

# **Trading Labour for Experience: The role of unpaid internships in shaping Active Labour Market Policies in Ireland since the Great Recession**

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## **Abstract:**

Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs), which include state-funded apprenticeships, have long been used as a way of encouraging unemployed youth into skilled and semi-skilled trades. However, new forms of ‘non-standard’ employment are now dominating young people’s experience of the labour market. In fact, unpaid internships are becoming a normal part of a modern curriculum vitae and viewed as a necessary rite of passage for a successful school-to-work transfer, especially in the middle-class professions. Through the use of freedom of information requests, policy documents, evaluation reports and semi-structured interviews, this paper examines the role of unpaid internships in shaping the four most recent ALMPs targeted at Irish youth since the Great Recession (2008). It theorises that the increased prevalence of unpaid internships in the entry level jobs market leads to Irish policymakers designing youth unemployment ALMPs based on a private-sector unpaid internship model. This paper will first situate youth unemployment policy within the literature on ALMPs and unpaid internships. It will then combine process tracing as a within case research method with a comparative case study of the four ALMPs. In conclusion, this paper finds that Irish youth unemployment policy designed during periods of economic crisis tends to prioritise the needs of host organisations and mirror employment norms established through unpaid internships. Conversely, during periods of economic growth, Irish youth unemployment policy reverts to a more regulated model that protects the entry level jobs market. Furthermore, this paper recommends that European states should prohibit the use of unpaid internships in order to avoid further entrenching precarious and discriminatory work patterns.

**Key Words:** Youth unemployment, Internships, Active Labour Market Policies, Public policy, Irish politics, European welfare policies.

## **Introduction**

The commonly established concept of work – understood as an exchange of labour for wages – has changed. This ‘wage for work bargain’ has been the traditional position of both the radical left (e.g., Marx 1867, pp.270 – 282; Gorz 2005, p.55) and the legal institutions of the liberal democratic state (Freedland and Deakin 2016). But this shared understanding of what constitutes work in the modern era has been undermined in recent decades by the growth of informal work practices in the Global North, which involve an exchange of labour in return for experience (Perlin 2012). This decoupling of wages and labour through unpaid internships is most pronounced within the entry level positions pursued by young workers. The culture of unpaid internships has spread from the United States to Europe, and a period spent working for free is now an established part of a modern curriculum vitae (Discenna 2016; Figiel 2013). This process is especially pronounced within competitive and prestigious middle-class professions, such as academia, journalism, media, publishing, law, the NGO sector, and almost all of the ‘creative’ industries (Perlin 2012, p.63).

In regard to youth unemployment, Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs), which include state-subsidised apprenticeships, have long been used as a way of encouraging younger unemployed citizens into skilled and semi-skilled trades; with the German apprenticeship model held up as an example of international best practice for vocational education (see: Barabasch et al. 2021; Gessler 2017). Many of these ‘experiential’ training programmes have successfully combined on-the-job training with class-based education. Host organisations get free or state-subsidised labour, and the participant receives training, a modest wage, and a formal qualification upon completion of their placement.

Scholars have shown how the liberalisation of the welfare state has led to an increasing prevalence of ‘welfare-to-work’ policies which disadvantage the unemployed (e.g., Dean 2006; Finn 2000). But has the growth of unpaid internships, in which unregulated host organisations receive free labour in return for ill-defined ‘experience’, influenced the design of ALMPs targeted at unemployed youth? Recent research has shown that Irish policymakers have prioritised the interests of host organisations over unemployed youth in the design and implementation of some activation policies (Arlow 2019). So, has this concern for the needs of host organisations also involved the embrace of a private-sector unpaid internship model by Irish policymakers? To what extent do Irish ALMPs exaggerate the benefit of ‘experience’, leading to a deterioration in the quality of work placements and a lack of effective vocational training for participants? These

potential issues lead to the central question of this paper, which asks: *to what extent does the culture of unpaid internships influence the design of youth unemployment policies in Ireland?*

This paper attempts to assess if a modern understanding of what counts as acceptable treatment of younger Irish workers seeking employment in middle-class professions, has influenced the design of ALMPs. *The central hypothesis being that the prevalence of unpaid internships in the private sector entry-level jobs market increases the likelihood of Irish policymakers delivering similarly underregulated schemes targeted at unemployed youth.* As a consequence of this policy design, which supports an unregulated trade of labour in return for poorly defined experience, these ALMPs will prioritise the needs of host organisations over delivering value for unemployed youth.

First, this paper will situate youth unemployment policy within the literature on ALMPs and unpaid internships. Second, it will outline the research methodology, case selection, and data used to test the above hypothesis. The case selection involves the last four programmes targeted at unemployed youth in Ireland since the Great Recession, which are: the Skills Development and Internship Programme, JobBridge, the Youth Employment Support Scheme, and the Work Placement Experience Programme. Third, it will assess and compare these four ALMPs, while presenting this analysis through a framework of international best practice in the design of ALMPs. In conclusion, the paper finds that Irish youth unemployment policy designed during periods of economic crisis does tend to prioritise the needs of host organisations and mirror employment norms established through unpaid internships in the private sector. However, during periods of economic growth, Irish youth unemployment policy reverts to a more traditional model of labour activation that protects the entry level jobs market and targets those sections of society that most need state aid in securing meaningful work. This paper concludes by placing these results into the wider context of youth unemployment research and recommends areas for further study.

### **Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) and unpaid internships**

Labour activation programmes were devised in 1970's Europe as a response to the crisis of high inflation, high unemployment, and low growth that hit the European post-war consensus (Safrafi 2013, p.149). Under the new liberal orthodoxy, it was assumed that spending on state-funded job creation programmes would increase inflation, damage economic productivity, and limit private sector job creation (Boyce 2010, pp. 208-209). Therefore, policymakers concluded that it was best to utilise ALMPs, in collaboration with the private sector, in order to encourage, assist, and even compel people into work (Van Ours 2007, p.77). In fact, the growth in ALMPs can be viewed as

part of a wider process of indirect social welfare privatisation, which has become increasingly prevalent in Europe since the turn of the century (Gilbert 2015, p. 50).

The empirical research on the effectiveness of ALMPs shows that they often result in ambivalent outcomes that regularly fail to meet their stated objectives (Dyke et al. 2006, p.601). If successful policy is about delivering value to citizens (Easton 1953, pp.126-129), then policy failure within ALMPs can be considered commonplace – especially when targeted at unemployed youth – as they regularly fail to meet their aims and often inspire widespread public opposition (McConnell 2010, p.357). For example, some studies that evaluate the effectiveness of ALMPs claim that they do help to reduce unemployment (De Serres & Murtin 2013; Estevao 2003; Murtin and Robin 2013), but others show that they have no significant impact on unemployment levels (Baker et al. 2003). The mixed results of these cross-national studies may be accounted for by the fact that they conceptualise ALMPs in broad terms, so highly structured apprenticeships are conflated with schemes which resemble welfare-to-work programmes that deliver little value in terms of long-term career prospects or training (Martin 2015, p.29).

Interestingly, the OECD's (2009) cross-national report on the effectiveness of ALMPs found that they only work well during periods of economic growth. This represents one of the few reports on ALMPs that did not disproportionately view youth unemployment as an individual flaw caused by a 'personal skills gap' or young people's inability to effectively transfer from formal education to work (see: Garlick 2013, p.216; Refrigeri and Aleandri 2013, p. 1264). In much of the literature there is a reluctance to view youth unemployment as a failure of the economy to provide sufficient jobs, instead there is a tendency to view it as an individual failing. For example, Safrati (2013, p. 152) argues that most academics and policymakers ignore the larger macro-economic causes of youth unemployment, such as the impact of technological change, the financialisation of the economy, and the globalised nature of labour. This may be due to liberal orthodoxy which places the onus on the individual rather than the state, or it may be because policymakers at the national level have no answer to these structural macro-economic problems.

Surprisingly, even when ALMPs receive significant amounts of state financing, labour activation has often failed to benefit those most in need of help, such as single mothers and vulnerable migrant workers (Safrati 2013, p.151). Martin (2015, p.29) finds that many countries only 'pay lip service' to labour activation so that they can artificially manipulate the

unemployment numbers and surreptitiously institute welfare-to-work schemes. But he also notes that ALMPs are generally effective at reducing the overall numbers of those signing on for assistance (*ibid.*). Card, Kluve, and Weber (2018, p.895) find that most ALMPs have a limited impact on unemployment in the first year after a participant completes a placement, but there is a larger effect in the medium and longer term (two years after programme completion). This research also finds that ‘work first’ models of ALMPs are less effective than employment programs that focus on developing ‘human capital’ (*ibid.*, p.928). But public sector employment programs are found to be either ineffective or counterproductive for the employment prospects of participants (*ibid.*).

Vooren et al. (2019, p.127) provides a more targeted cross-national study that separates out ALMPs into ‘enhanced services programs’ (such as apprenticeships), subsidised labor schemes, and public sector job creation. This research shows that most ALMPs have negative impacts for the participant and society over the short term and in general ALMPs have only a moderate positive effect on unemployment levels. However, similar to Card, Kluve and Weber (2018), they find that ‘enhanced service’ schemes are the most effective and deliver positive results faster than other types of ALMPs (Vooren et al. 2019, p.139). Vooren et al. (2019) show that subsidised labour schemes and public job creation are ineffective in the short term but there is a longer-term net benefit for society and the participant through avoiding the ‘scarring’ that periods of idleness can have on younger citizens (*ibid.*). Importantly, ALMPs that have considerable educational elements and high levels of state regulation will often avoid the initial negative impact on the participant (Robert and Saar 2012; Vooren et al. 2019, p. 15). Again, this research shows that it is the divergence in terms of the regulation and ALMP quality which goes some way to explain the mixed results of these schemes.

The apprenticeship model is the most effective ALMP, in which modest wages, on-the-job training, and some classroom-based learning are combined to deliver a formally qualified participant at the end of the programme (O’Higgins 2001, pp. 95-96). This process of young people trading cheap labour for training can be viewed as a modern adaptation of the traditional apprenticeship system which has an 800-year history (Prak and Wallace 2009, p.309). For instance, an apprentice in early modern Europe had a formal status and when they completed their ‘masterpiece’ they gained a prestigious position in the labour market through guild membership

(*ibid.*, p.17-18). However, the past does not always provide examples worth emulating, with the indentured servitude offered by apprenticeships in the new world colonies providing a strong contrast to the career progression and social status provided by apprenticeships in Europe (Galenson 1984).

States are increasingly placing renewed focus on the use of apprenticeship models for training young people in skilled and semi-skilled jobs, which have been proven to aid social mobility and economic growth in countries such as Germany and Japan (Thelen 2004, pp.17-18). The German apprenticeship system is widely regarded in the literature as being the most effective at preparing young people for rewarding work, which has knock on benefits for the wider German economy (O'Higgins 2001, pp. 95-96). However, the German system is highly regulated, inflexible in terms of training criteria, and expensive (*ibid.* p.100). The average cost of an apprenticeship for a host organisation in Germany is €15,536, with the remaining training and wage costs being provided by the state, leading to an average total cost of over €20,000 per annum during a three-year apprenticeship (Dionisius et al. 2009, p.11). This level of funding gives apprenticeships parity of esteem in terms of overall costs with most university science degrees, a level of commitment to vocational training that many European countries (including Ireland) would balk at in practice.

Effective ALMPs should not only be well funded but they should be 'targeted' at specific groups of unemployed youth, because a one-size-fits-all approach only leads to processes being put in place that predominantly benefit those best able to help themselves (Betcherman et al. 2007, p. 63; O'Higgins 2001, p. 142). They also need to be highly regulated to ensure a quality work experience, consistent training, and to avoid exploitation by host organisations using ALMPs to replace paid employment. Less well regulated ALMPs, that trust the private sector to utilise schemes in good faith, lead to high levels of deadweight losses (those utilising the scheme who have no need of it), substitution rates (paid jobs being replaced with scheme participants), and job displacement, which refers to job losses in companies who compete against host organisations that utilise ALMPs for cheap labour (Arlow 2019, pp. 88-89; O'Higgins 2001, p. 111).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars use the term 'displacement' when referring to the process of substitution, but this research will use the standard Industrial Labour Organisation (ILO) definitions detailed above in reference to these policy problems (O'Higgins 2001, p. 111).

In the case of Ireland, evaluations of ALMPs have prioritised research on the controversial JobBridge scheme, which faced widespread public opposition due to the perception that the state-funded internships in the private and voluntary sector exploited the unemployed during a period of severe economic crisis (e.g., Arlow 2019; McGrath 2015; Murphy 2015; O’Hogan 2016). In terms of the wider eco-system of Irish activation measures, Murphy (2016) demonstrates that since the Great Recession the design of Irish activation measures have followed a neoliberal model led by expert advice from the OECD and the Troika (which is the triumvirate of the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Commission that supervised the Irish ‘bailout’). This policy design embraced a ‘low road’ approach which accepted low skills and low wages in state subsidised activation, on the basis that any job would do for the unemployed, rather than a European social democratic model which favoured training and skills development (Murphy 2016, pp.447-448).

On the role of unpaid internships in the modern labour market, Perlin (2012) produced the seminal work on this topic, which traced their development in the US and their general acceptance as an established part of the labour market. In fact, much of the research produced to date has focused on the North American experience of internships, where they are most established (e.g., Corrigan 2015; Discenna 2016; Frenette 2015; Salamon 2016). It is now estimated that 1.3 per cent of those at work in the USA are unpaid interns and half of all college graduates claim to have completed an unpaid internship (Carnevale and Hansen 2015, p.77). A comparative approach to the growth of unpaid internship employment within Europe is notable by its absence and there is no hard data on the numbers of unpaid interns in either Europe or Ireland (O’Higgins and Pinedo 2018, p.1). However, there is much country-specific work that concentrates on the growth of unpaid internships in cases such as the UK (Figiel 2013, Halford et al. 2016), Greece (Mihail 2006), Portugal (Silva et al. 2016), and Croatia (Crnković-Pozaić 2006). This research would suggest that unpaid internships are a growing part of young people’s experience of work in Europe (O’Higgins and Pinedo 2018, p.11). Also, O’Hogan (2016, p. 40) notes that 25.6 per cent of Irish museums utilised unpaid internships during the recession years, which as suspected suggests they are commonplace in the cultural industries. Importantly, given the number of European countries with minimum wage legislation, some scholars have even begun to question the legality of unpaid internships within the European Union labour market (Feuerstein et al. 2017).

In defining an internship, this research refers to what is known in the literature as ‘open market internships’, which are internships that are sourced directly by the intern, usually within the private sector, and that involve an exchange of unpaid labour in return for experience, with the aim of gaining enough experience to eventually secure paid employment (O’Higgins and Pinedo 2018, p.3). Internships that are part of a course of academic study or work experience conducted as part of an ALMP (such as an apprenticeship as a plumber or electrician) are excluded from this definition (*ibid.*). Also, some employers refer to entry-level positions on modest wages with short term contracts as ‘internships’. Despite what they are called these are just traditional entry level positions, similar to any other early career job. What is of interest to this research is the substantial growth of unpaid internships undertaken in the private sector, which can be viewed as a form of ‘human capital entrepreneurship’ in the neoliberal era (Hope and Figiel 2015). These unpaid internships are an underacknowledged part of the ‘precariat’ labour force, in which anxiety, low (or no) pay, low status, and insecure work are part of the unofficial employment contract (Standing 2009, p.110-111). But unlike other forms of precarious work (such as zero-hour contracts), unpaid interns are not legal employees, do not pay social insurance, and do not have the same rights as the people they work alongside (*ibid.*). Pre-existing laws and workplace policies against bullying and sexual harassment should protect interns but given their informal status it is questionable how seriously human resource departments would take an intern’s complaint.

Some scholars have argued that we do not know enough about the informal work practices surrounding unpaid internships in Europe, especially given the formative role they play in young people’s early experience of the workplace (Halford et al. 2006, p.4; O’Higgins and Pinedo 2018, p.25). This lack of knowledge matters because these unpaid internships are widely viewed as an exploitative work practice that entrenches inequalities of opportunity because less privileged workers just cannot afford to work for free (Perlin 2012, p.125). In fact, the expectation that workers gain experience through internships rather than on-the-job training represents a transfer of training costs from employers to the individual (*ibid.*, p.28).

In summary, the literature shows that ALMPs deliver mixed results for the unemployed and especially for unemployed youth. And the literature on unpaid internships shows that they are important for young people’s early experiences of the workplace, that they are becoming increasingly prevalent in the Global North, but that there is also a lack of empirical evidence about



their impact on the jobs market. This paper attempts to draw upon both these fields of study to assess if informal work practices normalised through unpaid internships are filtering into the design of youth unemployment policy in Ireland.

### **Methodology (Process Tracing)**

Process tracing is methodological tool for testing the hypothesis within the four case studies. *This hypothesis claims that the prevalence of unpaid internships in the private sector entry level jobs market increases the likelihood of Irish policymakers delivering similarly underregulated ALMPs targeted at unemployed youth.* Given that critical periods often act as a catalyst to substantial policy change this process linking unpaid internships in the private sector to the design of ALMPs should be especially pronounced during economic crises.

Within the process tracing framework, it is causal-process observations which provide the bulk of the evidence to both describe the political phenomenon under investigation and to establish causal claims (Collier 2011, pp.823–824). Process tracing has been defined as, ‘... the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analyzed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator’ (*ibid.*, p.823). However, this broad-based interpretation has led to accusations that process tracing as an analytical tool is too ambiguous and far too reliant on the intuition of the researcher when establishing causal relationships (Beach 2015, p.464; Bennett and Checkel 2015, pp.4-5). A way of counteracting this tendency and providing accurate causal explanations is by focusing on hypothesized causal mechanisms (Bennett and Checkel 2015, p.3). In fact, a key technique in process tracing is to test hypothesized causal mechanisms in tough cases to clarify if the theory is generalizable beyond a limited number of cases (*ibid.*, p.13).

As applied to this research, the process tracing framework can be understood as, ‘... a distinct case-study methodology that involves tracing causal mechanisms that link causes (X) with their effects (i.e., outcomes) (Y)’ (Beach 2015, p.463). Within this methodology a causal mechanism should involve a theory of interlocking parts that regulates the causal force between cause and effect (Beach 2015, p.465). Therefore, the causal-process observations in this research should involve the independent variable (X), which is unpaid internships in the private sector, influencing the dependent variable, which is ALMPs that mirror this informal work practice (Y). Importantly, the variance between economic crisis and stability can be viewed as another key explanatory variable, given that such critical periods can inspire significant policy change or

innovation. So, by tracing the processes that provide case-specific observations of the hypothesized causal mechanism, process tracing can help to create new testable implications – informed by the academic literature – that may fit a modified theory during the assessment of the results (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 18).

If the hypothesis is valid, the causal mechanism should involve evidence of unpaid internship work practices influencing Irish policymaking on ALMPs targeted at unemployed youth. Within each case under investigation, it is the causal-process observations which will determine if the hypothesised causal mechanism is in evidence (Brady and Collier 2010, p.12). According to Bennett and Checkel (2015, p.29) one of the ten best practices for process tracing involves, ‘combining process tracing with case comparisons when useful for the research goal and feasible’, because comparative case studies can be a better source of inference than single case designs. Also, single case studies of ALMPs are prominent in the research on Irish youth unemployment policy (e.g., Arlow 2019; McGrath 2015; Murphy 2015; O’Hogan 2016), so a cross-unit study may add to our knowledge of youth unemployment policy in Ireland (Gerring 2004, p.353). Therefore, process tracing shall be used as the within case research method and combined with a comparative case study approach involving all four cases (Bennett and Checkel 2015, p.29). This means that within each case the hypothesis can be tested through process tracing and then the results compared. This provides a natural synergy between process tracing and case comparison as key causal process observations in one case may later influence (or limit) policy design in future cases.

### **Case selection**

Case selection for this paper is straightforward and simple, as it involves the four most recent ALMPs designed in Ireland and marketed at unemployed youth since the Great Recession (2008); these are the Skills Development and Internship Programme (SDIP), JobBridge, the Youth Employment Support Scheme (YESS), and the Work Placement Experience Programme (WPEP). Table 1 (below) provides a brief summary for each of these labour activation measures, which includes their key policy design features and the dates they were implemented. The Great Recession is the starting point for this research because it was an obvious moment of unprecedented crisis for Irish youth, as youth unemployment rates reached a high of 30.5 per cent

**Table 1: Summary of Active Labour Market Policies marketed at unemployed youth in Ireland (2008-2022).**

Name	Acronym	Years Active	Policy Design Description
Skills Development and Internship Programme	SDIP	November 2010 – April 2011	An internship-based ALMP designed before the Great Recession. It included host organisation contributions for labour, significant regulation of placements, and was limited to the under 35s. It was closed without a formal launch by the Fine Gael / Labour government due to the lack of interest from host organisations and a crisis in youth unemployment rates.
JobBridge	n/a	July 2011 – October 2016	Designed and launched within three months at a time of crisis for unemployed youth due to the Great Recession. Although marketed at unemployed youth it was open to all the unemployed. It consisted of up to 8,500 places, lasting from six to nine months. There was minimal regulation of host organisations, no regulation to ensure internship quality, and no host organisation contribution for labour costs. Participants received €50 on top of their welfare entitlements for an average of 39 hours per week.
Youth Employment Support Scheme	YESS	October 2018 – July 2021	Designed as a replacement for JobBridge this was a small pilot scheme that involved tightly regulated internships for unemployed youth. Designed and launched during a period of economic stability and decreasing unemployment. Places were restricted to disadvantaged youth under the age of 25, who were at risk of long-term unemployment. It was highly regulated by case officers and there were compulsory classes. Host organisations contributed to labour costs, and participants received minimum wage.
Work Placement Experience Programme	WPEP	July 2021 – present	Designed and launched during a period of crisis for youth unemployment (the Covid-19 pandemic). Although marketed at unemployed youth it is open to all the unemployed. It consists of up to 10,000 places of six months duration. Participants are eligible for two placements for a maximum of 12-months. There is minimal regulation of host organisations, no state regulation of placement quality, and no host organisation contribution to labour costs. But working weeks are limited to 30 hours and interns receive minimum wage.

by 2011 (Eurostat 2018).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, drawing on Punctuated Equilibrium Theory, we can understand most policy change as a gradual evolution, with reform of public policy developing slowly over time and led by policy experts (Baumgartner, Jones and Mortensen 2014, pp. 59-60). But periods of crisis can open the floodgates to significant policy change, often led by policy entrepreneurs and non-experts, this breaks the previous policy equilibrium leading to a new status-quo that is markedly different from previous policy norms (Baumgartner and Jones 2002, pp. 4-5). Therefore, by selecting two ALMPs that were designed during economic crises (JobBridge and WPEP) and two during periods of economic stability (SDIP and YESS), this will provide enough variation within the policymaking process for effective comparison (King, Keohane and Verba 1994, p.137). In effect, this is selection based on a *Most Similar Systems Design* (MSSD), in which systems are chosen that differ with respect to the independent variables but are as similar as possible in relation to all other extraneous variables (Anckar 2008, p.389; Sartori 1991, p.250). In practice, this requirement often involves choosing cases that are linked by geography and culture, which helps to keep the contesting variables constant (Anckar 2008, p.393). Fortunately, this research design naturally controls for extraneous variables as all the ALMPs were implemented in Ireland and the policies designed by governments that are of the centre or centre-right. Table 1 (above) outlines how these schemes vary in terms of state regulation and the levels of youth unemployment present during their implementation. For instance, JobBridge was a policy response to the youth unemployment crisis caused by the Great Recession and the WPEP was a policy response to the youth unemployment crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (see Table 1).

## **Data**

Data for this paper comes from Freedom of Information (FOI) requests sent to the Department of an Taoiseach (the Irish Prime Minister) and the Department of Social Protection, consisting of five separate requests in total. These are the two departments that contributed to the policy design of the selected cases. This data collection involved an FOI request sent to the Department of Social Protection (DSP) seeking information on the Skills Development and Internship Programme (FOI 2018a). Then FOI requests to the Department of an Taoiseach (DAT) and the DSP, seeking information on JobBridge (FOI 2018b, FOI 2018c). Another FOI request focusing on YESS and

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<sup>2</sup> For this research, youth unemployment is defined as those citizens not in full-time work or education between the ages of 18 and 25. This excludes non-adult citizens under 18 who may also not be in full-time work or education, as they have specific needs that are best assessed outside traditional unemployment policies.

WPEP was sent to both the DSP and DAT (FOI 2022a; FOI 2022b). The FOIs sought all documents on these ALMPs prepared for the Minister, senior officials, and Cabinet, including documentation prepared for any meeting, or documents arising from those meetings. They also requested any evaluation reports compiled on the four schemes.

Two evaluation reports into JobBridge (Indecon 2103; Indecon 2016) and policy documents from the Department of Social Protection were used to evaluate the effectiveness of Irish ALMPs. Also, two interviews were carried out with political actors that have an interest in the policy design of ALMPs. These interview subjects include Senator Regina Doherty of Fine Gael, who was Minister of Social Protection from June 2017 to June 2020 and was the minister responsible for implementing the YESS programme. And Paul Murphy TD (an abbreviation of *Teachta Dála*, a member of the Irish Parliament), who is a member of the radical left Trotskyist group People Before Profit and a prominent opponent of ALMPs. This provided insight into social movement opposition to ALMPs and helped to explain why JobBridge became a toxic brand for the government. Also, the fact that Paul Murphy is part of the radical left and Senator Doherty a member of a centre-right political party (FG) ensured that there was a divergence of opinion on the efficacy of ALMPs within the interview data.

**Table 2: Chronology of key decisions and events relating to Irish ALMPs marketed at unemployed youth (2008-2022).**

Date	Event
September 2008	Ireland officially enters recession
2009 – 2011	Youth unemployment rate increases from 13% to 30.5%
June 2009	Expansion of Work Placement Programme (WPP) launched
November 2009	SFA & IBEC launch Gradlink (employment process identical to JobBridge)
January 2010	Minister Mary Hanafin (Fianna Fáil) confirms retention of social welfare benefits for Gradlink interns
November 2010	Cabinet approval for the Skills Development and Internship Programme. It is included in the November Budget.

9 March 2011	Fine Gael / Labour Government
11 April 2011	Decision to scrap the Skills Development and Internship Programme and build on an open access model for host organisations, similar to Gradlink and WPP.
13 June 2011	Three Clerical Officers on six-month contracts assigned to administer JobBridge (funding from existing resources)
1 July 2011	JobBridge Scheme commences
December 2011	First welfare cut for unemployed youth
April 2013	Indecon JobBridge Evaluation Report I
May 2013	JobBridge expanded to a potential of 8,500 internships
May 2016	Minister Varadkar announces 'replacement' of JobBridge.  Fine Gael minority government formed.
14 October 2016	Indecon JobBridge Evaluation Report II
18 October 2016	Official end of JobBridge announced
October 2018	JobBridge replacement- Youth Employment Support Scheme (YESS) finally launched. But this is just a pilot scheme.
December 2019	Youth unemployment rate reduced to 11%
27 February 2020	First Covid-19 case on the island of Ireland
27 March 2020	Stay-at-home order issued for Republic of Ireland
27 June 2020	Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and Green Party coalition formed
April 2021	Youth unemployment rate at 16.8% but if those on Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) are included this figure rises to 61.8%
July 2021	YESS is closed to new entrants
12 July 2021	Work Placement Experience Programme is launched
July 2022	Youth unemployment rate reduces to 10.9%

(Sources: Arlow 2019; Central Statistics Office; Freedom of Information requests)

### **Skills Development and Internship Programme (SDIP)**

The first ALMP under consideration is the Skills Development and Internship Programme (SDIP). Table 2 (above) gives a chronology of the decision-making processes behind this policy, as well as the other three case studies. The SDIP was given Cabinet approval in November 2010 during a period of steadily growing youth unemployment numbers (see Table 2), and it was also included in the Troika supervised Budget of November 2010, but its policy design was devised long before Ireland entered recession (FOI 2018a).<sup>3</sup> In fact, the long design phase for this ALMP was due to its high levels of regulation and commitment to significant training elements, which made it a complicated scheme to launch from scratch. The SDIP involved state-subsidised internships in the private and voluntary sectors. The internships were to last for a maximum of 12 months and consist of a total of 5,000 places. In order to limit the potential for deadweight losses, the scheme envisioned the close monitoring of participants by case workers to ensure that only those who needed the scheme actually availed of it, with priority being given to the long-term unemployed, early school leavers, and those working in sectors that had been hit hardest by the recession, such as retail and construction (FOI 2018a). Host organisations were also to be monitored to ensure a uniform participant experience, and they were expected to contribute €150 per week to the DSP in return for the labour of the interns. In fact, this policy was one reason for the delay in launching this scheme, as the DSP did not have the pre-existing facilities to process payments from host organisations. These control measures and strict oversight meant that this scheme largely conformed to international best practice on designing ALMPs (Safrati 2013, p.153).

However, it would never be formally launched and in April 2011 it was scrapped as a policy by the Fine Gael (FG) / Labour government within their first month in power (see Table 2). The new Labour Party Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton, decided to scrap the scheme because only 195 companies expressed an interest in hosting internship placements, this was a remarkably low uptake given the extent of the economic crisis, which meant that availing of subsidised labour should have been very attractive to Irish employers (FOI 2018c).<sup>4</sup> So, why did private sector companies prove so unwilling to avail of this state-subsidised internship scheme?

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<sup>3</sup> *Skills Development and Internship Programme for the Unemployed*- Policy design document.

<sup>4</sup> Assistant Secretary DSP, *Email in response to opposition parliamentary questions*, 8 June 2011.

In response to parliamentary questions, the DSP's Assistant Secretary expressed the view that the host organisation contribution amount was too onerous on employers given the scale of the economic crisis (*ibid.*). But another factor, not considered by officials and policymakers at the time, was that there were already two pre-existing schemes that provided state-funded labour with minimal bureaucratic oversight. For example, the Work Placement Programme (WPP), was an activation measure that was limited to the public and voluntary sectors before the recession, but in June 2009 (see Table 2) the decision was made to expand it to include 2,500 places in the private sector (DSP 2011, p.2). This scheme involved the state paying the full welfare entitlements of participants while they completed their internships, it involved no case worker supervision, and limited regulation. The only criteria for host organisation acceptance into the scheme was simply registering with the state training agency and to be a legally registered company (FOI 2018a).<sup>5</sup>

Another scheme was established by the employer representative bodies, the Small Firms Association (SFA) and the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC). This programme was named Gradlink, and it involved Irish companies registering on an IBEC run website to advertise for unpaid internships, with the focus being on recent university graduates. Although, in practice, the site also allowed advertisements for unpaid internships in low skilled non-graduate positions. The state was not involved with this scheme, but issues arose when young people were informing their welfare officers that they were completing unpaid internships through Gradlink (FOI 2018c).<sup>6</sup> At this time the stigma around unemployed young people reached new heights in Ireland, despite the world-wide economic collapse (McGrath 2015). For instance, it was not uncommon to hear commentators on RTE (the national broadcaster) arguing that young citizens should 'work for nothing' or emigrate rather than claim social welfare (Cullen 2010).<sup>7</sup> So, given this type of public discourse, many well-meaning young people thought they were doing the correct thing as a jobseeker by completing a Gradlink internship and informing their welfare officers of their attempts to improve their experience levels. But to claim social welfare you must be a full-time jobseeker and it is technically illegal to do an unpaid internship while signing on for unemployment assistance. So, to address this issue the Minister for Social Protection, Mary

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<sup>5</sup> Press release prepared for the Minister for Education and Skills, Mary Coughlan, 14 December 2010.

<sup>6</sup> *Precursor to JobBridge Report*, 18 June 2015.

<sup>7</sup> This comment was made by Bill Cullen, a well-known television personality and businessman, who would later become bankrupt due to unwise investments during the Celtic Tiger. It is not known if he took his own advice during his period of joblessness.



Hanafin (Fianna Fáil), issued a directive allowing unemployed people to keep their welfare entitlements while completing a Gradlink programme (DSP 2010). This represented the first time that the Irish state directly subsidised unpaid internships in the private sector, without having any regulatory or supervisory role with that form of informal employment. Essentially, this was the state funding a privatised ALMP during an unemployment crisis.

Given the pre-existence of Gradlink and WPP before the launch of the Skills Development and Internship Programme (see Table 2), it is unsurprising that employers proved unwilling to avail of this more regulated and expensive ALMP. Why would they agree to become host organisations in a scheme where they would face case worker monitoring and cost contributions? Especially when they could just avail of free state-funded internships that had no real regulatory oversight. This shows how a private-sector unpaid internship model had become normalised by policymakers right at the beginning of the Great Recession. And how this model limited the ability of policymakers to institute more regulated and higher value schemes such as the SDIP.

### **JobBridge**

JobBridge was launched in July 2011, within the first three months of the new Fine Gael and Labour coalition government (see Table 2). This haste was due to the genuine crisis in youth unemployment which had reached a high of 30.5% in April 2011 (Eurostat 2018). JobBridge originally consisted of 5000 internship places, which was expanded to a potential of 8,500 places in May 2013 (see Table 2). The internships were available in the private, public, or voluntary sectors. Each internship lasted from six to nine months, with a working week consisting of at least 30 hours, but with an average working week of 39 hours (see Table 1). On top of their welfare entitlements an intern received €50 a week top-up payment from the DSP (Indecon 2016, p.24). This meant that at 2012 welfare rates, a nineteen-year-old availing of the scheme would receive a total of €150 per week, for possibly working more than forty hours, far below the national minimum wage.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that fair pay for a day's work is an important part of ALMP success (Safrati 2013, p. 153). Also, host organisations did not contribute anything to the cost of these internships. In effect, for the host organisation there was no difference between a JobBridge

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<sup>8</sup> The 2012 Budget cut welfare rates for unemployed youth to €100 a week for those under 21, and to €144 for those between the ages of 21 and 24.

placement and an unpaid intern, beyond some rather basic bureaucratic procedures (Arlow 2019, p.85).

Another issue for JobBridge was the public perception that job quality was a serious problem for the scheme. Paul Murphy TD, whose campaign group ‘Scambridge’ was partly responsible for this ALMP becoming a toxic brand for the government, believes that the prevalence of low skilled jobs advertised on the JobBridge website was the reason for the public’s dislike of the scheme (Murphy 2022). Essentially, no reasonable person could believe that some of the low-skill jobs on offer through JobBridge warranted a six-month internship (Murphy 2022). Indecon’s second evaluation report into the scheme claimed that over 67 per cent of JobBridge participants were satisfied with the quality of their internship (Indecon 2016, p.56). But a cursory glance at the JobBridge site at the time provided evidence of low-skilled jobs being offered as state funded internships. For example, a search in August 2014 showed internships offered as a shop assistant in Donegal town, a cleaner in a school in North Dublin, and a cleaner in a Dublin city centre crèche (JobBridge 2014). Indecon’s reporting of high internship satisfaction among participants may have been skewed by the fact that it relied solely on those participants that bothered to complete the survey after they had left the scheme (Indecon 2016, pp.55-59).

Arlow (2009, pp.85-86) notes how the JobBridge application structure for both participants and host organisations was largely the same as the IBEC sponsored Gradlink; even the JobBridge website was remarkably similar to that of Gradlink. In fact, host organisations were trusted to such an extent with JobBridge that there was no approval process for advertising a state funded internship, beyond being a legally constituted company (DSP 2011, pp. 3-4). Host organisations could immediately advertise for state funded internships once they registered for the scheme through its website. There was no initial contact between host organisations and DSP officials to screen for quality or suitable training plans. If problems arose with a host organisation it was pursued after-the-fact, but policing the scheme was hampered by the fact that only three clerical officers were assigned to administer thousands of placements, meaning that the DSP could only respond to the most egregious examples of exploitation (see Table 2; FOI 2018c).<sup>9</sup> In the initial months of JobBridge, a SIPTU trade union official raised this issue of policing internship quality

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<sup>9</sup> Directive from DSP officials to the Irish state’s job agency, 13 June 2011.

at a stakeholder meeting, requesting details on what controls could be put in place (FOI 2018a).<sup>10</sup> The response from DSP officials was that as JobBridge was ‘voluntary’ with no coercive element to force the unemployed to utilise the scheme, participants could just refuse to apply for low value or inappropriate internships (*ibid*). A remarkable transfer of quality control for activation placements from the state to the individual.

How effective was JobBridge as an activation measure? Perhaps due to the extent of the public controversy surrounding this scheme there were two independent reports into JobBridge by Indecon Economic Consultants (Indecon 2013; Indecon 2016). The first report recommended expanding the scheme (Indecon 2013, ix-x), the second report claimed that the scheme was unique to a period of economic crisis and should be replaced (Indecon 2016, viii & x). The headline figure from the final report was that 67.5 per cent of JobBridge participants found work within 12 months of completing their internship, which is a strong activation rate for an ALMP (Indecon 2016, p.51). However, Arlow (2019, pp. 75-76) highlights that this headline figure is undermined by the substance of the Indecon report which estimated deadweight losses of 75.6 per cent and job substitution rates of 29.1 per cent as part of their evaluation criteria. This means that based on Indecon’s own assessment, three quarters of participants could have found work without the scheme and almost one in three of the JobBridge internships were replacing real jobs (Indecon 2016, p.67). The estimate for substitution (29.1 per cent) was extrapolated from participant survey data so can be viewed as relatively reliable (*ibid*). The deadweight figure (of 75.6 per cent) was estimated at a high level ‘to ensure the net benefits [of the scheme] are not overestimated’ (Indecon 2016, p. viii). But given the light touch regulation of the scheme, the use of a lower figure would have placed the whole assessment model into question. Indecon’s cost-benefit analysis finds that there was a positive economic cost-benefit to the state from JobBridge, especially if additional employment linked to the scheme lasted over two years (Indecon 2016, p.86). However, cross-national evaluations of ALMPs show that most ‘labour subsidisation schemes’ deliver a net-benefit at the two-year mark, which places JobBridge within the norm of similar labour activation measures internationally (Vooren et al. 2019, p.139; Card, Kluve, Weber 2018, p.895). But it is the contention of this research that a small increase in the regulation and oversight of this scheme could have delivered significantly more value to both the state and unemployed youth.

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<sup>10</sup> Minutes to the JobBridge stakeholder meeting (DSP response to SIPTU official), 21 June 2011.

### **Youth Employment Support Scheme (YESS)**

The YESS scheme was the JobBridge replacement that ran from October 2018 to July 2021. The fact that it was launched two years after JobBridge was closed to new entrants shows how there was no rush in government to revisit a controversial policy area (see Table 2). In fairness, by the end of JobBridge's lifespan, youth unemployment had begun to steadily decline, due to a growing economy and decreasing levels of overall unemployment. By December 2019, youth unemployment rates had reduced to 11 per cent, levels not seen since the collapse of Ireland's Celtic Tiger economy. This meant that there was no significant pressure on policymakers to deliver on a new ALMP.

YESS replaced JobBridge as the state's attempt at a labour activation policy which specifically targeted youth unemployment and it followed many of the guidelines for successful ALMPs (see: O'Higgins 2001, pp. 142-145; Safrati 2013, pp.151-153). This included paying minimum wage; establishing an employer contribution in order to deter job substitution; and case worker monitoring to reduce deadweight losses and to ensure quality job placements (DSP 2018). This shift in direction from a JobBridge style of 'open market internship' and back towards policies attempted with the Skills Development and Internship Programme was aided by the fact that there was no longer a significant crisis in youth unemployment. This meant that policymakers did not need to massage unemployment figures and make it look like they were doing something substantial to tackle a youth jobs crisis, which is how many ALMPs are used in practice (Standing 2011, p. 144).

This level of close regulation and support meant that YESS was aimed at much smaller numbers of unemployed people than JobBridge. The Minister responsible for its launch, Regina Doherty of Fine Gael, portrays YESS as an innovative pilot measure involving a few hundred places (Doherty 2022). The small numbers involved, combined with the controls to deter abuse by host organisations, are probably why this scheme received much less media attention than JobBridge and why it did not warrant significant criticism from left-wing activists (Murphy 2022). Importantly, YESS was specifically aimed at those unemployed youth who had 'significant barriers' to employment (DSP 2018). It was targeted at younger citizens who needed higher levels of employment support, such as people with disabilities (e.g., hearing or visual impairment), early school leavers, single parents, people recovering from substance abuse, Irish travellers, and young people with criminal records.

To date, there has been no independent evaluation report into YESS. But there were some obvious implementation problems with this policy. Senator Regina Doherty claims that host organisations were more willing to support internships for young people with disabilities rather than other types of disadvantages (Doherty 2022). It can be assumed that some companies were willing to aid the disabled as part of their Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) commitments, but aiding more socially disadvantaged youth would have been viewed as potentially too difficult for their workers to support. This points to the limits of ALMPs, because employees in private companies availing of schemes may reasonably feel that they are not social workers and aiding troubled youth is outside of their job descriptions. Research has shown that incorporating volunteers into social welfare provision can aid delivery (O’Leary et al. 2018, p.301), but presumably there is a qualitative difference between optional volunteering and a worker being volunteered by their manager or employer.

Another issue for this scheme was job quality. Doherty claims that too many of the host organisations showing interest in the scheme were from low skilled industries that were suffering from acute labour shortages, such as fruit and vegetable picking in the farms of North County Dublin (Doherty 2022). This is problematic because successful ALMPs, even those targeted at people with low education levels, need to offer a certified apprenticeship style experience, that can actually lead to worthwhile and rewarding work (O’Higgins 2001, pp.95-98). The German apprenticeship model is the prime example of this willingness to foster an individual’s progress from unemployment (or a lack of academic success) to a certified and valuable trade (Barabasch et al. 2021). So, these types of low skill jobs were not conducive to a successful scheme.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (which controls the Irish state’s public spending) refused to fund the expansion of YESS (Doherty 2022). Doherty believes part of the reason for this refusal was that unemployment was decreasing, therefore officials believed that the number of ALMP places should also be decreased (Doherty 2022). But this pro-cyclical view on youth unemployment policy fails to acknowledge the need for employment support to certain sections of disadvantaged youth, even during periods of job growth. However, Doherty identifies a more structural problem with youth unemployment policy in general, which is the narrow focus on ‘activation’ as a measure of ALMP success (Doherty 2022). The analytical focus on overall numbers who gain employment upon completion of a scheme obviously discriminates against

those policies which are targeted at people who are the hardest to help but need the most state support. Even helping small numbers of people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds to find work can have significant net benefits for society, given the knock-on costs associated with long-term unemployment, drug addiction, and criminality.

Furthermore, YESS was similar to the Irish state's Community Employment (CE) Scheme, which offers part-time work in the community to the long-term unemployed and to vulnerable populations. They both incorporate significant case worker involvement, tight regulations, and a focus on the most disadvantaged (DSP 2015, pp.41-43). In practice, CE offers 'sheltered employment' to vulnerable people who need extra support and compassionate managers. In effect, it is an acknowledgement that small numbers of able-bodied people, for a variety of reasons, are just not capable of work as it is commonly structured. But that does not mean they cannot perform socially necessary labour and provide a service to their community. The CE scheme has very low activation rates but the labour it provides helps to fill gaps in the Irish welfare state, and it provides vulnerable people with a sense of purpose (DSP 2015, p.52). Doherty claims that YESS was an attempt to replicate this 'sheltered employment' CE model for disadvantaged youth (Doherty 2022). But this policy focus on personal development, training, and societal contribution is in competition with the insistence on activation as a measure of success.

### **Work Placement Experience Programme (WPEP)**

The Covid-19 crisis led to a similar sharp spike in youth unemployment as was experienced during the Great Recession, with the youth unemployment rate reaching a high of 18.8 per cent by April 2021 (see Table 2; Humphreys 2021). Ireland was one of the first countries in Europe to enter lockdown in March 2020, it largely conformed to EU-level health guidelines on personal restrictions during the pandemic and provided significant state support to those impacted by the lockdown (Colfer 2020, p.216). For example, if those in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment – which was Ireland's policy of emergency income support for people who lost jobs due to the Covid lockdown – are included then the absolute youth unemployment rate in April 2021 was a shocking 61.8 per cent (Humphreys 2021). In response to this obvious unemployment crisis the state launched the Work Placement Experience Programme (WPEP) in July 2021, the same month that YESS was closed to new entrants (see Table 2).

WPEP is an ongoing policy which involves state-funded internships in the private and voluntary sectors. As of yet, there have been no independent report into its effectiveness but while YESS largely escaped the notice of left-wing activists, WPEP was immediately criticised as a revised version of JobBridge (Murphy 2021). In fact, Paul Murphy TD relaunched his ‘ScamBridge’ campaign to resist this new policy initiative (Murphy 2022). However, unlike with JobBridge, criticism of this scheme failed to gain much traction with the public. Murphy argues that this scheme does have similar policy design features to JobBridge that are overly favourable to host organisations (Murphy 2022). But it failed to cause as much controversy because jobs in the Irish economy have recovered exceptionally quickly after the ending of Covid restrictions, which means many unemployed people are able to secure jobs without resorting to ALMPs (*ibid.*).

**Table 3: Work Placement Experience Programme job offer quality (over a two-month period)**

Skill levels	Total Numbers	Percentages
<b>Graduate</b>	0	0
<b>Skilled</b>	14	20
<b>Semi-skilled</b>	21	30
<b>Low skill</b>	34	50
Total:	<b>69</b>	<b>100</b>

(Source: JobsIreland.ie)

The Labour Market Advisory Council (LMAC) acted as an unofficial steering committee for WPEP, providing advice during its policy design (LMAC 2020). They advised that there would be a need to, ‘...ensure quality of work experience and training through the programme...’ and claimed that there was a need for the DSP to ‘build on lessons learnt’ from the JobBridge scheme (LMAC 2020). So, to what extent does WPEP actually provide a quality work experience? The above table (Table 3) represents 69 internship placements advertised through the WPEP, over a two-month period (from 26 August 2022 to 24 October 2022). Data was collected weekly on job offers, and the quality of these jobs was divided into skill levels based on a framework provided by the Central Statistics Office (CSO 2021). Table 3 shows that half of the jobs offered through

WPEP were in low skill areas that are hard to justify through a six-month placement. For instance, retail assistants in charity shops made up 11 of these low-skilled placements. There may be a case for this type of work experience for very inexperienced and poorly educated young people, but without significant training and support, a placement at this level is likely to be counterproductive. Also, without case workers controlling who has access to these types of low skilled jobs, jobs are more likely to go to the people who need them least, leading to high deadweight losses.

Semi-skilled jobs, such as hairdresser assistant, made up 30 per cent of placements (see Table 3). Skilled jobs, such as pay role clerk and digital marketing technician, made up 20 per cent of placements. Interestingly, there were no graduate positions on offer. This is in strong contrast to JobBridge where many graduates were able to use that scheme to fund their unpaid internship placements in prestigious careers (Arlow 2019, pp.88-89). In fact, they tended to be the people who gained most from JobBridge as the cost of their unpaid internship was transferred from the family to the state (*ibid.*). In the current climate, the fact that employers now need to compete for qualified staff in a growing Irish economy may mean that ALMPs are just not a practical or desirable option for graduates. So, despite WPEP being marketed as a chance for quality work experience, most of the job placements seem to be offering low skilled entry-level work. This dichotomy between intention and practice is a common feature of ALMPs within Europe, which are increasingly about building a successful narrative surrounding the policy rather than actually delivering a successful policy (Caswell 2020, pp. 24-25).

### **Comparison of Results**

After the closure of the JobBridge scheme, Arlow (2019, p.89) predicted that despite its flawed policy design features, Irish policymakers may use a similar policy again if faced with another economic crisis similar in scale to the Great Recession. Covid-19 was that crisis, and the DSP did repeat many of the policy decisions with WPEP that had prioritised open access for host organisations, minimal regulations, and no significant training elements. The ease of use (in terms of scalability) of the JobBridge model and its minimal running costs when compared to more social democratic activation measures make for a superficially attractive policy option during an employment crisis (*ibid.*). However, these types of low regulation ALMPs often fail to deliver real value to unemployed youth.



The Skills Development and Internship Programme (SDIP) was sabotaged by the existence of state-funded internships in the private sector through the Work Placement Programme (WPP) and Gradlink. This meant that a highly regulated and targeted scheme (which was limited to the under 35s) was ditched in favour of JobBridge, which was based on an unpaid internship model that emulated the structures of Gradlink. It would have made sense for policymakers to shut down the less regulated programmes before attempting to launch the SDIP, but this did not seem to be on the agenda. Instead, the DSP created JobBridge, which replicated the ‘open market internship’ model which Gradlink and the WPP had set as a precedent (O’Higgins and Pinedo 2018, p.5). Instead of being targeted at unemployed youth, and their specific needs, JobBridge was open to all the unemployed. WPEP replicated this pattern, preferring to once again use an ALMP model that emulated norms established by unpaid internships in the private sector. It also replicated JobBridge’s prevalence of low skilled jobs that are hard to justify as internship placements (see Table 3). However, it is likely that the jobs recovery in Ireland post-Covid has mitigated against the high deadweight losses and substitution rates that were a likely consequence of the JobBridge scheme.

The potential for high deadweight losses and substitution rates within JobBridge should not be surprising given the hands-off regulation employed by the Irish state. Obviously, there were financial constraints during the economy’s recovery from the Great Recession. But a FOI request shows that even the most rudimentary controls for job substitution in host organisation eligibility criteria, such as banning companies that had recently brought in redundancies from using the scheme, were being vetoed by Minister Joan Burton during the policy design stage of JobBridge (FOI 2018c).<sup>11</sup> This demonstrates how making JobBridge attractive to host organisations was a priority for policymakers, especially given the lack of host organisation interest in the Skills Development and Internship Programme (*ibid.*). Essentially, JobBridge was following the unpaid internship norms that policymakers had established with the WPP and Gradlink. Under these conditions, creating a scheme that involved light touch regulation, no formal training elements, and at no cost to host organisations, was the state essentially copying an ‘open market internship’

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<sup>11</sup> *Draft outline of the JobBridge Scheme*, 6 May 2011; Email from Assistant Secretary A (DSP) to Assistant Secretary B (DSP)- *note on Minister’s request to reduce host organisations eligibility criteria*, 6 May 2011.

framework that views the trade of labour for an ill-defined work experience to be a fair bargain (Discenna 2016, p.10).

In contrast to JobBridge and WPEP, the YESS scheme was actually targeted at unemployed youth, limiting entry to those under the age of 25. JobBridge was marketed at unemployed youth in its operating guidelines (DSP 2014, p.2), but it was open to all the unemployed, irrespective of age. In fact, only 25 per cent of its participants could actually be classified as unemployed youth (Indecon 2016, ii). This one-size-fits all model of labour activation tends to deliver undesirable outcomes, as citizens have specific needs based on differences like age, education level, and background (O’Higgins 2001, p.142). By targeting the most disadvantaged unemployed youth the YESS programme was focusing on those most in need of the state’s aid in seeking employment. Its high levels of regulation and host organisation cost contribution also meant that it was far less likely to damage the entry level jobs market than the WPEP or JobBridge schemes.

Both JobBridge and WPEP were instituted during periods of economic crisis, but how similar are they in terms of actual policy design? WPEP was originally designed to accommodate 10,000 places, which is 1,500 more than JobBridge at its height (DAT 2022). It was marketed by the DSP as a youth unemployment policy, and it was designed to replace YESS as the Department’s main support for unemployed youth (FOI 2022a).<sup>12</sup> But like JobBridge, it is actually open to all unemployed people between the ages of 18 to 65 (DAT 2022). Similar to JobBridge, it has an open-door policy for host organisations, with requirements merely limiting access to legally constituted companies that have registered with the state’s employment services agency, known as INTREO (DSP 2022). On-the-ground monitoring by case officers is limited to non-existent; it does not require host organisations to contribute to labour costs; and there are no obvious controls for substitution, deadweight losses or displacement (DSP 2022) However, the impact of job substitution is likely to be minimal because there is limited job scarcity in the current Irish economy and many sectors are experiencing labour shortages. Interestingly, the negative effects of ALMPs on the entry level jobs market may be lessened during periods of economic growth (OECD 2009), which means Ireland’s rate of 10.9 per cent youth unemployment by July 2022 may protect young people from the absence of regulations in the administration of WPEP (CSO 2022).

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<sup>12</sup> Public Employment Services Review and the development of WPEP, (FOI 2022a).

The reputational damage previously caused by JobBridge seems to be a serious concern for the Labour Market Advisory Council members when it came to providing recommendations for the design of WPEP. Council members urged the DSP to incorporate the aspects of YESS that attempted to aid ‘people distanced from the labour market’ and that the needs of disadvantaged youth should be considered within WPEP (FOI 2022a)<sup>13</sup>. However, unlike with YESS, there are no extra supports for disadvantaged youth in WPEP. The educational training is minimal, usually consisting of a nebulous module on ‘work experience’ (JobsIreland 2022). And Labour Council concerns for the quality of the work experience seem to have been completely ignored given the quality of the job placements that are on offer through the scheme (see Table 3).

The central hypothesis of this paper is that the prevalence of unpaid internships in the labour market has led to a decline in the quality and regulation of Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) targeted at unemployed youth in Ireland, as policymakers attempt to replicate private sector norms. For JobBridge and WPEP, it is clear that policymakers designed these lightly regulated labour activation measures by following patterns of employment established in ‘open market internships’ found in the private sector (O’Higgins and Pinedo 2018, p.3). In both cases, there was limited involvement of case workers, no stringent qualifying criteria for host organisations, no significant training, no certified education, and no real controls for job substitution. In the case of JobBridge, attempts to institute controls were being overruled by policymakers’ concern for host organisation eligibility. Also, the prevalence of low-skilled jobs available through WPEP shows a disregard for work experience quality and a tolerance for the potential of host organisations using the scheme to replace entry-level employment. And neither policy was designed in conjunction with trade unions, which is a factor in the success of most other ALMPs (O’Higgins 2001, p.150). Importantly, the SDIP was never formally launched due to the lack of host organisation interest, which was caused by the precedent of the open access internship model set by Gradlink and WPP.

So, for these three ALMPs (SDIP, JobBridge, and the WPEP), there is substantial evidence in support of the hypothesis. The causal mechanism – which involves policymakers making decisions influenced by workplace norms established through unpaid internships in the private sector – is clearly central to the policy design process of these activation measures. But the YESS

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<sup>13</sup> Public Employment Services Review and the development of WPEP, (FOI 2022a).

scheme represents a negative result for the hypothesis, as it is a return to a highly regulated ALMP which was specifically targeted at the most disadvantaged youth. It involved significant case worker support, which tried to match each individual YESS participant with the most suitable placement. This regulation provided natural countermeasures to host organisations using the scheme to subsidise their wage bill and limited entry to those who were believed to need it the most, which helps to mitigate against deadweight losses. Importantly, this policy was introduced during a period of economic stability, while the decisions to launch JobBridge and WPEP, as well as to cancel the SDIP, all occurred during crises. It is the need to be seen to respond to a crisis, even it is through ill-thought-out policy, that leads Irish policymakers to institute large activation schemes that replicate private sector norms, while economic stability lends itself to schemes limited to the most disadvantaged. This research finds that it is not a coincidence that during periods of economic crisis and job scarcity, Irish policymakers institute ALMPs that favour host organisations and resemble norms established in the informal sector of unpaid internships. Essentially, JobBridge and WPEP, were modelled on unpaid internships in which regulation is minimal and the work experience quality limited by the lack of structured education or formal certification. While YESS was small and innocuous, but with a lot of potential to help disadvantaged unemployed youth find meaningful work.

### **Conclusion: Activation as a flawed measure of youth unemployment policy success**

This research finds that Irish youth unemployment policy designed during periods of economic crisis tends to prioritise the needs of host organisations and mirror employment norms established through unpaid internships. Conversely, during periods of economic growth, Irish youth unemployment policy reverts to a more regulated model that protects the entry level jobs market and the interests of the unemployed. To what extent does the culture of unpaid internships influence the design of youth unemployment policies in the rest of Europe? While Ireland may have embraced a more liberalised system of social welfare provision compared to other Western European countries (McGann 2021; Murphy 2016), it seems reasonable to assume that unpaid internships are influencing youth unemployment policy design in other European countries. Research has shown that activation measures based on state-subsidised internships in the private sector have been introduced in the United Kingdom, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, France, and

Sweden, with varying degrees of success (see: Holford 2017; Kopečná, 2016; O’Higgins and Pinda 2018). This should prompt further research to determine if norms devised in the informal sector of unpaid internships are reducing the quality of youth unemployment policy across Europe.

Furthermore, this research concludes that the YESS scheme had the most potential for delivering value to the disadvantaged youth who most need state aid in securing employment. It is this ‘sheltered employment’ model – which is most regularly used to help people with disabilities (Dague 2012) – that policymakers should prioritise when designing policy on youth unemployment. Essentially, resources should be provided to the most disadvantaged and graduates left to enter the jobs market under their own initiative. The risk being that if the government attempts to aid graduates’ transition from education to work, they will just perpetuate the cycle of unpaid internships which transfers training costs away from industry and onto the individual or the state.

The Community Enterprise Scheme in Ireland provides a pre-existing example of sheltered employment that represents both a valuable service to the community (all jobs are in the voluntary and community sectors) and meaningful work to participants. Activation rates are low (at 25 per cent), but these small numbers actually represent big wins in difficult cases (DSP 2015, p.5). A focus on activation is necessary for effective policy evaluation but focusing on it as the sole measure of success leads to flawed policy outcomes and the potential for high deadweight losses. Importantly, the CE scheme provides an existing infrastructure of sheltered employment that could be re-tasked for unemployed youth. Only about 300 of the 20,000 CE places are reserved specifically for unemployed youth (DSP 2015, p.47). This should be expanded with places targeted at groups of youth with specific employment support needs, such as young offenders, Irish travellers, single parents, and recovering drug addicts. Ideally, bespoke programmes should be developed for each group; for instance, policy that works for young offenders may not be suitable for single parents. The priority should not be large catch-all policies, instead policies should focus on the needs of those unemployed young people who are most at risk of spending their lives on the margins of society (Betcherman et al 2007, p.63).

Finally, while in many European countries, including Ireland, there is a realistic possibility that unpaid internships are in breach of employment law (Feuerstein et al. 2017). It is extremely difficult for trade unions to find test cases on this issue because young people have rightly

recognised that a period working for free can be essential to building a successful career, especially in the middle-class professions (Perlin 2012, p. 125). These informal work practices benefit those people who have the most family resources (and connections) to support such unpaid work, with unpaid internships breaching any commonly understood liberal sense of equality of opportunity or any commitment to egalitarian outcomes. By emulating unpaid internship models in the policy design of ALMPs, the Irish state is implicitly normalising precarious work patterns in the jobs market. Similarly, scholars have noted how the British government's attempt to 'make work pay' through a 'universal credit' system, just further entrenched exploitative work practices by employers, such as zero hour contracts and low pay for migrant workers (Dean 2012, p.356) Therefore, in order to encourage a fairer workplace and to avoid the state further entrenching precarious work patterns, unpaid internships should be made explicitly illegal in European employment law and treated the same as breaches of minimum wage legislation.

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