Accessing and sustaining work after Service: The role of Active Labour Market Policies (ALMP) and implications for HRM

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Abstract

This article considers the extent to which Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) support the sustained inclusion of veterans in the civilian labour market. Drawing on the first in-depth research into veteran's interactions with the UK's Public Employment Services (PES) and other contracted providers, we present analysis of qualitative longitudinal data from 68 veterans. We demonstrate the important role ALMPs play in mediating the employment relationship, showing how veterans claiming out-of-work benefits are typically either 'pushed' towards inappropriate jobs or 'parked' through their exclusion from employment support when deemed unfit for work. This not only exposes veterans and other jobseekers to poor quality work but undermines both job match and inclusive employment practices. Furthermore, the potential for more positive outcomes through engagement with employers and HRM practitioners is not being realised. This is significant for veterans in the UK and beyond, where policymakers make broader commitments to post-Service integration into civilian employment. We critique Work First approaches centred on those deemed work ready and contribute to broader theorisation around interactions between the state and HRM, arguing the need for pluralist approaches which incorporate ALMPs.

Key words: veterans, Active Labour Market Policy, employability, longitudinal research, HRM

Introduction

Employment is 'a key factor influencing the success of transition from military to civilian life' (Keeling et al., 2019: 692). Although many who leave the Armed Forces 'go on to have successful and diverse alternative careers' (Pike, 2016: 7), some face difficulties navigating the civilian labour market (Maury et al., 2014; Fisher et al., 2021). Barriers to accessing and sustaining employment post-Service include the 'culture clash' of entering civilian workplaces, and difficulties when having to take entry-level jobs. The transition from a highly structured work environment to navigating a fragmented labour market characterised by underemployment and insecurity (Thompson, 2011) can be particularly challenging. Existing research suggests some veterans feel let down by limited understanding and empathy amongst civilian employers in relation to military experiences and how this can impact on veterans as they navigate civilian life (Kirchner, 2017; Dexter, 2020). Even within those organisations which demonstrate understanding and empathy, there is a need for guidance on greater inclusivity (Liggans et al., 2019; Carpenter and Silberman, 2020). Transferring skills from military to civilian employment can be challenging (Hardison et al., 2015), with some employers reluctant to recruit those requiring additional training (Fleischmann and Koster, 2018). Although many employers hold positive views of veterans (Stone, Lengnick-Hall and Muldoon, 2018), previous research has uncovered negative stereotyping, with harmful perceptions that many are 'mad, bad or sad' (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2018). Difficulties in securing and sustaining work post-Service can also occur alongside other challenges relating to health (Hynes and Thomas, 2016; Stern, 2017; Hynes et al., 2022), relationships (Scullion et al., 2019), and readjustments relating to the shift from a military to civilian identity (Brunger, Serrato and Ogden, 2013). Recognising some of these challenges, this paper considers the role of Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) and associated Public Employment Services (PES)[1], in supporting veterans' inclusion in the civilian labour market.

[1] Public Employment Services (PES) are authorities that connect jobseekers with employment opportunities. Within the UK, Jobcentre Plus (JCP) is the PES. JCP is a government funded employment agency and social security office, which provides support to those claiming working age benefits to move into employment.

Supporting veterans' successful labour market integration is a key concern for policymakers (MoD, 2020). Attention has often focused on support provided at the point of, or shortly after, exit from the Armed Forces (e.g. time-limited resettlement support programmes such as the Career Transition Partnership (CTP) in the UK). Indeed, rapid moves into civilian employment are often considered a measure of success (MoD, 2021); however, there is a need to consider whether such employment is fulfilling and sustainable (Fisher et al., 2021). Transitions from military to civilian life, including from military to civilian employment, occur over longer periods, with challenges for some veterans emerging many years post-Service (Scullion et al., 2021). Transitions are also not linear: although many find employment quickly, some experience movements in and out of work over time, including periods of unemployment that necessitate support from the out-of-work benefits system (Scullion et al, 2018). As is common for many experiencing unemployment in developed nations, veterans claiming out-of-work benefits will encounter the mainstream PES and the ALMPs that underpin those services. However, their experiences of interacting with these services are largely absent from the literature, particularly in relation to whether they facilitate access to, and sustainment of, employment in civilian life, and how these influence the employment relationship more broadly.

Our article proceeds as follows. The next sections integrate conceptual development in relation to ALMP, PES and HRM, placing this within a wider institutional framework of post-service support for UK veterans. Our methodology is then outlined before key findings are discussed and implications for theory and practice identified. We make a significant empirical contribution through new analysis of qualitative longitudinal data from the first in-depth research into veteran's interactions with UK ALMP and PES. A theoretical contribution is made through demonstrating the important role of ALMP in mediating the employment relationship – one often overlooked in the extant literature. Adopting a pluralist perspective, we argue for the development of a more supportive ALMP and PES that is better linked with employers and wider employment support eco-system (which for UK veterans include an extensive network of support from the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and employers); thus, better meeting the shared interests of veterans and employers.

Veterans, ALMPs and HRM

ALMPs are government employability interventions focused primarily on integrating unemployed people into the paid labour market. Common across developed nations, ALMPs incorporate activities including job searching, work experience, and training (Larsen, 2008). They are typically underpinned by conditionality, whereby receipt of out-of-work benefits requires mandatory engagement with work-related activities, with financial sanctions sometimes applied for non-compliance (Clasen and Clegg, 2011). ALMPs are typically enacted through PES often alongside contracted non-state providers (Kaufman, 2020). Over the course of working life, many people experience work interruptions, career changes, and a reduced capacity to work for various reasons (Van Berkel et al., 2017) and increased exposure to unemployment, underemployment and labour market insecurity associated with globalisation (Thompson, 2011). Consequently, ALMPs and PES are increasingly relevant for HRM scholars and practitioners concerned about responding to societal challenges including poverty and labour market precarity (Burgess, Connell and Winterton, 2013; Roca-Puig, Beltrán-Martín and García-Juan, 2019; Cooke, Dickmann and Parry, 2021).

Taking pluralism as our frame of reference (Fox, 1974), we integrate literature from social policy and HRM to demonstrate the importance of ALMP to HRM scholars and practitioners interested in the effective integration of veterans into civilian labour markets. We take as our starting point the recognition that while 'workers and employers have opposing interests' they are mutually dependent in that they have a shared interest in 'the effective and sustained operation of the employing enterprise' (Heery, 2016a, 5). Furthermore, there is a power imbalance inherent to the employment relationship, whereby the workforce is structurally disadvantaged in relation to employers (Heery, 2016a). Pluralist writers have highlighted the important role of state regulation and broader employment policy (e.g. National Minimum wages in the UK context) in regulating the employment relationship and facilitating better labour market outcomes – both for worker and employer (Heery, 2016a). However, the role of the state in HRM is 'under-examined and undertheorized' (Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2011: 3662), and the role of ALMP is particularly absent.

From the existing literature, ALMP can arguably be seen to influence the employment relationship via two key mechanisms. First, through shaping the labour supply and interacting with core functions of HRM in relation to people resourcing (Marchington et al., 2016) via conditionality requirements. 'Work First' (Peck and Theodore, 2000) approaches to ALMP, which are typical in Liberal Market Economies including the UK, have been subject to sustained critique in this respect. Here, a focus on moving jobseekers into work quickly with little regard for job quality (for example, whether or not it provides adequate pay or security) or fit compels those in receipt of out-of-work benefits to apply for jobs that they are neither suited nor qualified to undertake (Peck and Theodore, 2000; Daguerre, 2004; Wright and Dwyer, 2022). This pushes people into work that is unsustainable in the long-term, and creates problems 'upstream' (Wright, 2012) for employers and HR practitioners (Jones et al., 2019; Ingold, 2020), as managing high volumes of inappropriate applications is costly.

Second, ALMPs can to some extent redress the power imbalance inherent in the employment relationship where support is provided to address disadvantages faced by the workforce, thereby facilitating their inclusion in the labour market. Although the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021) advocate ALMP as a tool for labour market inclusion, a tendency for policymakers to develop policy centred on those deemed 'work ready' often leads to inadequate support for those with more substantial barriers to labour market participation, particularly those with disabilities (Baumberg, 2014; Pollard, 2018). In the UK, for example, processes for assessing benefit eligibility draw sharp distinctions between those who are fit for work and those deemed 'unfit for work'. Where contracted services are provided on payment-by-results models, efforts to support people into work tend to be centred on those closest to the labour market, excluding those with more significant barriers (Kaufman, 2020). This can create "ableist norms of the 'ideal jobseeker'" and push "disabled jobseekers further away from paid employment, rather than towards workplace inclusion" (Scholz and Ingold, 2021: 1604). ALMPs therefore often have poorer outcomes for people facing more significant barriers to labour market integration (Scholz and Ingold, 2021).

Overall, the literature exposes the dominance of narrow *supply side* conceptualisations of employability amongst policymakers that focus solely on the behaviour of jobseekers, failing to recognise that employability is also related to 'broader social, institutional and economic factors' (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005: 206). Such approaches often neglect working with employers to achieve better job matching, which is key to recruitment and retention (Sissons and Green, 2017).

HRM scholarship exploring the *demand side* of ALMP (van Berkel, 2017; Ingold and Valizade, 2017; Simms, 2017) emphasises how interactions with employers and HRM practitioners *can* help to facilitate better labour market outcomes. For Ingold and Valizade (2017: 530), for example, through fulfilling the HR functions of information provider and matchmaker, 'ALMPs can offer employers a channel for recruiting labour that has the potential to enhance workforce diversity and competitive advantage', potentially helping to overcome recruitment barriers. Lindsay (2005) also demonstrates how ALMPs can work with employers to create opportunities for jobseekers to try new sectors. However, the experiences of veterans have been absent from this evidence base.

Employers may have varying motivations in relation to engaging with veterans, including HR and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) agendas (Simms, 2017; Blank, 2019). However, limited knowledge and capacity amongst HRM practitioners (highlighted above) may frustrate inclusive ambitions to attract, retain and progress groups who face barriers to employment (van Berkel et al., 2017). Familiarity with the experiences and needs of veterans amongst civilian employers can help both to thrive (Davis and Minnis, 2017; Hammer, Brady and Perry, 2020; Carpenter and Silberman, 2020) but adjustments to recruitment and selection practices may be required (van Berkel et al., 2017). Business in the Community's (BITC, 2017) guide, for example, emphasises that hiring managers and recruiters need to understand the military environment and terminology, the employment support services that exist for service leavers (e.g. CTP), and how military skills and experiences can benefit their business.

UK ALMP and Veterans: Conditionality and the Covenant

This paper bridges two parallel worlds of UK policymaking, namely: welfare reform and veterans' support (Scullion et al, 2021). Welfare reforms introduced by successive UK governments have resulted in an increasingly conditional welfare state (Dwyer, 2016). The application of welfare conditionality links eligibility to receipt of out-of-work benefits to claimants' engagement with mandatory work-focused interviews, training and support schemes and/or job search requirements, with failure to undertake specified activities leading to the potential application of financial penalties (benefit sanctions).

A key aspect of UK welfare reforms relates to the ways in which people with disabilities and long-term health impairments are supported while not in paid employment (see Dwyer, McNeill and Scullion, 2014 for an overview). The generosity of benefits, and the conditions attached, vary according to the extent to which claimants are considered *fit for work*. In 2008, the UK government reformed the benefits system for those claiming on the grounds of disability or ill-health, introducing Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and a new assessment process (Work Capability Assessment, WCA) to determine the degree to which someone's illness or condition impacts on ability to work. Those assessed as *fit for work* were moved to Jobseekers' Allowance (JSA) with mandatory job-seeking and work-related activities. Those assessed as having *limited capability for work*, but considered capable of work in the future, were placed in the Work-Related Activity Group (WRAG), where conditionality is reduced. Those assessed as having *limited capability for work and work-related activity* were placed in the ESA Support Group with no conditionality (beyond attending assessments or providing medical evidence).

Following significant reform, Universal Credit (UC) replaces out-of-work benefits, including JSA and ESA. However, many still receive these *legacy benefits* as the transition to UC continues. Under UC, WCAs remain the means of determining fitness for work, with the three tiers of eligibility above still broadly in place (DWP, 2020a). Concerns have been raised around the WCA and the application of conditionality for those with disabilities and health conditions (Baumberg, 2014; Dwyer et al., 2020), with veterans only recently included within these debates (Scullion and Curchin, 2022).

Most claiming out-of-work benefits encounter the UK PES (Jobcentre Plus). Those with work-related conditions attached to their claims may be required to attend work focused interviews and demonstrate their engagement in job-seeking activities (up to 35 hours per week) or attend other forms of mandatory support (e.g. training courses). Claimants must also sign a Claimant Commitment, outlining their responsibilities (DWP, 2020b) and failure to meet these may result in benefit sanctions (as above). In addition to the PES, as in many other Liberal Market Economies (e.g. North America, Australia) the UK also introduced various contracted welfare-to-work schemes. The Work Programme (subsequently Work and Health Programme) was an example of this approach, with employment-related support delivered by private providers on a payment-by-results basis.

For veterans, there are important differences in the way that PES operate in line with the UK's wider commitments to supporting the Armed Forces community. The Armed Forces Covenant (MoD, 2011) recognises the nation's moral obligation to the Armed Forces community and sets out how they should be treated. Accordingly, no member of the Armed Forces community should face disadvantage when accessing public or commercial services. Through its commitment to the Covenant, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has introduced initiatives, exemptions and easements to support current and former Service personnel (DWP and MoD, 2016). This includes Armed Forces Champions (AFCs) within PES and immediate access to the Work and Health Programme for those who have served in the Armed Forces within the previous three years (access is usually for the long-term unemployed) (Powell, 2018). Outside of UK Government policy, wider commitments to veterans have been made. Significantly, many UK employers have signed the Covenant, pledging to provide job opportunities, placements and mentoring (Ford, 2017). Additionally, a substantial role is played by the Armed Forces VCS in supporting employment transitions (Pozo and Walker, 2014; Keeling et al., 2019).

Until now, research has not explored the experiences of veterans engaging with ALMP and PES, how this interacts with the wider policy and practice landscape highlighted above, and what this means for the employment relationship. To address this gap our article is underpinned by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do PES and ALMPs support the sustained inclusion of veterans in the civilian labour market?
2. What are the implications for HRM, and what role could practitioners play, in supporting more positive outcomes for job-seeking veterans?

Methods

This article draws on data from the first substantive Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) exploring veterans' experiences within the UK PES (Scullion et al. 2018, 2019). Rather than providing a *snapshot* of people's experiences, QLR provides deeper insights into people's trajectories over time (Corden and Millar, 2007) and over recent years has provided important insights on the dynamics of employment and welfare reform (Wright and Patrick, 2019). However, HRM scholarship 'lacks longitudinal studies' (Garmendia et al., 2021, 341), which are important for our understanding of 'the temporal dynamism inherent in employability' (van Harten et al., 2020, 1103). Our research provides unique insights into veterans' experiences of ALMP and PES through two waves (A and B) of in-depth interviews.

In line with a pluralist frame of reference, the project aimed to identify realistic policy and practice change, within the constraints of the UK's Liberal Welfare Regime (Heery, 2016b; Ackers, 2021). To this end, we embedded engagement with relevant stakeholders throughout the project, primarily via our expert advisory group, which included representatives of Armed Forces charities, DWP and MoD (see Scullion et al, 2021).

A total of 68 participants were recruited from four geographical areas in England: the North East; North West; Yorkshire and Humber; and London. These locations varied in relation to the proportion of veterans residing there (MoD, 2017) and, as appears significant in the findings below, the levels of support for/engagement with the Armed Forces community: some had Garrisons and therefore greater levels of support, whereas others had less provision targeted at the Armed Forces community. Using

purposive non-random sampling (Mason, 2002), we recruited participants through multiple statutory and VCS organisations. The inclusion criteria were: identifying as a UK Armed Forces veteran and claiming one of the following benefits: ESA, JSA or UC.

Most (66) were male, and the majority had served in the Army. Most (51) had left the Armed Forces over 10 years prior to Wave A interviews. A significant proportion had a physical and/or mental health impairment. Mental ill-health (including PTSD, anxiety and depression) was highlighted more frequently (59 people reported having a mental health impairment, 37 a physical health impairment). The majority attributed their mental ill-health to their time in Service. Project reports provide further sample detail (see Scullion et al, 2018, 2019).

Wave A interviews took place June-November 2017, with follow-up interviews (Wave B) around 12 months later. Of the original 68 participants, 52 were interviewed at Wave B (a 76% retention rate). The analysis and discussion in this paper is therefore based on a total of 120 interviews. The Wave A interviews provided an in-depth baseline of experiences of the PES, as well as exploring multiple aspects of participants' transitions to civilian life (e.g. employment, health, relationships). Wave B interviews explored experiences since the first interview, including any movements into employment.

Most interviews were face-to-face, lasting approximately one hour. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Salford School of Health & Society Research Ethics Panel. With consent, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Using NVivo, we deployed a framework approach (see Parkinson et al., 2016 for an overview of this approach), which enables analysis across both *cases* (e.g. individuals) and *themes*. Our analysis was therefore both cross-sectional and longitudinal (Lewis, 2007). The cross-sectional analysis of the first interviews provided important reflections on transitions to civilian life, with a specific focus on post-service employment experiences and routes into the PES, including contextual information relating to health and well-being. Longitudinal analysis involved reading the Wave A and B transcripts for each participant consecutively, enabling an understanding, on

a case-by-case basis, of any movements towards, into and out of employment, and the role of the PES within this context. Although the ability to track experiences over time was an important aspect of the research design, cross-sectional analysis included the experiences of those who participated in Wave A only. Here, we share Corden and Nice's (2007: 563) perspective that 'it is unethical not to use information from people who have agreed to take part in research and who expect their views to be taken into consideration'. Anonymous descriptors (e.g. V8 = Veteran 8 in our sample) are used to protect anonymity.

Findings

Experiences in the civilian labour market

Participants described varying experiences in the civilian labour market. Although many had found employment quickly upon leaving Service, many had struggled to maintain a strong foothold, encountering issues highlighted in the extant research including difficulties in translating their skills/experience to civilian employment, discriminatory practice, and challenges adapting to civilian workplace cultures.

> *"I did loads of training in the army, but none of it was transferable in to Civvy Street"* (V8, wave A).

The civilian labour market was a significant shock to some, with the quality of opportunities lower than expected. Time in Service had insulated many from the low pay and insecurity that increasingly pervades the civilian labour market (Thompson, 2011). For some, difficulties sustaining work interacted with broader struggles around re-settlement into civilian life. As one veteran explained:

> *"I've just bounced from place to place trying to find a place to settle in life"* (V7, Wave A).

Poor health, particularly mental health, and associated drug/alcohol misuse, also made sustaining work difficult for some:

> *"I rushed back into work without addressing my mental health and just relapsed again"* (V9, wave A).

Reflecting the varied characteristics of the sample, participants' positioning in relation to ALMPs and the PES varied and changed for some over the duration of the study as their capabilities for work and eligibility for benefits were re-assessed. However, broadly speaking we identified two divergent experiences, which characterised veterans' engagement with ALMP and the PES. First, we find that many *job-seeking* veterans (i.e. with conditions attached to their benefit claim) were often *pushed* towards any job. Second, we find veterans *without job-seeking conditions* due to health conditions were often *parked*, regardless of future work aspirations. In both instances, we observed limited tangible support to facilitate more sustained transitions into the labour market.

Pushing veterans into work: Veterans as jobseekers

At first interview, roughly one-third of participants were expected to demonstrate that they were *actively seeking work* or undertaking *work-related activities*. Participants commonly felt that the conditions attached to their claims were unreasonable or unachievable. Echoing research with other claimant groups (Dwyer et al., 2018; Wright and Dwyer, 2022), several veterans described undertaking counterproductive activities, centring efforts on avoiding a benefit sanction rather than activities that would support sustained transition into paid work. As such, some engaged in what they considered futile job search activities that did little to improve job prospects, pressured to apply for jobs they were not qualified for:

> *"You have to jump through hoops… you've got to have this CV, you've got to apply for X amount of jobs even if you're not qualified. They sanctioned me for not applying for a job, where it distinctly said that I had to have a particular ticket – I said, 'I haven't got that ticket', and they said, 'Apply anyway in case you don't need it'"* (V6, wave A).

For others, there was a mismatch between their skills and qualifications and the jobs that they felt *pushed* towards by the PES. For example, at Wave A, one veteran had identified the security industry as the career most suited to his Service acquired skillset. However, he remained unemployed when

interviewed at Wave B, feeling that his efforts to build a track-record of relevant employment experience were undermined by pressure from the PES to take any job:

> *"I work in the security industry. I'm only going to look at jobs in the security industry. No, I'm not going to look after Phyllis the old lady down at the old people's home… 'You're going to go and get a job at Tesco stacking shelves.' Well, no, sorry I'm not… I'm building a good CV for myself in [security]. If I then go and stack shelves at Tesco for eight months, that five years' security experience that I've just got, has just gone void ... That is the way that [employers], now, look at CVs… [The PES] don't see it like that. They see it as a job's a job, regardless"* (V12, wave B).

He explained that the Work First approach of taking any job ran counter to the work ethic and culture instilled within the Armed Forces, which emphasised specialisation:

> *"I actually got taught that in the Army as well. When you're working in something, you stick to that thing and push through it. When you start going to loads of different little things, it will just crumble, and it won't make your CV look any good. [Employers will ask] why is this person skipping from that, to that, to that, to that, to that?"* (V12, wave B).

Some participants had also encountered contracted ALMP providers (e.g. the Work Programme). Echoing acknowledged concerns about the effectiveness of these programmes (Scholz and Ingold, 2021), these interactions were generally considered ineffective at facilitating movements towards sustainable employment. Veterans questioned the quality of the support offered and felt that providers did not understand their specific needs.

Across the sample, whether engaging with the PES or contracted providers, participants reported limited tangible support to overcome difficulties accessing sustainable work. As part of this, limited useful training options were highlighted:

"They keep trying to send you on the same courses… You're like, 'Mate, we've done all that'… They've got a checklist of about 14, 15 courses, and they're all pretty badly taught anyway" (V3, wave B).

It is striking that only seven people moved into work over the duration of this longitudinal study.

Parking veterans with disabilities and health impairments

The analysis above has focused on the experiences of those veterans who were regarded as *jobseekers* (and so were expected to move quickly into work). The remainder of the sample (around two thirds) were claiming benefits because of health issues limiting their ability to secure and sustain employment. Where conditionality was absent it was evident that for some – counter to logics underpinning conditionality – the removal of mandated work-related activities impacted positively on their ability to prepare for, and enter, the labour market. Participants described having space to address on-going health issues but also engage in meaningful education, training and volunteering opportunities:

"The only reason I've been able to further my education and better myself is through having a debilitating illness" (V11, wave B).

However, as previous research has demonstrated (Dwyer et al., 2018, Pollard, 2018), participants who were classified as being unfit for work could also sometimes feel *abandoned*. Several participants felt able to work in the future. Although positive about the lack of conditionality, they were disappointed by the lack of employment support offered when part of this group of claimants:

"My Work Coach, at the local Jobcentre, if I ring her with anything she says, 'Are you off ESA yet?' She's not interested in offering me any support or helping me...I'm on my own" (V2, wave A).

Conversely, others who had conditionality attached to their benefit claim despite significant health barriers felt support was of limited value. Mandated to attend monthly meetings with a Work

Programme provider, one veteran voiced frustration at what they considered an 'utterly pointless' requirement given his ongoing mental and physical health issues:

> *"I had to attend every four weeks…all that involved was I attended there, and I would sit down with my caseworker, and he'd ask me, how am I coping with my mental health issues? How am I coping with my physical health issues? I'd be in there for no more than 15 minutes, and then told, 'Right, okay. We'll see you in a month's time"* (V5, wave A).

Overall, one-size-fits-all approaches centred on those deemed *work ready* failed to adequately support those with more substantial barriers to labour market participation, particularly for those with disabilities and long-term health impairments where work (re-)entry remained a future goal.

Good practice and the potential role for HRM

Despite these negative accounts, we identified some positive experiences of support from the PES. Some described empathetic Work Coaches who appeared to understand and prioritise health needs, easing conditionality and providing space to address wider issues. These PES staff also facilitated access to appropriate training courses and other local support services (mostly the VCS).

> *"They signed me off because of my PTSD… Because I didn't have to fill out any commitments, I actually approached the Jobcentre at that point and said, 'Look, I still want to look for work. What are my options?'… They set me up with a company… [who] actually helped me find this job that I've got now"* (V10, wave A).

However, our findings exposed significant variability across and within different PES delivery areas. Perhaps unsurprisingly, reports of more positive experiences appeared to emanate from participants who had engaged with the PES in areas where staff were more regularly supporting veterans (e.g.

Garrison areas). Here they felt staff had a better understanding of their needs and awareness of wider stakeholders offering support for veterans in their local areas.

> *"She's actually very sympathetic to military causes and stuff, and she gets a lot of the guys with PTSD, and I think that's a step forward. That's what I think a lot of the Jobcentres should do… she empathises. She'll go the extra mile"* (V4, wave A).

Furthermore, veterans wanted more opportunities to engage directly with employers to gain valuable experience. For example, although thankful for training facilitated through the PES, one participant felt what he really needed was a work placement in order to gain necessary experience. Several were also keen to undertake voluntary work as a first step towards full-time employment:

> *"There's no point me going in headfirst, [into work] if I have a wobble my head goes, then I haven't got any benefits coming in…Do voluntary work and then part-time work, then full-time work after that"* (V8, wave A).

Accounts of support from veterans-specific VCS organisations also appeared much more positive. As participation was voluntary, veterans were less anxious about the consequences of failing to meet requirements. A greater appreciation of veterans' needs was more apparent amongst these specialist agencies, and they were often able to connect people with support relating to employment and wider issues. Participants contrasted the personalised approach of the VCS to the one-size-fits-all approach often felt to characterise support provided through the PES.

VCS employment support also appeared to be connected to more relevant employers; thus creating opportunities for better matching and improving chances of retention and progression. Here, the VCS to some extent appeared to be providing the labour market intermediary role identified by Ingold and Valizade (2017). For example, some veteran-specific support agencies provided access to job vacancies that were not always publicly advertised, and training relating to finding jobs and undertaking interviews, including mock interviews with employers where feedback was provided:

> *"On the [Armed Forces organisation] course, because you've got a lot of coaches there and they look at you and look at what role you could do. They do assessments online and really, it's a really worthwhile course … You get a mock interview at the end of it and it's a proper interview and they give you feedback as well, so you go in suits … and it's to a proper employer and you get a proper interview"* (V1, wave A).

At Wave B, this participant had moved into employment. He felt that a combination of the veteran-specific support agency and his own motivation had helped him to find work rather than the Jobcentre, which to him had just provided basic financial support rather than employment support.

These examples highlight the potential for more supportive approaches underpinned by an understanding of veterans needs and engaging with employers. However, it is striking that this kind of activity is not more common, particularly given strong commitments from UK employers as part of the Armed Forces Covenant. Although there are evident areas for improvement in relation to the UK PES, employers may also need to recognise that their engagement activities are not consistently reaching out-of-work veterans engaging with the UK benefits system.

Discussion

Many civilians encounter ALMPs and PES over the course of their working life as circumstances change and within an increasingly fragmented labour market (Thompson, 2011). However, veterans' experiences of these mainstream services are largely absent from conceptualisations of military to civilian transitions. Our research demonstrates the importance of (i) including ALMP and PES within these debates, and (ii) including ALMPs within broader pluralist conceptualisations of the employment relationship.

As shown in our research and extant literature (Maury et al., 2014), veterans often move quickly into employment when transitioning from military to civilian life. However, finding sustainable work can be more difficult for some (Fisher et al., 2021). Our research suggests that the UK PES, contracted providers, and the Work First ALMP that underpins them, can fail to support the sustained inclusion of

veterans in the civilian labour market. By adopting an approach that interviews people over time, these findings are rooted in deep insights of veterans' ongoing engagement with ALMP and PES – rather than providing a snapshot at one point in time. Furthermore, the QLR design illustrates starkly the ineffectiveness of current approaches as only seven participants moved into work over the study period. Thus, rather than simply reflecting negative service user feedback, we illustrate how this employment support is not having the labour market outcomes that it could – or indeed should – have for this group.

Our findings demonstrate that the potential for employer engagement highlighted in previous HRM literature is not being realised (van Berkel et al., 2017). Although we found examples of good practice in the PES, our findings expose considerable variability, with more tailored support more commonly found outside the PES i.e. within the VCS. In our research, the role played by some veterans' organisations as trusted labour market intermediaries (Ingold and Valizade, 2017), suggests there is scope to develop more meaningful engagement with employers and HR practitioners.

Without a focus on sustainable job outcomes, the PES and ALMP potentially serves the *opposing interests* (Heery, 2016b) of employers rather than workers. The Work First approach may be perceived as beneficial to some employers offering insecure work as part of today's increasingly fragmented employment landscape (Thompson, 2011). Such employers may welcome the push from ALMP for veterans (and others) to take any job. However, this approach potentially does little other than (re)inserting veterans (and others) into employment that is not sustained.

Additionally, it does not appear to serve the *shared interests* of veterans and employers: a Work First approach inhibits the potential for matching veterans to employers where their skills and experience can be effectively utilised. Although the employer voice is absent here, existing research suggests that the upstream impact of unsuitable applications represents a cost to business (Wright, 2012) as employers spend significant resources sifting through inappropriate applications (Jones et al., 2019; Ingold, 2020). Furthermore, retention is less likely if veterans move into unsuitable employment (Sissons and Green, 2017).

By *pushing* or *parking* veterans with limited or no support to re-engage with employment, ALMPs can limit the potential for matching alongside undermining ambitions of HRM practitioners and policymakers for more inclusive employment, particularly in relation to disability and health impairments. Consequently, employers may miss the benefits of including veterans in their workforces (Blank, 2019), and the structurally disadvantaged position of those who face labour market exclusion is reinforced.

These findings are particularly pertinent in the UK and other international contexts where governments make commitments to ensuring veterans are supported to re-integrate into the civilian labour market. While ALMP is only one part of the employability support available to veterans in the UK (we acknowledge the significant role played by the CTP for veterans within the first two years post-Service), our findings expose a disconnect between ALMP and broader policy, employer and VCS commitments and interventions focused on supporting the Armed Forces community.

Although the interests of jobseekers and employers will not always align – i.e. the need for sustainable employment is often at odds with that offered in the UK's insecure labour market - there is further scope for policy to support shared interests, with both employers and veterans benefitting from approaches that facilitates better matches, and invest more in training and re-skilling. Several key areas for policy and practice can facilitate a more sustainable inclusion of veterans in the civilian labour market, including a specific role for HRM within this.

At the institutional level, inclusion of employers and HR professionals in the development and formulation of ALMPs may help address the narrow emphasis on *supply side* approaches to labour market policy. Paying more attention to the *demand side* places a greater emphasis on sustainable employment rather than fast job entry. A more enabling ALMP should provide tangible support to overcome individual barriers to work (e.g. quality training) and recognise and (where possible) help to address needs outside of the paid labour market (e.g. health). Shifting a focus from work entry to better matches with good quality sustainable job opportunities would lead to better longer-term outcomes.

At a practical level, considering the role of both PES and employers, more could be done to facilitate connections between veteran jobseekers and those employers interested in supporting veterans. PES should be better linked with wider employment support eco-system – which for UK veterans includes an extensive network of support from VCS and employers. Creating opportunities for employer engagement might enable more meaningful training and work experiences. Employers could play a role in supporting match, creating clear pathways and also providing light touch work experiences for those who are not immediately work ready, or *job carving* i.e. redesigning jobs around the capabilities of individuals, enabling veterans (and others) with disabilities and long-term health conditions to gradually transition into work. As van Berkel et al., (2017) highlight, HRM practitioners may require support to engage in this agenda given the lack of empathy sometimes reported by veterans (Davis and Minnis, 2017; Hammer, Brady and Perry, 2020; Carpenter and Silberman, 2020). Here, PES practitioners could engage with employers and identify scope for more inclusive practices (e.g. adjustments to recruitment and selection practices) (BITC, 2017). While extant research exposes a need for employers to be more empathetic to the challenges veterans may face (Kirchner, 2017; Dexter, 2020), our research demonstrates this applies equally to PES practitioners, with more positive experiences identified where PES staff were familiar with, and empathetic to, the specific issues veterans may face. Although we advocate approaches placing greater emphasis on job fit, there is perhaps more scope for the PES and ALMP to support people to explore new sectors (Lindsay, 2005; DWP, 2020c).

Conclusion

This article has made a significant empirical contribution through new analysis of data from the first QLR to focus veterans' interactions with UK ALMP and PES. We have shown that veterans claiming out-of-work benefits are typically either *pushed* towards inappropriate jobs or *parked* through their exclusion from employment support when deemed unfit for work. A theoretical contribution is made by demonstrating the important mediating role of ALMP in the employment relationship, which is often overlooked.

Although not representative of the whole veteran population, our research provides important insights into the diverse experiences of those interacting with the PES. Further investigation is needed to

understand how ALMP and PES are experienced by specific groups of veterans; for example, women, who we acknowledge were significantly underrepresented in our sample, yet face particular challenges (Parry et al, 2019). Future research could also explore employer engagement with support for unemployed veterans and how this interacts with mainstream PES. Finally, although our findings are of relevance outside of the UK, particularly other Liberal Market Economies, comparative research would be useful to explore how veterans' experiences of mainstream PES varies across different welfare state regimes, including how this interacts with broader policies within nation states relating to Armed Forces communities.

Data Availability Statement: Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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