

Institution: University of Glasgow (UofG)		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 13 Architecture, Built Environment and Planning		
Title of case study: Welfare reform: social security, sanctions and employability support		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013–2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): (1) Sharon Wright (2) Alasdair Stewart	Role(s) (e.g. job title): (1) Professor of Social Policy (2) Research Associate	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: (1) 2013–present (2) 2014–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015–2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>UofG research finds that Universal Credit (the UK working age benefit) and benefit sanctions (removal of income to prompt job-seeking activities) have long-term harmful effects, which undermine their policy objectives. Through extensive engagement with policymakers, these findings have influenced policy changes to lessen their harms. From 2015 onwards, the research informed the UK Government's decisions to: (i) reduce the maximum benefit sanction from 3 years to 6 months; (ii) remove call charges for the national helpline. In Scotland, the research informed the introduction of: (iii) sanction-free employment services for long-term ill and disabled people; (iv) devolved Universal Credit 'flexibilities'. The reach of the research has been extended internationally through engagement with the OECD. The beneficiaries are over 8.5 million claimants who face reduced risk of poverty and destitution.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>2.1. Overview</p> <p>The impacts reported in this case study are based upon the first major study of Welfare Conditionality (sanctions, support and behaviour change) in the UK. An ESRC large grant was originally awarded over the period 2013–2018, subsequently extended until 2019. This funding supported fieldwork conducted between 2014–2017 in 11 sites, three in Scotland and eight in England. It consisted of 52 policymaker/influencer interviews, 27 practitioner focus groups (with a total of 156 participants) and 1,082 qualitative interviews (with 481 'users' over three waves).</p> <p>The University of York (Principal Investigator, Professor Peter Dwyer) was the hub for this collaborative project involving six universities, 13 researchers, two support staff and eight PhD students. At the University of Glasgow (UofG), Professor Sharon Wright (Co-I) led the multi-site research teams on Universal Credit, Jobseekers and Social Security in Scotland. Dr Alasdair Stewart worked within the disability (including mental health) and migrants research teams.</p> <p>2.2. Investigating the UK's benefit sanction system</p> <p>The project investigated whether the UK's 2012 benefit sanction system, reckoned by experts to be the second harshest in the world, was (a) effective; or (b) ethical. Outputs [3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6] found that benefit claimants experienced sanctions as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neither effective nor ethical in encouraging job entry or progression; • Far too harsh, triggered easily without warning and ramping-up quickly for unmanageably lengthy periods (e.g. up to three years or indefinitely); • Unjust and disproportionate to the 'offence' (e.g. immediate loss of one month's benefit for once missing a Jobcentre appointment); • Counterproductive, preventing effective job search; • A trigger for severe suffering, causing or worsening mental and physical health problems, poverty, debt, rent arrears, housing insecurity and risk of destitution; • Of minimal help in finding sustainable paid employment. <p>2.3. The Universal Credit work package</p> <p>The Universal Credit work package (led by Wright at the UofG) was the first independent study of how this globally-innovative policy affects claimants. Universal Credit fundamentally reforms</p>		

means-tested out-of-work benefits (e.g. for unemployed people, lone parents and disabled people) by combining them with earnings top-ups and payments for children and housing (for those who would previously have claimed Working Tax Credits). The research [3.3, 3.4] found many problems with the design and implementation of Universal Credit, including new financial risks that deepen and extend poverty, and increase the risk of destitution. For example:

- The unmanageably-high cost of the telephone support line, meaning claimants had to use their limited income on administration, instead of essentials like food;
- Long gaps without income (6-10 weeks) between applying for Universal Credit and receiving the first payment, caused by an increased number of waiting days (relative to the benefits it replaces) and new administrative burdens (e.g. evidencing long-standing rent levels);
- Inadequate benefit rates that include the housing element paid directly to claimants rather than transferred to landlords, as was previously the case (this increases the risk of rent arrears and eviction);
- Inadequate work allowances, which mean, contrary to the policy promise, claimants are often not financially better off in work.

Key messages for policy change were shared with policymakers via UofG-funded dissemination and engagement activities (led by Wright) in advance of the launch of the research findings in May 2016 [3.4, 3.5] and May 2018 [3.3, 3.6].

3. References to the research

3.1. Fletcher, D. R. and Wright, S. (2018) [A hand up or a slap down? Criminalising benefit claimants in Britain via strategies of surveillance, sanctions and deterrence](#). *Critical Social Policy*, 38(2), pp. 323–344. (doi:[10.1177/0261018317726622](#))

3.2. Dwyer, P. and Wright, S. (2014) [Universal credit, ubiquitous conditionality and its implications for social citizenship](#). *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 22(1), pp. 27–35. (doi:[10.1332/175982714X13875305151043](#)) [available on request from HEI]

3.3. Wright, S., Dwyer, P., Jones, K., McNeill, J., Scullion, L. and Stewart, A. B. R. (2018) [Final findings: Universal Credit](#). Project Report. Welfare Conditionality, York. [[PDF link](#)]

3.4. Wright, S., Dwyer, P., McNeill, J. and Stewart, A. B. R. (2016) [First wave findings: Universal Credit](#). Project Report. Welfare Conditionality, York. [[PDF link](#)]

3.5. Dwyer, P., Bright, J., Wright, S., Stewart, A. B. R., Fletcher, D. R., Flint, J. and Johnsen, S. (2016) [First wave findings: Overview: Social security in Scotland](#). Project Report. Welfare Conditionality, York. [[PDF link](#)]

3.6. Wright, S., Stewart, A. B. R. and Dwyer, P. (2018) [Final findings: social security in Scotland](#). Project Report. Welfare Conditionality. [[PDF link](#)]

3.7. Wright, S., Fletcher, D. R. and Stewart, A. (2020) [Punitive benefit sanctions, welfare conditionality and the social abuse of unemployed people in Britain: transforming claimants into offenders?](#) *Social Policy and Administration*, 54(2), pp. 278-294. (doi: [10.1111/spol.12577](#))

Evidence of research quality: Outputs [3.1] and [3.2] are published in esteemed international double-blind peer-reviewed journals, with both outputs in the top 5% of field weighted citations. Output [3.2] was also cited in the House of Commons in 2017. Outputs [3.3, 3.4] and [3.6] are original peer-reviewed reports from research funded by ESRC.

4. Details of the impact

4.1. Pathways to impact

Since 2015, through extensive dissemination activities (e.g. over 203 conference presentations and 148,551 [webpage](#) visits) and direct engagement with policymakers (e.g. John Griffiths AM, Jamie Hepburn MSP and Sandra White MSP), the underpinning research has generated three explicit citations in House of Commons debates; 27 formal responses to inquiries and consultations (e.g. the Work and Pensions Committee); 36 briefings to parliamentarians and 52 citations in official reports (confirmed by collated evidence [5A]). On the basis of the underpinning research, Professor Wright was appointed as an Expert Advisor to the Social Security Committee, Scottish Parliament (2016–2019). Through these channels, the research has provided evidence to inform policy at UK-level and in Scotland in the following ways:

4.2. Informing the UK-wide reduction of maximum benefit sanctions

In 2019, the underpinning research provided evidence to inform the UK Government's decision to reduce the maximum Universal Credit benefit sanction from 3 years to 6 months. The research report on Universal Credit [3.3] recommends that the length and severity of financial benefit sanctions should be reduced to ensure '*proportionality*' and '*human dignity*'. It concludes that, '*stringent sanctions [...] could be counterproductive in creating unnecessary barriers to paid work*'. On 9 May 2019, the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Amber Rudd, announced that the maximum sanction would be reduced from 3 years to 6 months. Rudd said: '*I want to ensure that the penalties for not meeting these conditions are proportionate, particularly for the most vulnerable [...] I will end financial sanctions for welfare claimants that last for three years. Such sanctions were rarely used but I believe they were counterproductive and ultimately undermined our goal of supporting people into work*' (confirmed by transcript [5B]).

Given the similarities between the research recommendations and the wording of Rudd's statement, a Freedom of Information request was made in order to establish a direct link between the two. The response [5C] states that, '*Following the initial Government response to the Work and Pensions Select Committee in their November 2018 report on Benefit Sanctions, we gave further consideration to the Committee's recommendation on higher-level sanctions. At this point the decision was made to amend this policy*'. The report in question [5D] directly cites the underpinning research on seven occasions (specifically in establishing evidence of the counterproductivity of sanctions). Despite the fact that the maximum sanction was rarely used, this decision has benefitted over 6.8 million claimants since December 2019 [5A], as the research [3.3] finds the *threat* of lengthy sanctions to be a trigger for severe suffering, linked to mental and physical health problems.

4.3. Informing the UK-wide removal of Universal Credit helpline call charges

In September 2017, Professor Sharon Wright (UofG) and Dr Lisa Scullion (University of Salford) gave evidence to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee (ELGCC), National Assembly of Wales, on the failings of Universal Credit. This included evidence on the unaffordable call costs for the helpline, which were as high as GBP0.55 per minute ([3.4] was the only research highlighting this issue at the time). As a direct result of their recommendation to remove call charges, John Griffiths AM, Chair of ELGCC, wrote to the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, David Gauke on 11 October 2017 [5E]. Although Gauke's official response to Griffiths' letter (dated 1 November 2017) dismissed concerns over the cost of the helpline, one week after Griffiths' letter (on 18 October 2017), in response to widespread criticism, Gauke announced that the helpline would be made free of charge. The ELGCC report [5F] states that, '*witnesses told us that a simple, but very helpful, action would be for the number to be made free [...] We strongly supported this suggestion, and are pleased that this change has been made.*'

A Freedom of Information request first obtained by the BBC [5G], established that in September 2017, 'live' helpline customers were on the phone for an average of 7min 20sec once their call was answered. Those waiting the average time for their call to be answered could have been paying up to GBP7.63 (with GBP3.59 of this spent before they had spoken to anyone). While this may seem like a relatively small amount, during the initial five-week wait for benefits, many claimants will have zero income, so these charges could push them into debt. In September

2017 alone, a total of 743,435 calls were made to both helplines (the 'full' and 'live' services), 624,980 of which were answered [5G]. The decision to make the helpline free of charge has benefitted a caseload of over 8.5 million Universal Credit claimants since December 2017 [5A], thus reducing the risks of extreme poverty and destitution by allowing claimants to use their limited income on essentials such as food, rent and energy bills.

4.4. The introduction of sanction-free employment services in Scotland

In 2016, UofG research provided evidence to inform the introduction of sanction-free devolved employment services (designed to help unemployed people with health problems back to work in Scotland). This benefitted 5,527 Work First Scotland and Work Able Scotland users (2017–2018) and an ongoing caseload of approximately 27,076 users of the GBP96m Fair Start Scotland programme from 2018 onwards (confirmed by collated evidence [5H]). On 8 September 2016, Wright presented research findings [3.4, 3.5] on the ineffectiveness and harmfulness of benefit sanctions to the Scottish Parliament. The next day, the then Convenor of the Social Security Committee, Sandra White, wrote to the UK Secretary of State for Work and Pensions at the time, Damian Green, quoting Wright's evidence to request an urgent review of the claimant conditionality and the sanction regime.

White subsequently lodged a Scottish Parliament Motion based upon the research findings [5I]. On 2 November 2016, in the Scottish Parliament Debate of the Motion, 10 MSPs (SNP, Labour and Conservative) made explicit use of UofG evidence [3.4, 3.5] attracting significant [media coverage](#). During the debate, the then Minister for Employability and Training, Jamie Hepburn, announced sanctions-free Scottish employment services, directly citing the influence of UofG research (confirmed by transcript [5J]). The next day (3 November 2016), Damian Green appeared at the Scottish Parliament Social Security Committee and was challenged repeatedly on sanctions by MSPs explicitly citing UofG research [3.4, 3.5]. During the session, Green confirmed that the Scottish Government would have power over conditionality and sanctions for employability programmes (confirmed by transcript [5K]).

4.5. The introduction of new 'Scottish flexibilities' for Universal Credit

The Scottish Parliament also negotiated new 'flexibilities' for the implementation of Universal Credit in Scotland. This means that, unlike the other parts of the UK, claimants in Scotland can choose to receive their Universal Credit payment fortnightly rather than monthly—and have the option of the housing element being paid directly to landlords, which can reduce the risks of rent arrears and evictions. This decision was directly informed by UofG research [3.5] (as outlined below), which was the only evidence at the time to identify how Universal Credit was failing in Scotland.

On 27 October 2015, Wright presented findings to Scottish Government civil servants, recommending defaulting to fortnightly (rather than monthly) payments and payment of the housing element to landlords as default. This was reiterated in the interim report [3.5], which was presented to Scottish Government officials (on 9 June 2016) and reinforced in a formal written response to the Scottish Parliament consultation on Social Security in Scotland (on 31 October 2016) [5L]. The then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Damian Green, was subsequently pushed by MSPs (directly citing the influence of UofG research) to expedite Universal Credit flexibilities in Scotland on 3 November 2016. He said, *'There is clearly evidence on both sides, but I will always make a commitment to looking at evidence.'* (confirmed by transcript [5K]). As a result of sustained pressure, new Scottish welfare powers were subsequently [announced](#) by the then Social Security Minister, Jeane Freeman, on 13 January 2017. Between October 2017 and the end of March 2020, a total of 147,000 new claimants who were offered took up one or both choices, enabling quicker access to essential income for food and bills (confirmed by report [5M])

4.6. International engagement

Wright presented the underpinning research findings to OECD economists on 1 February 2019. An OECD representative later confirmed that they had discussed the UofG research with the UK Treasury, who were already aware of the findings. A subsequent OECD Economic Survey of the UK [5N] directly cites the underpinning research [3.5] as evidence that punitive conditions discourage households with the greatest needs from applying for, or maintaining enrolment in,

Universal Credit. It notes that, *'Recognising these issues, the Government has abolished some sanctions, is reviewing others, and the share of Universal Credit recipients receiving sanctions has been declining since 2018.'* Notably, a subsequent Sanctions Statistics Briefing (2020), also cited by the OECD, found that the Universal Credit sanction rate reduced substantially between March 2018 and August 2019 from 8.5% to 2.3% (confirmed by collated evidence [5N]). This significant reduction in sanction rates correlates with the use of the underpinning research within the national policy arena, as outlined above.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[5A] Collated evidence: (i) briefing from the York Project Officer (confirms dissemination stats); (ii) email confirming website statistics; (iii) email confirming Universal Credit claimant numbers from December 2017 (over 8.5 million) and December 2019 (over 6.8 million) based upon analysis of official Government Statistics (as of October 2020) **[PDFs available]**.

[5B] Full Transcript of Amber Rudd's announcement (9 May 2019) **[PDF available]**.

[5C] Request for Information – ref: FOI2019/4169 (although the initial information requested was not held, additional information was provided outside the obligations of the Freedom of Information Act) **[PDF available]**.

[5D] Commons Work & Pensions Committee report on '[Benefit Sanctions](#)' (2018) (cites the Welfare Conditionality Project evidence 7 times, specifically with regards to gathering evidence of the counterproductive nature of benefit sanctions on p.13–14) **[PDF available]**.

[5E] Testimonial letter from John Griffiths AM (March 2019) (confirming direct action based upon Wright's evidence; Griffiths' subsequent letter to Gauke and Gauke's reply are hyperlinked on p.1) **[PDF available]**.

[5F] National Assembly for Wales, Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee 'Making the economy work for people on low incomes' (May 2018) **[PDF available]**.

[5G] Collated evidence: (i) BBC News article (13 November 2017); (ii) corresponding Request for Information – ref: FOI2019/25991 (confirms the figures used) **[PDFs available]**.

[5H] (i) Scotland's Devolved Employment Services – Work First Scotland & Work Able Scotland, 2018, Quarter 1 (confirms 5,527 figure used on p.6); (ii) Fair Start Scotland Reporting (confirms 27,076 figure; (iii) Fair Start Scotland Evaluation (2019) (confirms GBP96m figure) **[PDFs available]**.

[5I] Motion S5M-01360: Sandra White, Glasgow Kelvin, SNP (Date Lodged: 9 September 2016) signed by 22 MSPs across three parties, thereby triggering a parliamentary debate (September 2016) **[PDF available]**.

[5J] [Transcript of Meeting of Parliament](#) (November 2016) including the then Employment Minister's commitment to sanctions-free employment services (and reference to the underpinning research) (18.25–18.33) **[PDF available]**.

[5K] [Social Security Committee Official Report](#) (3 November 2016) with the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Damian Green, referencing UofG research on the topic of sanctions (e.g. on p.16, 25; quote p.26) (MSP Ruth Maguire welcomes the Secretary of State's guarantee that the Scottish Government will have power over conditionality and sanctions for employability programmes on p.23) **[PDF available]**.

[5L] Written Response to: Scottish Government 'A new future for social security: consultation on social security in Scotland' (31 October 2016) **[PDF available]**.

[5M] Universal Credit Scottish choices – management information to end March 2020 (confirms that a total of 147,000 new claimants have taken up one or both choices on p.2) **[PDF available]**.

[5N] Collated evidence: (i) OECD Economic Survey: United Kingdom (October 2020) (confirms quote in relation to the underpinning research on p.41); (ii) Webster, D. (2020), 'Briefing: Benefit Sanctions Statistics, February 2020', *Mimeo* (confirms statistics released by the DWP up to the end of April 2020) **[PDFs available]**.