

RESEARCH

Enhancing Employability through Positive Interventions for improving Career potential (EEPIC)



We continue to receive examples of research from the guidance community and, as promoters of evidence-based practice, we continue to publish. In this article, Chartered Work & Organisational Psychologist, Dr Nuala Whelan, focusses on the effectiveness of Ireland's labour market policy on the well-being and employability of long-term unemployed job seekers. This stems from her doctoral research on this topic funded by the Irish Research Council and could inform the future development of guidance services for unemployed adults.

Having worked in the Local Employment Service for many years, I was often struck by the unrecognised and latent potential of people, and how it begins to emerge when they start a journey of career exploration or job seeking. Many practitioners talk about the subtle changes they see as clients learn more about who they are, what their strengths and capabilities may be, and what their labour market potential is. Not only do people display increased levels of hopefulness for the future and curiosity about where it will take them, but they also express feelings of improved well-being.

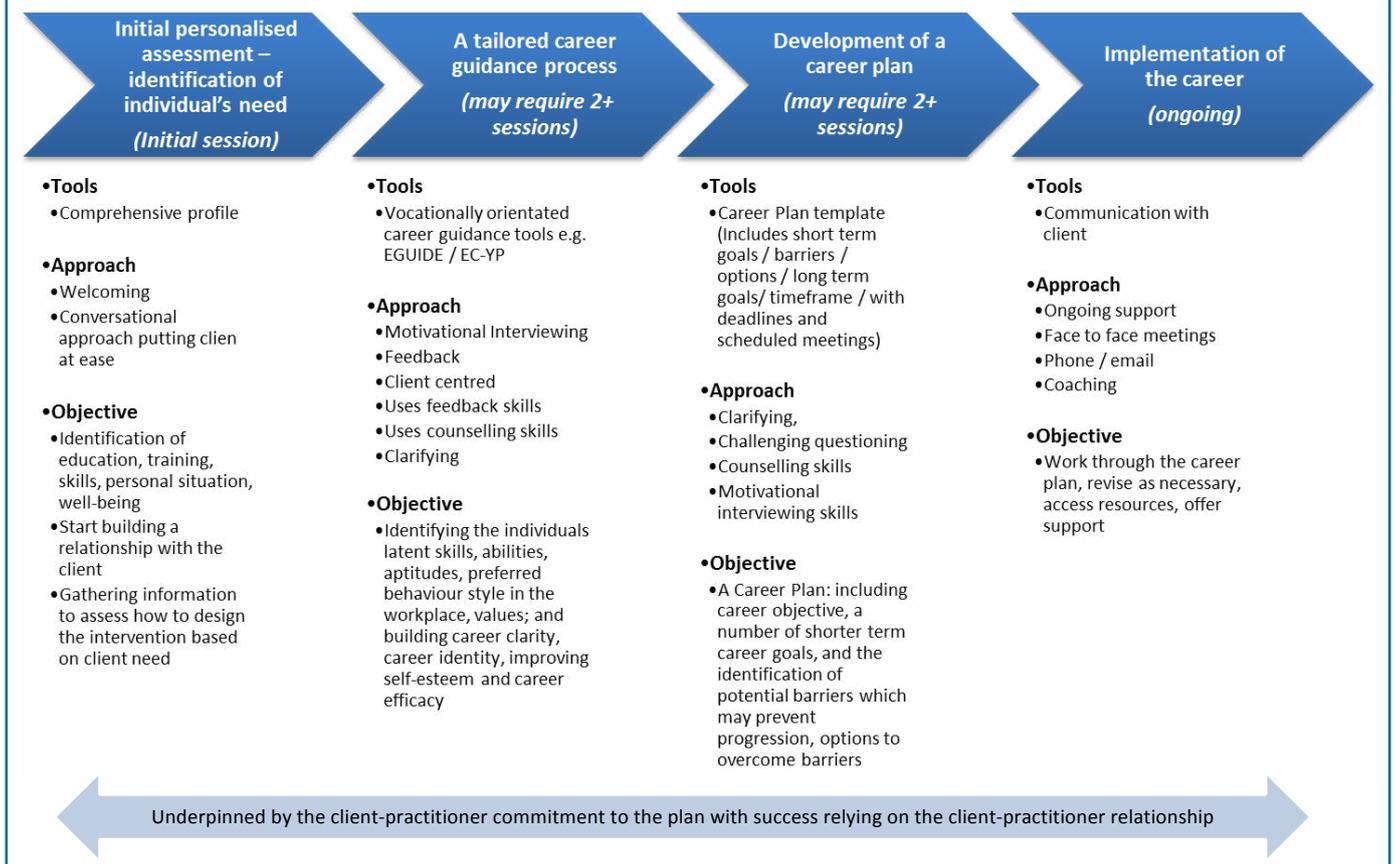
With this in mind I set out to investigate the impact of a career guidance focused employment support intervention, 'EEPIC' (see Fig.1) on key re-employment factors, such as well-being, career efficacy, and increased employability.

The Psychosocial Impact of Unemployment

It is widely acknowledged that at an individual level unemployment results in a loss of income and declining job-related skills and is often considered a stressful life event (Wanberg, Zhang, & Diehn, 2010), comparable with other traumatic events such as coping with divorce or the death of a spouse (Chen & Lim, 2012; Defrank

& Ivancevich, 1986). Indeed, a large body of research undertaken since the early 1980s has provided convincing evidence that psychological well-being and subsequent re-employment are both negatively affected by unemployment (e.g. Fryer & Payne, 1986; Jahoda, 1979, 1981; Murphy & Athanasou, 1999; Paul & Moser, 2009; Wanberg, 2012). A number of meta-analytic studies, which have synthesised much of the research in this area, provide robust evidence for the strong association between unemployment and lower levels of psychological well-being (e.g. McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005; Murphy & Athanasou, 1999; Paul & Moser, 2009). Their collective findings shed light on the causal nature of reduced well-being in the unemployed and the influence of moderating variables, such as age and gender, implying its individualised effects. In fact, Paul and Moser (2009) warned that unemployment poses a serious threat to public mental health and should not be underestimated when compared to other potential mental health risk factors. This is important as positive mental health has been found to contribute to overall well-being, enabling individuals to realise their abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and make important contributions to their communities (WHO, 2012).

Fig 1.



Tackling unemployment through labour market policy

Unemployment continues to be a persistent global problem attracting considerable interest from governments, policy makers, researchers and practitioners. During the last three decades or so, there has been a significant shift in international labour market policy toward activation and active labour market policy to help the unemployed progress more quickly into employment. In Ireland, policy changes have been more recent, with the implementation of the Pathways to Work policy (PTWP; 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016-2020). Despite our current low unemployment rate in Ireland (5.3%, CSO, Oct 2018), long-term unemployment (LTU), youth unemployment and insecure work remain problematic and more work is needed to identify how best to intervene effectively and appropriately so as to support job seekers, particularly with regard to securing quality sustainable employment, and building a healthy and resilient workforce for the future.

Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs) are the most commonly used means of tackling unemployment and broadly aim to increase employability, support people to re-access the labour market, and reduce the risk of future unemployment (Coutts, Stuckler, & Cann, 2014). However, the ways in which these policies are designed and implemented can vary considerably across different jurisdictions. For example, Nordic countries have traditionally opted for models which aim to build

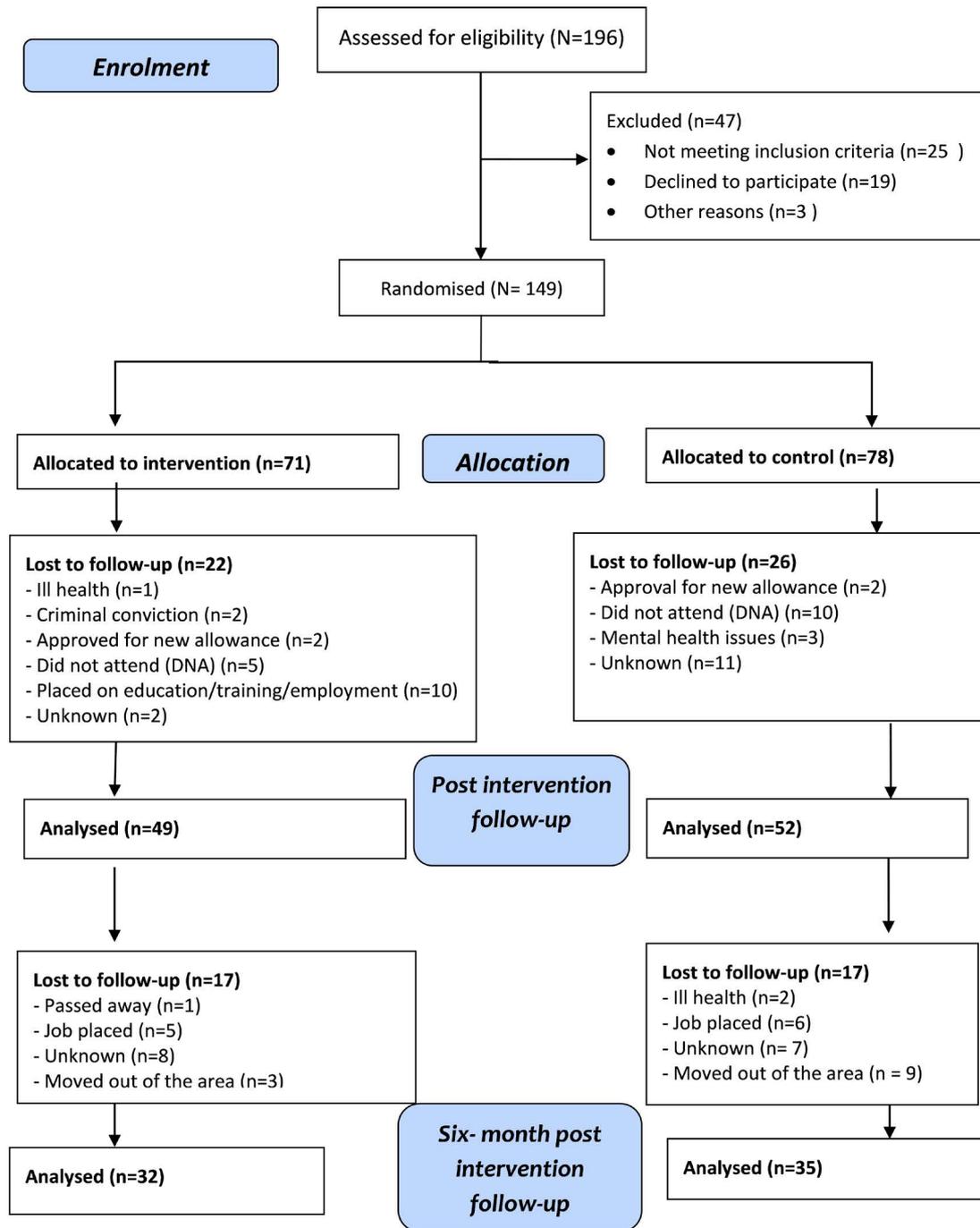
human capital whereas countries, such as the UK and the US use more direct 'work-first' approaches which require unemployed people to accept the first job offered regardless of its quality in terms of pay and conditions.

While PTWP has been critiqued as a work-first policy (Boland & Griffin, 2015), many have recognised its greater capacity for engagement with unemployed people (O'Connell, 2017) leading to what the OECD has described as a 'much improved labour market activation regime' (2015, p.16). Yet despite the widespread use of ALMPs, there have been very few evaluations; in particular, we know little about their impact on well-being and employability. In fact, their effectiveness tends to be measured specifically in terms of job placement or reductions in welfare dependency (Coutts et al., 2014).

The EEPIK Study

The EEPIK study sought to evaluate the PTWP in terms of key re-employment factors, including well-being, career efficacy, and increased employability. It took the form of a single-centre randomised controlled trial with a sample of LTU clients (N=149) randomly assigned into a high support intervention or the 'service as usual' control group (see Fig.2). Participants were followed up immediately post-intervention and six months later to assess changes in well-being and employability outcomes. While there were many findings from the study, three important findings for guidance and employment services emerged.

Fig 2.



- Baseline analysis of self-reported psychological well-being (GHQ-12) revealed that almost three-quarters (72%) of the entire sample scored at or above the clinical cut-off indicating a need for formal mental health intervention. This has important implications for employment services' initial engagement with job seekers.
- Findings suggest that both services led to improvements over time in well-being and employability, albeit with a number of more positive effects observed amongst male intervention participants in terms of hopefulness and career efficacy. Employability outcomes, assessed using self-reported measures of hopefulness, self-esteem, career efficacy, and perceived employability, all improved.

- Intervention participants were more likely to progress to education and training than job seeking when compared to control participants.

A subsequent implementation process evaluation highlighted the important role of the practitioner-client relationship, the informal service setting, and the skill sets of practitioners in improving outcomes.

This study is the first to examine the PTWP with regard to psychological well-being and employability outcomes for the unemployed. It provides support for detailing the 'how to' of implementation, emphasising the potential added value of well-designed interventions in terms of mental health and well-being outcomes, and career progression, not just for vulnerable job seekers but for all job seekers.

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