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The Productivity of Unemployment and the Temporality of Employment-to-Come: Older Disadvantaged Job Seekers

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This article emerged from a research project conducted with older, disadvantaged job seekers living in social housing managed by Unison. Social housing tenants are among the most underprivileged members of society and commonly have high rates of unemployment. Unemployment, however, does not equate with inactivity. Unemployment policy in Australia is ingrained with expectations of mutual obligation and workfare: the unemployed are expected to be productive in exchange for income support. Primarily, this entails looking for work, skills development to improve job prospects, or being involved in alternative labour such as volunteering.

This project was developed through a partnership between the Unison Housing Research Lab and the Melbourne School of Graduate Education at The University of Melbourne. We explored social housing tenants' experiences of looking for work, and their engagement in education and the development of employable skills over the life course. We also investigated the daily lives of job seekers, their perspectives on current work and education opportunities, and their plans for the future. This involved in-depth interviewing on two occasions over a nine-month period with six tenants aged 53 and over who had been unemployed for 12 months or more and who were in receipt of the government job seeking welfare allowance.

Employment precarity was not a new phenomenon for the tenants; they had enduring experiences of unemployment, underemployment and low-paid insecure work. Nevertheless, being out of work did not equate with idleness. The tenants demonstrated 'productive unemployment' through job searching, engaging with job service agencies, participating in educational programs, as well as effectively offering free labour through volunteering and 'work-for-the-dole' schemes. Individual management of these conditions of compliance, however, did little to assist with securing employment – long-term or otherwise. Unemployment policy is based on the presumption of employment-to-come; yet, our study found that the reality for these older job seekers was that employment remained aspirational, despite their investment in, and perseverance with, the mechanisms designed to facilitate returning to work.

If you are interested in reading the full article, please contact: juliet.watson@rmit.edu.au