

# What employability? Using the Capability Approach to unpack the idea of employability

Bussi Margherita<sup>1</sup>

*Working in progress – comments welcomed*

## Abstract

In the literature on individualised Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) less attention seems to have been paid to the quality and the extent of individualisation, which are both embedded in the concept of “employability”. On the one hand, taking into account the quality of employability policies means considering the objectives of the policies themselves; on the other hand, investigating how and to what extent individualisation is actually delivered calls for a deeper analysis of the implementation process, where employability is partially reinterpreted and adapted. With the aim of matching both perspectives, this paper elaborates three ideal-types of employability policies serving as an analytical tool. The contribution elaborates on relevant analytical dimensions of the well-known Work-First and Human Capital approach by using the Capability Approach (CA) perspective (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). The paper argues that the CA constitutes an added value for developing a new methodological tool of investigation because it: 1) identifies the underlying normative concept of employability against which quality can be assessed; 2) depicts the degree of individualisation actually implemented while going beyond a labour market-centred approach to ALMPs. This analytical tool is applied to the illustrative example of the Brussels Capital Region and its decentralised public employment offices.

## Introduction: activation and active labour market policies

In the last 15 years, several researches have investigated the impact of the shift towards a more active welfare state on the redefinition of labour market policies (Eichhorst et al., 2008, Lodemel and Trickey, 2000).

Researches dealing with supply side ALMPs mainly adopted a dualistic typology: on the one hand the welfare-to-work or work-first approach based on quick and cost-effective reintegration in the labour market (Peck and Theodore, 2000, Bruttel and Sol, 2006, Nicaise, 2002); on the other hand, a human capital oriented approach known for its emphasis on education and training for developing people’s capacity to go back to work.

In both typologies, the evaluation of employability policies is done looking at quantitative objectives (Lodemel and Trickey, 2000). However, these evaluative methods cannot fully address the quality and the extent of individualisation claimed by employability policies. In particular, they account for individual heterogeneity and needs from a labour market perspective, and aim at modifying behaviours to match labour market rules instead of answering to individual needs.

The process of individualisation of employability policies necessarily requires developing an idea of the “welfare subject” that informs institutional actions. If in the past social benefits were granted to an impersonal category of “deviant” people outside the system of production (the unemployed, the disabled...), in the active

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<sup>1</sup> European Trade Union Institute, Bd Roi Albert II, 5, 1210 Brussels [mbussi@etui.org](mailto:mbussi@etui.org) ; Université de Genève. This research benefited from the INT – Marie Curie «Eduwel » (2010-2013).

welfare state, interventions bring the individual back at the heart of the social action (Franssen, 2003). The question of the « welfare subject » - i.e. the ideas, concepts, anthropological and social features at the foundation of the conception of the beneficiary of public policies - is of crucial importance in the design and implementation of policies. Again, the two well-known typologies of WF and HC approaches provide interesting perspectives, but mostly on the expected outcomes of policies: a prompt return to the labour market or the development skills and addressing individual barriers to work (Lindsay et al. 2007).

Moreover, when analysing labour market policies under these perspectives, the way in which institutions and recipients are actually making use of the instruments available, the normative and social construction of the welfare subject and their translation into the idea of employability are less investigated.

Further, the literature on (social) policy implementation has highlighted that the implementation process is to be considered because policies can be fully, partially, correctly or wrongly implemented by decentralised authorities (Lipsky, 2010, Bonvin and Farvaque, 2006, Meyers et al., 1998). Divergence in implementation is likely to be amplified by the decentralisation of new social policies (Finn, 2000, Hamzaoui, 2003, Bonvin and Conter, 2006). Decentralisation aims at bringing public action closer to target population in order to better respond to (contextualised) needs and increase efficiency in service provisions.

To sum up, any analytical tool used to investigate the quality and the extent of individualisation embedded in employability policies should account for analysing the cognitive assumptions informing social problems while accounting for implementation processes.

The CA (Nussbaum and Sen 1993) is introduced here with the aim of providing an analytical tool to highlight the (socially constructed) idea of employability informing policy choices. It is argued that the CA provides an alternative methodological tool that helps identify the quality and the extent to which existing opportunities are actually made available to “activated” welfare recipients.

The CA is believed to account for the relationship between individuals and the institutional, social and environmental structure they act in, thus taking into account that the relation between individuals and the welfare state has dramatically changed (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2006).

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 shortly introduces the Capability Approach and elaborates the three ideal-types of employability; section 3 presents the Brussels case study and analyses it against the three ideal-types developed, the conclusions take stock of the advantages of the elaborated analytical tool.

## **Section 2 The Capability Approach as an analytical tool for investigating employability**

The CA stems from the dissatisfaction with measurements of human well-being on the level of subjective states and command over resources as concepts of well-being or (in)equality (Sen, 1979).

This means, for instance, that equality of (primary) resources is not enough to ensure that all people have the same opportunities to attain a certain level of effective well-

being and agency freedom. People need to have ‘conversion factors’ (Robeyns 2005)<sup>2</sup> that allow them to transform available resources into valuable doings and beings.

From a CA perspective, public institutions are meant to increase the space of capabilities and eliminate or, at least, reduce those barriers to the achievements of freedoms (enabling/empowering State) (Farvaque, 2002). This can be done, for instance, via the creation of “instrumental freedoms” that are freedoms which function as conversion factors of material and immaterial resources (Sen, 1999), such as access to income support, accessible social services, support economic growth which allow the achievement of valuable doings and beings (Farvaque, 2010).

Creating services or providing benefits and resources, which are usually scarce, involve regulations of access requirements and the definition of possible acceptable scenarios. Further, the definition of what kind of information is asked and used is embedded and shaped both by the social definition of the problem and the institutional environment.

In welfare programmes, welfare bureaucrats need to know what kind of information to collect in order to decide whether to grant benefits or provide a service. The information gathered in order to judge is called *informational basis of judgment in justice* by Sen (Sen, 1990).

The role played by the informational basis of judgement in justice is particularly important as it defines the factual territory of justice (Sen quoted in (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2005) and the scope of freedom of choice that is guaranteed to people as well as the way in which implementing actors will use these pieces of information.

### **Section 3 Three ideal types of employability**

The analytical grid below is drawn on the existing research on employability measures as well as on the suggested operationalization of the CA for individualised policies by Sirovatka (Sirovátka, 2007).

The grid focuses on the institutional capacity of delivering employability policies and highlights the relevant dimensions of the public policy action that distinguish the three approaches. The suggested dimensions try account for all useful elements identified by previous researches and the dimensions of analysis overlooked by the WF and HC approach which become relevant when applying the CA.

This tool is meant to provide a tool for analysing the underlying conceptualisation of employability (i.e. what informational basis of judgement in justice is adopted) of welfare programmes and the way in which this is implemented namely by looking at:

- 1) The *overall rationale* informing the programme/policy goal in order to identify which is the stated normative perspective adopted.
- 2) The *causes of unemployment* and the *conception of the welfare subject*, as well as to what extent individuals are born responsible. This helps understand how the target population is defined and what negative or positive reward is associated with it (Schneider and Ingram, 1993).
- 3) The *intervention model* and the *use of policy tools* and their (discretionary) use in the relationship with individuals. This stems from the idea that street-level bureaucrats

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<sup>2</sup> Robeyns (2005) provides some examples of conversion factors: personal conversion factors are the metabolism, sex, intelligence, etc; social conversion factors include public policies, power relations, gender roles, and discriminating practices, etc; while environmental conversion factors can be identified, for instance, with the geographical location or the infrastructure facilities.

tend to 'play' with the rules (Lipsky, 2010). Indeed, this has an impact on the way the approach to employability is implemented.

4) *The relationship with the market and with other relevant institutions.* This dimension sheds light on the involvement of other (social) actors and on the opportunity structure created. The opportunity structure from which a beneficiary can benefit does not only lie on individual's ability and resources but also on what the institutional environment is able to offer.

5) The *time perspective* is considered as fundamental from a capability perspective for two main reasons: 1) individuals might need time to be able to capitalise on their resources and skills 2) individuals might need to reverse their life and working choices (Anxo and Erhel, 2006).

Table 1: Three ideal-types of employability

EMPLOYABILITY POLICIES		OBJECTIVES AND PRINCIPLES		
	Work first	HCD	CA	
Rationale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitating quick return to the labour market</li> <li>• Lowering the number of benefit recipients</li> <li>• Strengthening individual responsibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving skills, health and personal development to increase economic return at individual and aggregate level</li> <li>• Promoting lifelong learning</li> <li>• Employability as an individual economic performance</li> <li>• Social inclusion equals labour market integration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving personal, professional and social integration</li> <li>• Promoting favourable and sustainable transitions considering needs and aspirations.</li> <li>• Targeting social justice objectives</li> </ul>	
Conception of the welfare subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of motivation, working ethics and meaningful working experience</li> <li>• Individualisation of macroeconomic problem</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of skills needed in the market or lack of recognised qualifications (skills-match)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multidimensionality of causes</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lays on individuals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In principle, responsibility is shared among individuals, institutions and the society in a regime of mutual obligations. Often reduced to emphasis of the entrepreneurial self.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibility shared among individuals, institutions and the society</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals maximise utility in the short term</li> <li>• Individuals as passive recipients of activation measure</li> <li>• Culture of poverty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maximising utility in the longer term and reaping economic returns from increased skills</li> <li>• Well-being freedom and no agency freedom.</li> <li>• Informed actor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Capability for work</i></li> <li>• “thick needs” and an elaborated conception of the good</li> <li>• Capable of practical reasoning</li> <li>• Intrinsic and instrumental role of work and of education</li> </ul>	
<b>INSTRUMENTS AND IMPLEMENTATION</b>				
Intervention model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short-term training and intense job search</li> <li>• Low cost intervention by unit, standardised practices</li> <li>• Focus on immediate activity</li> <li>• Clear and strict objectives</li> <li>• Strong conditionality of monetary benefits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal entitlements supporting long-term training integrated with other social services aiming at reaching economic integration</li> <li>• Individual job-coaching (job search and personal working development plan)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal and actual entitlements</li> <li>• Holistic approach to individual situation</li> <li>• Attention to people’s needs of work and life balance and (career) aspirations as well as competences</li> <li>• Sufficient amount and duration of benefits</li> <li>• Flexible arrangements</li> </ul>	

<b>Use of tools in relationship with individuals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extensive use of sanctions</li> <li>• Limited action plans and time for coaching</li> <li>• Low discretion and strongly standardised</li> <li>• Positive views about ICT and computerisation of practices</li> <li>• Paternalistic approach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust-related approach</li> <li>• Recipients are seen as “clients”</li> <li>• Use of ITC tools to monitor “objectively” individual performance</li> <li>• Promoting training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No actual use (or very limited) of sanction</li> <li>• Trust-related approach/partnership</li> <li>• Negotiated action plans <i>capability for voice</i></li> <li>• Action plans with reversible objectives</li> <li>• Providing beneficiaries with all possible information</li> </ul>
<b>Relationships with the demand side and Institutions involved</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No established or long-term collaborations</li> <li>• Strong top-down approach; objectives and performance-oriented management.</li> <li>• Financial top-ups to incentive job entry (make work pay)</li> <li>• Focused on short-term skills needs in the market</li> <li>• Regular market is preferred</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperation with other institutions</li> <li>• Trainings shaped according to market needs</li> <li>• Financial incentive to companies that guarantee on-the-job training or job coaching for people in training</li> <li>• Preference for regular market</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New partnerships so as to answer people’s training/social and personal needs</li> <li>• Limited constraints from top-down or internal performance targets.</li> <li>• Sheltered employment opportunities if necessary</li> <li>• Employers are often involved in providing access to professional or training activities</li> </ul>
<b>Time perspective</b>	Short time perspective	Medium to long time perspective	Time perspective depending on people’s needs and aspiration (forward looking)
<b>EMPLOYABILITY</b>	Market/functional employability	Fostering employability	Enabling employability

Source: own elaboration based on Sirovátka (2007), Lindsay et al( 2007), Theodore and Peck (2000), Pohl and Walther (2007),Dif-Pradalier et al( 2012), Dean et al.(2003), Becker 2009, Bruttel and Sol (2006)

### Section 3 The Brussels case study – what employability?

The French-speaking PES for the Brussels Capital Region (Actiris) is our case study. The grid is applied to 15 semi-structured interviews with street-level bureaucrats in five out of 18 decentralised Public Employment offices<sup>3</sup>.

The Brussels Capital Region shows a high degree of socio-economic diversity of its boroughs. The decentralisation of Public Employment Services is meant to increase the quality and the degree of proximity of welfare services and, as a result, their individualised approach<sup>4</sup>.

My fieldwork mobilised several methodologies. Firstly, I used documentary analysis to understand the main official viewpoints; secondly, I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with street-level bureaucrats working in five decentralised public employment offices.

Interviews were mainly focused on the guidance of young recipients. This group was chosen because youth is often pictured like being ‘unemployable’ and an ‘at-risk’ group (Serrano Pascual, 2004), this often is used to justify the emphasis on individualisation of the activation policies targeting this group.

#### *The Belgian and Brussels context*

1999 is often considered as the birth year of the Belgian Active Welfare State when the then Minister for Social Affairs, Frank Vandenbroucke, mentioned it in his speech as the objective of the social-democratic party at the government at that time<sup>5</sup>.

He argued that the reorganisation of the institutional answer to the emergence new social risk – such as ‘not being employable’ – should be developed via: 1) the individualisation and customisation of services; 2) targeting – which is supposed to increase efficiency; 3) and the steering ‘at a distance’ approach - meant to leave professionals adapt their work and use their competences while following the main centrally-imposed guidelines. Decentralisation (i.e. regionalisation) was put forward as a means to open the way to rapid investments, personalised intervention and local initiatives (Vandenbroucke, 1999). These suggestions were developed particularly with regards to youth, a group highly affected by unemployment at that time<sup>6</sup>.

At the federal level, individualised policies were draft already since 1993 with the introduction of the ‘*Plan pour l’accompagnement des chômeurs*’ coupled with stricter control (Oriane, 2005, Cockx et al., 2007). At the end of the 1990s, the Rosetta Plan addressed youth unemployment while making explicit for the first time the idea of mutual obligations both for young people, who might lose their benefits if they refuse

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<sup>3</sup> There currently are 18 decentralised offices of Actiris in the Brussels Capital Region, approximately one for each of the 19 municipalities in the Region. The interviews were conducted in 5 different PES: 1 (“small-size”) in a borough with a wealth index of 115% (2010) compared to the national mean and with an overall share of unemployed of 12%; 1 (“medium”) in a borough with a wealth index of 86% (2010) and with rate of unemployed 18.5% in 2012; 3 (“big”) in more disadvantaged municipalities with an index of wealth between 60 and 70 % of the country average and unemployment rates between 28.3 and 22.7% (2012). The wealth index and its methodology are available at <https://monitoringdesquartiers.irisnet.be/indicators/>

<sup>4</sup> CEREXHE, B. 2010. Etude de la satisfaction des clients d'ACTIRIS Intervention du Ministre Benoît CEREXHE.

<sup>5</sup> <http://oud.frankvandenbroucke.be/html/soc/ZT-991213.htm> , last accessed 6 March 2014

<sup>6</sup> Eurostat data show that in 1999 youth unemployment (15-24 years old) in the country hit 22.6%, the highest rate since 1986.

to take part in ‘integration pathways’, and employers who are obliged to hire young people (Nicaise, 2001).

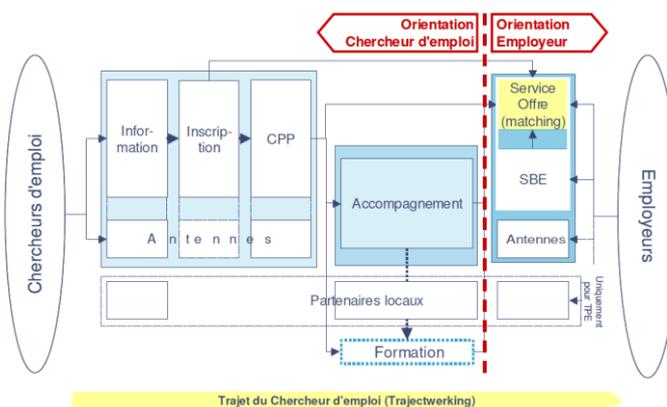
The Rosetta Plan opened the way to the federal ‘*Activation du comportement de recherche d’emploi*’ measure introduced in 2004 (Cockx et al., 2007). This federal plan aimed at reducing abnormally long unemployment spells by sanctioning passive behaviours. This was an answer to the critiques expressed by the OECD and the European Community on the unlimited – although highly digressive – unemployment benefits, considered as a trap to inactivity (OECD, 2013).

At the local level, the PES in Brussels concentrated its efforts in promoting job-search via job-search intensive programmes organised with local actors<sup>7</sup>. The most important change towards individualisation of the job-placement service for young people is the introduction in 2004 of the ‘*contrat de projet professionnel*’ (‘CPP’ in Figure 1), which formalised the use of a voluntary action plan between the job-seeker and the PES. Most of the pillars attributable to the Active Welfare State paradigm were promoted: mutual obligations, making people more autonomous and ready to enter the labour market while providing an individualised approach which was meant to be ‘respectful of individual choice and feasible.’<sup>8</sup>

In 2010, the ‘*contrat de projet professionnel*’ became compulsory for young people under 25 with at most upper secondary education. It changed its name into ‘*construction*’ in order to convey the idea that it was no longer an option for the young job-seekers.

In 2006, Actiris signed with the Regional Government the first contract clearly regulating the PES role, objectives and organisation. The contract established four main axes, particularly including the adoption of ‘a client approach’ and a ‘more efficient internal organisation’<sup>9</sup>.

**Figure 1: job-seekers path in Actiris**<sup>10</sup>



<sup>7</sup> OBSERVATOIRE BRUXELLOIS DU MARCHÉ DU TRAVAIL ET DES QUALIFICATIONS/ENIAC 2006. Inventaire des mesures d’aide à l’emploi en 2005. DOCUMENT RÉALISÉ DANS LE CADRE DU SUIVI DU PROGRAMME NATIONAL DE RÉFORME 2005-2008 (PNR). Brussels.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.actiris.be/apropos/tabid/259/language/fr-BE/Historique.aspx>

<sup>10</sup> GOUVERNEMENT DE LA RÉGION DE BRUXELLES-CAPITALE OFFICE RÉGIONAL BRUXELLOIS DE L’EMPLOI (ORBEM) 2006. Contrat de Gestion entre l’ORBEM et le Gouvernement de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale.

Figure 1 shows the integration path of job-seekers at the PES. There are two main phases: the first of guidance (e.g. job-search, special guidance, training) and the second of matching supply and demand. The ‘*accompagnement*’ (guidance) can be done either by outsourced partner institutions (private or public) or by some internal services in Actiris, although services internally provided are limited to job-search, counselling against discrimination or social guidance. Our interviews mainly concentrate on the job-counselling at the decentralised offices of Actiris where the ‘action plan’ (CPP) is agreed upon. It is clear from the figure that there is a great challenge of coordination within services and institutions. In several occasions, the job-seeker is likely to have multiple contacts with different institutions. Similarly, job-counsellors are likely to deal with several other institutions to coordinate a coherent individualised approach.

### *Work-first, Human Capital and the Capability Approach: differences and similarities among ideal-types*

This section goes through the main features of each ideal-type by comparing each dimension while applying it to the Brussels case-study.

It does so by using the analytical grid in order to unpack the idea of employability and investigate what individualisation is associated and if this is concretised both on the rationale and in its process dimension.

#### *The rationale*

The rationale can be imagined as composed of two focuses: a macro and a micro goal. The macro goal of Work First (WF) policies is reducing the number of recipients: it is an economic rationale that aims at coping with scarce human and financial resources available to social services. The micro economic focus is the prompt return of beneficiaries into the labour market (Peck and Theodore, 2000).

The Human Capital (HC) approach extends its macro objective and takes the personal perspective into consideration. From a macro perspective, the main objective is reducing the mismatch between skills supplied and demanded, while ensuring better and long lasting employment opportunities. This represents a step towards a more individualised conception of labour market outcomes because it includes an individual perspective on the economic and physical return (Becker, 2009).

Also the Capability Approach (CA) includes the development of skills as a central feature; however, at the individual level, skills acquired are not only useful for increasing job opportunities or accumulation of economic resources (functional aspects), but also *per se*, i.e. intrinsic value of education (Saito, 2003, Robeyns, 2006).

The CA adds some crucial dimensions to the HC: 1. it considers the process leading the accumulation of these resources by paying particular attention to those potential – social, environmental, institutional - barriers or facilitating factors that influence the process. 2. It also widens the idea of resources including “agency” freedom (i.e. the freedom of individuals to make realise choice they value), thus evolving from a resourcist approach to a freedom and agency perspective. 3. It includes a social justice perspective that accounts for diversity of individual needs for reaching valued functionings (achievements) and advocates for the democratic active participation of individuals both in public debates and decisions. At a macro perspective, the CA

extends its focus on social justice objectives aiming at an inter-individual equality of real opportunities and aim at social cohesion (Farvaque and Oliveau 2004).

The rationale behind the guidance of (young) job-seekers and of the reorganisation of Actiris is clearly stated for the first time in the contract of management (see above). Among other objectives, the goal is to create a structure closer and more responsive to local needs. As Galster et al. explain, this can be seen as an attempt to reconcile a federal and regional requests in terms of reductions of (youth) unemployment and better matching of the supply and demand in the context of local peculiarities (Galster et al., 2009), which are particularly marked in the region. A further goal was to rationalise services following the profiling of the job-seekers in order to offer different services according to the needs and attitudes of job-seekers and ensure a sustainable integration in the labour market<sup>11</sup>. In particular, the CPP is describe as a ‘voluntary commitment between parties [the job seeker and job-counsellor] respectful of job-seekers’ needs and choices as well as in line with the labour market reality<sup>12</sup>’. The prevailing official approach seems to suggest that the strategy is closer to a HC approach because it includes both an attention to individual’s choices and needs as well as labour market requirements. Nevertheless, the investigation showed that this rationale is rather nuanced as several elements, such as the complexity of the task and the organisational structure, challenge the rationale. Job-counsellors report lack of time for going into depth on real social and health problems of claimants. Moreover, the IT tool used for the guidance does not always allow including more qualitative aspects that can help to have a better understanding of the person’s situation. This is combined with a limited idea of sustainable job and job satisfaction (e.g. work and life balance):

« [...]conciliation vie familiale, vie professionnelle, on a l'impression que de plus en plus, quand on entend les discours maintenant, [...]on fait quand-même un retour en arrière vers un travail qui n'apporte pas un plus, de l'épanouissement, etc. et qui va devenir un job alimentaire»<sup>13</sup>

Further, it seems then that the full integration in the labour market of job-seekers is rather done by aiming at a quick integration in the labour market even though working contracts are precarious and do not answer to people’s need of stability, thus overlooking the personal needs but only concentrating on personal features responding to labour market requests (acquiring working experience). As stated by a job-counsellor:

« [...]Je leur dis: je sais bien que vous cherchez quelque chose de beaucoup plus stable, mais acceptez-le quand-même en 1<sup>o</sup> travail, car ça fait une expérience en plus, et voyez également si c'est le métier que vous voulez[...] »<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> OBSERVATOIRE BRUXELLOIS DU MARCHÉ DU TRAVAIL ET DES QUALIFICATIONS/ENIAC 2006. Inventaire des mesures d’aide à l’emploi en 2005. DOCUMENT RÉALISÉ DANS LE CADRE DU SUIVI DU PROGRAMME NATIONAL DE RÉFORME 2005-2008 (PNR). Brussels.

<sup>13</sup> Work and life balance, it seems that more and more, when we hear the official discourse now, [...] it is a return back to a job that does not provide you nothing more, no fulfilment, etc.. and will become a day job

<sup>14</sup> I tell them: I know you are looking for something more stable, but accept it anyway as a first job because it gives you some working experience, and you can also see if this is the job you want

### *The conception of the welfare subject*

Looking at the idea of the welfare subject reveals what informational basis of judgement in justice (IB) the policy and the street-level bureaucrats use to define young people and to decide their approach to them.

WF policies assume that individuals maximise their utility and are therefore victim of moral hazard as living on (generous) benefits can be economically more convenient than working. Beneficiaries are mainly seen as “recipients” of a policy measure and not really as participants.

In contrast, the HC approach conceives individuals as interested in maximising their employment opportunities in the long term via sound investments in skills development and training, in spite of the fact that the reward might not come immediately. A wider perspective on general well-being is necessary as skills development can take place when the general personal situation is positive. Furthermore, the person is still supposed to be informed on possible alternatives and think rationally of what skills are needed in the market and which opportunities are more economically rewarding than others.

With the overarching aim of guaranteeing equality of real opportunity, the CA adopts a life-perspective that respects the diversity of biographical situations. It argues that public actions can only genuinely back individual biographies by taking into account empirical individuals (and not hypothetical), with (self)-interpretations, motives, aspirations, but also emotional, practical, and cognitive competences (Ziegler, 2011). It also emphasises the importance of providing social, institutional and environmental conversion factors that support individual’s biographies.

These different approaches to the welfare subject differently shape the share of individual and public responsibility: from a WF perspective it is individuals who have to cater for their lack of competitiveness; from a HC and the CA the responsibility is shared between the individual and public institutions and the society. Going beyond even this positions, the CA stresses the importance to have recipients entitled to formal rights, equipped with enough resources and factors of conversion before considering them accountable for their choices (Salais, 2004).

The responsabilisation of the young claimant is not often mentioned by job-counsellors who prefer to talk about ‘making the person autonomous’. Autonomy is understood as a broad term and the lack of it is identified with a poor understanding of the rules, with low skills and working experience and with a lack of working ethics. Job-counsellor when evoking difficulties in acceding the labour market are mostly referring to the lack of personal competences and technical skills, which do not meet the demand side, an approach recalling the ‘thesis of the deficit’ (Rea et al., 2009). Further, difficulty of finding jobs is rarely contextualised by job-counsellors in the Brussels Regional labour market mostly characterised by high competition, lack of job positions for low-qualified and hiring discrimination (Martens et al., 2005). The focus on the supply side and the lack of contextualised judgement makes the informational basis of judgement of job-counsellors incomplete and biased. The de-contextualisation of the welfare subject from the institutional and socio-economic environment is emphasized by the lack of overview of job-counsellors of job offers actually available. The ‘matching service’ of Actiris -in charge of sending job offers to the registered unemployed- does not participate in the guidance and no direct contact is established with job-counsellors. This organisational gap limits the intervention of job-counsellors to the achievement of individual’s standardised goals

(e.g. increase their skills, improve their working attitudes, increase their autonomy) as most of their knowledge of the labour market is based on common perceptions rather than direct experience.

*Instruments and implementation: the intervention model – use of tools – relationship with the demand side and the institutions involved – time*

The use of sanction is one of the main differences distinguishing the WF approach from the HC and CA: sanctions are expected to be more often used in the first, namely due to stricter constraints and conditionality. The discretionary power of front-line agents is another fundamental element characterising these approaches: WF employability policies, due to their emphasis on economic performance, provide lower discretionary power to front-line agents who need to ensure a certain number of caseload treatment. Conversely, the HC and CA approaches should provide wider room for manoeuvre as they are expected to take into account aspirations, competences and interests, personal and social resources which are meant to help the person towards a training or employment or life project. However, a distinction can be drawn between the HC and CA approach: the latter is expected to create a more flexible and balanced relationship between the public/private provider and the recipients, who are free to express their voice and to actively shape their life/professional project and contribute to the process (i.e. capability for voice Bonvin and Farvaque 2005).

In our case study, after a first ‘factual’ profiling based on age and educational level, the action plan is drawn on further elements assessing the autonomy and the existence of a feasible personal project. This process is called ‘*Procédure d’objectivation*’ (‘factual profiling procedure’). The informational basis used by job-counsellors at the PES is limited to data that can be – potentially - objectively verified like the educational level and formal certified experiences. All potential obstacles to labour market integration need to be tackled by job-counsellors by guiding the person towards the most suitable external partners. However, there is often no direct contact with the external partners and the job-counsellor - who is supposed to have a privileged contact with the young unemployed - is not aware of the progress of the job-seeker. Due to the lack of information from the partners but also the lack of formal instruments for keeping track of other features of the person that the job-counsellor deems important for providing the right support to meet individual’s needs, the interviewees reported strategies to overcome these weaknesses of the system in order to account for individual needs<sup>15</sup>:

«[...] je garde un petit dossier avec le CV de la personne, je mets plus du qualitatif par rapport à... je sais que la personne a des difficultés de santé, ... [...] que la personne a 3 enfants, qu'il y a eu un décès dans la famille, des choses qui sont quand-même importantes pour que la personne sache qu'on s'intéresse à elle [...] »<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> There are clear indications on how many minutes are allocated for each type of interview. While all job-counsellors in all employment offices reported that there is a flexibility of 10 minutes, only those working in a low unemployment area declared that they can guarantee to see the person again for going more into details about their action plans. The huge workload in the other employment offices and the obligation of keeping up with calling in job-seekers for convocations seems to play an important role in reducing the capacity of guaranteeing a thorough follow up.

<sup>16</sup> *I keep a small folder with the CV of the person, I put more qualitative compared to ... I know that the person has health problems ... [...] that the person has 3 children, there was a death in the family, things that are nonetheless important for the person to know that we care for her*

Even if these informal strategies aimed at adding a more qualitative and holistic perspective to the guidance, they are taken over by the more stringent criteria of limiting the guidance to labour market aspects and aiming at achieving employment. The role of control and sanctioning in terms of financial benefits is still competence of the federal office. The direct type of sanctioning Actiris can exert is striking the unemployed off the register; this implies that the federal institution can call in the unemployed for justifying her unavailability in the labour market. Striking off job-seekers increased significantly since the introduction of the '*Activation du comportement de recherché d'emploi*' in 2004 (SPF EMPLOI, 2008). Nonetheless, while there are a number of radiations that is done automatically via the IT system because of no show-up, all job-counsellors report that they rarely radiate job-seekers for non-collaborative behaviour suggesting that they try to reduce the share of sanctions coming directly from their institution.

The discretionary power of job-counsellors is also shaped by the existence of management techniques (Brodkin, 2011). Since the new management board was appointed in 2011, the use of performance indicators has changed: job-counsellors are not individually judged on the – quantitative – aspects of their work<sup>17</sup>; it is rather the performance of the whole decentralised office which is monitored by the central level. This has reduced the pressure on job-counsellors coming from the central management while giving more freedom to middle managers to discretionary use these performance tools to organise their internal resources.

A limited use of direct sanctioning, a less punitive use of individual indicators and the emphasis on 'factual' information for assessing the unemployed indicate that a human capital approach is sought (see Table 1). An approach closer to the CA approach was found in the small PES where the pressure stemming from high diversity of claimants of the boroughs and the consequently amount of the workload is reduced (Scott, 1997). When comparing the working conditions of her previous working place in a disadvantaged borough with high rate of unemployment and poverty with her current position in a wealthy borough, a job-counsellor particularly pointed at the better knowledge of her work-field, more time to study job-seekers requests and go into depth during face-to-face while adapting the timing of interviews to individual's needs.

*The relationship with the labour market* also marks differences among approaches: WF tends to promote a complete adaptation of the workforce to labour demand requirements; the HC approach privileges the focus on training even if the kind of training that is suggested shaped on market's needs. From a CA perspective, the public action and public institutions should not only act on the supply side but also on the demand side, for example mediating with employers (formally or informally) whose requirements are inappropriate thus contributing to negative hiring practices.

In the Brussels case, the relationship with the labour market is rather weak at the level of job-counsellors. As explained above, the relationship with the service in charge of job-offers is limited, not formalised and rather negative. However, there are

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<sup>17</sup> Among other indicators, each job-counsellor is supposed to fill in 85% of her working time with actions that are registered in the IT interface. 15% of working time should be dedicated to internal meeting, coordination or informal exchange. Although office middle managers are supposed to justify whenever these objectives are not met, there are no direct economic sanctions. The consequences of a low

some strategies that job-counsellors and the ‘job-offer managing service’ put into place to overcome barriers set up by employers hindering the integration of young people in the labour market. At the central level, Actiris tries to mediate with employers who tend to set too high and strict requirements for low-skill jobs. They persuade the employer that this will lead to less profitable outcomes as medium-to-high qualified young job-seekers will tend to leave to find better jobs. Hence, while supporting employers’ needs, Actiris also tries to exert pressure on the demand side in order to adapt it – whenever possible – to job-seekers personal resources. At the local level job-counsellors try to inform job-seekers in the best way in order to empower them with the right instruments, ‘conversion factors’, for coping with discriminatory practices and misuse of contracts.

Concerning the creation of a functioning opportunity structure, we might expect that – from a CA perspective – the range of the institutions involved to be larger from a capability perspective, as several life aspects are supposed to be taken into consideration while providing an enlarged opportunity structure.

In Belgium and in particularly in Brussels, there is a strong presence of NGOs and private institutions operating in the field of life-long learning and social issues (Ouali and Rea, 1994). The structure of the guidance as well as the decentralisation called for an increasing collaboration of external partners for taking care of aspects which are no longer provided by Actiris itself. The decentralisation and its low formalised rules have provided room for manoeuvre to middle managers for looking for the right partners in the local contexts in the near boroughs and to job-counsellors to have a wider choice of alternative partners to propose to job-seekers. This flexible approach to partnership seems to answer to a CA approach to partnership – where the situated judgment over the job-seekers leads to the creation of ad-hoc solutions. Moreover, there is no obligation of collaborating only with partners with an agreement with Actiris, which allows looking for the most appropriate partners. Despite this flexibility, the freedom of working with partnership at the local level is limited by the lack of control over financial means by decentralised offices. Moreover, the limited availability of training options and the lack of places highly reduce the impact of a well-functioning opportunity structure: formal entitlements to training and guidance become broken promises. The scarcity of real opportunities for young people is translated into long waiting lists and increased risks of long term unemployment reduce the potential impact of a CA-approach to the demand side.

Finally, there are two *dimensions of time* to consider when analysing employability programmes: a first one deals with the reversibility of the actions taken, the second one refers to the time-frame within the action plan and its measures are scheduled. WF approach privileges a prompt integration in the labour market, this means that the time perspective adopted is necessarily short and limited and there is no time enough for revising medium/long term action plans. The HC embraces a medium to long time perspective mainly in line with the time-frame needed for acquiring new skills and competences. The CA promotes broader projects that might touch upon other aspects (health, education, socialization) that need different time horizons as well as the possibility of reversing the order of steps. The reversibility of life and professional plans is particularly relevant when the social situation is instable. The possibility to change and modify plans goes with the ‘capability for voice’: the formal or informal actual opportunity that the person has to be “incorporated into the judgement that local actors operate” (Bonvin and Farvaque 2005).

In our case study, the reversibility of the action plan is confirmed by most of the job-counsellors. Although there should be a progression from basic training towards an autonomous job-search, young people often are allowed to start with a reverse order: starting with a more autonomous approach to job-search and then going back to training if deemed necessary to find a job. This allows certain flexibility to job-seekers to decide their action plans according to their perceived immediate needs while having the opportunity to modify their decisions. The reversibility of the action plan is also exploited by job-counsellors who find it useful to let the young person cope with the labour market in order to learn the basic rules and requests. Although this might suggest a paternalistic approach coupled with idea of pushing the unemployed to ‘work on herself’ (Orienne, 2006), this helps job-counsellors to leave the communication with the young person open while respecting – at least at an early stage – personal aspirations.

Official guidelines for job-counsellors clearly state that action plans can include a long-term or a short-term objective. The long-term objective often involved specialised training or basic training. It is interesting to note that only qualifying training is considered an objective which exempts job-seekers from finding a job. Conversely, training courses for learning a second language<sup>18</sup> are often proposed – almost imposed – but these courses and no-qualifying training do not have the priority over short-term work-oriented projects or short-term job offers. Hence, attending classes is not considered as an acceptable motive for not showing up at convocation at the PES.

## Conclusions

It can be said that the WF approach aims at reaching “*functional employability*”: meaning an employability that is meant to ensure a return to the labour market – put it a bit bluntly - no matter in what way. Individual employability is thus functional either to respond to market needs either to help public organisations to comply with their performance objectives. The HC approach would instead promote a “*fostering employability*” meaning that it aims at providing people with basic resources (training, skills) that are meant to increase people chances to improve their job and employment positions. The CA is targeting an “*enabling employability*”, this means that the public institutions involved in the delivery of employability policies will provide both resources and factors of conversion (thus create the social, and environmental arrangements) that make the set of opportunities available to individuals valuable and possible. Individuals would then be able to make the choices they value.

Using the CA as a yardstick for evaluating employability policies helped underlining differences of “rationale and implementation” across approaches that might be overlooked in outcome-oriented evaluations.

Firstly, re-focusing individualisation back to an individual’s perspective goes beyond the instrumental idea of individualisation of policies as an effective policy design to reach more and better results at the aggregate level (e.g. more people into employment).

Secondly reflecting on how resources, instruments and relationships among relevant actors are implementing gives a wider evaluative perspective on how public action actually contributes to enhancing the opportunity structure.

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<sup>18</sup> Dutch courses are often offered to job-seekers by the PES. Language skills are particularly important in the Brussels Capital Region as most of the job offers also require at least some notions of Dutch, the second official language of the Region.

Moreover, the CA is not an explanatory theory of equality and welfare, but rather an evaluative framework of different policies and institutional arrangements (Verd and López, 2011), then the analytical grid might also serve as a policy developer tool that accompanies the design of welfare to work policies.

In most of the dimensions investigated, the Brussels case study suggests that a 'fostering employability' prevails in official discourses and at the implementation level. Some strategies closer to a CA approach are informally adopted by street-level bureaucrats. Factors hindering the capacity of creating a genuine opportunity structure seem to come from: internal organisational obstacles (lack of communication between complementary services, ill-functioning IT tools, and high workload); a limited informational basis used for assessing people and lack of real opportunities of training and in the labour market.

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