

FIRST WAVE FINDINGS: Universal Credit

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Universal Credit (UC) is the new working age benefit for those in and out of work (replacing six benefits), which introduces a new enhanced conditionality regime (including the Claimant Commitment and 35 hour per week job search requirements). It represents a step-change in intensifying and extending sanctions and mandatory support for claimants and their partners. This briefing paper presents findings from our research undertaken to date, based on policy stakeholder interviews, practitioner focus groups and interviews with 58 UC recipients (welfare service users, approximately one third of whom were in paid work and two thirds out of work).

Key points

- The behaviour change logic of UC conditionality was undermined in cases where: sanctions were applied because of administrative errors and IT system inadequacies; claimants had good cause (for example, for being late or missing appointments); and when heavy penalties

were incurred for very minor infringements by compliant claimants keen to work (including those with jobs and those already actively seeking work).

- Sanctions had severely detrimental financial, material, emotional and health impacts on those subject to them.

- In-work UC recipients did not think that they should be subject to the same sanctions as out-of-work claimants:

- » in-work conditionality could be counterproductive and introduce new disincentives to work
- » there was a mismatch between the flexibility required by employers and the rigidity of UC job search requirements and Jobcentre Plus appointments systems
- » there was an imbalance between the weight of sanctions and the absence of in-work support.

- Most research participants saw the 35 hour per week job search requirement as unrealistic and inappropriate.

- Support services, including Universal Jobmatch and the premium rate telephone line, were often viewed as insufficient, costly or ineffective.

- There were examples of empathetic and supportive Jobcentre Plus advisers who had helped claimants to find the training and jobs that they wanted.

- Many welfare service users were not against conditionality in principle; they expected and even defend it, but think it is being applied punitively, unjustly, inappropriately or disproportionately.



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Universal Credit and the enhanced conditionality regime

Sanctions

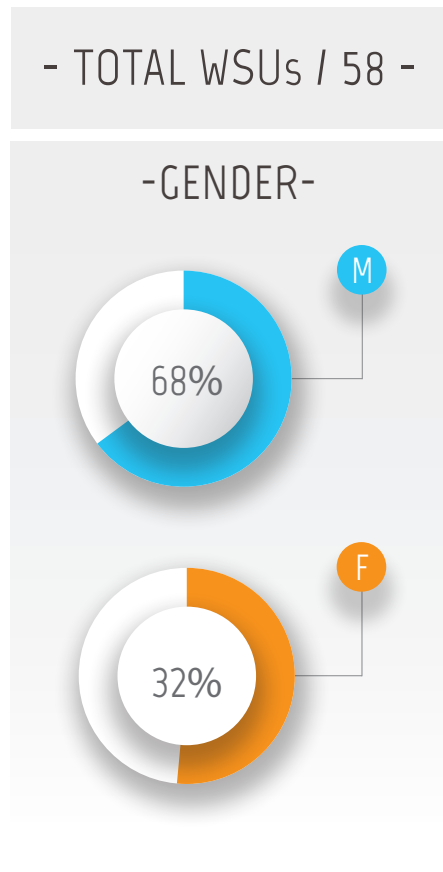
Since its inception, the UC system has incorporated severe sanctions. For example, if a claimant (whether in or out of work) is late for or misses an appointment, their payment is stopped 'until compliance'. Another example is when a claimant fails to look for work. They will receive a 91-day sanction in the first instance, accelerating rapidly to a 182-day sanction for second and 1095 days (three years) for third 'offences'. For those out of work this is triggered for failure to complete 35 hours' job search according to their Claimant Commitment, using the online Universal Jobmatch system; for those already in paid work, this means for failure to look for a second or third job or failure to increase their hours.

Experience of sanctions

In our study, 23 of the UC participants had received a sanction. Of those sanctions, 38% had occurred within the previous three months. Fifteen interviewees had been sanctioned once, five had been sanctioned two to five times and three had been sanctioned six times or more. UC claimants had experienced sanctions in a range of circumstances and for different reasons, including:

- missing or being late for appointments at Jobcentre Plus or the Work Programme (14 sanctions)
- being 'voluntarily unemployed', which was disputed (five)
- inadequate or not fully documented job search (four)
- refusal to apply for a particular job, which the claimant had good reason to deem unsuitable (two)
- unknown (two).

There were many examples of sanctions that claimants felt were unjust:



“ I got sanctioned by the Jobcentre because I didn't have a note from the hospital stating that I was in hospital after trying to take my life. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

“ They rearranged the time of my appointment, phoned me and told me, and I said, 'Right that's fine.' And then they went and changed it back to the original appointment and they didn't tell me. So I missed my appointment by a day... I lost half my month's money for that. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, Scotland)

Interviewees often thought that the sanction they received was disproportionate to their infringement:

“ I did turn up just a little late. I explained the situation... I’m usually quite punctual. But no, it’s straightaway; they’re quick, they just seem to want to sanction you. I just think it’s absolutely crazy. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

The logic of using threats of sanction to promote job search behaviour was undermined in cases where recipients were keen to find work and taking the appropriate action, but were sanctioned as a result of poor communication, such as not being informed of appointments. Inflexible or counterproductive requirements that were implemented unresponsively or incomprehensibly were also reported:

“ I rung them and explained I’d been on work trial and they were ‘All right’ and then I got a letter through the door saying I’d been sanctioned... But what was it for? I did something like 40 something hours [job search] on the thing [Universal Jobmatch]... I explained it to them. They weren’t bothered. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

In-work UC recipients thought that they should not be subject to the same sanctions as unemployed people, particularly in relation to missing appointments through work commitments:

“ I was working at the time... it was something like, ‘We’re going to charge you £10 a day for seven days’ and I said, ‘What, you’re going to fine me £70 for missing an appointment that I couldn’t even ring you to tell you that I’d be late?’ ”

(WSU, UC recipient, female, England)

This highlights the inflexibility of the Jobcentre Plus appointments system. It was not usually possible for claimants (whether in or out of work) to change their appointment time, even with

good cause. This system created unnecessary sanctioning of compliant claimants with reasonable grounds for changes to availability.

Impact of sanctions

Sanctions affected interviewees in a range of overwhelmingly negative ways, including financial, material and emotional impacts. The most severe response was from a man sanctioned for missing an appointment he was not informed of:

“ So for the whole month of February when I first moved into my flat I had £150 to live off... In March I had a suicide attempt. ”

(WSU UC recipient, male, Scotland)

It was usual for those sanctioned to experience poverty, financial hardship and social exclusion, including missing meals, not being able to afford electricity and in one case not being able to heat water for daily washing:

“ So for two months I only had £60 to my name. So I was having to borrow and steal - I literally had to steal to make sure that I could eat... It’s affected me a hell of a lot because I can’t afford to do anything. I can’t afford to see my friends, like the amount of money that I get isn’t enough to live on. ”

(WSU v recipient, male, England)

“ Left me with £7 a month and no-one can live off £7 a month. ”

(WSU UC recipient, male, England)

One man reported losing his home as a result of a sanction (WSU UC recipient, Scotland) and several other interviewees reported rent arrears and eviction threats. Borrowing and debt were commonly associated with receiving a sanction:

“ That was absolutely terrifying. As soon as you start getting in debt, when you

get into arrears like hundreds of pounds you start getting nasty letters from your landlord and possibly eviction as well... I was like a nervous wreck... I didn't eat for a few days... I'm absolutely scared stiff of going in there [Jobcentre Plus] these days because you just feel as though you could get sanctioned for absolutely anything. ”
 (WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

One in-work UC claimant reported being sanctioned for almost a year for missing multiple Jobcentre Plus appointments because of unpredictable working hours, variable care demands and ill-health:

“ I'm on my court order for the eviction plus because of my arrears... I kept thinking, 'Why is this happening? Why is this?...' I really was struggling. I fell behind on a lot especially because with the sanctions and then when I got poorly and I wouldn't work and, because of the sanctions, I still wasn't getting my main allowance. ”
 (WSU, UC recipient, female, England)

The need to repay hardship loans increased pressure and prolonged the material effects of sanctioning:

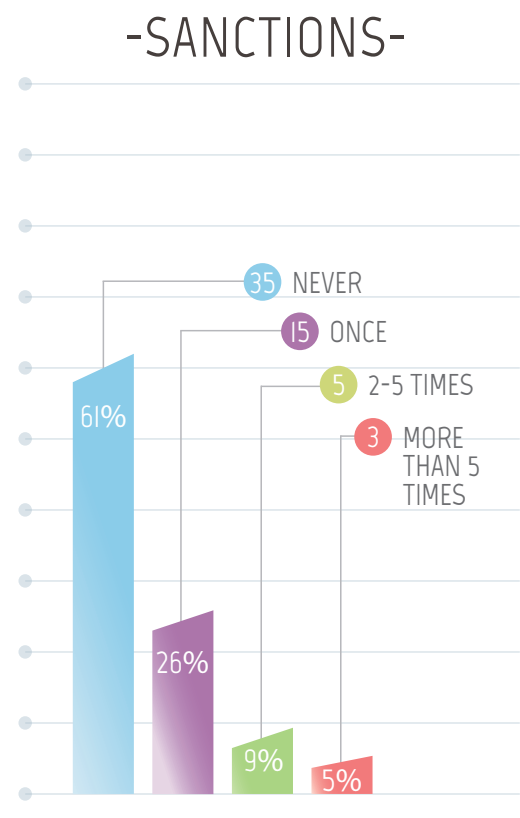
“ I think it was like £2000 something that they'd actually given me over the year in hardship payments, so I'm still currently paying them off now... You're in a rut like I've been with the bailiffs... I've never really been in a debt like that and for it to still carry on now to this day escalating... It doesn't give you much confidence. It doesn't really make you want to go into work all happy and carrying on, do you know? It knocks you down and down and it wears you out. ”
 (WSU, UC recipient, female, England)

The emotional impacts included: anxiety (sometimes acute), stress, feeling pressured, depression and low mood, shame, anger, frustration, disempowerment, feeling intimidated, embarrassment, low self esteem (feeling worthless, demeaned and patronised), reduced confidence and feeling unsafe. Two interviewees reported specific health problems exacerbated by being sanctioned, including a diabetic man who had to miss meals.

Thirty-five hour job search requirement

UC introduces the requirement for 35 hours job search per week. Most focus group participants viewed this requirement as unrealistic and inappropriate:

“ What are they going to do for 35 hours? With the best will in the world, you cannot job search for 35 hours a week. In [this area], even if you took an hour for every job application, there are not 35 jobs every week... It's setting up people to fail. ”
 (FG3, Universal Credit, Scotland)



“ I don’t like the idea of 35 hours of jobseeking; that’s nonsense, it’s physically impossible. But 35 hours of being proactive in making themselves more employable, that’s good, that’s an excellent thing. ”

(FG3, Universal Credit, Scotland)

A minority of the UC claimants interviewed found the 35 hour job search requirement ‘reasonable’:

“ It means you’re not sitting around doing nothing, you’re actually doing something with the time that you’ve got which is good. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

However, most of the claimant participants found the 35 hour per week job search requirement impractical and unhelpful:

“ Unrealistic. Very unrealistic. It’s too much. It’s too much for anybody. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, Scotland)

“ Who could... go out looking for work for eight hours a day with no money... Yes, you’ve got to – cold calling they call it, knocking on firms’ doors and this, that and the other... I think it’s ridiculous. Who does that? Not only that; when you’re on Universal Credit, who has got the finances to do that? ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

One man was working 16 hours per week and was required to do 19 hours’ job search per week despite his rural location and lack of internet access:

“ I live 25 miles outside town. Do you know what I mean? And I don’t have internet access or anything. I don’t even have phone

boxes. Well it’s an hour there and an hour back so it’s two hours a day. So you do that five days a week, which I’d have to do to get my... hours in, job searching, like being on the internet and the papers and all that, if I didn’t that was it, I wasn’t fulfilling my agreement. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, Scotland)

Interviewees were concerned that requirements for using Universal Jobmatch to conduct and document job searches were too narrow. In some cases, satisfying the 35 hour per week job search requirement via Universal Jobmatch prevented them from pursuing more meaningful approaches to improving employability, such as volunteering or work trials, which could serve to enhance experience, learn skills, build confidence and develop networks that could lead to suitable and sustainable job outcomes. There was variation in the treatment of voluntary work, which was allowed to count towards the 35 job search requirement by some Jobcentre Plus advisers and was viewed by focus group participants as a key advantage of UC as an enlightened change that rewarded effort and societal contribution.

“ Well it actually works in my benefit the volunteering, but for every bit I do volunteering I don’t need to do a search for that hour. So say I do 16 hours a week, I don’t need to search for 16 hours a week. It’s taken off the top. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, Scotland)

However, there were reports of other Jobcentre Plus advisers who did not allow some or any type of voluntary work to count towards the 35 hour job search regulation:

“ We had a guy who was wanting to do conservation work with [national organisation]... he really wanted to do this. It was only six weeks or something, maybe a bit longer. Because it was five days a week he couldn’t have done it. But he was

almost guaranteed of a job at the end of it. But the Jobcentre said ‘no.’ ”

(FG3, Universal Credit, Scotland)

One in-work UC claimant was allowed to do voluntary work as part of his 35 hour job search requirement (WSU UC recipient, male, England), but was sanctioned for going overseas on a charity fundraising trip. This is an example of UC introducing new restrictions on workers’ movements and chosen activities.

UC recipients had varying experiences of forming their Claimant Commitment and its application. Some recipients found that the job search requirements they faced were inappropriate, coercive and disempowering, rather than a mutually agreed ‘contract’:

“ I’ve been in the building trade forty years and he wanted me to apply for administration in a library. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

Support: minimal, costly and ineffective?

UC recipients generally felt that Jobcentre Plus offered little or ‘no help, absolutely no help’ (WSU, UC recipient, male, Scotland) in finding work and was focused on policing job search activities and applying sanctions. In-work UC claimants were also disadvantaged because their requirements to find work were not balanced with support to make that possible. ‘They’re working: it’s not always as easy to access help.’ (FG3, Universal Credit, Scotland). Those with previous involvement contrasted this with earlier experiences:

“ The Jobcentre used to try and help you find work, you’d go in and they’d get on the computer and say, ‘Oh we’ve got that many jobs today.’ That doesn’t happen anymore. They don’t really help you to find a job. They just help you to sign on every two weeks. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

This reflects a shift in service design and reduced staffing levels. Support for UC is mainly provided online or via call centre support. However, claimants bear the cost of support calls and reported frequent long delays.

“ When I got put on the Universal Credit, that cost me a tenner on the first week just to get things sorted because everything is a premium rate line. I don’t get that. They’re giving you money and then you’re paying a bill... Why is it not an 0800 number? Why is it not freephone? Why are they giving you money to give away to other companies? Surely, that money they’re giving you should be money for yourself to keep you going. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, Scotland)

Focus group participants were concerned about this change to the mode of contact. Their view was that phone contact would be prohibitively costly for many of the claimants that they supported, meaning that support needs would go unmet and/or that claimants would disengage.

“ There are going to be thousands of folks out there who don’t engage with any agencies and are just going, ‘Oh my god, look at my phone bill?... I think the phone is a huge, huge issue... It’s absolutely absurd. ”

(FG3, Universal Credit, Scotland)

Many UC recipients reported that lack of support was combined with an impersonal approach. This could create a particular dynamic between Jobcentre Plus advisers and claimants, which some interviewees experienced as intimidating, dehumanising and disempowering, ‘just all threats’ (WSU UC recipient, male, England):

“ Goes through the motions, ‘Sign there: He [Jobcentre Plus adviser] doesn’t even look at you... He prints everything off,

‘Right, sign there, initial there, sign there’ and he’s not even looking at you... ‘If you don’t do that, we’ll sanction you. If you don’t do that we’ll sanction’ - everything is a sanction, sanction, sanction, that’s all you get... It’s like being bullied, ‘If you don’t do as I tell you, I’m going to take some money off you.’”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

However, there were examples of empathetic Jobcentre Plus advisers, whose support was appreciated:

“ I really like my adviser. She’s great... she’s a really caring helpful person in general I find. It’s not always been like that in there, but she is really lovely. I’m really happy to have her... It’s been quite positive yes. It’s fine yes. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, female, England)

“ I’m perfectly happy with the Jobcentre... I’ve never seen anyone being told, ‘No, I’m too busy,’ which is always nice to see. Yes, they’ve got a lot of good support in there for people who need it, I can’t sing their praises high enough. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, Scotland)

Universal Jobmatch

In the context of very limited face-to-face contact and a focus on sanctions, mandatory online self-help use of Universal Jobmatch formed the basis of Jobcentre Plus support. UC participants had varying experiences of Universal Jobmatch, including positive experiences:

“ That’s my best chance, I feel, of finding something immediate. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, Scotland)

However, several UC claimants found Universal Jobmatch unfit for purpose. The requirement for claimants to use the system every day did not match the flow of vacancies, which was less frequent. Applying for a vacancy often involved linking to an external website, but this was not necessarily logged as job search activity (because of the limitations of the Universal Jobmatch system). This meant compliant claimants could be sanctioned because of inadequate IT system design, rather than their own lack of effort.

“ It’s the same ones [vacancies], but they’re just taking it from different sites and they don’t... update them as regularly as the other sites. The other sites get new jobs every week or every day... Universal Jobmatch does it once a month, if that. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, female, England)

“ You start seeing the same jobs on different sites... I’ve already applied for them, I’ve already applied for that, I’ve already applied for this, you know? Then you go back and tell them, they’re not interested. They don’t want to hear it. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

Some claimants were uncomfortable about the surveillance involved, since advisers could monitor Universal Jobmatch use (which could be used as evidence for a sanction):

“ They can see everything I’ve applied for, how long I’ve been on it, when I’ve been on it. They can see all that. To be honest with you, I think that’s an invasion of privacy. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, Scotland)

Some participants did not seem to be aware that they did not have to give their adviser access to view their Universal Jobmatch activity. Others

made the decision to allow adviser access in an informed, but constrained way:

“ He [Jobcentre Plus adviser] said could I tick the box that says that they can have a look at what you’re doing on it, so you share it. Because I didn’t know there was a box like that. So I thought well I better do what he’s asked. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, female, England)

One woman who chose to refuse adviser access felt this had negative consequences for her:

“ She [Jobcentre Plus adviser] didn’t tick the box for my housing benefit, we’d had a ding-dong with each other, and [it] went like this: ‘You’ve not given me access to your Universal Jobmatch’. ‘Well, no, I haven’t, because it’s optional.’ ‘Yes, but I can’t see what you’ve done with the job search.’ So I said, ‘Well, I’ve just given you a booklet and it’s all handwritten there; that’s my job search there.’ ‘Well, how do I know you’ve done a job search if you don’t give me access?... I should have accused her of harassing me, really, at the time, but I was a bit depressed anyway. I wasn’t in a good space, because of this job that I’d left, and it was a very negative experience... I was really quite incredulous at her attitude. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, female, England)

Claimants often reported that their adviser checked their Universal Jobmatch activity. Some also had more direct adviser interaction via emails and alerts. This could vary in its helpfulness:

“ They know I don’t have a driving licence. I’ve been asked to go for driving instructor, because they give you jobs you should apply for, or they advise you to apply for, from the Universal Jobmatch. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, Scotland)

“ Sometimes when you log on to Universal Jobmatch there’s a thing at the top that’s saying ‘you’d be welcome to apply for this job’.. and I’ve applied for that job before, got an interview... and I know it’s not going to happen. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, female, Scotland)

The requirement to use Universal Jobmatch to search for work presupposes computer and internet access and IT skills. For those with their own computers (or shared access to personal or public computers) and adequate or advanced IT literacy, this process was ‘pretty straightforward’ (WSU, UC recipient, male, England), ‘quite easy to use’ (WSU, UC recipient, male, England) and ‘all right for me’ (WSU, UC recipient, male, Scotland). However, others struggled to satisfy this dimension of conditionality:

“ I haven’t got the facilities to have a computer, a laptop, a tablet. I haven’t got the money for it... She [adviser] showed me loads of times, but I can’t get to grips with it. You can like put in there, write down what you’re actually doing for jobs. But for me to say like, ‘Oh, I’ve applied for this job today’, takes two, three minutes, because I only use one finger on a keyboard. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

In-work conditionality

UC broadens the reach of conditionality to those who would previously have been working independently, without any intervention, and those who would previously have claimed Working Tax Credit as a top-up to low earnings. In-work claimants are required to seek more hours, better pay and/or additional jobs to satisfy the ‘conditionality threshold’. Seventeen of our UC interviewees were in paid work. Five were working full-time; four worked part-time; three worked short hours and three worked variable hours. Two

were self-employed. Five held multiple jobs. One of the main advantages of UC anticipated by policy stakeholders was:

“ The fact that it’s paid to unemployed and employed people, so you don’t have that follow off point where you move from employment, so you remain on Universal Credit. Also the fact that there will be childcare provision for working one hour, two hours as opposed to the golden 16 hours, I think those are real positives. ”
(PS39, Senior representative, Lone parent voluntary sector organisation)

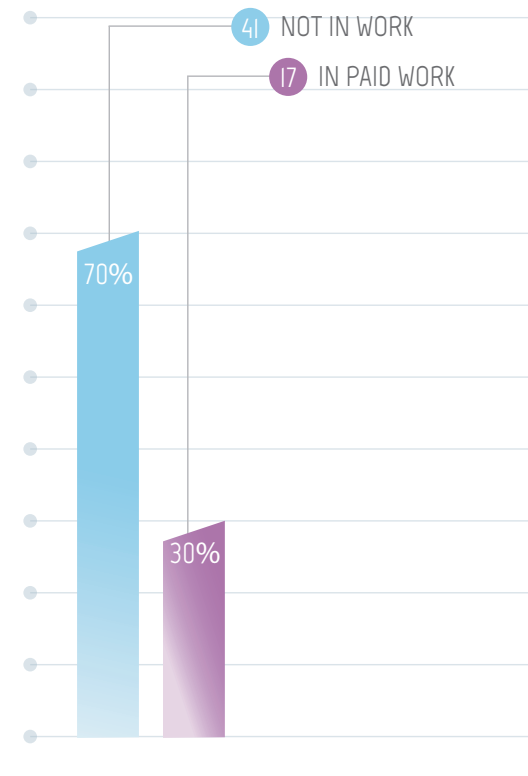
“ It’s interesting under Universal Credit with the ability to continue engagement as people move into work, how actually we can use that to support continued progression once you’ve achieved that first job. ”
(PS44, Senior policy stakeholder)

One stated intention of Universal Credit is to ensure that claimants are ‘always better off in work’. However, one interviewee (WSU, UC recipient, male, England) was working full-time on the minimum wage, but received less money than he would out of work.

In-work conditionality means that those who are already working still have to comply with the 35 hour per week job search requirement: if a claimant works 20 hours per week, they must attend Jobcentre Plus and provide evidence of 15 hours job search. In practice, this means looking for multiple jobs or increased hours from current employers. Jobcentre Plus appointments are still mandatory, backed with sanctions for non-attendance. Focus group participants in our study were sceptical of in-work conditionality:

“ That’s quite hard because then you need to get another job so that people, they feel good that they’ve got a part-time job

-EMPLOYMENT-



so that’s one step and they’re doing quite well. But then they’re really pushed to get another job and this could be people with kids. ”

(FG3, Universal Credit, Scotland)

In-work UC claimants were also subject to job search requirements and surveillance, which were designed on the assumption that claimants need to be cajoled into active job search. This assumption does not fit the lived experience of in-work claimants, who already provide evidence of their willingness to work by being in paid employment. A mismatch exists between the design of conditionality and its application to in-work claimants:

“ It’s a bit degrading... my adviser, she isn’t too bad. She says to me most times, ‘I’m quite happy with what you’re doing, and obviously you want to work because you’re working, and it’s not as though you’re not looking for jobs.’ But like they’re

always checking up on you. They always want to know... 'If I wasn't happy with you, we can sanction you.' Every other meeting it's kind of there, a reminder that like keep on doing what you're doing, otherwise this will happen to you. "

(WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

Focus group participants also noted that changing work norms (such as zero hours contracts without guaranteed regular hours) could make it difficult to predict actual working hours. For example, an in-work UC claimant could have full-time work one week and no work the next, but because of their contractual obligations to be available for work for their first employer, they might be less attractive to, or contractually prevented from engaging with, a second employer:

" It is really difficult because they've got the pressure... to get a second job. They've got the pressure coming because employers don't want to employ them because they're not available. I think that is actually as much pressure as being out of work. "

(FG3, Universal Credit, Scotland)

" All the first employers want you to be available at the snap of a finger for the zero-hour contracts... So when you go for a second job, if you're in retail everybody's going to want you on a Saturday, aren't they? If you go, 'Oh no, I'm at such-and-such that day' they're going to go, 'No.' "

(FG3, Universal Credit, Scotland)

This reflects a mismatch between the rigid expectations of in-work UC conditionality and contemporary workplace practices. For UC claimants who would otherwise have claimed Working Tax Credit, it also means a comparative loss of status. Working Tax Credit claimants receive their wage top up as a respectable 'tax credit',

linked symbolically to earnings rather than being linked to the heavy stigma of claiming benefits or using related services like Jobcentre Plus, and without additional pressure to increase hours of work or rates of pay. This loss of status can impact on the very sense of self and emotional wellbeing that is crucial for finding and keeping paid employment. This in turn means, when compared with the previous tax credit system, UC creates new disincentives to work in cases where the financial gains of work are minimal (or non-existent) and there is the added factor of being no longer connected with the reward of a respectable worker status, free from job search requirements, surveillance or stigma.

" If you get a job you're going to feel much better, you're going to be contributing to society'... But instead of that when they're just starting into work it's almost like the pressure is still really full on and it shouldn't be. "

(FG3, Universal Credit, Scotland)

Self-employment

The two self-employed UC interviewees related a range of experiences. One whose work and wages were episodic outlined repeated frustration with the administration of his claim due to non-existent earnings from his self-employment, which meant that his claim was wrongly cancelled every month and his promised payment was withheld (WSU, UC recipient, male, England).

One woman newly experiencing self-employment was very appreciative of the support she had accessed through both Jobcentre Plus and a course provided by her social landlord:

" I've seen twice a Jobcentre adviser because I want to go self-employed... He's very, very helpful... I was expecting to be made to look for any kind of job... because I want to go on the Social Enterprise Scheme... he showed me the templates

and everything, it's like really easy. About a business plan and everything like that. The extra money and help that you can get... I've had support from my landlord [housing association]... helping people that are unemployed back into work. They've been really, really supportive and today I did a ten to two course with them... That was really, really good... there was a guy from the college that came over, he was really, really accommodating and helpful. ”
 (WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

Another man (WSU UC recipient, male, England) was frustrated because he was not recognised as self-employed (and had to evidence 35 hours of job search, including pressure to apply for full-time work). But he similarly praised the support he had received (including basic accounting training, mentoring and business plan development) and Enterprise Allowance funds for advertising.

Universal Credit and behaviour change

The logic of UC is that it is intended to encourage people to move from claiming benefits into paid work. For those in work, UC is intended to increase labour market attachment. However, in practice, conditionality can be counterproductive – undermining work incentives and opportunities rather than reinforcing them. The impact of financial problems and heavy pressure to take action that may be inappropriate could inhibit confidence for job search:

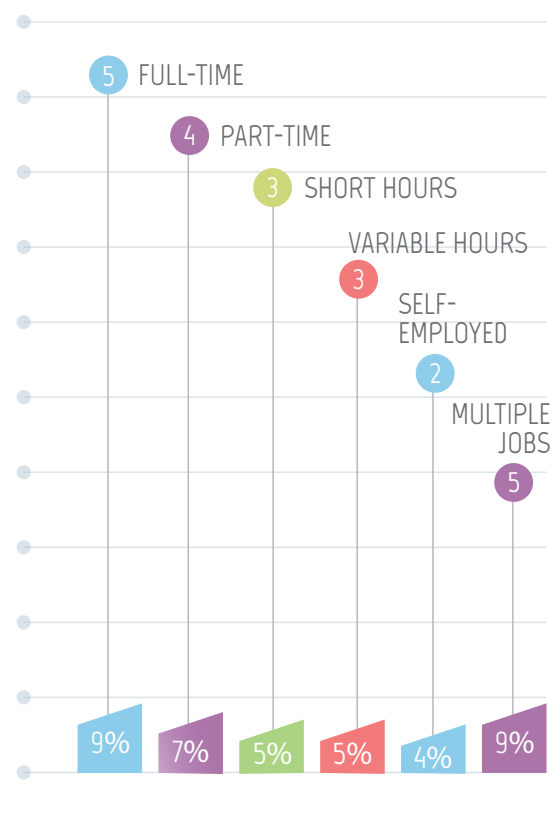
“ Somebody who was maybe already in debt has sort of been pushed over the edge. I've had to refer, I'd say, probably 25% more people to actually go and get some emotional help as well... people who would have been [job] ready are knocked back quite significantly. ”
 (FG16, Universal Credit, England)

One man said that being sanctioned made him find a job (WSU, UC recipient, male, Scotland),

whilst another (WSU, UC recipient, male, England) felt that being punished while doing the right thing undermined motivation to comply with requirements. The majority experience was that threat of sanction and experience of sanction were inappropriate because interviewees were seeking work eagerly or were already in paid work. One woman (WSU, UC recipient, female, Scotland) found the experience of being threatened with sanctions so stressful and problematic that she said she would never seek state support in times of need again. Thus, for some who were eligible, UC conditionality created a disincentive to access financial support or engage with services.

Support workers were concerned that this type of disengagement left adults and children living in extreme hardship, without the necessary financial intervention or interpersonal support that they were entitled to and could enable them to cope with their situation and move into (or progress in) employment:

-WORK PATTERNS-



“ We’ve got a number of people who’ve decided not to have any sort of benefits at all... my first person that got sanctioned was living in a car, so they said it was really difficult for them to prove on a computer that they’d done 35 hours’ job search. So, we had somebody else who got a sanction and they were a parent of a child that had just gone back to school but they had no computer skills at all... ‘I don’t want to sign on. I’m just going to survive however I can.’ ”

(FG16, Universal Credit, England)

Several focus group participants thought that UC had been specifically designed to create a disincentive strategy:

“ Let’s make no bones about it, the one thing about getting on UC is that you have got a whole wealth, a whole support network that... is trying to get you off it. ”

(FG16, Universal Credit, England)

Ethics

In principle, a significant number of respondents on UC viewed welfare conditionality as fair. The application of a principle of conditionality within social benefit systems was routinely defended by reference to support for broad notions of reciprocity and mutualism – that is, access to benefits being dependent upon individuals first meeting their wider responsibilities to other community members. In this case, the right to UC being linked to an individual’s responsibility to actively search for work as required by the state. However, in parallel to this broad endorsement, many respondents clearly stated that questions about the fairness of imposing behavioural requirements were dependent upon each claimant’s particular circumstances. The notion of applying the same behavioural requirements as able bodied unemployed people to those who were incapable of work, because of impairment

and/or holding sole caring responsibilities for children, was often seen as inappropriate.

“ It’s not fair if people are going out paying their taxes and you’ve got people like sitting on the backsides just like doing nothing and still getting money. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

“ I say some aspects yes, because there are people that just do not want to work and just plain sit on their bums all day every day, just sponging off the government, but then there are other people that aren’t capable of being able to work that still have to do job search to get money. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

The use of benefit sanctions was more contentious. Some interviewees were more supportive of the principle of sanctioning than others. Those who endorsed the use of sanctions emphasised the need for a dialogue between claimant and adviser in order to ascertain the appropriateness of sanctioning a particular claimant prior to enactment. For example:

“ Sanctions, now if someone walks out of a job, yes, fair enough, they need a slap on the wrist but they need to give that person a chance to speak. They need to hear the other side of the story. There’s always two sides to a story, always. So, that needs to be get sorted out. Secondly, they’re not sanctioning people just to punish them. They’re sanctioning people because certain people aren’t doing what they’ve actually signed up to do when they sign for... When you sign up for Universal Credit, it is a contract basically and you have to do 35 hours a week of actively seeking work. ”

(WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

UC claimants who opposed the use of sanctions

believed sanctions to be both unfair and counterproductive.

“ You’ll sanction somebody for it right, then they’ll stamp their feet in even more. It’s like getting the belt at school, punishment never works... It’s always unfair; never sanction anybody. ”
(WSU, UC recipient, male, Scotland)

A significant number within the UC sample also stated that individuals, including those who had failed to meet job search/work preparation requirements should never be left in a situation where they unable to meet their basic needs. Aside from a few dissenters, there was a general agreement that everyone should be entitled to a basic minimum of financial support.

“ Yes, a bare minimum, and then sanction the rest. If that’s what’s going on, then fair enough. You should be able to walk into a shop, buy a loaf of bread and a pint of milk. You shouldn’t be having to go to food banks or go for handouts to your relatives. I think that’s degrading, if I’m honest. So, yes, I think there should be a bare minimum. ”
(WSU, UC recipient, male, Scotland)

“ [As] long as there’s a roof over their head, and for example depending on how many dependent children there are, so much per head for that week, and that’s their minimum amount. ”
(WSU, UC recipient, male, England)

Some UC respondents believed that the extension of conditionality to those who were already in low paid and or part-time employment was unfair and inappropriate. They resented that they could be subject to sanctions for failure to meet job search (up to the 35 hour per week threshold) and minimum waged income requirements especially when they were already meeting their responsibility to engage in paid work, in some cases by holding down more than one part-time

job simultaneously.

“ Universal Credit and it was like 35 hours a week jobs searching. Constantly on your case, constantly trying to sanction you. It’s an absolute nightmare... I mean you can be applying for 20 jobs a day, not one of them, you know, to get back to you and say sorry. Then you’ve got them in the Jobcentre giving you more grief. If you don’t feel shit enough, you know you’re not getting anywhere, they’re trying to make you feel ten times worse, that you’re not trying hard enough. ”
(WSU, UC recipient, female, England)

“ Because I only work in the evenings on a Tuesday and a Thursday, I’ve got to do my job search on a Tuesday and a Thursday... It’s [threat of sanctions] not going to help me. I’m going to try and do more anyway. At the end of the day, no amount of forcing is going to make me do it even more. For what I do I want to do it. ”
(WSU, UC recipient, female, England)

Many welfare service users were not against conditionality in principle; they expect and even defend it, but think it is being punitively/inappropriately/disproportionately applied. Some focus group participants saw sanctions as unfair, disproportionate and detrimental to constructive relationships between claimants and advisers, which were a vital foundation for meaningful action to be taken.

“ UC is grossly unfair... when people are sanctioned because they didn’t turn up to something or they were five minutes late and they didn’t get the letter... that’s not going to encourage anybody to engage or to feel sort of warm enough that they want to have a partnership with anybody. ”
(FG16, Universal Credit, England)

Further research

The Universal Credit service users will be interviewed again for our research in 2015-16 and then for a third time in 2016-17. This will enable the research to capture the dynamics of change for these individuals and the role of sanctions and support within this. It will also enable a better understanding of the medium-term cumulative outcomes of interventions and the impacts of

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PS refers to policy stakeholder
 FG refers to focus group
 WSU refers to welfare service user

new legislation and mechanisms of sanctions and support that are currently being introduced.

Further Information

This paper was written by Dr Sharon Wright and Dr Alasdair B R Stewart from the University of Glasgow, Prof Peter Dwyer from the University of York, and Dr Jenny McNeill from the Universities of Sheffield and York. It is one of a set of nine presenting our first wave findings on different policy areas. An overview paper sets out our findings in summary.

Further information about the project may be found at: <http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/>
 A briefing paper on the policy context and existing research evidence on Universal Credit may be accessed at: <http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/publications/>

For further information about our findings, please contact communications officer Janis Bright at janis.bright@york.ac.uk

Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change is a major five-year programme of research funded under the Economic and Social Research Council's Centres and Large Grants Scheme. The project aims to create an international and interdisciplinary focal point for social science research on welfare conditionality and brings together teams of researchers working in six English and Scottish Universities.

