

A Capability Approach to Unemployed Young People's Voice and Agency in the Development and Implementation of Employment Activation Policies

Introduction

Youth unemployment is a major concern for governments across Europe. In the UK, tackling youth unemployment has often focused on the 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training) group. However, the focus on NEETs is criticised for: overlooking the heterogeneity of young people's experiences, framing young people as the problem, and not taking into account the complexity of transitions into work (Macdonald 2011). More generally, although human capital development is recognised in current approaches to address unemployment, the emphasis is on compulsion and rapid labour market entry (Lindsay *et al.* 2007; Fuertes *et al.* 2014; McQuaid and Fuertes 2014). It has been proposed that measures of successful employment activation for young people should be refocused, using the Capability Approach (CA) as an alternative framework (Egdell and McQuaid 2016). The CA is concerned with what people can do rather than what they actually do, together with substantive freedom of choice, taking account of external factors and personal characteristics (Sen 2009: 232). In applying the CA, attention is drawn to the need for jobseekers to have a voice in the design and implementation of employment activation programmes (Bonvin and Orton 2009; Orton 2011). However, at present the constraints on jobseekers' voice in policy development and implementation have not been fully explored. This paper seeks to address this gap.

Drawing on in-depth qualitative research undertaken in Scotland, this paper uses the CA as a framework to explore the capability for voice and agency among unemployed young people (aged 16-24) in employment activation policy development and implementation. This paper

takes as its definition of 'capability for voice' that of Bonvin and Farvaque (2005) who define it as an individual's "*participation in the public process itself, and the effective possibility of expressing her concerns and wishes*" (270). This paper analyses how far, and in what ways, young people's ideas, experiences and voices are effectively included in policy development and implementation. Questions are asked about: how different voices are included in policy processes; what is meaningful engagement and participation; and what enables voice taking and voice making. Reflections are made about how the policy discourse, which stresses the importance of centring services on user needs, is reflected in employment activation policy.

A Capability Approach to Employment Activation

The CA was developed by Sen (1985a/b, 1990, 1992, 1998, 2009) as an approach to welfare economics and development, but has since been applied to a variety of policy fields including youth employment activation (Egdell and McQuaid 2016), school-to-work transitions (Otto *et al.* 2015) and careers guidance (Robertson 2015). In its application across a range of policy areas, the CA provides a normative language in which to frame social action, based on freedom, wellbeing and agency (Deneulin 2014).

The CA is centred on the individual's substantive freedom for autonomous action, taking account of external factors and personal characteristics (Sen 1985a/b; Robeyns 2006, 2005). It emphasises human agency, seeing individuals as autonomous persons who should be able to decide what they wish to achieve (Sen 1985a; Walker and Unterhalter 2007; Kotan 2010), based on their own understanding of a 'good life' rather than one imposed upon them (Deneulin 2011).

Key to understanding the CA are five conceptual building blocks (Goerne 2010: 7-8). *Commodities* are the material and non-material resources an individual has access to. Deprivation and wellbeing should not be assessed in terms of these commodities; rather, attention should be paid to *functionings* - what individuals do and are. In turn, these functionings are a subset of an individual's *capability set* - all that an individual can do and be. Hence, capabilities represent the potential to achieve valued functionings (Sen 1985a/b, 1998, 2009; Robeyns 2006, 2005). From their capability set, individuals ultimately make *choices* about their preferred functionings. The transformation of commodities into valued functionings is also mediated by *conversion factors* (personal, environmental and social conditions) (Robeyns 2005). Thus equal welfare inputs do not necessarily lead to equal welfare outputs, as the ability for the individual to live a life that they value is constrained by a range of factors (Dean *et al.* 2005).

The CA offers a useful perspective on employment activation as it draws attention to freedom of choice, motivation, what individuals value, and their access to resources (Bonvin and Orton 2009; Lindsay and McQuaid 2010; Orton 2011; Egdell and McQuaid 2016). A capability informed employment activation policy would take a long-term perspective and promote an individual's freedom to choose the work they have reason to value (Bonvin and Farvaque 2007; Lindsay and McQuaid 2010). Jobseekers would be empowered through the provision of sufficient resources (e.g. welfare benefits) and access to appropriate conversion factors (e.g. employability support) in order to have the capacity to do work that they value. As active participants jobseekers would have a voice in programme development, negotiate programme content, and be able to refuse a job at a bearable cost (Bonvin and Farvaque 2007; Bonvin and Orton 2009; Orton 2011). At present, young people often lack power in the relationships they have with agencies, having to take part in activities that they perceive as irrelevant (Sealey

2014). Agents would have flexibility in service delivery to meet local labour market and individual service user needs; and there would be a clear articulation of both individual and collective responsibilities (Bonvin and Farvaque 2007; Bonvin and Orton 2009). A capability informed approach to employment activation would recognise that empowering jobseekers to choose work that they value also cannot be achieved without taking into account the importance of external conversion factors such as social stratification, labour market conditions or labour market segregation in shaping an individual's choices (Bonvin 2009; Hollywood *et al.* 2012; Egdell and McQuaid 2016). Taking this approach would also challenge the existing normative framework, which reproduces capitalist relations due to its emphasis on paid work (Avis 2014). Valuable options beyond paid employment, such as volunteering or providing informal care, would be promoted (Orton 2011).

Taking a capability informed approach would necessitate a reworking of the informational basis for judgements in justice (IBJJ). This is the information that is deemed relevant by actors (e.g. policymakers) when considering an individual or a situation (Sen 1990). In a subjective evaluation – such as that of a jobseeker – there is a plurality of informational bases that can be taken, with divergent effects on participants' substantive freedom (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2005). A capability informed approach would assess the situation of jobseekers in terms of their capabilities and functionings, as well as their preferences, with the end goal “*to design individualised policies that truly promote the individuals' autonomy, not only as an end-product but throughout the entire policy process*” (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2005: 286).

The CA has been critiqued both in terms of its conceptual underpinnings, and implications for its application. At the conceptual level, Dean (2009) argues that the CA does not challenge the roots of social injustice in that it does not reflect on or contest the systemic injustices of

capitalism. While the CA places emphasis on consensus, the focus should be on *“the struggle for the recognition of unspoken needs; the struggle for more direct forms of political participation; the struggle against exploitation and the systemic injustices of capitalism”* (Dean 2009: 274-5). Dean (2009) also contends that as the CA is premised on the self-sufficient individual subject, it does not acknowledge human interdependency. Individuals are both materially and emotionally dependent on each other. In addition Taylor (2011) argues that the CA over emphasises rational cognitive action, and does not consider the relational nature of inter-subjectivity. The authors of this current paper acknowledge the relevance of these critiques. However, the value of the CA in challenging inequality and promoting justice should not be discounted. The CA provides a paradigm that *“goes beyond the relentless criticism of income to propose an alternative space in which to conceptualize both poverty reduction and justice. This space includes multiple functionings, and freedoms”* (Alkire 2005). As Orton (2011) argues it offers an alternative to the neoliberal framework to understand the purpose of social policy and its underpinning principles, focusing on the way in which policy can shape the freedoms and opportunities available to individuals. In terms of employment activation the CA also goes beyond a narrow focus on employability, but creates the space to consider economic development and state responsibility etc. (Orton 2011). There is of course opportunity to develop the CA further to respond and reflect upon critiques, however, this is beyond the scope of this current paper.

In its practical application, the CA also raises questions about the value attached to different jobs and who should do the ‘less desirable’ jobs (Dunn 2010). Mead (1992) maintains that unemployed people should not be able to choose, and should be forced to engage in training or unpaid jobs to remain eligible for welfare benefits. Refusing a job could also prolong unemployment and deepen disadvantage (Dunn 2013). These sentiments are arguably reflected

in UK policy. However, the CA “*does not imply the disappearance of constraints*” rather it “*advocates a fair and negotiated construction of this constraint*” (Orton 2011: 357). Thus questions are asked about whether choices, such as between poverty level welfare benefits and low-wage employment really enhance an individual’s capabilities and ability to live a life that they value (Orton 2011: 357). Mead’s (1992) argument is also grounded in normative assumptions regarding the value of paid work over other activities. In applying the CA to employment activation individuals would have the time and space to establish and realise their capabilities, and provide the right (but not the obligation), to work and to have a choice regarding work (Dean *et al.* 2005). Emphasising the need for individuals to be able to choose work would shift the focus to also consider the need for affordable childcare or more flexible working opportunities (Orton 2011).

Service User Voice and Agency in Employment Activation

Three key discourses underpin recent changes to public service delivery in the UK and internationally: individualisation; personalisation; and co-production. These policy discourses raise the potential for service users to have an active voice and agency in policy development and implementation.

Employment activation in Europe has become increasingly individualised, with services adjusted to the specificities of the individual’s everyday life, to reflect increasing heterogeneity in the labour market and the variety of jobseekers’ needs (van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007; Eichhorst *et al.* 2008). Individualisation may be realised through: having tailor-made services; service users shaping the support they receive; or through service users taking greater responsibility for addressing their situation, often under threat of sanctioning or conditionality

(Clegg and Clasen 2007; van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007; Wright 2012; Grover and Piggot 2013b)

Crucially, the individual is framed as responsible for bearing and producing risks and, in terms of employment activation, responsible for seeking work (van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007; Eriksson 2012). However, there is often a simplistic assumption that behaving responsibly coincides with quick labour market reintegration. The discourse surrounding the NEET group has been criticised for attributing NEET status purely to individual disposition and choice, not accounting for wider labour market structures (Thompson 2011). There is an over-estimation of the agency of individuals in the context of the preconditions they have to meet, which may challenge jobseeker's abilities to be capable and autonomous actors (Dahmen 2014; Leppänen 2014). In this context, responsibility is 'fostered' through requirements that jobseekers comply with a range of injunctions, and individual preferences that conform to institutional expectations are only considered (Bonvin 2008). However, the CA argues that the 'responsibilisation' of jobseekers requires both empowerment and real freedom of choice (Bonvin 2008).

The term individualisation is used alongside, or interchangeably with, the term 'personalisation', which means taking service users' strengths and preferences into account when providing services (Carr 2012). Personalisation assumes that people are experts in their own needs, and that personalised services better reflect the realities of people's lives (Needham 2011). While personalisation first emerged in relation to social care, other policy areas such as employment and education are increasingly personalised. In employment activation in the UK, services have become flexible and less standardised; although the extent to which this is delivered in practice is not always clear (Borghi and van Berkel 2007). For example,

personalisation may be “*largely procedural in nature, with an emphasis on building up a personal and mutually respectful relationship between adviser and participant, and making use of tools such as assessment and action planning, which contain a degree of individualisation in their implementation*” (Newton *et al.* 2012: 122). However, there may be less substantive personalisation in the sense of service users receiving distinct and, if appropriate, specialised support aimed at addressing their individual needs (Newton *et al.* 2012).

Bonvin and Farvaque (2007) have argued that the changes described above have resulted in the reshuffling of the policy process away from the traditional three stage process of policy design, implementation, and evaluation; instead there is more interconnection and interdependency between these stages. Local actors have a greater margin for interpretation and there is constant monitoring and evaluation of the behaviours of service users. It is relevant here to introduce the co-production of public services which has arguably played an important role in the reorganisation of the policy process. In co-producing services the aim has been to encourage equal partnership between service providers and service users: “*Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours*” (Boyle and Harris 2009: 11). Service users are not framed as passive recipients; instead they are innovators, critical success factors, resources, asset-holders and community-developers (Bovaird and Loeffler 2013). In practice co-produced services may include: user run and user led organisations; peer support projects; and involving service users in designing and delivering services to other service users and professionals (see for examples: Nesta *et al.* 2012). However, a range of barriers to young people’s involvement in co-productive and other service user engagement activity have been identified including: tokenism; an over-reliance on formal and/or adult centered participation

mechanisms; the constraints of organisational structures such as school timetabling; and lack of support to help young people communicate their views (see for example Lightfoot and Sloper 2003; Mallan and Greenaway 2011; Vromen and Collin, 2010; Tisdall 2011; SCCYP 2013). Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People has outlined key elements of good quality participation from the point of view of children and young people (SCCYP 2013: 20-21). These include giving young people the opportunity to participate in a fun and creative way as appropriate; providing young people with the opportunity to have a voice using appropriate communication methods, using an advocate if necessary; and respecting differences in views between adults and children and young people.

Methods

This paper draws on in-depth qualitative research undertaken in Scotland at two policy levels; national and devolved government (UK and Scotland) and local government (Edinburgh).

Firstly data was collected (May 2013-March 2014) to map and analyse policymaking processes and youth participation opportunities (both generally and also in relation to employment policy) in Scotland. Both Scottish and UK Government policy documents were examined (reflecting the devolved, shared and reserved policy landscape). The aim was to: identify and evaluate relevant existing employment youth policies in relation to disadvantage; identify the actors responsible for the development and delivery of employment policy and the relationship between the state and various actors; and identify social innovation and its role in the delivery and development of youth employment policy. Semi-structured interviews conducted with 18 stakeholders (e.g. training/education providers; employment support service providers; citizen's bodies; youth work organisations; networks and membership organisations which represented a range of organisations or individuals concerned with a particular thematic, policy

or service area) added further rich data which illuminated the results of the policy analysis, and in particular provided insights between the links or disconnects between policy and practice.

A case study of youth employment policy and opportunities for youth participation in Edinburgh was also undertaken (December 2013-July 2014). The aim was to provide an analysis of social support networks, socially innovative policies and strategies of local actors in relation to disadvantaged unemployed youth by mapping current policy processes and local social support networks. Policies designed to tackle youth unemployment and opportunities for youth participation were explored. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a further 19 stakeholders (e.g. training/education providers; employment support service providers; citizen's bodies), and four focus groups were held with 21 young people in total, who were engaged with different employment support programmes. In one of these focus groups, three staff members from the employment support programme also participated (in addition to the 19 stakeholders interviewed). The policy analysis, interviews and focus groups sought to address questions such as how the target group in relation to youth employment policies is constructed, and what information is used in policy judgements.

All the interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants, or detailed notes were taken. Thematic content analysis of the transcripts was undertaken. The research adhered to the Code of Practice on Research Integrity of **[Name of University]**. Verbal or written consent was taken from all participants.

Findings

The research findings research illuminate the extent of young people's capability for voice and agency in terms of: (1) The voice of young people in policy development; (2) in the informational basis of employment policy priorities; and (3) the voice of young people in programme delivery.

The voices of young people in policy development

This first section explores young people's voice and agency in policy development at a general level in Scotland, and reflects on the contribution of young people to the IBJJ. As outlined earlier, taking a capability informed approach to employment activation necessitates a reworking of the information that is deemed relevant by actors such as policymakers when considering a situation (Sen 1990). This section examines whether and how young people contribute to the IBJJ.

The policy mapping/analysis identified a range of mechanisms and platforms to encourage and enable young people to have voice in policymaking, and contribute to the IBJJ, at the Scottish Government and local authority level. Providing opportunities for voice to service users, to allow them to shape and change their own circumstances, is a core part of the Scottish Government's approach to policymaking. As part of this, individuals and communities are seen to have a stake in co-producing interventions that will bring about positive changes to their circumstances (Scottish Government 2011: 9). Consultation and engagement activities with service users and the organisations representing them are also an important part of policy development in areas such as youth employment. For example, in 2013 a consultation on developing Scotland's young workforce was opened, which young people could respond to. Stakeholders also commented that their organisations were often consulted, giving young

people a voice by proxy. Thus it could be argued that young people contribute to the development of the IBJJ, as the presence of these mechanisms and platforms indicate that policymakers see young people's views and ideas as relevant. It could be asserted that a capability informed approach to policy making is being taken as there are opportunities for youth voices to be heard.

However, despite these opportunities, stakeholders expressed scepticism about the degree to which young people's voice was included in policy development (and the IBJJ), and the impact of young people's participation in practice. It was felt by many stakeholders that young people's participation primarily occurred through formal channels; which while open to all, were unattractive, or inaccessible, to those not engaged in these formal systems (e.g. school). A stakeholder from an employment support provider felt that, while there were young people who were actively participating and taking up opportunities to make their views heard, these were not the type of young person who would typically be engaged with their organisation. Therefore, attempts to widen the IBJJ may be limited, if there is a lack of diversity in terms of the views and experiences represented and heard. In particular, it may be those young people who are the targets of employment activation policy that are less likely to be heard.

'Young people that are involved and active, while their views are absolutely most welcome I think how do you actually get the voice of those who are disadvantaged... there doesn't seem to be any real evidence of consultation of those young people'
(Employment Support Provider)

The ways in which views are sought (e.g. through formal meetings) were felt to exclude some young people. For example, one stakeholder outlined how they made the unemployed young

people that they were working with aware of community meetings that might be relevant, but the young people were not interested in attending.

‘[There are] local neighbourhood partnership meetings and they are kind of open meetings. But [young people] would never really fancy just turning up to one of those and seeing what is happening. And if there are things that are kind of like topical then we would say do you fancy coming along to one of these meetings. But it wouldn’t be their kind of thing’ (Employment Support Provider)

The stakeholders also reflected on whether, when young people’s views were sought, they could effect change in policy direction, shaping the IBJJ. Participation was often cited by the stakeholders as a ‘tick-box exercise’ rather than a meaningful activity, and some felt that it was not always obvious to see whether any information gathered through consultations with service users was reflected in policy. It was also felt that consultation took place after the initial design phase, and so the likelihood that young people’s views would change the policy direction was limited.

‘The sketches have been done and the plans are drafted and outlined and we’re then consulted about how would you shape this, how would you change it, is this acceptable’
(Employment Support Provider)

Some stakeholders perceived that young people felt removed and not welcome to partake in the process, or that some young people did not see the relevance of policy and politics, making it less likely that they would engage in formal participative processes. Young people may also feel that government is not on the ‘side’ of young people.

‘[Young people] feel that it’s totally irrelevant and the government is going to do what it wants to do regardless of what they feel about anything... [or] the government always sides against young people’ (Employment Support Provider)

These views were confirmed by the young people in the focus groups, most of whom did not engage in political or civic activities. However, they were not necessarily politically disengaged, with some discussing their views of the Scottish Independence Referendum (the focus groups were conducted during the build-up). The focus group participants’ apparent disengagement may also have been due to a reluctance to discuss political views in a group setting. Some peer groups and settings encourage political talk, and others do not (Ekström 2015).

The young people were cynical about why their views might be sought by policymakers, and the extent to which policymakers cared about young people. They felt that policymakers were out of touch, not realising or having experienced the realities of their daily lives and difficulties finding work. They did not feel that they had a voice in the development of policies.

‘They think they know it because they run the policies...but they’re not experiencing it first-hand. They’re not us. They’re sitting at the top of the triangle with all their money thinking oh you know these people are not looking for jobs’ (Female, 17/18 years)

Links can be made here to findings from other research highlighting that young people from communities who are less engaged with politics may find it hard to relate to political debates because they may feel: that the issues that they are concerned about are not addressed; that

politicians talk at them rather than to them; and that politicians do not understand their day-to-day lives (Bastedo 2014).

The informational basis of employment policy priorities

This section considers the informational basis of employment policy priorities. It explores, taking a capability informed approach, the similarities and differences between the current policy direction on one hand, and young people's views of the causes of youth unemployment and the best ways to support young people into work on the other.

The CA acknowledges the conversion factors – the personal, environmental and social conditions – that mediate the transformation of commodities into valued functionings (Robeyns 2005). However, the policy analysis suggested that policymakers' understandings of disadvantage in the labour market often focus on the individual jobseeker's attributes and deficits. Demand-side issues are acknowledged through a small number of employer recruitment incentives. However, the focus is predominantly centred on supply-side measures and the individual jobseeker; forcing supply to fit with demand, even if this is calling for unnecessary skills and experience. Thus generally the understandings of young people's labour market barriers are narrow, and tend to individualise the causes of their unemployment and the best ways to support them into the labour market. This can be contrasted against the narratives of the young people in the focus groups, who focused on the wider structural issues (or external conversion factors) that presented challenges to them. This does not mean that individual barriers were not an issue for them, as they may have preferred not to discuss these in a group discussion context, but they emphasised the external constraints that they faced. For example, many of the young people discussed their perceptions of not being 'given a chance' by

employers because of a lack of experience, and not being capable of their preferred outcome, due to some factor beyond their control. As others have argued, while young people may recognise their own responsibilities, they also see a role for government to address economic and other inequalities (Pimlott-Wilson 2015).

The policy analysis highlighted that the evaluative yardstick used to assess the value and success of policy focuses on getting young people into work or providing them with the skills and qualifications to find work, with little consideration given to individual jobseekers' capabilities, choices, motivations and valued outcomes. There are some Scottish Government policy discussions about 'positive' destinations for young people, with programmes working towards a young person moving into a positive destination (defined as employment or education, a voluntary placement, or a Modern Apprenticeship¹). However it is not clear whether this is a positive destination solely from a policy point of view, or whether they are positive for the young person. The CA demonstrates that the transition to work is not always necessarily a positive move into 'quality' employment (Vero *et al.* 2012). Equally, the focus on positive destinations does not challenge the normative framework that young people should be expected to work and should expect to do paid work (Avis 2014). The CA argues for individual choice rather than the imposition by the State of conceptions of what a good life is (Deneulin 2011). As such the CA promotes the importance of valuable options beyond paid employment (Orton 2011).

Although policy largely ignores socio-economic barriers and the complexity of labour market disadvantage, stakeholders did discuss these issues. Some employment support providers acknowledged that many of those commissioning employability programmes recognise the importance of achieving soft outcomes that might encompass wider, potentially capability

enhancing, factors such as developing a young person's confidence. Although the primary focus was on 'harder' job outcomes, they also felt that they had some flexibility to meet the 'softer' outcome needs of the young people as well. 'Hard' outcomes include tangible and quantifiable outcomes such as jobs and qualifications. On the other hand 'soft' outcomes include interpersonal, organisational, analytical and personal skills. Thus softer skills may be more difficult to measure (Dewson *et al.* 2000: 2). As a result of the flexibility regarding soft outcomes stakeholders did not necessarily feel constrained in supporting young people, and could offer a personalised and capability enhancing service. Indeed, others have found a perception among employment support providers that focusing on young people's needs is the most effective way of meeting funders' targets (Egdell and McQuaid 2016).

'The funding that's available these days is more kind of harder outcome based generally speaking but yes I don't think we feel too pressured. We've got targets and we have to meet them and we agree them each year and they tend to get stretched slightly each year... provided we are making progress the funders are reasonably flexible' (Employment Support Provider)

The voice of young people in programme delivery

Having explored, through a capability lens, the development and underlying assumptions of policies to tackle youth unemployment, this final section considers the implementation and delivery of these policies. It explores the potential for young unemployed people to have voice in the services and programmes targeted at them, and the extent to which they are active participants and genuine partners who are able to negotiate programme content (Bonvin and Farvaque 2007; Bonvin and Orton 2009; Orton 2011).

The stakeholder interviews found evidence that young people do feed into individual programmes and services. Employment support providers discussed the ways in which young people had a voice in their programmes. For example, they had a voice through forums and formal mechanisms built into programmes for feedback and evaluation, as well as more informal mechanisms for seeking feedback.

‘Our outcomes framework means that we formally have to evaluate and get feedback from the young person... But informally we always make a point of seeking feedback after anything we would do with the young person,’ (Employment Support Provider)

Other stakeholders described how input from young people could be used to shape the way in which they worked with the young person and type of support offered to them. Therefore, it could be argued that a personalised and capability enhancing approach was being taken to service delivery.

‘We are very flexible and adaptable to what the young people are telling us... We always have a plan and we always try to be prepared and have a plan, but if at any point we need to tear it up and throw it out the window then we do’ (Training/Education provider)

Examples were also identified of ways in which young people could have a say in how those providing services operate at an organisational level. For example, third sector providers working with young people could have their service users: sitting on their Board of Trustees, engaging in staff recruitment, or shaping programme themes and design.

However, while some programmes may be flexible to young people's needs and their aspirations, the views and preferences that young people are expressing (that in turn programmes are responding to) may be shaped by their environment. This phenomenon is referred to in the CA as 'adaptive preference formation'; the adjustment of expectations and aspirations downwards so that the individual does not have the freedom to live a life that they value (Nussbaum 2000). Some stakeholders felt that this did happen in practice; that young people had narrow conceptions of the opportunities available to them. Therefore employment support programmes engaged in activities designed to expand young people's horizons. There was a feeling from one participant in particular that young people sometimes wanted a 'quick fix' through the form of temporary or zero hour contracts in the retail and hospitality sectors, rather than trying to find a more sustainable opportunity. Therefore, a transition to work may not imply that the capabilities of an individual have been developed, as young people may find themselves in a precarious job (Vero *et al.* 2012).

The narratives from the young people provided a mixed picture as to whether they were willing to accept 'any job', or sought out opportunities that they had reason to value. Some emphasised that a less desirable job was better than no job at all:

'Jobs are pretty scarce, so if you get offered a job you're doing well, take it, snap the employer's hand off...you might not like that job but you can still look' (Male, 25 years)

Others were inclined to accept any job because they wanted to be independent:

“It’s just money, I just want to have my own money instead of asking my mum all the time, I’m seventeen!” (Male, 17 years)

However, some young people emphasised the importance of finding work that they valued, although it could make it harder to find a job.

‘You need to get a job that isn’t just a job to you, it has to have meaning, so that it doesn’t become a job, it becomes more of an obligation, a calling...and it’s not easy getting jobs like that’ (Male, 17/18 years)

Care needs to be taken in making any inferences from what is arguably limited and mixed evidence regarding young people’s aspirations and what they find valuable. There are wider political discourses in the UK regarding youth ‘poverty of aspirations’ and ‘cultures of worklessness’. However, evidence from other studies suggests that these discourses are unfounded (Macdonald *et al.* 2014), and that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds do not have a deficit of aspirations, but lack the means to achieve them due to structural barriers compared to young people from more advantaged backgrounds (Sealey 2014).

Opportunities for voice also come up against the realities of funding priorities and local labour market opportunities. Despite some flexibility to participants’ needs and motivations, the fundamentals of the programmes often stay the same, as there is a need to meet the requirements of service commissioners. As such, the extent to which programmes can be capability enhancing, focusing on what young people value, could be constrained by the demands of commissioners. These demands might not necessarily align with the priorities of young people, as indicated in the previous two findings sections.

‘I think we as a programme are flexible but our funders aren’t flexible in terms of that...we need those outcomes in order to be continually funded’ (Employment Support Provider)

Nevertheless, some of the service provider participants made it clear that they are not funding led and would only deliver what they think meets the needs of the young people they work with. As outlined previously, while programmes were aware of hard outcome requirements, they also worked towards supporting young people to achieve softer outcomes.

The prevailing norms of the labour market also presented constraints on young people’s choices and the degree of flexibility available in programmes. One employment support provider felt that there needed to be ‘realism’ in the experiences and opportunities offered to young people in order to reflect the reality of the labour market, which limited flexibility: *“Work is not a democracy. And that places an immediate limit on flexibility”*. Another employment support provider outlined that, while they held forums with their service users, they could not always make the changes requested by the young people, for various reasons.

‘We do youth forums here...at times they ask for things that just cannot happen, it doesn’t fit into policy or it’s a health and safety issue, or something else that we have to say no’ (Employment Support Provider)

Discussion and Conclusions

In the context of a policy discourse focused on the individualisation, personalisation, and co-production of public service delivery, this paper has used the CA as a framework to explore young people's voice and agency in the development and implementation of employment activation policies, exposing the informational basis of policymaking (Sen 1990). It has analysed how far, and in what ways, unemployed young people's ideas, experiences and voices are included in policy development and implementation. Questions addressed include how different voices are included in policy processes, and what enables voice taking and enables young people to live a life that they have reason to value.

The CA offers a useful framework to critically analyse unemployed young people's voice and agency in the development and implementation of employment activation policy. The CA argues that a 'good life' is a life of genuine choice and takes into account external factors and personal characteristics (Sen 1985a/b, 1998, 2009; Robeyns 2006, 2005). It highlights the need for an individual to be able to choose between alternative lives that are of value rather than the imposition of external conceptions of what a good life is (Deneulin 2011). In its application to employment activation it draws attention to choice, motivation, what individual jobseekers value, and access to resources (Bonvin and Orton 2009; Lindsay and McQuaid 2010; Egdell and McQuaid 2016). It emphasises that service users need to be genuine partners in the activation process and have a voice in programme development (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2007; Bonvin and Orton 2009; Orton 2011).

The findings of the research presented in this paper highlight ways in which young people's voices are included in the development and delivery of policy. In theory it can be argued that young people's views are seen as relevant by policymakers, as there are mechanisms and platforms in place to gather them. However, in practice these are not accessible or attractive to

all young people, especially those who are most disadvantaged. The view of disadvantaged young people may be sought by proxy, through those who provide employability services aimed at them, but it is not clear whether this is capability enhancing from the point of view of young people, as they are not being consulted directly, or how representative these views gathered by proxy are. Even if opportunities for the direct participation of young people are available, participation may be approached by policymakers as a tick-box exercise, and so while voices may be sought, they are not necessarily heard. Young people themselves may also be cynical of attempts by policymakers to engage with them. However, previous research has suggested that they may feel powerless and unable to make a difference, rather than apathetic (Threadgold 2012).

The evidence from this study also suggests that unemployed young people's views about their own barriers to employment do not seem to be reflected in current employment policy priorities. Their narratives highlight that young people perceive wider structural constraints as the key barriers to their labour market participation. However, the policy analysis showed that the focus of employability is on the individual, rather than on addressing wider structural conditions. Thus young people's contribution to the informational basis of policymaking seems to be limited.

At the meso-level of programme delivery, there is evidence that young people do feed into individual programmes and services. But while there was some flexibility in programmes to the needs of young people, the fundamentals of the programmes have to meet the requirements of service commissioners, and other considerations such as health and safety. Where there is flexibility to young people's needs and their aspirations, 'adaptive preference formation' may mean the views and preferences that young people are expressing are constrained. The

‘realities’ of the local labour market may also restrict the opportunities available to young people. The CA demonstrates that the transition to work is not always a positive move into ‘quality’ employment (Vero *et al.* 2012). As a result of funding requirements there may be little scope for individuals to determine valuable outcomes, and move beyond concerns of whether they are in or out of work – although programmes do seek to address softer outcomes too. As such normative assumptions about the value of paid work are not questioned or challenged. There is not the policy space for unemployed young people to express capabilities, desires and aspirations if they do not include paid work. A capability informed approach would provide the right, but not the obligation, to work and to have a choice regarding work (Dean *et al.* 2005). It is only at the meso- and micro-level, rather than the macro-level, where capabilities, desires and aspirations beyond paid work can be realised in terms of programmes seeking to address softer outcomes. However, the question as to the extent to which the value of the achievement of these softer outcomes is primarily rooted in contributing to a longer term achievement of paid work, needs to be asked.

There are of course limitations to this study. It could be argued that the findings are specific to the Scottish context. In addition given the small sample size and the local case study focus on Edinburgh, the experiences of the interview participants may not be representative of the situation in the whole of Scotland. However, themes identified in this research do have international resonance [**Author et al., 2014a/b/c**]. The paper also points to the need for further research. Questions can also be raised about the opportunities for service user voice more generally when welfare-to-work is increasingly characterised by sanctions and conditionality – despite concurrent discourses of individualisation, personalisation, and co-production of public service delivery. These questions certainly warrant further analysis and discussion, and the CA offers a useful framework for this.

In summary, to what extent can the approach taken to the development and implementation of employment activation policy in Scotland really be understood in terms of Sen's notion of the CA as allowing voice, autonomy and choice? It has been demonstrated that in theory the presence of platforms and mechanisms for youth voice demonstrate that young people's views are seen as relevant. However, in practice these are not accessible to many young people. Unemployed young people's views about their own barriers to employment do not seem to be reflected in current employment policy priorities, and opportunities for young people to have agency and choice at the meso-level of programme delivery can be limited. Thus while at a superficial level arguments could be made that the approach taken in Scotland is capability enhancing, in practice the approach is often characterised by a narrow IBJJ, grounded in normative understandings about the value of paid work over and above other activities.

Endnotes

¹ Modern Apprenticeships provide opportunities for paid work combined with training, and the achievement of an industry recognised qualification, in a range of sectors. They are available to all those aged 16 years and over. See: www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/what-we-do/our-products/modern-apprenticeships/

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