently the categories of the unemployed distinguished as good/deserving and bad/undeserving (Brodkin, 2011; Wright, 2013) where the opinion of 'front-line workers as situated agents' is important (Nothdurfter, 2016).

With the NPM reforms and practices, the organisational characteristics of front-line work become important. The typical trend coming with activation policies is an integration of the services (institutional mergers) like integration of benefit administration and employment services provision. Such reforms have implications for the way the front-line activation work is delivered, e.g. on how Individual Action Plans are used. In the 'integration model' in particular, tensions emerge between personalised services ('servicing client techniques') and rule-guided technologies

(‘processing-people techniques’) which involve behaviour assessing and sanctioning the clients (Van Berkel & Knies, 2018).

Data and methodology

Our empirical findings are based on a combination of data sources and methods. First, we use secondary sources that mainly include qualitative information gained in 14 focus group discussions involving 11–17 participants that were conducted in 2017 at all regional employment offices (189 participants in total), and quantitative data from an on-line survey conducted in 2017 at all (78) local employment offices. In this survey, 4,788 employees were invited, of whom 1,999 completed the questionnaire (42% response rate). Of the questionnaires received, 668 questionnaires were filled-in by respondents who do not perform individual front-line work and thus were excluded. The final sample, limited by self-selection bias, included 1,331 participants/front-line workers. The findings from the focus group discussions and the on-line survey capture various aspects of the designing and implementation of employment services and ALMP measures, including front-line work (Rákczyová et al., 2019). We also use quantitative information gained through an analysis of registry data of the unemployed and participants in re-qualification programmes in 2016,¹ which include information on targeting, quality and estimates of the net effects of the programmes (Hora et al., 2020).

The authors of this study took part in the above field research studies. We are aware of a key data limitation: the cited studies focused on a broad range of aspects related to implementation of ALMP measures that may affect their effectiveness (objectives, instruments, resources, governance); individual front-line work was only one of the issues in focus. For this reason, after completion of the secondary analysis of these sources (where our focus was on the links between governance of ALMPs, front-line work and targeting re-qualifications), we conducted in-depth individual interviews with selected front-line workers in order to gain deeper insight in individual work: this was our primary source of qualitative data. The interviews (13) were conducted at different local and regional employment offices during 2019. Although the data are not representative in a statistical sense, they do provide a representation of all important types of positions performing front-line work (job-mediators, counsellors, psychologists). We invited those respondents who had been identified as potentially rich sources of information during the previous research. Among these respondents was also one counsellor from an NGO working with hard-to-place unemployed. The content analysis of the interviews was conducted using conceptual/axial coding, with the aim to identify the themes and subthemes and their broader contexts.

Data collection in the above field studies, both the qualitative and the quantitative ones, was carried out in compliance with the guidelines of the Ethical Code of the Research Institute of Labour and Social Affairs. In particular, the interviewees and respondents were informed about our strict compliance with the principle of confidentiality and data pseudonymisation.²

The strength of our approach and data is exactly in the combination of qualitative and quantitative data and methods of their analysis; we are able to assess the targeting of re-qualifications at disadvantaged groups of the unemployed, clarify how individual front-line work affects targeting/delivery of the programmes, and how front-line work is affected by the governance context.

The failures in the individual front-line work and targeting re-qualifications: evidence from the Czech Republic

Following the theoretical assumptions, we can identify three interrelated groups of factors that contribute to failures in the individual work and in targeting re-qualification programmes in the Czech Republic: first, the governance reforms in activation, second, insufficient personnel resources (number of staff, time, competencies) and third, the coercive nature of activation work, all these leading to de-professionalisation of front-line individual work.

Governance and pitfalls of activation

Distribution of ALMP programmes to the unemployed in the Czech Republic is guided by a Methodological Guidance by the General Directorate of the Employment Office, where preference for the disadvantaged unemployed – especially long-term unemployed – is emphasised. Room is also provided to the front-line workers for individual assessment of the multiple disadvantages (social and occupational disabilities) of the unemployed. The definition of target groups is, however, broad and makes the selection of more employable candidates within the target groups relatively easy (Kotíková, 2017; Rákoczyová et al., 2019).

Another factor contributing to the rather low targeting of re-qualification programmes at job-seekers with multiple disadvantages could be an emphasis on quantitative performance indicators at the expense of qualitative indicators.³ Employment office staff specified that quantitative performance indicators typically looked at the number of face-to-face sessions and mediation and counselling activities:

These indicators are different for each department and are calculated per member of staff. Here at mediation we've been ordered to have 300 interactions per employee a month. That's not quite possible if you don't even have 300 of them in the database. The same clients would have to rotate for us to be able to meet the number. (interview, front-line staff, mediation department, local employment office)

Lack of cooperation with other relevant actors providing social work also plays a role. There is a gap in the system of individual case work with job-seekers in this regard: neither the Employment Act provides for integration of social work within job mediation services at employment offices, nor does the Social Services Act envisage that social services providers would deliver any employment support services. Finally, the coordination between employment offices and municipal and non-governmental social workers in addressing job-seekers' complex problems is not clearly defined either. Thus, social workers are not systematically involved in tackling the complex problems related to employment, although cooperation with social workers often takes place (Interviews with front-line staff at employment offices).

In practice, employment office front-line workers often try to suppress such problems and refer/shift them to the other agencies, like to the social workers of municipalities or NGOs working with the specific groups of clients. Such a strategy, however, does not guarantee but rather precludes coordinated case work with these clients.

Nevertheless, employment offices cooperate with external parties. Where cooperation does take place, typically by outsourcing counselling services, a limited follow-up and synergies are observed. Some cooperating parties have noted that when these outsourced interventions come to an end, the results achieved by the external counsellors are not always leveraged ('the kick-start goes to waste'):

The client returns back to the employment office from us and there's no special care and no trust-based approach happening there. Besides, the mediators are sometimes rather casual about their work, they've got blinkers on, so it's only a matter of time before it fizzles out. (an interview with a consultant from an external cooperating agency)

Finally, there are some other governance problems related to financing the programmes. The tenders for vocational training courses stipulate the price of the courses as grounds for choosing a preferred provider: consequently, insufficient tailor-made small-scale programmes are available (for example, the number of courses for the low-skilled unemployed is very limited) and their quality is variable. Re-qualification courses 'on choice' by the client,⁴ which are not required to be contracted based on tender, represent a certain way to overcome the obstacles associated with price-based preferences and the unpredictable interval of the calls. On the other hand, this type of re-qualification (by choice) is leading to a more significant effect of creaming-off due to self-selection of more motivated and better equipped candidates as well as due to the selection of the candidates by the employers (Rákoczyová et al., 2019).

Personnel resources and de-professionalisation of individual front-line work

The common problem of front-line work is the work overload. Sirovátka et al. (2019) reported an average of 122 job-seekers per front-line worker in 2018, which is a significant improvement since 2015 when it was 311 job-seekers (Sirovátka et al., 2019). However, in connection with increasing paperwork, many front-line workers continue to perceive the space for individual case work as insufficient. Besides, the 2011–2012 reform (transfer of the social assistance agenda from municipalities to the employment office) significantly reduced the space for social work previously carried out by municipalities. This was due to marked cuts in staff assigned to this agenda under the organisational reform. This one-off reduction in staff numbers has not yet been fully offset (interviews with front-line employment-office workers).

With a decreasing unemployment rate and improvements in terms of workload, the lack of competencies for individual case work (the qualitative capacity) becomes a more urgent problem than the quantitative capacity. In the Czech Republic, front-line staff performing individual work (job mediators and counsellors of employment offices) are not required to be qualified in social work: any type of education at the secondary level is required for the positions of mediators (ISCED 4), and higher vocational education (ISCED 5) is required for the positions of counsellors. There is no systemic training provided to front-line workers in individual work. They are required to follow the standard courses for public servants (mainly focused on legislation like the Employment Act and Administrative Rules/Správní řád).

We used to have an education system of some kind, where there was first a week of psycho-social training and then there were follow-up courses. Now, basically, only legal training is required. Add-ons are more a matter for the manager, how he can motivate people to further educate themselves, and how opportunities are created by training centres. (interview, front-line staff/counsellor, local employment office)

Training in individual work is provided mainly when workers participate in ESF-funded projects. In prevailing practice, for new employees, guidance in individual work with clients is provided by more experienced colleagues/mentors.

This is dealt with by training the employee: we have a sort of adaptation process where he goes through e-learning training and also does a rotation in the employment office, where he looks at how different agendas look like and then he is trained by his colleagues. It's going very fast: one week you're just on the other side of the counter and the next week you match people with jobs and you learn as you go. (interview, front-line staff/counsellor, local employment office)

The situation described above emerged due to the deliberate de-professionalisation of front-line work that was initiated in 2011 as a part of far reaching 'social reform' implemented by the centre-right government. Before the 2011 centralisation reform the 78 local employment offices had discretion in deciding their organisational structure and staffing. They mostly preferred to hire front-line staff with higher or university education in humanities and social sciences, especially for the positions of counsellors, and offered adequate salaries. The reform shifted responsibility for staff recruitment to 14 regional offices. This implied rigorous application of low qualification requirements for front-line workers and, the creation of barriers for hiring university graduates for these positions: The low pay grade of these workers corresponding to secondary-school professions makes these positions less attractive for more qualified workers. On top of that, the positions of counsellor and mediator were later subjected to the Public Servants Act (2015).

The way counselling used to work was that, in the hierarchy of the labour office, there were mediators and above them special counselling. This was also differentiated by pay grade. Under Minister Drábek, it was said that any office worker is actually a counsellor; that is, there is nothing special about it, it is necessary to line it all up. They made the mediators consultants for mediation and made us consultants for everything, depending on the agenda. With the Civil Service Act, this got completely mixed up: recruitment is managed by the regional office. It proceeds according to what is officially defined for those positions, that is completed secondary education with no specification of qualification requirements. (an interview with a local employment office counsellor)

Finally, as part of the reforms, the position of psychologist at points of contact was abolished, though sometimes employees in other roles have qualifications in psychology. Psychologists thus work only at some regional offices.

Work-first approach, standardisation and stereotypes in individual case work

According to employment-office workers, the key obstacle to targeting ALMP measures at disadvantaged job-seekers is the low motivation of a large number of job-seekers to work, as well as to participate in ALMP programmes and projects. Some staff members highlighted two reasons in particular for the low motivation and uncooperative attitude of these job-seekers. One larger group of registered job-seekers has bad work habits and/or tends to avoid work and abuse the benefits system. Another group has adopted an attitude of resignation, have low self-confidence, are not well oriented, have limited social ties and also have other social problems. These two categories only partially overlap (Kotíková, 2017; Rákoczyová et al., 2019).

It's not always people who don't want to work. For example, some struggle with social phobias, fears of certain situations that they then try to avoid (and it appears as if they were avoiding work). Some experienced bullying in their previous job. And multiple disadvantages. Often it is found that they have mental problems, deteriorating health. (an interview with a regional employment office psychologist)

The staff experience considerable work-related stress that often leads to burnout. Moreover, these circumstances also give rise to or reproduce negative stereotypes of unmotivated clients. This is further reinforced by the favourable situation in the labour market. In many cases, these consequences (stress and stereotypes) lead to the neglect of clients seen as less motivated, including those whose motivation is still assessed to some extent as influenceable (Rákoczyová et al., 2019).

They're overburdened with problematic dealings with some clients, this exhausts them and they then don't feel okay when dealing with those who'd like to receive help and perhaps even some optimism, because some really just need to have that optimism infused. This all sometimes leads to an inadequate approach to clients. (an interview with the head of a regional employment office)

Mostly, consider individual work with such clients as well as providing these clients with ALMPs to be ineffective. They prefer to increase pressure on these clients, asking them to intensify job-searching, to control them and to use sanctions as a more promising/effective strategy in these cases (interviews with front-line workers).

The sanctioning is therefore becoming a more prominent strategy: despite a significant drop in the level of unemployment, the absolute number of sanctions has remained at the same relatively high level since 2010. The number of the unemployed excluded from the register based on sanctions because of a failure to cooperate with the employment office between 2014 and 2018 was between 85–90 thousand every year. Since the number of the registered unemployed dropped from 541 thousand to 232 thousand in this period, the percentage of those who were sanctioned and excluded increased from 15% to 37% of the unemployment stock. In contrast, the number of all ALMP participants dropped from about 116–46 thousand, i.e. it remained about 20% of the unemployment stock (see Graph 1).

In correspondence with this prevailing coercive and punishing strategy, the Individual Action Plans are generally considered a main tool with which to impose sanctions on the clients rather than a tool of individualised treatment/policy delivery.

The IAP should serve the client, so that he had some vision, but is used "as a defence against clients", as a tool to exclude them from the register. (interview, front-line staff/counsellor, local employment office)

The Individual Action Plan is perceived by colleagues from mediation as something they must do. The advantage that they see is that there is the possibility of sanction: the possibility to exclude a job-seeker if he doesn't want to comply with it. But this undermines the whole principle of counselling, I call it sanction counselling. (interview, methodological advisor in a ESF project)

The identification of clients' needs and development of a relationship of trust are hindered by the characteristics of the premises in which counselling (especially sessions with the mediation counsellor) takes place. These rather correspond to the coercive strategy: the premises are often shared offices in which several interviews take place simultaneously, with the mediators usually being separated from the client by a physical barrier (screen).

Targeting re-qualifications: neglect of the disadvantaged unemployed

In consequence of the above failures in the individual work, there is a selection bias in favour of better equipped unemployed while disadvantaged groups of the unemployed are underrepresented in re-qualification programmes that, potentially, could bring about the best effects in terms of employability.

We will now demonstrate this finding using data on the participants of re-qualification programmes from 2016. Our analysis compares the characteristics of participants who entered re-qualification programmes in 2016 against those of all registered unemployed: in this case we include both those unemployed who were registered at the beginning of 2016 (1st January) – this is 'stock' – and those who entered into unemployment registers at least once during 2016 (this is 'inflows'). The reason for combining the unemployment stock at the beginning of 2016 with inflows registered later in 2016 is that all unemployed persons who had a theoretical chance to participate in the programme are included in our sample.

Comparison of the structure of the participants and the sample of the other registered unemployed is expressed by a condensed measure: 'targeting index'. If the value of the index equals 1, this means that the specific category/group of the unemployed is represented among the participants of re-qualification proportionally, i.e. by the same share as among all registered unemployed. If the value is higher than 1, this means that the group/category is overrepresented among the participants when compared to all unemployed, while a value lower than 1 means that the group/category is underrepresented among the participants of re-qualification programmes.

We distinguish two types of re-qualification programmes here. The first is 'standard' re-qualifications organised by the employment office (regardless whether these are outsourced from other providers). The other type is re-qualifications 'by choice', which are the programmes chosen by the unemployed themselves but not organised by the employment office; the employment office in these cases only approves participation in the programme and covers the costs of the programme. The reason why we distinguish these two types of the programme is that individual case work with the unemployed typically plays a more important role in the case of standard re-qualifications, while self-selection by the participants themselves is more significant in the case of the re-qualifications by choice. As a matter of fact, front-line workers do not influence recruitment for re-qualifications by choice. The recruitment for standard re-qualifications is a highly structured process: front-line workers from local/contact employment offices recommend the candidates for the programme, based on individual assessment, and the final decision is made by a commission at the regional employment office where heads of the main departments are represented. The selection criteria are twofold: first, cases with clearly good employment chances are excluded. Second, among the rest of the candidates, the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme are the guiding principles: the most important factor is the chance of the candidates to get a corresponding job in the re-qualification field soon after the programme completion.

There is a pressure that re-qualifications should be 100 percent effective in terms of subsequent job placement, including for the long-term unemployed. This doesn't seem meaningful to us because these people are not adjusted to systematic training. Although we succeed in motivating them for the training they still may fail, some percentage of them. (interview with a counsellor at the local employment office)

Such criteria mean that a great part of disadvantaged unemployed is omitted. According to our findings, Re-qualification programmes are targeted more at the unemployed with upper secondary and tertiary education than at those with primary and lower secondary education and more at the short – and middle-term unemployed than at the long-term unemployed (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Targeting of re-qualification programmes by demographic variables (the structure of the unemployed and programme participants and targeting indexes).

	Structure in percent			Targeting indexes	
	Unemployed	Standard re-qual.	Re-qual. by choice	Standard re-qualifications	Re-qualifications by choice
Women	49.7	54.9	44.7	1.1	0.9
Men	50.3	45.1	55.3	0.9	1.1
<i>Education</i>					
Primary education	24.3	13.4	12.9	0.6	0.5
Lower secondary	38.5	34.0	32.9	0.9	0.9
Upper secondary	26.3	39.7	39.1	1.5	1.5
Tertiary	10.8	12.9	15.1	1.2	1.4
<i>Health status</i>					
Good health	72.5	72.6	83.1	1	1.1
Disadvantaged	13.6	15.2	9.6	1.1	0.7
Partial invalidity (pension)	7.1	7.3	3.4	1	0.5
Full invalidity (pension)	3.9	2.9	1.7	0.7	0.4
No answer	2.9	2.0	2.2	x	X
<i>Current unemployment period</i>					
Short-term (1-90 days)	23.0	23.2	29.5	1	1.3
Middle-term (91-365 days)	43.0	53.8	53.0	1.2	1.2
Long-term (366+ days)	34.0	23.0	17.5	0.7	0.5
Absolute number	835,487	10,376	6,785	x	x

Source: Data OK Práce 2016, in Hora et al. (2020, adapted).

These differences are more pronounced in the case of re-qualifications by choice than in the case of standard re-qualifications, but the differences are still not very significant. A certain difference is apparent in the case of the unemployed with disabilities/disadvantages regarding their health status: they are actually proportionally represented in standard re-qualifications although they are underrepresented in re-qualifications by choice. This demonstrates the effort by employment office front-line staff to focus more on a category that is often considered more motivated to cooperate and simultaneously perceived by front-line workers as more deserving because of the objective disadvantage that is out of their control.

Similarly, unemployed younger than 20 years old as well as those over 50, school-leavers without work experience, unemployed people registered longer than six months, women who are pregnant or have children younger than 9 months old and individuals in need of special help are underrepresented in re-qualification programmes. The differences between those in standard re-qualifications and those in re-qualifications by choice are small, except the category 'unemployed more than 6 months' which is only negligibly represented in re-qualifications by choice (see Table 2).

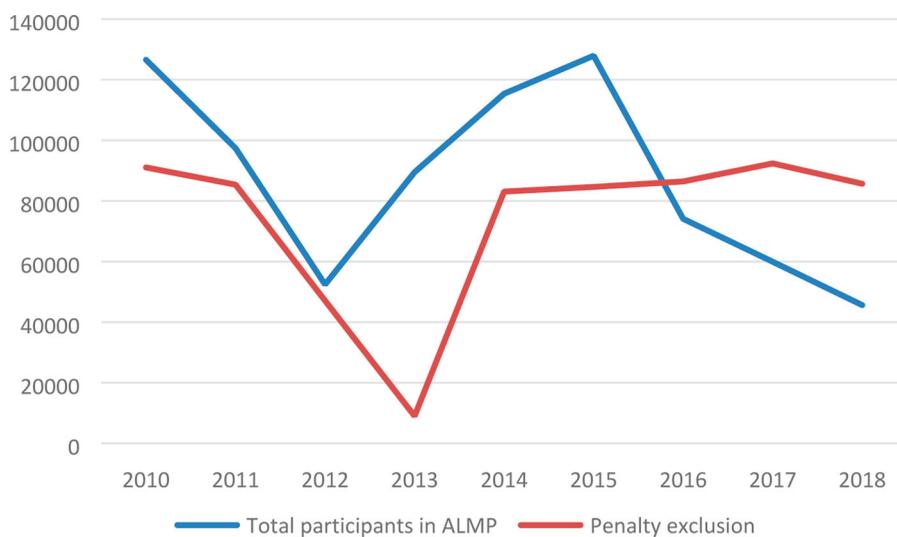
On the other hand, individuals caring about children younger than 15 years old are overrepresented; the disabled are proportionally represented in standard re-qualifications. This can be again explained by the fact that the unemployed caring about children (mostly women) represent

Table 2. Targeting of re-qualification programmes on the selected disadvantaged groups (targeting indexes).

Re-qualifications	Standard	By choice
Younger than 20 years old	0.3	0.2
Over 50 years old	1	0.6
School-leavers	0.6	0.7
School-leavers (tertiary level, younger than 30 years old)	0.7	0.6
Women – pregnant and children up to 9 months old	0.4	0.3
Individuals caring for children younger than 15 years old	1.4	1.3
Unemployed registered for longer than 6 months	0.8	0.2
Disabled	1	0.5
Individuals in need of special help (ex-offenders, socially excluded)	0.7	0.5

Source: Data OK Práce 2016, in Hora et al. (2020, adapted).

Note: Total sample (N = 835,487), standard re-qualifications (N = 10,376), re-qualifications by choice (N = 6,785).



Graph 1. ALMP participants and unemployed excluded due to sanctions in 2010–2018. Source: MLSA (2019a) and MLSA (2019b).

a category which is perceived as deserving the intervention and participation in re-qualification programmes, especially if there is a work-career break due to childrearing responsibilities.⁵ This category of unemployed is also perceived as quite motivated to participate in these programmes and not as difficult to work with: most women obviously wish to return to work after parental leave.

Conclusions

Over the last decade, activation and employment policies have become concerned with marginalised groups that include people with multiple disadvantages. The challenges emerging are making appropriate policy adaptations: an individualised and complex approach leading to well-tailored and targeted ALMP measures.

The studies originally highlighted the dilemmas for front-line workers in implementing activation policies that emerge from scarcity of the resources, ambiguity and multiplicity of the policy goals; the more recent studies on front-line work, however, focus more on the interaction between the various aspects of individualised activation work and governance/organisational contexts. In our empirical study, we analyse how front-line-level work in activation succeeds in targeting re-qualification programmes at those most disadvantaged and what factors of the governance context are important.

We identify three groups of factors that contribute to the failures in the individual work and in targeting re-qualification programmes since they lead to de-professionalisation of front-line work: governance reforms in activation, insufficient personnel resources and the coercive nature and standardisation of activation work. The Czech governance reforms in activation emphasise quantitative, simple objectives and cost-containment. They are leading to standardisation, de-professionalisation and de-individualisation of front-line work, contradicting the increasing demand for individually tailored and targeted policies. The other problem is a lack of cooperation with other actors for whom the legislative framework is actually absent. The centralisation reforms of 2011 and the Public Servant Act (2015) brought about cuts in personnel and rigorous application of lower qualification standards that are currently insufficient for individual work with hard-to-place clients. The work-first approach and standardisation of individual work promotes coercive practices in activation. The negative stereotype of the unmotivated, uncooperative client constructed by employment office staff is a particularly important barrier to their participation in ALMP measures. Because of the

deficits in individual work analysed above, there is a selection bias in favour of better equipped unemployed people while disadvantaged groups of the unemployed are underrepresented in the programmes of re-qualifications that could bring about the best effects in terms of employability. On the other hand, the disabled and mothers of children under 15 are not underrepresented in these re-qualification programmes. This may indicate that in their case the negative stereotype does not apply because the 'objective' barriers to employment are apparent.

Our study documents the impacts of governance framework on front-line activation work and on targeting re-qualification programmes at disadvantaged groups. The policy implications are as follows: 1. assessment of activation effects should take into account service quality, targeting measures towards vulnerable groups and net effects in job-placement; 2. individual front-line work should be professionalised and include qualification standards and systematic staff training in skills needed for individual case work and 3. cooperation with other actors like municipality social workers and NGOs should be strengthened and the creation of a legislative base for such cooperation would be beneficial.

Notes

1. For this year data on targeting are available.
2. Assessment by an ethical board is not obligatory in the Czech Republic.
3. In addition, it is considerably more challenging and laborious to fulfil the qualitative indicators than the quantitative ones when dealing with complicated job-seekers. This reduces the effort that employment-office workers invest in case work with these clients (see below).
4. The client can choose any course which is not organised by employment office her/him-self and gets reimbursement of the costs of the course.
5. Parental leave in the Czech Republic is extremely long; it, as well as parental benefit, can be provided until the child is 4 years old.

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