

Job Guarantees, Employability Training and Partnerships in the Retail Sector

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ABSTRACT This paper discusses the potential value of local, partnership-based employability training and job guarantee programmes, focusing on one example—the ‘Alloa Initiative’. The Initiative involved an employability training and job guarantee scheme developed in partnership with Tesco, a major retailer, in preparation for the opening of one of the company’s new stores. This paper reports on the outputs from this project, which placed 109 disadvantaged job seekers into positions at the store, and proved particularly effective at targeting the long-term unemployed and those with limited experience of the retail sector. The analysis is based on the findings of survey research undertaken with 86 of the 109 training course completers (a 79 per cent response rate) and all the main partners involved in the Initiative. Innovative elements of the training programme that contributed to its positive outcomes are discussed, and a model for ‘managing successful partnerships’ is applied, in order to identify critical factors explaining the apparent success of the Initiative. In particular, the importance of employers providing job guarantees is noted.

KEY WORDS: Employability, job guarantees, regeneration, corporate social responsibility, partnerships, service work

Introduction

The long-term unemployed, and other job seekers who have been excluded from work for considerable periods (for example, due to sickness or caring responsibilities) can face a complex range of personal and circumstantial barriers. Given the complex and multi-dimensional nature

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of these problems, local partnerships have become increasingly valued as a tool for delivering client-centred employability training initiatives. In particular, more demand-responsive initiatives, which include employers within local partnerships and may provide job or interview guarantees for programme participants, have emerged as a means of delivering training that is relevant to the needs of the labour market and provides security and long-term benefits for job seekers (Hoogvelt & France, 2000; Adams *et al.*, 2001).

This paper examines the operation and effectiveness of one such partnership, built around the commitment of a major retail employer to provide a job guarantee for unemployed people completing a tailored employability training programme. The 'Alloa Initiative' was charged with implementing this programme in partnership with Tesco, in preparation for the opening of one of the company's retail superstores in Alloa in central Scotland in July 2002. This paper reports on the outputs from the Initiative, which placed 109 disadvantaged job seekers into positions at the store, and proved particularly effective at targeting those with limited or no experience of the retail sector. We identify critical factors explaining the apparent success of the Alloa Initiative, and accordingly develop a model for successful partnership working in this area of employability policy.

Following this introduction, the paper provides a brief description of the policy context for the research and methodology. The outcomes arising from the Alloa Initiative's employability training and job guarantee scheme are then discussed, with particular reference to job entry and retention rates and the results of a survey of participants (which provided data about the background, characteristics and attitudes of trainees). Finally, a model for successful partnership working and implications for policy are discussed.

Context for the Research and Methodology

Local Responses to Unemployment: the Role of Partnerships

Such is the rhetorical power of the language of 'partnership' that concerns have been raised that the concept has become little more than a 'buzzword' (Osborne, 1998)—an idea so ubiquitous in major policy initiatives and service guidelines that it risks losing its meaning (Miller, 1999), or a catch-all term 'used to convey a feeling of comfort rather than an exact meaning' (Falconer, 1999, p. 176).

Yet partnership-based approaches to dealing with labour market exclusion have become increasingly popular amongst policy makers eager to access a number of apparent benefits, including (see, for example, McQuaid, 1994, 1999, 2000; Geddes, 1998; Hutchinson & Campbell, 1998; Conway, 1999; Hawranek, 2000; Lindsay, 2000; Nativel *et al.*, 2002): the emergence of more responsive policy solutions tailored to the problems and opportunities of local labour markets; the effective sharing of local knowledge, resources and expertise; the opportunity to develop more

integrated and long-term approaches; and the legitimisation of, and mobilisation of local support for, policies.

Given these potential benefits, national and local government policy makers have sought to promote various forms of partnership as a means of delivering local labour market strategies, including the New Deal programmes for young people and the long-term unemployed (Lindsay, 2000). Finally, with major employers increasingly concerned with the development of the 'corporate social responsibility' agenda, a number of examples have emerged of private sector companies taking the lead in local employment access and regeneration partnerships. More specifically, it has been suggested that partnerships between labour market intermediaries and employers are most effective where the latter can be persuaded to guarantee jobs for those undertaking employability training provided by the former. Such approaches have been particularly prevalent in the retail sector (NRU, 2003).

The Policy and Labour Market Context for the Alloa Initiative

Tesco's outlet at Alloa joined 12 other stores in the initial phase of the company's national 'Regeneration Partnership Programme'. The Regeneration Partnership Programme seeks to link employment access and area regeneration initiatives to the opening of new Tesco stores in inner cities and on other brown-field sites. From the perspective of the company, these local partnership initiatives are not merely a means of 'giving something back' to the community, but also an essential tool facilitating the development of sustainable markets in urban areas. By taking direct action in these areas, retailers can help secure the market for their products and services throughout the communities in which stores are located, contributing to the increased long-term viability of these outlets, guarding the company's infrastructure investment and easing potential staff recruitment and retention problems. Tesco's commitment to working with local partners to provide access to employment for disadvantaged groups in these areas therefore reflects a corporate social responsibility strategy that seeks to identify 'a win/win for communities, customers and business' (Tesco, 2002).

The development at Alloa represented an important 'experiment' for Tesco—the company was keen to establish whether the Regeneration Partnership store model, successful in a number of inner city locations, could be applied to smaller town. Alloa is a small town (population 19,000) in the Clackmannanshire local authority area in central Scotland, approximately 40 km from the major 'central belt' cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh. Clackmannanshire has experienced high unemployment in recent years, and, at the time of the store's opening, claimant unemployment remained higher than the national average. Once a centre of the brewing and textile industries, the area haemorrhaged jobs with the closure of major employers in the 1980s and 1990s.

The Partnership and Programme Content

The Alloa Initiative partnership linked Tesco with relevant policy actors in the Alloa and wider Clackmannanshire areas, including: Clackmannanshire Council; Jobcentre Plus; Scottish Enterprise Forth Valley (the Local Enterprise Company); and Triage Central (a private sector organisation which has led the delivery of the New Deal in the area since 1998). Triage Central was largely responsible for coordinating the Initiative's activities. Funding for the Initiative's work was drawn mainly from New Deal and Training for Work budgets, which supported trainees on a client-by-client basis (some additional marketing and support funding was provided by Scottish Enterprise Forth Valley and the Alloa South and East Social Inclusion Partnership).

The Employability Training Course (ETC) that was at the centre of the Initiative's approach was largely (but not totally) based upon a model used by Tesco within other Regeneration Partnership projects. The final programme for the ETC offered a broad range of training provision, including: team working; personal presentation; retailing skills and customer care; stock control and security; workplace health and safety; and communication skills (including written communication). Trainees also visited other stores and, in some cases, depending on job roles, undertook work placements at the company's other outlets.

The programme's 'client-centred approach' was important in informing the ethos of the ETC. Company managers and staff from partner organisations made themselves available to trainees throughout the training process. Advice on salary scales, in-work benefits, training and job roles was therefore readily available. Childcare support and public transport subsidies were provided. Peer support between trainees was strongly encouraged. Furthermore, the Alloa Initiative, mirroring other Regeneration Partnership projects, included two additional innovative features:

- *The Job Guarantee*: all those who completed the Initiative's eight-week ETC programme were guaranteed jobs at the store, with positions, pay and working hours agreed between the company and trainees prior to the course's start. The aim of providing a job guarantee was to offer an incentive to programme participants to attend and complete the training course and to remove the fear, often reported by long-term unemployed people, that leaving benefits to start work or training represents a 'risk' that can result in negative longer term financial consequences.
- *'First impressions' selection*: Tesco's standard 'select the best' recruitment procedures focus on the skills and experience of candidates, and seek to identify the best candidates for given posts by testing their initiative, confidence and interpersonal skills. In contrast, the 'first impressions' interviews used to identify candidates for the Alloa Initiative's ETC provided a supportive (rather than competitive) environment, and replaced competency-based assessment with a flexible discussion-based approach, designed to identify enthusiastic

and communicative individuals (particularly those showing a desire to work in retail). The large numbers of vacancies created by the opening of a new store were therefore 'opened up' to disadvantaged job seekers.

It is worth noting the distinctiveness of the Initiative's 'job guarantee' approach within the broader employability policy context. National welfare to work policies, such as the New Deal 25+ (the government's main programme for the 'adult' long-term unemployed) prioritise working with employers to provide 'real work' opportunities for trainees. However, the New Deal 25+ has been unable to establish a job guarantee route for participants engaged in in-work training, with implications for job entry rates (see below). Even the 'employment subsidy' option of New Deal 25+ (where trainees are placed with employers for six months while being paid at or near the 'rate for the job', with wages subsidised by Jobcentre Plus) has struggled to match programme participants with opportunities. At the time of the research, only 5 per cent of those participating in the 'enhanced' New Deal 25+ were undertaking this employment subsidy option, with the majority involved in a range of other training or job search activities (DWP, 2002).

Clearly, there are limits to any job guarantee strategy. Policy makers at the national level have been concerned to guard against displacement effects (which may be particularly prevalent in sectors like retail) while the overall impact of partnerships with employers will largely depend on sectoral conditions and labour demand at the local level. Nevertheless, engaging with major employers to secure guaranteed jobs attached to employability training programmes has the potential to improve substantially the chances of achieving positive outcomes for clients, as well as providing an additional incentive for participation. The Alloa Initiative provided a testing ground for this approach within a particularly challenging local labour market context.

Evaluating the Alloa Initiative: Methodology

The research findings are drawn from an evaluation process (undertaken by the authors on behalf of the Alloa Initiative partnership) that involved two main elements. First, interviews were undertaken with key policy actors involved in the partnership and employer management representatives, focusing on the outputs from the project, the roles adopted by individual partners, and the dynamics of the partnership process. Secondly, interviews were undertaken with course participants who had completed the programme and taken up their posts at the store, focusing on respondents' backgrounds and previous experience, and views regarding the programme. Interviews were undertaken with day- and night-shift staff, supplemented by a smaller postal survey. Of the 109 course completers, 86 were interviewed or surveyed, representing a response rate of 79 per cent.

Outputs from the Alloa Initiative

Job Entry and Retention

The new store in Alloa created 278 jobs, 184 of which were filled by unemployed local residents. The Alloa Initiative's eight-week Employability Training Course (ETC) was designed to provide a route into work for local unemployed people who would not otherwise have found employment with the company. A 'jobs inquiry hotline' set up by the Initiative received 500 expressions of interest. Following the assessment and interview process, 119 individuals were recruited to the course, with 109 completing the programme and taking up work at the store. This represents an impressive course completion and job entry rate of 92 per cent (see Table 1). It should also be noted that six of the ten individuals who did not complete the ETC moved on to other 'positive' employment or training outcomes.

Since the completion of the training programme, job retention rates have been similarly impressive—13 weeks after taking up their positions at the store, 102 of the 109 trainees remained in post, a retention rate of 94 per cent (note that 13 weeks in post is considered to be 'sustained employment' under New Deal evaluation guidelines). By comparison, national statistics for Scotland show that only 78 per cent of those gaining work through the New Deal 25+ programme enter 'sustained employment'. Of course, job entry rates for that programme are understandably much lower, standing at around 27 per cent of all programme leavers (Scottish Executive, 2003). Finally, after 26 weeks, 95 trainees were still working at the store, a retention rate of 87 per cent. Given the characteristics of the client group, many of whom had not worked for prolonged periods, and the high staff turnover often experienced by retail employers, with annual turnover rates of 33 per cent in the sector, these retention figures are all the more impressive.

Characteristics of Participants

The Initiative appears to have been successful in achieving its objective of supporting those who would otherwise have had relatively little chance of finding employment at the store. Of the 109 individuals who entered the ETC, 76 (70 per cent) had not worked in the previous six months. For some, unemployment durations were considerably longer (although it should be noted that 40 per cent of those employed at the store through the

Table 1. Completion and retention rates for the Alloa Initiative ETC programme

Completion/retention criteria	Number of clients (%)
Completed ETC programme	109 (92% of all programme starters)
Sustained employment for 13 weeks	102 (94% of all programme completers)
Sustained employment for 26 weeks	95 (87% of all programme completers)

Table 2. Respondents' descriptions of their 'working life' since leaving school

Description of 'working life'	Number	Percent
Mostly stable employment	40	47
Mostly caring for children/family	16	19
Repeated periods of unemployment	14	16
Mostly unemployed/unemployed long periods	11	13
Mostly in full-time education	2	2
Other	1	1
Mostly sick/claiming other benefits	1	1
Total (% rounded)	85	100

company's open recruitment process were also previously unemployed). Furthermore, when asked to describe their 'working life' since leaving school in general terms, less than half of our sample of ETC participants suggested that they had experienced 'mostly stable employment' (see Table 2). Almost 30 per cent instead characterised their working life as involving prolonged or repeated periods of unemployment, and 19 per cent had spent long periods in caring roles. By comparison, a limited survey of entry-level staff employed through the company's 'select the best', open recruitment process found that 70 per cent of respondents reported a 'mostly stable' work history.¹ Men participating in the ETC were more likely to characterise their work history as stable (55 per cent of those experiencing 'mostly stable employment' were male, despite men accounting for only 47 per cent of the survey sample). All but one respondent reporting spending most of their time in caring roles were female.

The course also clearly assisted those who might otherwise have struggled to compete for jobs at the store due to their lack of experience in the retail sector. At the most basic level, substantial minorities within the ETC client group were male (45 per cent) and aged over 40 (31 per cent), groups sometimes viewed as being reluctant to work in retail. Furthermore, the ETC successfully recruited job seekers who had previously been employed in other sectors of the economy. Approximately 45 per cent of ETC participants reported their regular occupation as involving unskilled or skilled manual work, or machine operations. Only 15 per cent had previously regularly been employed in retail occupations (see Table 3). This compared with over one-third (34 per cent) of those responding to our

¹ In order to develop a comparative sample, 85 questionnaires were distributed to staff in entry level positions at the Alloa store, employed through the company's open recruitment process. In total, 48 responses were received (a response rate of 56 per cent). Despite the limited nature of the sample, this survey provides some comparative insights regarding the characteristics of 'openly recruited' staff.

Table 3. Respondents' most regular former occupation

Previous occupation	Number	Percent
Plant and machine operatives/skilled manual	21	25
Unskilled manual	17	20
Personal and protective services	16	19
Retail and other sales	13	15
Clerical and administrative	7	8
Managerial/professional/associate professional	6	7
None	6	7
Total (% rounded)	86	100

survey of staff employed through the select the best/open recruitment route. Approximately two-thirds (66 per cent) of open recruitment staff had worked in retail *at some time*, compared with only 42 per cent of ETC participants.

The Alloa Initiative's job guarantee scheme and ETC programme enjoyed considerable success in assisting long-term unemployed and disadvantaged job seekers into work. Perhaps even more importantly, the Initiative provided an enabling mechanism assisting job seekers who had little or no experience of retail, and who previously may have been unlikely to consider seeking employment in this growing sector of the economy. The job guarantee would appear to be a crucial here. When asked what had attracted them to the Alloa Initiative programme, 70 per cent of respondents named the guarantee of a job on the completion of training as the main reason. Many participants, and particularly men who had previously worked in 'traditional' sectors such as manufacturing, reported that they would simply not have considered looking for work in the retail sector without the guaranteed job offered to ETC completers.

A Model for Successful Partnerships

The Alloa Initiative is an example of a limited-scale, public-private sector partnership which has apparently enjoyed considerable success in achieving its core objective—the training and placement of disadvantaged unemployed people into sustained employment. Below, we seek to identify lessons from the success of the partnership initiative, drawing on frameworks proposed by McQuaid (1994, 2000) and Hutchinson & Campbell (1998). Reviewing this literature on partnership working, a number of recurring features can be identified within successful partnerships:

- *A clear and agreed strategy*—expressed in: a commitment to shared objectives and clear targets informed by an overarching strategic vision; a transparency of operations; and a non-instrumental approach by partners, so that strategic interests are given priority over local or sectional interests.

- *The importance of organisations and people in partnerships*—in terms of: the right mix of skills and expertise; certainty within each partner organisation regarding roles and responsibilities; continuity of approaches and membership in order to maintain ‘trust and certainty’; effective resource pooling; and a recognised and legitimate role for all partners, with no one actor dominating.
- *Capacity for co-operation and mutualism* – through strong and established networks of communication and joint-working at the local level, and, where external actors are involved, the inclusion of organisations with the capacity and resources to engage effectively in partnership relations and add value to the partnership process.
- *Clear incentives for partners* – in terms of: benefits related to securing markets and addressing recruitment and retention issues (for employers); the extension of partnership working and areas of influence and competence, and the achievement of positive outcomes for target groups (for policy actors and service providers).
- *The value of results-oriented procedures* – in terms of: an emphasis on quality rather than quantity; clear decision making procedures, with management close to service provision; and an action and results-oriented approach, with measurable goals clearly defined and evaluated.

Our research with programme participants and representatives from partner organisations in Alloa confirms the importance of each of these elements in the delivery of effective, partnership-based policies. First, the development and implementation of *a clear and agreed strategy* was an early priority for the Initiative partners. Assisted by Tesco’s existing framework for the delivery of employability training/job guarantee schemes within the company’s Regeneration Partnership Programme, the partners were able to agree the key objectives and methods at an early stage. The clarity of the programme’s objectives allowed quick progress to be made in the development of course materials and the agreement of recruitment procedures.

Secondly, the importance of including appropriate *organisations and people in partnerships* also emerges from an analysis of the Alloa Initiative. The partnership included the Local Enterprise Company (which coordinates the Training for Work funding that supported the majority of participants) along with the two key agencies dealing with unemployed people in the area. Working with a responsive employer also helped to ensure success. Tesco has a strong track record in working in partnership with local agencies. The company also provided two crucial elements of the programme—the ‘first impressions’ selection process and job guarantee scheme (along with sufficient vacancies to provide guaranteed job opportunities). Given the apparent value of the job guarantee in attracting those who otherwise might have not considered working in retail, the importance of working with employers who are willing to demonstrate their commitment by allocating guaranteed jobs is clear.

In this sense, the employer and other partners clearly demonstrated a *capacity for co-operation and mutualism*. The company was able to provide both the resources and the organisational support structures to ensure that its national level policy on inclusive recruitment found effective expression in its interaction with partners at the local level. Meanwhile, already long-established formal and informal networks at the local level (where, for example, Triage Central and Jobcentre Plus have been closely cooperating on New Deal provision) facilitated the strong relationships of mutual support and trust that characterised the partnership process. In more general terms, the Alloa Initiative was able to draw on national funding sources and the resources of national government agencies such as Jobcentre Plus, while retaining a strong element of local flexibility.

There were also *clear incentives for partners*. There were potential benefits for the employer in securing markets, deepening the pool of available labour and ensuring high retention rates. For Jobcentre Plus and Triage Central, the Initiative offered the opportunity to provide both employability training and positive job outcomes for clients. Finally, *the value of results-oriented procedures* similarly defines the Alloa Initiative's partnership process. The partnership itself was restricted to those organisations that had the capacity to 'deliver', in terms of access to financial resources and manpower, and/or the achievement of the partnership's key objective (as articulated within measurable targets). Both partners within the Initiative and Tesco, as the employer, were also 'close to service provision', with important consequences for the Initiative's outputs. Although the ETC programme was delivered by a local Further Education college, Initiative partners such as Triage Central and Jobcentre Plus continued to play a crucial, 'hands on' support role—in dealing with problems experienced by participants regarding benefits, transport or childcare; investigating absenteeism; and providing encouragement.

Conclusions and Implications for Policy

Several 'critical success factors' for successful partnership working appear to have been in place, which help to explain the success of the Alloa Initiative. The above findings add to existing evidence that the negative attitudes held by many unemployed people towards service employment, and other barriers to work in sectors such as retail, can be addressed given the right job opportunities and appropriate training and support. Such an approach is informing partnerships elsewhere in the sector, designed to encourage job seekers who would otherwise not consider retail to engage in training and work placements. A recurring theme in these innovative approaches centres on the value of job and interview guarantees.

In the case of the Alloa Initiative, the job guarantee added value by enabling labour market transitions for job seekers formerly employed in traditional sectors. Job seekers who would otherwise have rejected retail vacancies were attracted by the certainty of success in gaining work for programme completers, and the commitment on the part of the employer

implied by this guarantee. Perhaps even more importantly, those job seekers claiming non-work-related benefits and the long-term unemployed were attracted by the removal of risk that resulted from the job guarantee. People claiming long-term sickness or passported housing benefits are often concerned about the consequences of taking up short-term work or training opportunities without the guarantee of support at the same income level should they have to re-claim benefits. The certainty provided by the job guarantee, and the supportive environment provided throughout the ETC process, encouraged these vulnerable job seekers to 'take a risk' in the labour market.

To this end, the Initiative benefited from the involvement of a major employer. As the UK's largest retailer, and indeed the country's largest private-sector employer (employing almost 200,000 staff) Tesco had the capacity to guarantee over 100 places for successful trainees. It will not always be possible to engage major employers on the scale seen at Alloa and other Tesco Regeneration Partnership sites. This has obvious implications for the transferability of the Alloa approach. However, there is some evidence to suggest that an 'academies' model, where employers within sectors such as retail support employment access initiatives linked to a 'pool' of opportunities across the sector, can enjoy similar success (Lindsay & Sturgeon, 2003).

The approach described above is not a panacea for labour market exclusion. Within all partnerships there remain organisational issues relating to the balance of power between local people and agencies, employers and national bodies. Furthermore, there are more fundamental concerns regarding the displacement and substitution effects associated with such initiatives, and the suitability of approaches that prioritise 'work first'. Some job seekers may not be inclined towards or suited to service work, while the relatively low pay and preponderance of part-time work associated with sectors such as retail will continue to act as a barrier for those without alternative sources of income. The most disadvantaged will also clearly require more intensive training and support than can be provided through an eight-week employability training course. Job seekers with basic skills gaps and those experiencing multiple disadvantages are likely to need longer term assistance to make a more gradual transition from welfare to work.

Nevertheless, the Alloa Initiative and similar partnerships may provide a useful model for future policies, at least in terms of widening access to employment in retail and other areas of the service sector. Partnership initiatives that combine client-centred training and support with guaranteed job opportunities have the potential to deliver considerable benefits in terms of sustainable employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups. The case discussed in this paper demonstrates how the mutual commitment and trust that characterises effective partnership working can come to define the shared experience of service providers, employers and participants within client-centred employability training initiatives.

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