

# The Jobseeker's Allowance Skills Conditionality Pilot evaluation report

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The Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) Skills Conditionality Pilot was launched in April 2010 with the aim of exploring the effects of mandating participation in training. The pilot targeted JSA claimants entering stage 3 of the Jobseeker's Regime and Flexible New Deal (JRFND) – generally unemployed for six months – with an identified skills need. The pilot was designed to randomly assign customers to a Test group, where they were mandated to training, or to a Control group, where training would be voluntary. Assignment was on the basis of National Insurance number.

This report presents the findings from two parallel studies of the pilot. The quantitative analysis used administrative data to assess the implementation of the pilot and whether it could be used to provide valid estimates of the impact of mandating. The qualitative analysis explored the experiences, views and behaviour of participants in the pilots: principally mandated customers and Jobcentre Plus advisers, but also training providers.

## Key findings

### Part One: Findings from the quantitative analysis

The quantitative analysis presents evidence from the first few months of the Skills Conditionality Pilot on how well the pilot was implemented and whether it can provide credible estimates of the effect of conditionality. Central to this is the question of whether random assignment took place as intended.

The quantitative analysis used Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administrative data to:

- Examine whether the right people were being targeted.
- Check that those eligible were being assigned correctly.
- Check that those assigned to the Test group were having conditionality applied, where appropriate.
- Consider whether the implementation of the pilot was suitable for producing estimates of the impact of conditionality.

A caveat to the results is that the DWP data did not allow skills needs and training participation to be perfectly observed. The original intention was to link the DWP data to Individual Learner Record data but, in the event, that was not possible. With this in mind, the results identified several ways in which the implementation of the pilot appeared to deviate from the evaluation design:

- In more than half the sample, individuals were identified through basic skills screening as having no potential skills need (this finding does not imply they had no **actual** skills need – we cannot observe this in the data – but may at least give cause for some concern).
- Nearly one-fifth of people were not assigned to the Test or Control group.
- A small proportion of people were assigned to the wrong group.
- Referrals to training as part of the pilot were much lower than expected.

These points raise concerns about the extent to which the pilot can be viewed as providing reliable evidence of the effects of conditionality for the target group. If the objective of the pilot – to understand the effect of conditionality – is to be met:

- implementation issues need to be better understood and, possibly, addressed
- accurate training data are required;
- longer-term outcomes need to be observed.

For individuals in the pilot who were identified through basic skills screening as having a potential skills need and who had a valid pilot marker, the analysis can provide estimates of the impact of conditionality as **operationalised in this pilot** on training, sanctions and early labour market outcomes. There is no evidence of any impact, but this finding has a caveat attached to it in view of the low level of referrals and, for some outcomes, the nature of the available data.

## Part two: Findings from the qualitative research

The aim of the qualitative evaluation was to gain an understanding of the experiences, views and behaviour of mandated customers and of Jobcentre Plus staff. The perspectives of training providers were also included. The research included interviews with 25 advisers in five Jobcentre Plus offices, 40 customers and seven providers.

### Introduction of the pilot

The pilot was not introduced into Jobcentres in a systematic way: advisers in most of the Jobcentres visited were informed about it through email and at staff meetings, rather than through training sessions. Advisers and providers found supporting materials and procedures to be complicated. Advisers expressed uncertainty about aspects of the pilot, including eligibility, the definition of ‘skills need’ and random assignment, leading to low referral rates. The proliferation of Jobcentre Plus initiatives and pilots, pressure of time during JSA interviews

and uncertainty over the pilot following the General Election in 2010 were also identified as factors contributing to low pilot numbers.

### The availability of training for the pilot programme

Variability in the provision of training locally was identified by advisers as one of the biggest barriers to progressing customers through the pilot. Particular problems identified with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses, long waiting times and uncertain start dates resulting from ‘roll-on, roll-off’ course programming. Shortages were also identified in sector skills training in some Jobcentre Plus districts. Some customers felt they had been given little choice in the course they went on and would have preferred something different.

### Customer response to the JSA Skills Conditionality Pilot

Many customers were positive about attending training because it might help them address skills gaps and find work. Others welcomed the activity or thought it would help improve their confidence. Those who wanted training with a sector-based skills element were among those most motivated to take part, but some were disappointed when the courses they had wanted were not offered. Some customers resisted training because they had previous bad experiences of courses offered by Jobcentre Plus, or felt they did not need it. Some customers had already attended courses in areas like job search and CV writing. Others were taking part in volunteering or training they had arranged themselves.

Some customers enjoyed their courses and experienced positive outcomes, for example, improved basic skills and certificates to work in industries such as security and construction. A few had found work or felt optimistic that they would do so. Customers dissatisfied with the training had found courses were below their ability level, were badly taught or were repetitive.

## Mandation

All customers in the evaluation were mandated. The research findings suggest that many customers would have taken part in the training had they not been mandated. This was because they were willing to participate in training or felt obliged to do so to improve their job prospects and comply with the jobseekers agreement. However, not all respondents were happy with being mandated because they did not see it as improving their job prospects.

A range of views were expressed on the practice of mandated training. In favour of mandate, customers cited the benefits of training, expectations on JSA customers and its role in dealing with the minority of 'work-shy' customers. Against mandate, training was seen as beneficial principally where the individual is motivated and willing to take part, rather than compelled. Mandate was also viewed as treating all customers as 'work-shy' and without their own strategies for finding work.

Advisers also expressed a range of views on mandate, with some saying they preferred to exercise discretion over mandate. Both customers and advisers stated that, where training is mandatory, it must be of good quality and meet individual needs. It was also argued customers' barriers to work cannot all be addressed by training and that many need additional help.

## Sanctions

Customers who said they had been sanctioned included some who declined to take part in training, had left their courses, had been late or forgotten to attend. Poor organisational skills, rather than unwillingness to comply with mandate, led to some customers being sanctioned. Because of the circumstances in which they were sanctioned, it was unlikely to have been effective in ensuring future participation of these customers.

Family members and friends were sources of support for sanctioned customers during the period without benefit. This sometimes caused stress and affected family relationships where incomes, including benefits, were pooled or where other family members were on benefits or low pay.

## Policy recommendations

The report's 12 recommendations include the following:

- Improvements to the implementation and operation of future pilot programmes, including control of the number of pilots and preparation of advisers.
- Measures to address problems in the supply of training, including delays in training which occur through 'roll-on, roll off' courses and closures during the summer.
- Fuller customer engagement in decisions about their training needs.
- No mandate to training for customers already engaged in employment-related training and use of discretion for customers who are engaged in job formation activities such as volunteering or setting up a business.
- Motivation of customers through explaining the benefits of training and, in mandatory programmes, referral to good quality training.
- Discretion over sanctioning where customers have made genuine errors affecting attendance.
- Awareness of the wider impact that sanctioning may have on low-income families where benefits and wages are pooled.
- Personalised attention to the non-skill needs of some customers who are hardest to help, such as ex-offenders and substance abusers.

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 908523 14 3. Research Report 768. August 2011).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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