Evaluating Jobseeker's Allowance: A Summary of the Research Findings

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements v
The Authors vi
Summary 1

1 Introduction 5
  1.1 Policy Background 5
  1.2 Evaluation Design 6

2 Speed of leaving unemployment 7
  2.1 Increase in movements off benefit 7
  2.2 Changes in duration of unemployment spells 7
  2.3 Other factors influencing movements off benefit 8

3 Destinations and experiences of those leaving unemployment 9
  3.1 Destinations of former jobseekers 9
  3.2 Factors influencing destinations of former jobseekers 10
  3.3 Experiences of benefit leavers 10

4 Jobsearch behaviour 11
  4.1 Job applications 11
  4.2 Jobsearch methods 11
  4.3 Barriers to jobsearch 12

5 JSA interventions 13
  5.1 The New Jobseeker Interview 13
  5.2 The Jobseeker’s Agreement 13
  5.3 TheFortnightly Jobsearch Review 13
  5.4 Clients’ attitudes towards ES 14
  5.5 Operational issues 14
  5.6 Consistency of delivery 15
  5.7 Changes over the post-JSA period 15

6 Understanding of rules and obligations amongst jobseekers 17
  6.1 Understanding of the ‘contract’ 17
  6.2 Agreement with ‘conditionality’ 17
  6.3 Understanding of disallowance and sanction 17
  6.4 Understanding of the rules 18
  6.5 Experiences of disallowed and sanctioned claimants 18
  6.6 The impact of disallowance and sanction 19
  6.7 Staff attitudes towards disallowance and sanction 19
7 Activities whilst claiming 21
7.1 Participation in part-time work whilst claiming 21
7.2 Knowledge of the rules associated with part-time work whilst claiming 21
7.3 Jobseekers’ attitudes towards part-time work whilst claiming 21
7.4 The impact of part-time work whilst claiming upon movements off benefit 22
7.5 The impact of the Back to Work Bonus 22
7.6 Participation in voluntary work whilst claiming 22
7.7 Knowledge of the rules associated with voluntary work whilst claiming 23
7.8 Jobseeker’s attitudes towards voluntary work whilst claiming 23
7.9 The impact of voluntary work whilst claiming upon movements off benefit 23
7.10 Participation in courses of study whilst claiming 24
7.11 Knowledge of the rules associated with studying whilst claiming 24
7.12 The impact of studying whilst claiming upon movements off benefit 24

8 Partners and unemployment 25
8.1 Characteristics of jobseekers’ partners 25
8.2 The impact of the economic activity of individuals on their partners 25
8.3 Other factors influencing the economic activity of partners 25

9 Conclusion 27

Endnotes 29

References 33

Other research reports available 35

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1 Destinations of JSA leavers 9
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SUMMARY

Introduction
Jobseeker’s Allowance was introduced in 1996 and replaced Unemployment Benefit (UB) and Income Support (IS) as the benefit for unemployed people seeking work.

In order to evaluate the impact of JSA against its objectives, a large-scale programme of research was conducted. This report draws together the key findings of the evaluation as a whole.

Speed of leaving unemployment
JSA led to a large increase in movements off the claimant count in the first year of operation. Thereafter, it has resulted in smaller but significant increases in movements off the claimant count, which are accounted for by increased movement off benefit in areas of low unemployment and amongst longer-term clients.¹

The likelihood of leaving benefit remained highest during the first eight weeks of unemployment, with the ‘average’ spell of unemployment being approximately three months. Otherwise, the relationship between social and demographic characteristics, and duration of unemployment, remained the same. A balance between flexibility regarding working conditions and focused jobsearch continued to be important in securing work.

Destinations and experiences of those leaving unemployment
After JSA, just over two-thirds of people who left benefit moved into work, compared with just under two-thirds before the introduction of JSA. The duration of a client’s unemployment and the level of local unemployment both influence the destinations of those who cease claiming JSA. The majority of return-to-work jobs remained stable both before and after JSA, especially for those who had experienced only a short spell of unemployment.

Former jobseekers were less likely to return to benefit after the introduction of JSA; and those who had left benefit for work were less likely to return to unemployment-related benefit when they lost their jobs. This is accounted for by the increase in the proportion of people who took up part-time work or who experienced health problems.

In general, JSA has had little impact upon the job satisfaction levels of those leaving unemployment, despite the fact that return-to-work earnings have fallen.

¹ The period of observation for this latter research was summer 1997 to spring 1998.
Since the introduction of JSA, there have been fewer inactive clients. More jobseekers are making regular job applications under JSA; and clients in high unemployment areas are now making as many job applications as those in low unemployment areas. However, the increase in job applications made by those in high unemployment areas has not led to a corresponding increase in movements into work for this group.

In general, the jobsearch strategies of unemployed people changed little with the introduction of JSA. However, there was a significant increase in the numbers of jobseekers contacting employers directly, suggesting that jobsearch behaviour has become more active since the introduction of JSA.

The content of the New Jobseeker Interview had improved under JSA, with a greater number of jobseekers being informed of the rules, alerted to job vacancies, and taking action as a result of the interview than was the case under UB/IS. Most jobseekers reported following the Jobseeker’s Agreement to some extent, but less than half of these found it useful.

JSA has succeeded in changing jobseekers’ perceptions of the purpose of the Fortnightly Jobsearch Review, and the interventions themselves are now more focused on jobsearch. ‘Active signing’ was found to have a significant impact on movements off the claimant count.

Jobseekers’ attitudes towards greater ES intervention were mixed, and ‘jobfinders’ tended to underestimate the role ES played in helping them find work. The transition to delivery of JSA from a single office appears to have been seamless. The quality and consistency of JSA delivery has improved even since the introduction of JSA.

JSA has succeeded in reinforcing the idea of a ‘contract’ between client and state. Awareness of the existence of disallowance and sanction was very high both before and after JSA, and jobseekers generally agreed with the principle of sanctions. However, the proportion of jobseekers who believed that sanctions would be applied has increased since the introduction of JSA, and over the post-JSA period.

Many jobseekers who had been disallowed or sanctioned expressed surprise at their penalty and expressed a need for more face-to-face contact with ES. Appeals against disallowance or sanction have increased under JSA. Disallowance and sanction had a significant impact upon jobseekers, exacerbated by their uncertainty of entitlement to hardship payments. Many jobseekers experiencing disallowance or sanction increased their jobsearch as a result of the penalty. However, others considered that their personal circumstances had made the penalty unavoidable, suggesting that the deterrent effect is limited. Only a third of ES advisors believe penalties are effective in enforcing compliance with benefit rules, although
their attitudes towards disallowance and sanction are much more positive than before the introduction of JSA.

Activities whilst claiming

JSA had little impact upon levels of jobseekers' participation in part-time work whilst claiming, with around one in ten participating. Income disregard levels continued to act as a major disincentive, and the introduction of the Back to Work Bonus has failed to strengthen the appeal of part-time work.

Evidence regarding the 'stepping stone' effect of part-time work whilst claiming is inconclusive, and suggests that part-time work whilst claiming has no great effect upon movements off benefit for JSA claimants.

Around one in ten jobseekers participate in voluntary work whilst claiming, as was the case prior to JSA. There is some small evidence that voluntary work had assisted in the pursuit of full-time work for some groups of JSA claimants.

Partners and unemployment

The characteristics and economic activity of jobseekers' partners changed little after the introduction of JSA. The economic activity of individuals continued to influence that of their partners, although the impact upon partners' behaviour is not immediate.

One of the most significant changes since the introduction of JSA has been in the timing of partners' withdrawal from the labour market. This may be due to the reduction, to six months, in the period of entitlement to contributory benefit. Benefit disincentives continue to influence partners' economic activity, but play a lesser role than domestic commitments.

Conclusion

Research examining the effect of JSA found that the new benefit has had a significant impact upon unemployed people. Unemployed people are now looking for, and finding, work much more than they were before the introduction of JSA, and are now much clearer about the rules and their responsibilities - probably as a result of the extra advice and assistance they receive from Jobcentre staff.
1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Policy background  
Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) was introduced on 7 October 1996, replacing Unemployment Benefit (UB) and Income Support (IS) for unemployed people. The main objectives of JSA, as described in the ‘Jobseeker’s Allowance’ White Paper presented to Parliament in October 1994, were to:

- improve the operation of the labour market by helping people in their search for work, while ensuring that they understand and fulfil the conditions for receipt of benefit;
- secure better value for money for the taxpayer by a streamlined administration, closer targeting on those who need financial support and a regime which more effectively helps people back into work; and
- improve the service to unemployed people themselves by a simpler, clearer, more consistent benefit structure and by better service delivery.

JSA has two components: ‘contributory JSA’ and ‘income-based JSA’, reflecting the previous regime of UB and IS. JSA harmonised many of the rules of entitlement which differed between UB and IS.

Key changes under JSA include:

- a reduction in the length of entitlement to contributory benefit from a year (under UB) to six months (under JSA(C));
- delivering of the benefit from a single office, the Jobcentre, and hence a reduction in the need to visit the Benefits Agency;
- the introduction of the ‘Jobseeker’s Agreement’ (JSAg) as a condition of benefit receipt; and
- the introduction of the ‘Back to Work Bonus’ to encourage jobseekers to undertake part-time work whilst claiming with a view to returning to full time work.

The Green Paper ‘A New Contract for Welfare’, published in March 1998, laid out the current Government’s priorities for people of working age. These are as follows:

- the new welfare state should help and encourage people of working age to work where they are capable of doing so;
- the system should encourage openness and honesty and the gateways to benefit should be clear and enforceable; and
- the system of delivering modern welfare should be flexible, efficient and easy for people to use.
JSA is consistent with this new policy agenda, and the JSA objectives of providing jobsearch assistance and improving clients' understanding of conditionality mirror those of the New Deals and ONE.

1.2 Evaluation design

In order to assess whether the new benefit had met its objectives, a large-scale programme of research was undertaken, based on a series of ‘before’ and ‘after’ studies designed to compare the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of clients under the UB/IS and JSA regimes. It was sponsored, and managed jointly, by researchers from the Department of Social Security (DSS), the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), the Employment Service (ES) and the Benefits Agency (BA). The centrepiece of the evaluation was a series of client surveys, in which the experience of two separate samples, some 10,000 unemployed people in total, were compared under the old and new benefit regimes. Respondents in each sample were interviewed twice, approximately six months apart. A macro-economic evaluation and a number of smaller qualitative studies complemented the client surveys. This paper draws together the key findings of the evaluation as a whole.
JSA was designed to increase both the number of people finding work and the speed with which they found work. The principal mechanism for this change was through better service delivery to unemployed people, which is intended both to help clients in their search for work, and to ensure that clients are indeed actively seeking and available for work. There was a reduction in the period of entitlement to contributory benefit from one year, under UB; to six months, under JSA. We might therefore expect there to be increases in movement off benefit at around the time when contribution-based benefit is withdrawn.2

Indeed, it was found that JSA led to a large increase in movements off the claimant count in the first year of operation, and thereafter has resulted in smaller but significant increases in movements off the claimant count. Macro-economic analysis suggests that, in the year following the introduction of JSA, the fall in claimant unemployment was 240,000 higher than it would have been if JSA had not been introduced, and this has resulted in a permanently lower level of unemployment of about 0.8 per cent.3 Survey evidence, which controls for the effects of the improved economy, shows that 32 per cent of jobseekers were in full-time work of over 16 hours a week after approximately eight months under JSA, compared with 26 per cent prior to JSA.4

The initial increase in movements off benefit was due to a 'weeding out' of those who were not previously assiduous in their jobsearch or were claiming fraudulently; and secondly, a stepping-up of jobsearch efforts on the part of jobseekers, leading to more successful rates of movement off benefit in the period immediately after the introduction of JSA. This increase in labour market attachment and jobsearch has resulted in a greater responsiveness, by 0.9 per cent, of the claimant count to improvements in employment levels.5

The smaller increases in movements off benefit observed after this initial period are accounted for by increased movement off benefit in areas of low unemployment and amongst longer-term clients.6

The pattern of duration of unemployment of jobseekers as a whole was little changed under JSA, although since JSA the rate of movement off benefit increased significantly for those in their twenty-sixth to thirty-fourth week of unemployment,7 and this was confirmed by macro-economic analysis.8 This is probably due to the withdrawal of contributory benefit.

2 It is important to note that, at any one time, only around one quarter of unemployed claimants receive contribution-based JSA, either alone, or in combination with income-based JSA.
benefit, or the fact that, after six months of unemployment jobseekers are no longer able to specify a minimum wage level they are willing to accept.

The likelihood of leaving benefit remained highest during the first eight weeks of unemployment, with the ‘average’ spell of unemployment being approximately three months. During the first eight weeks of unemployment six to eight per cent of jobseekers left benefit each week. Thereafter, the likelihood of a jobseeker leaving unemployment declined quite steeply and flattened out somewhat after 12 weeks. In other words, many periods of unemployment were short: the median length of unemployment among new clients was 12.4 weeks under JSA and 14 weeks under UB/IS.9

JSA did little to change the relationship between social and demographic characteristics, and duration of unemployment. The rate of leaving benefit continued to be lower for clients who were male, had pre-school aged children, lived in rented accommodation, were studying whilst claiming, who reported health problems, and who had experienced another spell of unemployment in the previous year.10 The median length of unemployment experienced by disabled jobseekers (approximately a quarter of all jobseekers) was, at six months, twice that for clients without disabilities, which might partly be accounted for by the fact that jobseekers with disabilities were typically less well qualified than other clients.11 The median length of unemployment experienced by those from ethnic minorities was, at eight months, over twice that for other clients, despite the fact that ethnic minority clients were typically relatively well qualified.12

A balance between flexibility regarding working conditions and focused jobsearch continued to be important in securing work after the introduction of JSA. Jobseekers who were prepared to accept a temporary or short term job, shift work or vary their weekly hours were all likely to leave benefit more quickly than those who did not. At the same time, those who had focused their efforts on a job in a particular occupation left benefit quicker than those who were less focused in their jobsearch.13

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3 Based on pre-JSA data
JSA could be expected to have both positive and negative impact upon the quality of labour market outcomes. On the one hand, it might be expected that the extra jobsearch assistance available to jobseekers would improve the quality of the match between jobseeker and job vacancy. On the other hand, stricter applications of the labour market conditions and the reduction in length of entitlement to contribution-based benefit could result in jobseekers accepting lower quality, less well paid jobs in order to leave benefit as soon as possible.

After JSA, just over two-thirds of people who left benefit moved into work, compared with just under two-thirds before the introduction of JSA. Sixty-eight per cent of people who had left JSA had left benefit to move into some form of employment, compared with sixty-two per cent prior to the introduction of JSA. Over half of people who had moved off JSA (53 per cent) had moved into full-time work of over 30 hours a week, 15 per cent had moved into part-time work, and 12 per cent of people had taken up a course of study or a training scheme. Despite the slight increase in the proportion of people who had moved into work, overall the range of destinations had changed very little between the two benefit regimes.

**Figure 3.1 Destinations of JSA leavers**
3.2 Factors influencing destinations of former jobseekers

The duration of a client’s unemployment and the level of local unemployment both influence the destinations of those who cease claiming JSA. Those who left benefit most quickly were much more likely to move directly into work, both before and after JSA. Eighty-three per cent of people who left JSA within six weeks of becoming unemployed moved into work, compared with 68 per cent of former clients as a whole. Conversely, the proportion of respondents who transferred between JSA and sickness-related benefits increased the longer they remained on benefit, rising from two per cent of those who left JSA within six weeks, to eight per cent of those who remained unemployed for over 21 weeks. A lower local rate of unemployment was associated with more frequent moves into full-time work, and a higher rate of unemployment coincided with greater entry into a course of training.

3.3 Experiences of benefit leavers

The majority of return-to-work jobs remained stable both before and after JSA, especially for those who had experienced only a short spell of unemployment. Seventy-six per cent of ‘jobfinders’ who moved into full-time work continued to be employed full-time six months later. This figure was 84 per cent for those ‘jobfinders’ who had experienced a spell of unemployment of less than ten weeks. Findings were similar under the UB/IS regime. A round five per cent of respondents who left unemployment reclaimed JSA within five weeks, and almost a third reclaimed JSA within 30 weeks, confirming that the longer people remain off benefit the less likely they are to return.

After the introduction of JSA, ‘jobfinders’ who then lost their jobs were less likely to return to unemployment-related benefit. Under JSA, individuals who moved from full-time work were less likely to move back into unemployment. Only 14 per cent of individuals who had moved from JSA to full-time work were unemployed again six months later, compared with 21 per cent of individuals under UB/IS. This is accounted for by the increase in the number of individuals who moved into part-time work, or who experienced health problems.

In general, JSA has had little impact upon the job satisfaction levels of those leaving unemployment, despite the fact that return-to-work earnings have fallen. Once changes in median wage rates are taken into account, the real wage rates commanded by male ‘jobfinders’ were significantly lower in real terms after the introduction of JSA. Median wage rates fell by £20 a week to £141 after the introduction of JSA. However, the proportion of ‘jobfinders’ who reported low levels of job satisfaction did not change significantly with the introduction of JSA.
JSA was intended to increase clients' jobsearch behaviour through the provision of more jobsearch assistance and advice at fortnightly interventions; and through a stricter application of the labour market conditions for entitlement to JSA. However, even before the introduction of JSA most jobseekers were strongly committed to finding work, and for this reason the scope for major change was limited. Nevertheless, the research found that the proportion of JSA clients who are not actively seeking work has fallen under JSA. Fourteen per cent of unemployed clients reported that they were not seeking work in August 1996, compared with ten per cent in summer 1998.

Furthermore, more jobseekers are making regular job applications under JSA; and clients in high unemployment areas are now making as many job applications as those in low unemployment areas. Eighty-four per cent of jobseekers had submitted at least one application in the preceding month; compared with three-quarters of jobseekers prior to the introduction of JSA. After JSA, jobseekers in high unemployment areas were making as many applications as those in low unemployment areas.

The increase in the number of job applications submitted has resulted in a small overall increase in the proportions of jobseekers gaining interviews, from 31 per cent of clients reporting that they had been invited for interview before JSA, to 38 per cent after. The likelihood of gaining an interview from an application remains the same at 16 per cent, and the likelihood of gaining a job following an interview is the same at around 50 per cent. However, the improved efforts of those in high unemployment areas have not been rewarded, with the proportion of job applications resulting in interview lower in areas of slack labour demand than they were prior to JSA. The proportion of interviews that led to a job offer was also less.

In general, jobseekers used similar jobsearch methods and to the same extent following the introduction of JSA. The most common methods were: consulting a local newspaper (88 per cent of jobseekers had done so during the previous week); and checking Jobcentre vacancies (73 per cent of respondents).

The one significant change since the introduction of JSA was in the number of people contacting employers directly: 41 per cent of JSA clients had done so during the previous week, compared with 31 per cent of UB/JS clients. This suggests that clients' jobsearch activity has become more active following the introduction of JSA.
Over time, most jobseekers who remain unemployed continued to look for work among the same range of jobs, and this is the same as before the introduction of JSA. There is a wide variation in the amount of time spent by different individuals on jobsearch; almost two thirds spent up to six hours per week, a further quarter spent seven to 12 hours per week, and the remaining one in five spent more than 12 hours per week. There was an increase of nine percentage points, to 36 per cent, in the number of jobseekers who had used four or five jobsearch tactics in the previous week.

4.3 Barriers to jobsearch

After the introduction of JSA, jobseekers reported the same barriers to jobsearch as before. Four out of ten jobseekers believed that their jobsearch was limited because of the costs involved, and this was also the case prior to the introduction of JSA. In particular, travel costs appear to constrain jobsearch activities, with telephone, postage, newspapers and clothing costs also being mentioned.
JSA is delivered through the medium of ‘labour market interventions’ carried out by ES staff in Jobcentres. The interventions were redesigned, upon the introduction of JSA, to focus more on the labour market agenda than on the benefit agenda. This was intended to ensure that clients understand and fulfil the labour market conditions for receipt of benefit.

5.1 The New Jobseeker Interview
The content of the New Jobseeker Interview had improved under JSA, with a greater number of jobseekers being informed of the rules, alerted to job vacancies, and taking action as a result of the interview than was the case under UB/IS. In general, jobseekers believed the purpose of the New Jobseeker Interview was to check eligibility. However, there was an increase in the proportion of clients who believed the purpose of the New Jobseeker Interview was to provide assistance in finding work, from 34 per cent under UB/IS to 41 per cent under JSA.

Jobseekers were more likely to report being told about actively seeking work and availability for work rules following the introduction of JSA. Furthermore, over twice as many clients reported being alerted to job vacancies during their NJI. Most jobseekers (84 per cent) felt they had a clear understanding of what was expected of them following the NJI; and there was a clear increase following the introduction of JSA in the proportion of jobseekers taking action as a direct result of their NJI (from 33 per cent to 41 per cent).30

5.2 The Jobseeker’s Agreement
The Jobseeker’s Agreement is an individually tailored document which describes the nature of the ‘contract’ between the claimant and Jobcentre and describes the steps that the claimant must take to find work. It is drawn up at the beginning of a claim and is a condition of receipt of JSA.

The research found that most jobseekers reported following their Jobseeker’s Agreement to some extent. However, less than half of these jobseekers (42 per cent) found the agreement useful.31

5.3 The Fortnightly Jobsearch Review
JSA has succeeded in changing jobseekers’ perceptions of the purpose of the Fortnightly Jobsearch Review. Significantly more clients believed that the purpose of attending to sign was for ES to check if clients were actively seeking and available for work (an increase from 39 per cent to 51 per cent; and 52 per cent to 60 per cent respectively). Similarly, significantly fewer believed that the main purpose of the intervention was to receive benefit (36 per cent under UB/IS compared with 30 per cent under JSA).32
In addition, the interventions themselves are now more focused on jobsearch. Two-thirds of jobseekers were asked about their jobsearch the last time they attended to sign, compared with a third prior to the introduction of JSA. Furthermore, one in five were alerted to job vacancies during their most recent Fortnightly Jobsearch Review, representing a significant increase since the introduction of JSA.33

ES advisers also report that they provide clients with more jobsearch advice than they did prior to JSA. In general they believe that they are able to do this effectively and that this service is effective in helping jobseekers back to work.34

This greater emphasis on the labour market agenda during ES interventions has had a significant impact on movements off benefit. Jobseekers who had experienced ‘active signing’ in their most recent fortnightly intervention were fifteen per cent more likely to have moved off benefit after six months than were those who had not been ‘actively signed’.35

Jobseekers differed in their attitudes towards the greater jobsearch monitoring associated with JSA. Some jobseekers resented the ‘policing’ tone of the activity; whilst others welcomed the change and took the opportunity to discuss their progress, seek endorsement of their jobsearch activities, and accept the help on offer.35 Some ‘jobfinders’ felt that ES help was more of a problem than aid, and that the perceived pressure from ES had led them to take jobs which they were unhappy with.36

‘Jobfinders’ tended to underestimate the role ES played in helping them find work. Most people who had found jobs disputed that ES played any role in helping them find work; and instead claimed that they had found work through their own determination and jobsearch activity. However, the research revealed that many of these people had obtained work directly via ES advertisements, and in a few cases it was felt that the ES had made a distinctive contribution by drawing their attention to specific jobs. Others conceded that the combination of specific ES interventions coupled with a climate of expectation with regard to jobsearch may have led to more productive activity leading to employment.37

A key change under JSA was that benefit is now delivered from a single office, the Jobcentre. It is usually not now necessary to visit the Benefits Agency as well. The research found that the transition to delivery of JSA from a single office does appear to have been seamless, and JSA has not increased duplication of ES and BA operations. There may however still be scope to improve the overall smooth running of operational arrangements.38
In general, advisers believe that they are able to provide effective advice to jobseekers. However, many believe that performance targets conflict with their aim of being jobseeker focused, and this may impair the effectiveness of interventions.  

Research undertaken in 1997 found that there was wide variation between offices in the time spent on fortnightly interventions. However, the time each office spent on interventions, and specifically, the time staff spent on discussion of jobsearch at the fortnightly review, had improved and become more consistent by 1999.

The delivery of JSA, and client satisfaction with ES has improved over the post-JSA period. Fifty-six per cent of jobseekers attending a New Jobseeker Interview in 1999 believed that the adviser was very well prepared to deal with their individual circumstances, compared with 43 per cent in 1997. The proportion of those who considered that the adviser answered questions ‘well’ or ‘very well’ increased from 88 per cent to 93 per cent. Jobseekers’ perceptions of the level of knowledge possessed by ES staff in fortnightly interventions had also increased: 82 per cent of clients rated staff either ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ knowledgeable in 1999, compared with 69 per cent in 1997. The percentage not discussing jobsearch at all has halved to 12 per cent between 1997 and 1999, demonstrating that improvements have been made even since the introduction of JSA.
6 UNDERSTANDING OF RULES AND OBLIGATIONS AMONGST JOBSEEKERS

The receipt of JSA is conditional upon meeting the following three criteria: jobseekers must be actively seeking and available for work, and should have entered into a Jobseekers Agreement. Clients who fail to satisfy any one of these conditions lose their entitlement and are ‘disallowed’. ‘Sanctions’ function as a system of penalties that guard against jobseekers who satisfy the conditions but act in a way that unreasonably causes or perpetuates their own unemployment.4 The new regime aims to provide greater transparency of entitlement and conditionality attached to claiming JSA.

6.1 Understanding of the ‘contract’

There is evidence that JSA, and specifically the Jobseeker’s Agreement, has succeeded in making clearer the terms of the contract between client and state. Clients are especially clearer about their jobsearch responsibilities, and referred to the way in which the terms of Jobseeker’s Agreement are enforced by sanctions in a manner that was rarely the case with the Back to Work Plan.43 Advisers also believed that jobseekers understood their obligations better following the introduction of JSA.44

6.2 Agreement with ‘conditionality’

Nearly four jobseekers in five agreed that receiving JSA should be conditional upon proving that you are actively seeking work, and this proportion had increased since the introduction of JSA. This demonstrates that JSA has succeeded in shaping jobseekers’ attitudes.

Opinion was more divided over the type of work unemployed people should take. Just under half thought that unemployed people should have to take any job available, not just in their usual occupation. This had not changed between the two regimes.45

6.3 Understanding of disallowance and sanction

Almost nine in ten jobseekers were aware that JSA clients can have their benefit stopped or reduced. When asked in which situations JSA could be stopped, the most common responses by jobseekers were ‘failing to declare work’, or ‘failing to actively seek work’, both of which were mentioned by more than half of jobseekers. Only six per cent of jobseekers mentioned the failure to be available for work as a reason for sanction.46 The existence and nature of sanctions was thought to be fair. However, it was felt that the sanctions regime is unlikely to be effective in preventing abuse or fraud by others.47

The proportion of jobseekers who believed that sanctions would actually be imposed by Jobcentre staff has increased since the introduction of

4 ‘Sanction’ was known as ‘disqualification’ under UB/IS.
6.4 Understanding of the rules

Jobseekers claim to understand the rules better under JSA. After the introduction of JSA, 46 per cent of jobseekers reported that they had a 'good understanding' of the rules, compared with 37 per cent of jobseekers under UB/IS. The requirement to actively seek work (recalled by 33 per cent of jobseekers), to stop claiming when a job is secured (29 per cent), to declare any earnings (17 per cent), to attend the Jobcentre to 'sign' (14 per cent), and to be available for work (11 per cent) were the most commonly recalled rules.

However, despite increases in jobseekers' understanding of the conditionality of benefit receipt, clients' spontaneous recall of the rules associated with claiming benefit had changed little since the introduction of JSA. The concept of 'availability for work' continued to be less understood than 'actively seeking work'. The latter term was well understood by respondents and regarded as fair, and the former was broadly well understood and accepted. However, there is evidence that some jobseekers perceive the term rather more loosely than ES. Examples include jobseekers who were unaware that holidays constituted unavailability, or were unaware that they should be prepared to start work straight away, or that they were unable to restrict their availability to jobs in their usual profession or commanding a certain wage level.

6.5 Experiences of disallowed or sanctioned claimants

No particular differences were observed in terms of personal characteristics between those who experienced benefit reduction and those who did not. Of those who received less than full benefit, only 38 per cent said they expected this and 31 per cent stated that the decision had not been explained to them by ES. Jobseekers who had experienced disallowance and sanction also accepted the principle that entitlement to JSA should be conditional on behaviour; although they questioned the application of penalties in their own case. Respondents experiencing a sanction often expressed surprise and felt they needed more explanation.
Respondents tended to want more face-to-face contact with the ES, and less written correspondence. They felt the volume of correspondence made it easy to miss important information such as warnings about the possibility of sanction. There seemed to be little change since the introduction of JSA.55

Evidence suggests that formal appeals regarding disallowance and sanction have increased since the introduction of JSA. Social Security Appeal Tribunal statistics show that appeals for disallowance (formerly known as disqualification) or sanction have risen from 1.3% of disallowed and sanctioned clients in the year 1994/5 to 8.3% of disallowed and sanctioned jobseekers in 1997/8. More formal appeals were made by the respondents in the second phase of this study than in the pre-JSA phase, though more respondents felt hurt and aggrieved than committed themselves to a formal appeal.56

Loss of benefit had a significant impact upon respondents. Respondents reported similar ways of coping as they did before the introduction of JSA, and shared the same fears about falling into debt. Some respondents were able to claim hardship payments, but some appeared to have lacked information or been misinformed about their entitlement to hardship payments.57

Respondents differed in the ways in which disallowance/sanction had influenced their behaviour. Some respondents said that their disallowance/sanction had prompted them to widen their efforts to find work, in contrast with others who reported being more cautious now about the kind of job they would take for fear that the job would be unsuitable and they would have to return to benefit. Some believed that their personal circumstances had made their disallowance/sanction unavoidable and that they could not behave differently in the future. However, more said that they would take more care and be more wary, and that they had become more determined to find work. This evidence suggests that although disallowance/sanction is having a deterrent effect to some extent, the effect is limited.58

Only a third of ES advisors believe penalties are effective in enforcing compliance with benefit rules, although attitudes towards disallowance and sanction are much more positive than before the introduction of JSA: there was a significant increase, to 36 per cent, in the proportion of ES advisors who agreed that sanctions are effective, compared with the UB/IS regime.59 Advisors believed that penalties are a more effective deterrent for jobseekers who have already experienced disallowance or sanction. In addition, many advisors stated that they had avoided carrying out sanctions for reasons including lack of time, resources and fear of assault.60 However, jobseekers often felt that non-compliance with the rules, in particular instances of undeclared working, are still widespread and that policing of the system is inadequate in preventing this.61
7 ACTIVITIES WHILST CLAIMING

The rules regarding undertaking activities whilst claiming did not change under JSA. Clients continue to be permitted to work or undertake a course of study for up to 16 hours a week, and/or to undertake unlimited hours of voluntary work on the condition that they continue to fulfil the labour market conditions for receipt of JSA. The Back to Work Bonus was introduced at the same time as JSA and aims to encourage clients to work part-time whilst claiming. The Bonus is paid as a lump sum to people who have worked part-time whilst claiming JSA and who have moved off benefit into work.

7.1 Participation in part-time work whilst claiming

JSA had little impact upon levels of jobseekers’ participation in part-time work whilst claiming. Both before and after the introduction of JSA, 13 per cent of respondents had worked part-time during their most recent spell of unemployment. Part-time work in the post-JSA survey was evenly split between ‘regular’ jobs and irregular or casual jobs; whereas irregular forms of work had been more common in the pre-JSA sample. Part-time work continued to be more common among women than men.

7.2 Knowledge of the rules associated with part-time work whilst claiming

Jobseekers’ knowledge of the rules relating to part-time work had increased under JSA. Twenty-five per cent of respondents did not realise that part-time work whilst claiming was permitted; a lower level of ignorance than in the pre-JSA sample, where the figure was 32 per cent. The increase in awareness may be due to publicity surrounding the introduction of the Back to Work Bonus. Respondents were largely aware of the need to declare part-time work to the Employment Service or Benefits Agency, though some confusion was apparent over the number of hours that could be worked. At the same time, Jobcentre staff were felt to have insufficient knowledge of the benefits system in order to help devise strategies for combining part-time work with claiming benefit.

7.3 Jobseekers’ attitudes towards part-time work whilst claiming

Interviews with clients undertaking part-time work found a range of motivations for undertaking such activities. Part-time work was said to stave off the boredom of unemployment, enabled clients to keep in touch with the world of work, maintain experience and contacts, and build confidence.

However, on the whole, part-time work was perceived somewhat negatively by jobseekers both before and after the introduction of JSA. Numerous barriers were identified as reasons not to undertake part-time work and in many cases these barriers were related to personal circumstances (such as caring responsibilities, the work status of the household, and work aspirations).
Current levels of income disregard were viewed particularly negatively and perceived as a major disincentive to taking up part-time work. This is because the amount earned was felt to be minimal once transport, childcare and other work associated costs were considered. This research also suggested that people’s perceptions of part-time work fed into the decision not to take on part-time work. Many viewed part-time work as being insecure, low paid, of low status, and as not constituting a ‘proper job’.66

More than two-thirds of respondents believed that working part-time whilst claiming improves clients’ chances of gaining full-time employment; and this had changed little since the introduction of JSA.67 However, evidence regarding the ‘stepping stone’ effect is inconclusive, and suggests that undertaking part-time work has no great effect upon jobseekers’ speed of return to the labour market.68 However, qualitative research found that, for some respondents, part-time work had been an indirect route into full-time employment.69

Awareness of the existence of the Bonus was relatively high: 56 per cent of jobseekers had heard of it, and awareness was greatest amongst the target group of longer term unemployed people.70 Indeed, evidence suggests that this was the best known of the work incentive schemes, with many respondents having received information from ES staff, and had seen mailshots and posters.71 Despite high awareness of its existence, knowledge of the rules associated with claiming the Bonus was low. Only two per cent of respondents who had heard of the Bonus were able to correctly state the qualifying period as 91 days.72

Research suggests that the scheme has limited popularity. Jobseekers tended to consider the scheme initially appealing, due to the prospect of the £1000 cash sum, but concluded that the scheme was too complicated and of limited relevance upon closer inspection73; and that the Bonus simply comprised money that was rightfully theirs anyway. This tended to mitigate any incentivising effect that the Bonus may have been intended to have.74

JSA had little impact upon levels of jobseekers’ participation in voluntary work. Nearly one respondent in ten was doing some unpaid voluntary work during their most recent spell of unemployment, a similar proportion as in the pre-JSA survey.75 However, just under half of these respondents had begun volunteering before becoming unemployed, suggesting that many unemployed people see voluntary work as something separate from their search for work.76 The largest group of volunteers, around a quarter in total, had a weekly time commitment of three hours or less. There was little change in the hours worked by those doing unpaid work between the two benefit regimes.77
7.7 Knowledge of the rules associated with voluntary work whilst claiming

Knowledge of the rules regarding voluntary work was low. Qualitative research suggested that knowledge of the rules applying to voluntary work was scant even among the more interested minority. Respondents tended to assume that the constraints to undertaking voluntary work whilst claiming are stricter than they actually are. Respondents believed that voluntary work had to be declared and that there would be restrictions on the hours allowed.78

7.8 Jobseekers' attitudes towards voluntary work whilst claiming

Jobseekers' attitudes towards voluntary work had changed little since the introduction of JSA. Evidence suggests that the majority of clients had no interest in voluntary work, partly because it is unpaid, partly because they thought it might hinder their efforts to find paid work, and partly also because respondents knew of nothing that they felt they would enjoy doing on this basis. However, those few clients who did do voluntary work could see the benefits in terms of keeping busy, getting a reference and as a direct entry into certain sorts of work.79

Voluntary work was perceived somewhat negatively by jobseekers both before and after JSA. Further qualitative research found that many respondents who were hostile to the idea of voluntary work had a very limited idea of what constituted such work, typically viewing it in terms of working ‘in a charity shop’. However, when encouraged to consider the idea further, and when presented with a wider range of voluntary activities, the same respondents often became more positive in their attitudes.80 This suggests that there may be potential for a change in attitudes if voluntary work is ‘marketed’ more effectively.

7.9 The impact of voluntary work whilst claiming upon movements off benefit

Jobseekers were mixed in terms of their beliefs in a potential ‘stepping-stone effect’. Overall, 39 per cent of respondents thought that voluntary work increased people’s chances of getting a full-time job, whilst a similar number, 41 per cent, thought it had no effect. In the pre-JSA survey, similar numbers of respondents (38 per cent) believed that voluntary work increased employment prospects; however there was a reduction between the surveys in the numbers of respondents who believed that voluntary work had no impact (48 per cent pre-JSA).81

Evidence regarding the ‘stepping stone’ effect of voluntary work was mixed. There was no strong quantitative evidence that participation in voluntary work leads to greater movements off benefit. However, qualitative research suggests that many, generally younger, jobseekers take up voluntary work in order to gain a ‘way in’ to their chosen career; and there is evidence that voluntary work did act as a direct stepping stone into employment for a handful of these jobseekers. In general, though, volunteering assisted indirectly in helping people back to work by developing jobseekers’ skills and experience and demonstrating a willingness to work to potential employers.82
Participation in courses of study whilst claiming

JSA had little impact upon levels of jobseekers’ participation in courses of study, with 13 per cent participating after the introduction of JSA, compared with 14 per cent before. An additional ten per cent of respondents in the post-JSA survey were not currently studying, but had undertaken a course at some point during their most recent spell of unemployment. Women were more likely than men to study. It is interesting to note that those who did participate tended to be already relatively well-qualified compared with those not studying, suggesting that the opportunity to study is not being taken up by those who would most benefit.

The most significant change was that jobseekers tend to spend more time studying under JSA than under UB/IS. Nearly one in five (17 per cent) of those claiming JSA claimed to spend 30 hours or more a week studying. More than three-quarters (76 per cent) of respondents undertaking a course of study were working towards a qualification. Of these, the largest group (33 per cent) were working towards an NVQ or SVQ.

Knowledge of the rules associated with studying whilst claiming

Jobseekers’ knowledge of rules regarding studying, and attitudes towards them were unchanged: nearly a quarter of respondents in both the pre and post JSA surveys were unaware that clients are allowed to study whilst claiming unemployment-related benefits. Those that did study seemed to be aware of the rules, but knowledge of the rules was somewhat poor amongst those who did not study. Jobseekers’ attitudes towards the rules were split between accepting the restrictions as fair, on the one hand; and as unreasonable, on the other. The latter group viewed studying as a vital component in the attempt to find work and did not believe it should be subject to restrictions.

The impact of studying whilst claiming upon movements off benefit

There was some optimism that courses of study would help people move into full-time work. More than half (56 per cent) of the post-JSA sample believed that studying would increase the chances of finding full-time work. Attitudes had changed little since the introduction of JSA.

Indeed, the possession of academic and vocational qualifications increased the chances of moving off JSA after six months by 35% and 25% respectively compared with someone without formal qualifications. However, taking an educational course while on JSA actually reduced the probability of leaving by a third. This may be attributed to the fact that clients who study whilst claiming JSA were generally determined to finish their courses before moving into work; and many are motivated for reasons of self-achievement, rather than for the purposes of securing a job.
The rules regarding treatment of partners of unemployed clients did not change with the introduction of JSA.

8.1 Characteristics of jobseekers' partners

Thirty-three per cent of all jobseekers had a partner after the introduction of JSA; with men more likely than women to have a partner (36 per cent compared with 25 per cent). Most partners of jobseekers (86 per cent) were female, reflecting the fact that most JSA claimants are male. 29 per cent of partners of jobseekers were in paid work. Another 29 per cent of partners were not working and said they did not currently want a job. There were few differences in the characteristics and economic activity of partners after the introduction of JSA.

8.2 The impact of the economic activity of individuals on their partners

The economic activity of individuals continued to influence that of their partners after the introduction of JSA, although the impact upon partners' behaviour is not immediate. Forty-one per cent of the partners of respondents who were unemployed for less than six months were in paid work compared with only 16 per cent of the partners of respondents unemployed for longer. Partners of unemployed respondents in paid work after eight months were 3.5 times more likely to be working themselves than were partners of respondents who were still claiming benefit at the second interview.

Although the effect of the client's employment status upon the partner's economic activity was little changed, the timing of partners' withdrawal from the labour market changed significantly. After the introduction of JSA, the most significant fall in female partners' employment rate occurred at around six months after the client became unemployed, rather than at 12 months as had been the case prior to JSA. This may be due to the reduction, to six months, in the period of entitlement to contributory benefit.

8.3 Other factors influencing the economic activity of partners

The probability of partners being employed at second interview was associated with a number of other factors that did not alter with the introduction of JSA. Most notable among these factors are the level of local unemployment and the presence of children; partners living in high unemployment areas were only half as likely to be working after eight months as were partners in low unemployment areas, and for partners of respondents unemployed for longer than six months, only two per cent of those with pre-school age children were in paid work compared with 28 per cent of those without children. Other important factors included the gender, age, family type, education level and housing tenure of the partner.
Perceived benefit disincentives continue to influence partners' economic activity, but play a lesser role than domestic commitments. Of partners who were not looking for work, sixty-nine per cent said this was because of home and family commitments; and only 14 per cent stated that the reason they did not want to work was for fear of losing benefit, suggesting that personal circumstances play a more important role than benefit disincentives in influencing partners' economic activity. However, only 34 per cent of partners thought their household would be better off if one member of the couple had a low paid job rather than relying on benefits, which suggests that perceived benefit disincentives could still act as a barrier for partners, even if other barriers were removed.95
Research examining the effect of JSA found that the new benefit has had a significant impact upon unemployed people. Unemployed people are now looking for, and finding, work much more than they were before the introduction of JSA, and are now much clearer about their responsibilities - probably as a result of the extra advice and assistance they receive from Jobcentre staff. Attitudes have changed too: clients themselves increasingly feel that their entitlement to benefit should be conditional upon proving that they are looking for work. Concerns that the stricter regime of JSA would push unemployed people into ‘bad’ jobs were largely unrealised: the majority of ‘return-to-work’ jobs were stable, and there was no change in the levels of job satisfaction reported by clients in the pre and post-JSA regimes.
1 Jobseeker’s Allowance White Paper, 1994, page 5.
3 JSA economic analysis.
4 Smith et al, 2000, page 12.
5 JSA economic analysis.
7 Smith et al, 2000, page 118.
8 JSA economic analysis.
12 Shropshire et al, 1999b, pages i and ii.
16 McKay et al, 1999, pages 81 to 84.
17 Smith et al, 2000, page 22.
21 Smith et al 2000, page 84.
22 Labour Force Survey.
26 Smith et al, 2000, page 63.
28 McKay et al, 1999, page 64.
30 McKay et al, 1999, pages 51 to 53.
32 McKay et al, 1999, pages 54 and 56.
33 McKay et al, 1999, pages 54 to 56.


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