

York professor leads fightback against Universal Credit



By [Oscar Bentley](#), Editor (2018)
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Image: JJ Ellison

Professor Peter Dwyer of the University of York's Department of Social Policy and Social Work has led calls from some 114 academics for major changes to the Government's controversial Universal Credit benefit.

Professor Dwyer, who has been involved in the UK's largest research study into the benefit through the ESRC funded [Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support, and Behaviour Change](#) project, was one of three key signatories, along with Dr Michael Orton of the University of Warwick and Dr Sharon Wright of the University of Glasgow, of a letter to the Daily Telegraph which widely criticises Universal Credit for failing to deliver on promises to make work pay.

The letter examines the effects of Universal Credit not being paid for at least six weeks, tipping those who rely on it into debt and rent arrears. It also outlines how a reduction from six to four weeks for payment would not be much of an improvement either, as this is unlikely to avoid missed monthly rent payments, which not only impacts on claimants and tenants but also has a significant effect on landlords. The letter also notes how discretionary advance payment loans to claimants experiencing financial difficulties do not solve the problem, as they add unnecessary complexity and fail to address any ongoing financial problems. Claimants can apply for a loan of up to 50 per cent of the value of their first payment, however it begins to be deducted immediately from claimants' payments, potentially leaving them constantly in debt.

Universal Credit was introduced in 2013, designed to roll six means tested benefits into one, which was intended to smooth out the bumps between being in work and unemployment at the low end of the flexible labour market. However, Professor Dwyer summarised to *Nouse* how Universal Credit "redefines welfare dependency", and is fundamentally flawed in combining in and out of work benefits.

Professor Dwyer outlined how teething problems for the benefit have caused major complications, due to its nature of fundamentally changing the complicated benefits system. He noted how claimants are made to sign a 'claimant commitment' that matches them with a jobs coach who can set targets, such as searching for a job for up to 37.5 hours a week and applying for a certain number of jobs, which if claimants cannot fulfil they can be sanctioned up to 100 per cent of their benefit. The key point made by Professor Dwyer was that this system locates the causes and solutions for worklessness at the level of the individual, rather than a societal lack of jobs, and in his view unfairly added conditionality to claiming the benefit.

Another key aspect outlined in the letter was Universal Credit's effect on those who are already employed. Professor Dwyer explained to *Nouse* how the benefit seems to unfairly penalise those already in work. Jobs coaches can cause them to look for work for the amount of time they are working under 37.5 hours a week at the National Living Wage, and can sanction them for failing to do so. Crucially, the benefit seems to place emphasis on maximum work, rather than looking at benefits as a way of assisting those who are in work.

Professor Dwyer commented: "While it is good to see the government addressing some of the issues around the implementation of Universal Credit, such as getting rid of the premium rate cost of the support helpline and possibly reducing the six week wait for the first Universal Credit payment, which is expected to be announced in this week's Budget, a more fundamental review of Universal Credit and particularly the welfare conditionality at its heart will be necessary if the benefits system is to deliver real social security in the future."



One comment

Ian

26 Nov '17 at 7:50 pm

The words "premium rate cost" do not apply to DWP helplines.

DWP changed their premium rate 0845 lines over to inclusive 0345 numbers on 17 March 2014. Calls are inclusive in allowances on landlines and mobiles otherwise cost the same as calling 01 and 02 numbers.

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