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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MATTHEW? EXCLUDED GROUPS, CUMULATIVE DISADVANTAGE AND LABOUR MARKET INTERVENTION

Silvana CRIVOI¹, Maria Denisa VASILESCU², Mike TITTERTON³

Abstract

Active labour market policies (ALMPs) are intended to reduce the uncertainty in labour markets for the most vulnerable groups through the improvement of skills. Further, this is expected to promote economic and social inclusion. However, research on the topic remains sparse and evidence suggests access biases in these interventions for the most vulnerable people. While Romania forms the focus of our inquiry, the wider lessons for Central Europe and other countries are considered. Our paper contributes to research on cumulative disadvantages on ALMPs provided by public employment services (PES) to improve access and participation in activation interventions. Between February and April 2024, we undertook 38 interviews with occupational and social work professionals designated as “experts” in public institutions in Romania. Our results confirm the existence of cumulative disadvantages in access to training and counselling provided by PES for three categories of people affected by unemployment. The low-skilled, the poorest and the extremely marginalised (the “invisible”) are confronted by specific mechanisms of cumulative disadvantages that impede them from participating in ALMPs. We also identify best practices for enhancing access to these interventions and promoting social inclusion more broadly. The originality of the paper lies in its examination of the topic from the perspective of experts as sources of critical opinion on policy issues. Further research could focus on producing complementary data on the topic.

Keywords: unemployed people, Matthew effect, cumulative disadvantages, active labour market policies, ALMPs access bias, interviews with experts.

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Introduction

Active labour market policies (ALMPs) pursued by EU Member States are expected to reduce the uncertainty in the labour market among the most vulnerable groups, especially through the continual improvement of skills. Member States are investing different amounts in these interventions. On average, in 2020, they dedicated almost 3% of their GDPs to labour market policies-related expenditure, with Romania being the country with the smallest expenditure (approx. 0,1% of GDP) (Eurostat, 2025). However, the effectiveness of ALMPs depends not only on public financial investment but also on individuals' participation in these programmes. While Denmark has over half (55%) of persons waiting to work receiving activation support, Romania, Bulgaria, Latvia, Estonia and the United Kingdom have less than 5% of persons waiting to work participating in ALMPs in 2015 (European Commission, n.d.). Moreover, research on the topic (Auer, & Fossati, 2020; Bonoli, & Liechti, 2018; Im, & Shin, 2022; Pisoni, 2018) indicates the presence of inequalities in participation among social groups, which affect the results of these interventions.

Various theoretical perspectives have been used to explain why unemployed individuals do not benefit equally from labour market activation programmes. Among the most relevant approaches are theories of cumulative disadvantage, the Matthew effects, or categorical inequalities. Cumulative disadvantage refers to mechanisms through which initial deprivation becomes a barrier to further gains (DiPrete, & Eirich, 2006). This mechanism may further give rise to Matthew effects, a concept that describes situations in which initial advantages tend to generate further advantages, while initial disadvantages develop into further losses, thereby widening inequalities between social groups (Bask, & Bask, 2015). The Matthew effect, initially used interchangeably with the concept of cumulative (dis)advantage, was inspired by the Gospel of Matthew (13:12) and first coined by Robert Merton (1968a; 1968b) in the field of the science studies. According to Merton, the Matthew effect is a cumulative advantage that operates in social systems, resulting in "the rich get richer at a rate that makes the poor become relatively poorer" (1968a, p. 7). Research regarding on cumulative disadvantages and Matthew effect on ALMPs (especially those provided by PES) remains relatively scarce (Auer, & Fossati, 2020; Bonoli, & Liechti, 2018; Im, & Shin, 2022; Pisoni, 2018). Those affected by access inequalities include low-educated people, long-term unemployed and ethnic minorities.

Categorical inequalities refer to "inequalities in advantages among human beings... [because of] categorical differences such as black/white, male/female, citizen/foreigner, or Muslim/Jew rather than to individual differences in attributes, propensity or performances" and they explain the long-lasting social inequalities (Tilly, 1998). The theory was used by Parsland (2024) to explore how ethnic groups and the "general unemployed" are activated through different interventions that benefit from unequal resources.

In our research, we apply a theoretical perspective that allows for the deployment of two complementary concepts, namely cumulative disadvantages and the Matthew effect, to explore the differences in access to and participation in labour market interventions. This theoretical perspective was selected due to its initial appropriateness with the data collected. The mix of the two theoretical perspective is a novel aspect of our article since – to the best of our knowledge – it hasn't been used to study Romanian unemployed.

The present research is part of a larger study on challenges for labour market inclusion among Romanian unemployed individuals. This paper focuses on biases related to ALMPs provided by public employment services (PES) and it aims to contribute to the body of research on the topic from the theoretical perspective of cumulative (dis)advantages, via the lens of and Matthew effects on ALMPs provided by public employment services (PES). By looking at access biases on counselling and training, we seek to answer two research questions: (RQ1) Are cumulative disadvantages present in participation in Romanian active labour market interventions? If so, who are the disadvantaged groups? (RQ2) What mechanisms explain the stratified participation of unemployed people in ALM interventions? We aim to contribute to the improvement of access and participation in activation policies. To this end, we employed qualitative research consisting of interviews with respondents designated as “experts” in occupation and social work in public institutions. Data was collected between February and April 2024. While Romania forms the focus of our inquiry, the wider lessons for Central Europe and other countries are considered.

The paper comprises, first, a section in which is described the previous research on cumulative (dis)advantages and Matthew effects on ALMPs; second, a section that provides the methodological background of the research; and third, a results section setting out the main findings, with a concluding section drawing out the implications of the research.

Cumulative disadvantages

Cumulative advantages are mechanisms “for inequality across any temporal process (e.g., life course, family generations) in which a favourable relative position becomes a resource that produces further relative gains” (DiPrete, & Eirich, 2006). The concept was used in relation to multiple aspects of social life. For example, Crystal and Shea (1990) operated with the cumulative advantage/disadvantage model to explain the inequality among older people: the stratification of well-being among retirees is explained by pre-retirement inequalities, such as economic and educational stratification, and health status. In other words, cumulative disadvantages can be defined as mechanisms through which initial disadvantages (e.g. low educational status, low income) become a barrier to further gains.

According to Merton, the Matthew effect represents a cumulative advantage or conversely disadvantage, which have multiplicative impacts in social systems and value sets (Merton, 1968b). In his paper on the sociology of science, Merton went on to observe that two scientists who made the same contribution to science received different credit based on their previous recognition in the scientific community, thus reinforcing the stratification of honour and esteem scientists receive. Rigney defined the Matthew effect as a process or mechanism that perpetuates or even amplifies the initial social inequalities and considers that the study of social stratification requires the understanding of these mechanisms (2010, p. 2). The author investigated the Matthew effect in different social systems (e.g. economy, politics, education and culture), including public policy.

Cumulative (dis)advantage is an intra-individual micro-level phenomenon, consisting of people accumulating advantages or disadvantages in the social system based on their previous socio-economic status, thus being an individual trajectory. While it may be the case that disparities can exist between vulnerable and the least vulnerable categories, nevertheless the Matthew effect, or Matthew mechanism, can usefully be considered an inter-individual macro-level process, resulting in increased inequality.

Cumulative (dis)advantages in ALMPs

The few papers that studied Matthew effects and/or cumulative (dis)advantages on ALMPs, especially on interventions provided by PES focused on training, job creation programmes, and job subsidies (Bonoli, & Liechti, 2018), upskilling measures (courses and training that relate to professional development) versus parking measures (upskilling rather than in parking measures) (Auer, & Fossati, 2020), training programmes and hiring subsidies (Benda *et al.*, 2019), vocational education and training (Pisoni, 2018), training provided by public employment services (Im, & Shin, 2022), multiple ALMPs (Bråthen, Wel, & Løyland, 2020), participation in lifelong learning including on-the-job training (Nordheim, & Huijts, 2023).

Table 1. Specific groups studied in relation to the Matthew effect in ALMPs

Specific groups	Authors
low-skilled individuals / low-educated workers	(Bonoli, & Liechti, 2018; Benda, Koster, & van Der Veen, 2019; Im, & Shin, 2022; Nordheim, & Huijts, 2023)
migrant people	(Auer, & Fossati, 2020; Bonoli, & Liechti, 2018)
young people	(Pisoni, 2018)
people with mental health issues	(Bråthen, Wel, & Løyland, 2020)

Source: authors.

In Table 1 specific groups studied in relation to the Matthew effect in ALMPs are presented; these include marginal groupings distinguished either in terms of socio-economic or demographic differences or by belonging to a category with distinctive health characteristics.

Bonoli and Liechti (2018) tested the Matthew effects on low-skilled individuals and immigrant people on three ALMPs: training, job creation programmes and job subsidies. The authors employed a systematic review that included 87 evaluations of ALMPs in 14 counties, evaluations published between 1998 and 2013. Migrants are under-represented in all three ALMPs, while low-skilled individuals are under-represented in job subsidies and training only. Positive biases in favour of these two populations were also identified. However, when looking deeper into the connection between access bias and the effectiveness of programmes, the authors concluded that “disadvantaged unemployed people are less likely to participate in programmes that are effective” (2018, p. 907), either because they are attributed to less ambitious interventions, or because the interventions they are attributed to have less-impressive results as a consequence of the increased distance of these individuals from the labour market (reversed causality). The authors also distinguished between welfare state regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990), with conservative regimes found to be more prone to negative labour market biases against low-skilled individuals and immigrants compared to social democratic regimes.

To explain the Matthew effect on active labour market interventions, Bonoli *et al.* (2017) and Bonoli and Liechti (2018) distinguished between two stages of access to active labour market interventions - eligibility and inclusion - each with their specific criteria for job seekers. The eligibility stage consists of formal criteria to access public interventions and is expected to generate a positive bias for disadvantaged people as the main target of public interventions. Inclusion refers to additional criteria that could limit access to ALM interventions for some categories. The mechanism of these additional limitative access criteria relies on the creaming strategy applied by the gatekeepers. Under the imperative of institutional financial efficiency and high targets, job centre caseworkers engage in the process of labour market anticipation and they select the unemployed people most close to the labour market. Since participation in ALM interventions requires a minimum of cognitive and social skills, the lowest-skilled individuals have the lowest chances of benefiting from these interventions.

Table 2. Data and methods used in the papers on cumulative (dis)advantage and Matthew effects on ALMPs participation

Data and method	Authors
Systematic review that included 87 evaluations of ALMPs in 14 counties, evaluations published between 1998 and 2013.	(Bonoli, & Liechti, 2018)
Longitudinal analysis of administrative data of all newly unemployed individuals in Switzerland (2010-2012): each individual was followed for a maximum of 24 months, until the transition into employment or the exit from the registry.	(Auer, & Fossati 2020; Bonoli, & Liechti, 2018)
Multi-level data: micro-level data from the fifth wave (2010) of the European Social Survey combined with macro-level data on labour market policies of the OECD.	(Benda, Koster, & van Der Veen, 2019)
Microdata from the Finnish Income Distribution Survey (2007-2012)	(Im, & Shin, 2022)
In-depth case studies (60 semi-directive interviews with politico-administrative actors, street-level bureaucrats, 18-25-year-old recipients, and other members of the organisation combined with document analysis)	(Pisoni, 2018)
Data on a cohort of a long-term (more than 6 months) recipients of social assistance benefits; data collected between 2004-2009	(Bråthen, Wel, & Løyland, 2020)
Multi-level data: micro-level data on skills level from Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) that includes nationally representative samples of around 250,000 individuals, aged 15-55 years old, from 31 OECD countries, data collected between 2011-2015 combined with macro-level data on social expenditures from the OECD Social Expenditure Database	(Nordheim and Huijts, 2023)

Source: authors.

Table 2 presents a description of data and methods used in the papers on cumulative (dis)advantage and Matthew effects on ALMP participation.

Auer and Fossati (2020) explain the cumulative advantages using the distinction between *compensation* vs *competition logic* in the allocation of unemployed people to the ALM interventions. While the *compensation logic* aspires to fill through training the skills lacunas of the unemployed to further prevent the maintenance of the labour market disadvantages, thus focusing on the least employable, the *competition logic* aspires to “optimise reinsertion statistics” and “reduce welfare

costs” (p. 2). The second perspective encourages the creaming strategy; jobseekers are subject to a strict evaluation based on the perceived social distance between their sociocultural characteristics and the anticipated expectations of the labour market and those with higher employability are allocated to efficient upskilling measures, while those with lower (perceived) employability are assigned to less efficient, “parking” programmes. The authors also tested whether people with lower (perceived) employability have fewer chances to participate in more efficient, upskilling measures compared to individuals with higher (perceived) employability in Switzerland. The results indicated that job centre workers apply a competition logic when allocating the jobseekers to interventions, with the lowest-skilled individuals, such as immigrants, being designated to the least-efficient programs.

Bråthen, Wel, & Løyland (2020) studied the probability of participation in ALMPs for the recipients of social assistance benefits who also had mental health issues in Finland. Results indicate that the participation in ALMPs in general indicated no significant differences between people without and people with mental health problems (70% and 66% respectively). However, the participation on a specific programme consisting of practice in workplace through employment incentives was significantly lower for people with psychological distress (26%) compared to people who do not experience these issues (36%).

Pisoni (2018) examined the access to apprenticeship and VET for the most disadvantaged youth in Switzerland. The author identifies two types of mechanisms that result in a Matthew effect. The eligibility criteria for access to VET put a strong emphasis on the indicators of the chances of activation of participants: in a selective market such as the Swiss apprenticeship market, in order to participate in VET young people must find themselves the training (for programmes financed by the cantonal authority), or they have to prove they are motivated enough to attend and finish the training (for programmes financed by the federal government). In both cases, a creaming effect is in evidence, with less disadvantaged youth having the best chances of participating in VET. For programmes financed by the cantonal authority, a second bias occurs. Because the financing of these programmes depends on political support, their effectiveness is a priority so a strong creaming process manifests with the most disadvantaged youth (with housing problems, low family support, health issues) being rejected from VET participation.

Im and Shin (2022) considered biases in participating in training provided by PES against low-educated Finnish. The findings indicated that unemployed people with vocational training, who are the most stable on the labour market (because of the good match between vocational training in Finland and demanded skills on the labour market), benefit disproportionately more from training compared to upper secondary and primary educated. The results also indicate that while participation in training is influenced by the regional unemployment rate and GDP, the differences in training availability do not influence the participation of the lower educated, who are under-represented regardless of the training availability.

Nordheim and Huijts (2023) took a broader perspective and looked at disparities in labour market participation, internet use, health status and access to on-the-job training among employed individuals based on the level of education in several OECD countries. The results revealed that low educated individuals have poorer access to on-the-job training comparative to more educated individuals.

In line with the distinction between cumulative disadvantage and the Matthew mechanism made by Bask and Bask (2015) and Benda *et al.* (2019) examined the macro-level consequences of the micro-level biases in active labour market policies, such as creaming practices, problematic access to ALMPs, and unequal benefits of programmes' participation. More specifically, the authors tested how, in times of economic crisis, unemployment risk differs among the lesser educated compared to the higher educated depending on ALMPs intensity and spending level, focusing on training programmes and hiring subsidies. The results indicated that the above-mentioned biases do not transfer at the macro-level as Matthew effects, providing evidence that interventions dedicated to reducing the skills gaps favoured the employment stability for the less-educated during the economic downturn.

In brief, access to ALMPs involves multiple stages, each with its own criteria. If typically (however, not in all countries; see Pisoni, 2018), the formal criteria should create a positive bias for the most disadvantaged, the subsequent stages are prone to negative biases that lead to the underrepresentation of the most marginalised. A “creaming” strategy occurs, with the unemployed closest to the labour market having the best chances of being admitted to these interventions. The strong emphasis on efficiency and cost-cutting amplifies these biases.

Active labour market policies in Romania as an EU country

As a Member State and following the Council recommendation of 15 February 2016 on the integration of the long-term unemployed into the labour market, Romania implements active labour market policies for the unemployed. Under Law 76/2002, these policies aim to increase employment opportunities for job seekers, stimulate employers in recruiting the unemployed and creating new jobs, encourage the integration of young people at risk of social marginalisation and facilitate the employment of people with criminal records. Increasing employment opportunities for job seekers is mainly achieved through i) career information and counselling, ii) labour mediation, iii) professional training, iv) consultancy and assistance for starting an independent activity or a business and v) stimulating labour mobility.

Career information and counselling are free services designed for job seekers, aimed at providing information about the labour market, profiling them according to their level of employability, and building self-confidence. These services also include training in job search techniques and guidance in professional integration. Job mediation facilitates the connection between employers and job seekers, helping

to establish employment relationships. To improve employment opportunities, unemployed individuals can participate in professional training programmes designed to diversify their skills and facilitate reintegration into the labour market. Those interested in independent activities or starting a business can receive legal, financial and managerial consultancy. To encourage labour mobility, unemployed individuals who take up a job more than 15km from their home may receive a placement allowance, while those relocating for a job over 50km away may receive a settling-in allowance. Incentives for employers to hire the unemployed are provided through job subsidies and advantageous loans for creating new jobs. These measures aim to support employers in integrating job seekers, contributing to unemployment reduction and increased workforce participation.

For young people at risk of social marginalisation, the National Employment Agency supports their labour market integration through personalised social accompaniment, the promotion of their interests, and employer awareness. Additionally, jobs designated for this group can be subsidised, thus facilitating the employment and social inclusion of this vulnerable segment. Our research focused on ALM interventions consisting of counselling and training provided by public employment services.

Barriers against the labour market integration of Romanians who are unemployed have been extensively studied (Bădoi, & Preoteasa, 2024; Mihai, & Nițu, 2024; Mateescu, & Neagu, 2014; Stanila *et al.*, 2020), so has been the topic of Romanians' participation in long-life learning (EC, 2025; CEDEFOP, 2019; Clain, 2016; Clain, 2015). However, to the best of our knowledge, challenges for access and participation in ALMPs are understudied, especially to programmes provided by PES. An exception could be considered the study of CRIPS (2012) on difficulties and barriers in access to training for people with disabilities, among which the authors identified a lack of specialised human resources at the employment agencies to support courses for people with disabilities.

Method

The researchers adopted the ontological lens of critical realism, which affirms the existence of a reality on which there are different perspectives, representations and interpretations, and that this reality is independent of the researcher (Braun, & Clarke, 2022). Our epistemological approach is contextualism, which states that for understanding the data, the specific social contexts in which the individuals' perspectives and experiences occur must be taken into account. As a result of different social contexts, there can be multiple perspectives, even contradictory ones, on the same phenomenon (Braun, & Clarke, 2022). Accordingly, the present research explores experts' perspectives on the effectiveness of ALMPs for Romanians who are unemployed, with the aim of identifying strategies for better job integration of the most vulnerable individuals.

Data collection

A qualitative methodology consisting of interviews with experts was employed. Between February and April 2024, a total of 38 interviews with experts in occupation and social work were collected from all geographical regions of Romania. Invitations to participate in the study were sent to all County Employment Agencies in Romania. Public social service providers were selected from the Single Electronic Registry from all macroregions of the country and invitations were sent to them. Data was collected from all the macroregions and all the development regions (County Employment Agencies - all macroregions and all development regions; Public social service providers – all macroregions, development regions South-East, West, South, North-West, Center, in accordance with social services providers' availability).

In 2024, Macroregion 1 (including development regions North-West and Center) and Macroregion 3 (including development regions South-Muntenia and București-Ilfov) have employment rates higher than the national level (49,2%) and relative poverty rate lower than the national level (19%). Macroregion 2 (including development regions North-East and South-East) and Macroregion 4 (including development regions South-West, West) have employment rates lower than the national level and relative poverty rates higher than the national level.

Table 3. Participants in the interviews by microregion and domain of expertise

Microregions of Romania/ Type of institution	County employment agencies	Public providers of social services
Macroregion 1	7	2
Macroregion 2	11	1
Macroregion 3	7	2
Macroregion 4	6	2
TOTAL	31	7

Source: authors.

Table 3 provides a description of the sample.

When defining the concept of *expert*, we referred to Kaiser (2014), Von Soest (2023) and Van Audenhove and Donders (2019) papers. Kaiser (2014) states that experts are individuals with responsibilities for the design, implementation or control of strategies, policies etc. based on their privileged access to information regarding groups and processes. We focus on mid-/low-level civil servants responsible for the implementation of ALMPs, who have access to primary

sources of information. The sampling frame (Goldstein, 2002) consisted of (1) civil servants working for (a) the county employment agencies or (b) the national social assistance system (from local public administration authorities), (2) who work/interact directly with unemployed individuals.

Experts, while representing a valuable source of critical opinion on policy issues (Moore, 2017), can themselves be sources of bias. We were particularly concerned about three types of biases: lacking or insufficient memory/knowledge; misrepresentation; and subjective interpretation (Von Soest, 2023). Insufficient memory/knowledge was addressed in two modalities: first, we mentioned in the invitation of participation that our target consists of civil servants that directly interact with adults excluded from the labour market, and second, we mentioned at the beginning of the interview that we are interested in discussing in detail about the specific groups of unemployed people that the interviewed worked in the last 5 years and is still working in the present, and about the specific interventions familiar to the interviewee. Misrepresentation was also a possible bias, especially misrepresentations that internalise the performance of the interventions and externalise their lack of success to the beneficiaries. Also, the expert may be tempted to give desirable answers (Meuser, & Nagel, 2009). To reduce these biases, the interviewer had an empathic, non-critical attitude and also encouraged the experts to describe facts, used later by the researcher for a critical interpretation of the data. The subjective interpretation of the experts' own worldview is considered as the interviewee's perspective. The researcher tried to both identify and make salient the interviewee's perspective.

The interview started with listing the specific group of unemployed people (e.g. NEETs, people over 45 years old) the interviewee had been working with by the time of our interview and the selection of one specific group the interviewee is most familiar with, based on the last 5 years of work experience. Further questions were addressed in relation to the specific group selected. The interview guide included the following themes:

Main theme 1: Current situation of the unemployed - the main challenges for the unemployed, with a focus on the labour market challenges.

Main theme 2: Socio-economic changes in the last 5 years - includes questions related to the main positive and negative changes in the selected group, with a focus on the labour market changes.

Main theme 3: Actions/measures for labour market inclusion - regarding the measures to reduce the labour market vulnerability and increase job integration.

Main theme 4: Feasible and desirable outcomes of the measures for labour market inclusion - the desirable and at the same time realistic results that we can expect after applying the measures discussed above.

Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed using the specific function from Microsoft Word, and later they were imported into NVivo 12, which provided the software used for analysing the data. The data analysis method used was thematic analysis (Braun, & Clarke, 2022; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). According to Morriss (2024) who emphasises the ideas of Braun and Clarke (2022) on thematic analysis, the themes do not simply emerge from the data. Defining the themes is a reflexive process in which the researcher engages based on the review of the literature and the context of Romania. The data analysis consisted of the following steps: (1) repeatedly going through the transcripts (*immersion*) and engaging in depth in understanding the data for the identification of codes; (2) formulating themes based on the codes identified in the first stage; (3) the data interpretation action, including the extraction of text passages and the narration of themes was done according to the illustrative method (Braun, & Clarke, 2022).

The main themes and sub-themes identified from the interviews are detailed in the Appendix.

Ethical issues

No ethical issues were identified. Interviewees were informed through the use of a *consent form*. The interview did not contain private data on the participants in ALMPs.

Results

The themes and sub-themes included in the analysis are: Theme 1.2: People with low educational status - Sub-theme A, Theme 1.3: People with low income - Sub-theme A, Theme 1.4: NEETs - Sub-theme A (the specific category of NEETs not registered in official records and statistics), Theme 3.1: Counselling and job-search assistance – Sub-theme B, Theme 3.2: Training – Sub-theme B. The relevant themes in relation to the research question were selected.

The low-skilled

The low-skilled individuals correspond to Theme 1.2: People with low educational status - Sub-theme A. They face specific access barriers, one of them being the low educational attainment itself. A minimum level of formal education, generally consisting of secondary school, is a prerequisite for counselling and training, especially in a dynamic labour market.

"... most of them are illiterate... there are [ALM] programs for the unemployed... where they are required to have at least four classes, to read and write, courses that require a minimum of four classes, eight classes, we do not find service users..." (SW expert, Macroregion 1)

Further, some of the low-skilled unemployed people lack basic knowledge of the Romanian language, both counseling and training being in Romanian language.

"...either they don't know Romanian [language], they come from ethnic... communities, and they come [to employment agencies] with someone who translates. Which is a cumbersome process." (PES expert, Macroregion 1)

The Second Chance Programme¹ could represent a chance for these people to acquire basic skills, who could then participate in ALMPs.

"... there are intentions to start a Second Chance Program in a particular school. But the school inspectorate may not be able to organise it if they don't have the resources... And we direct them [the low-educated unemployed people] to Second Chance [Program] and [then] we find out that in September they organise it in another place [further away from where the unemployed people live]." (PES expert, Macroregion 3)

However, participation in the Second Chance Programme is not without its obstacles. The unpredictability of the organisation of the courses, the distance from the participant's home to the place where the course is organised, the costs of participation and the like, hinder the access of certain categories of people to formal education, which is a prerequisite for further counselling and training.

Also, more general skills, such as communication skills, self-confidence, health etc. prove to be important when accessing counselling and training. For example, a lack of self-confidence to access training and acquire new skills represents a barrier to accessing activation policies.

"They are not used to going to the programme, to having a boss, to having... targets..." (PES expert, Macroregion 4)

They're used to resting late because they stay [awake] at night. When we call them to offer them a job, they barely get up in the morning. They prefer these part-time jobs or after 12:00." (PES expert, Macroregion 4)

Some of the unemployed get discouraged and need more in-depth counselling, including psychological counselling.

"... they are in a mental state... not very favourable to work, they are quite flat, ... they have no confidence in themselves." (PES expert, Macroregion 2)

The low-skilled unemployed people require a high focus of resources. Despite that, the allocated resources are scarce, and the approach is more oriented towards cost reduction.

The availability of human and material resources is considered deficient by the experts interviewed. Only few of the occupational counsellors have specialisation in fields such as psychology and sociology, which is totally necessary as the challenges of unemployed people are complex and require a highly specialised approach.

“Our counsellors are not [specialised] in psychology, they’re not sociologists. They are civil servants who have attended courses [in psychology or sociology], they have experience, they have the desire to make things work well and correctly, but they are not psychologists and that is important. Because we see the results in the counties where there are psychologists. It is because of the salaries. ... nobody came [to work here] for this salary.” (PES expert, Macroregion 3)

The limited number of public servants is also an impediment. The small number of public servants in employment agencies does not allow for counselling sessions to be carried out with all unemployed people registered and handled to the standards that the experts themselves consider desirable.

“... a counselling session should last at least half an hour. If we multiply thirty minutes by seven thousand or so unemployed people [registered and allocated to that public servant], this man [public servant] should be here day and night and he still could not manage [to counsel all the beneficiaries]. We are told to counsel all the unemployed who come in. It’s impossible...” (PES expert, Macroregion 2)

The limited availability of material resources is also an impediment: the lack of adequate premises for the provision of career guidance and counselling services makes this intervention less efficient.

“... this counselling should be done in private, not in the same office with other colleagues. They can’t afford to go... to talk to a [specialised private] person... to do counselling in an office with three other people, I don’t think it really helps too much, and there are people who don’t come back...” (PES expert, Macroregion 2)

This first category of unemployed experiences negative biases in accessing counselling and training provided by PES, both from the supply side (the allocated resources are scarce, and the approach is more oriented to cost reduction) and the demand side (e.g. discouragement, poor health).

The poorest

This category corresponds to Theme 1.3: People with low income – Sub-theme A. Being extremely poor proves to be a barrier to participating in ALM intervention. This category includes unemployed people with very low income

(generally in-cash benefits received by unemployed people seeking work). Even if they receive in-cash benefits (minimum inclusion income), that income proves to be insufficient relative to number of family members makes. Attending vocational training and counselling requires expenses (e.g. transport, clothes and shoes, food) that unemployed people cannot cover on their own, this being the main source of cumulative disadvantage in ALMPs participation among this group. Being from remote rural areas is an additional risk factor for this group.

“... going away from home sometimes involves additional expenses, so this is also a reason [for some unemployed people not participating to training], and I honestly tell you that I have encountered... people who didn't have money for tickets, transportation,... the funds allocated are limited and ... we have to do [the best we can] with the pennies that are there [allocated]... I was once at a meeting where there were discussions about some aid for the unemployed in rural areas to participate in vocational training. What disappointed me is that it had been a couple of years [since those discussions] and I hadn't heard anything more about that. Interviewer: When you say aid, you mean transportation, food... Interviewee: Yes. Exactly.” (PES expert, Macroregion 2)

Generally, poor income level intersects with low educational and skills levels. These people could benefit from participation in the Second Chance Programme. Yet the financial constraints turned out to be barriers to enrolment in governmental programmes.

“We encourage them to go [to enrol] to the Second Chance Program, but... there are no vacancies in the Second Chance Program or ...[the classes are organised in school] 30km away and who has the money to go?!” (social work expert, Macroregion 1)

The data indicates the necessity of in-kind or in-cash aid (food, clothing, transportation) during the training. Although in-cash aid for these expenses has been discussed by the policymakers, the aid has not yet been granted.

“Interviewee: Do you know what interventions have been effective [in achieving the target group]? There was a time when ... [the] participants to training received a participation grant, ... a meal, a sandwich... juice. They gave them lunch, plus that bonus. [the training] was accepted very, very quickly... Interviewer: Were these courses successful in helping them to integrate into the labour market? Interviewee: Young people. Young people, yes... they got employed..., but people so over 50 [years old]... very rarely.” (PES expert, Macroregion 3)

“Vocational training courses... to make them more effective for young people... they could give an allowance.” (PES expert, Macroregion 4)

For the poorest, participation in training requires constant expenses that exceed their budget. This is the main mechanism for the accumulation of disadvantages related to training and counselling participation.

The extremely marginalised (and “invisible”)

This category consists of a specific sub-category of NEETs that are not registered in official records and statistics (included in Theme 1.4: NEETs – Sub-theme A). The extremely marginalised individuals hardly have access to ALM interventions. This category includes unemployed people, generally young NEETs (not in education, employment or training) at the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities. Not only do they confront housing poverty, material deprivation, and misinformation, but a great number of them also lack identity documents or/and documents proving their studies, which is seen by the experts as the main impediment in accessing ALMPs. We considered them a distinct category because they require specific interventions.

“We had a protocol with the School Inspectorate... most of them didn’t have their diplomas, papers [ID]. And the school inspectorate helped us to identify them, as well as the Town Hall, the social assistance. It was quite difficult, but not impossible... Even they [generally young NEETs] wanted it [to participate in the interventions]. To be informed, to know about the labour market, to know about the existence of the employment agencies... There ... are not informed and [they] don’t realize how beneficial this help ... is.” (PES expert, Macroregion 4)

Because they lack identity documents, these young people are not registered with public institutions, including PES, and cannot be properly targeted by PES. The interventions proven effective consisted of campaigns in the communities to identify these unemployed people and then provide personalised social accompaniment for integration into the labour market, including counselling and training.

“... we had a very successful project for these young people. It lasted five years, it was [financed through] European funds. It was extraordinary: a personalised social accompaniment. We noticed that they don’t come to us [to PES for registration]. We went to the localities, village to village, door to door and we identified them. It was an information campaign because these young people were not in any database, nor in school, or on the labour market, they were nowhere, and we managed to inform more than 5,000 young people in our county and we trained them, and we placed [on the labour market] 40% of them.” (PES expert, Macroregion 4)

These young people also lack skills in searching for accurate information, including information relevant to their participation in ALMPs.

“... they are also misinformed. They don’t know how to choose their sources of information. They get their information from their [online] platforms we try everything we can, including digital marketing, to get to them.” (PES expert, Macroregion 2)

From identifying to counselling and training, targeting this category of extremely marginalised young unemployed people requires additional high resources that

are not allocated regularly to PES by the government. The interventions proven efficient were financed through the Social European Fund and are only available during the project implementation.

Discussion

The cumulative disadvantages in accessing training and counselling received increased attention in the last years, yet research on the topic is scarce (Bonoli, & Liechti, 2018; Pisoni, 2018; Auer, & Fossati, 2020; Im, & Shin, 2022). Our exploratory research contributes to the scientific discussion on biases in access to counselling and training provided by PES, intending to improve access and participation in activation policies. Our findings indicate stratified access to counselling and training based on prior socio-economic status. Variables such as level of education, labour market-specific or general skills, income, and social marginalisation are relevant for the chances of access to ALM interventions. We have identified three principal groups of unemployed people prone to exclusion from training and counselling.

The first group consists of individuals with low educational status. In order to attend PES services, they need to develop basic skills such as writing and reading skills. In theory, these unemployed people could access the Second Chance Programme, educational formal path for adults who could not complete the mandatory studies and then participate in ALMPs. In practice, impediments such as the small number of schools that organise Second Chance classes and opportunity costs (e.g. working in the household) limit the access of these people to the alternative formal educational path. In this case, the low level of education influences the chances of participation in employment interventions. This may further negatively impact their chances of integration into the labour market.

The findings are similar to other papers (Bonoli, & Liechti, 2018; Im, & Shin, 2022) that identified negative access biases to ALMPs against the low-educated. These papers focus on cognitive skills, generally acquired through formal education. We also identified a second subgroup of skills subject to cumulative disadvantages, namely more general skills relevant for a job, such as interpersonal abilities, self-confidence, habitus. This category of unemployed people has complex needs that translate into a high social distance from the labour market. They require large investments in services such as counselling, psychotherapy, medical treatment for diverse health problems etc., incompatible with the logic of financial restrictions applied in Romanian PES institutions. Pearson *et al.* (2023) evaluate the relational approach to employability for the specific category of unemployed lone parents, who face multiple and complex challenges in the labour market. The authors indicate an innovative, co-produced intervention that focuses on meaningful learning and employment, which balances employment with family responsibilities

and the needs of the participants, prioritising wellbeing. This approach may be a more efficient one for the category of low-skilled unemployed people, compared with the current cost-oriented approach.

The second group consists of the poorest unemployed people. At the intersection between low income and high family spendings (e.g. because of the number of family members), these unemployed cannot afford the basic expenses with participation in training and counselling (e.g. transport, clothes and shoes). For this group, the low-income level is the variable that generated the cumulative disadvantage in ALMPs participation. This may further contribute to their exclusion from the labour market.

The third group consists of extremely marginalised unemployed people, some of them “invisible” for the reasons mentioned below. Generally, they are young NEETs who confront housing poverty, material deprivation, and misinformation. A great number of them also lack identity documents or/and documents proving their studies. One of the main challenges is that these individuals are not in the records of public institutions, including PES. Similar results were obtained by Maguire (2015) who identified groups of young people aged between 16-24 not represented in the official registration; in this context, the author addresses questions regarding the dimension of this group in the UK and also the characteristics and needs of this population, a question relevant also for the young NEETs in Romania and EU. The interventions for this category consist of several steps, from their identification in communities to personalised social accompaniment. Regarding these young people, social marginalisation itself generates cumulative disadvantage in accessing labour market interventions and contributes to their further exclusion from social life.

Conclusion

Our research results have confirmed the existence of cumulative disadvantages in access to training and counselling provided by PES for three categories of people affected by unemployment. Our findings broadly chime with other explorations of employment issues (Messing, 2014; EUFRA, 2019). The results did not confirm the Matthew effect as defined by Bask and Bask (2015), which identifies the increase in inequalities as the core aspect of the mechanism, in terms of access and participation to ALMPs. However, we provide a more detailed picture of the interaction of exclusivities, which forms a formidable obstacle to inclusion in Central Europe and particularly in Romania. The low-skilled, the poorest, and the extremely marginalised (the “invisible”) face specific mechanisms of cumulative disadvantages, which perpetuate their social exclusion for ALMPs (RQ1).

The implication is that in order to improve access and participation in activation interventions, the recommendations consist of targeting the three identified

categories in different ways. The first category needs extensive specialised concealing to increase both their formal education and more general skills, such as adapting to changes. Digital technologies have the potential to surmount impediments such as the small number of locations where the “Second Chance” is organised and the high costs of participating in such activities. Also, a different approach that prioritises mutual support, meaningful work and employment and wellbeing may prove beneficial for this category. The second category needs material support for covering the expenses by participating in ALM interventions. The third category requires specific interventions consisting of identifying these “invisible” individuals in their communities (RQ2).

This research has certain limitations. First, it builds on the perspective of experts, so that some of the conclusions are indirect. Also, building on experts’ perspective may contribute to contextual factors and beneficiary-related factors of cumulative being overestimated. Further research among unemployed people could produce benefit from complementary data on the topic, especially data from beneficiaries themselves. Second, the complex topic of access and participation in ALMPs would benefit from its analysis from multiple theoretical perspectives. Nonetheless, this paper makes both theoretical and practical contributions to the existing body of evidence. We have identified cumulative disadvantages in access to counselling and training provided by PES in Romania, a state with a welfare mix regime and post-communist experience (Stanescu, & Voicu, 2019). We also explored the sources of cumulative disadvantages of access to training and counselling and the main underrepresented groups. From a practical perspective, our results provide useful data for better targeting the diverse groups of unemployed people who are not homogeneous and who need specifically designed interventions.

Our findings, finally, have confirmed the value of a framework like the cumulative disadvantages when examining public interventions.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions. The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, SC. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Note

¹ A formal educational path for the unemployed with no education, which on completion could lead to participation in ALMPs.

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Appendix

List of main themes and sub-themes extracted from the data

Themes and sub-themes	Short description
Main theme 1: Current situation of the unemployed	The data revealed the main challenges for the unemployed as described by experts in occupation and social work, with a focus on the barriers on labour market integration.
Sub-theme 1.1: Main risks factor for labour market integration in Romania	Risk factors for labour market exclusion: low educational level; low income level (household and/or individual); age (people close to the retirement age); rural area; ethnic minority status; gender; single parent status or caregiver status; disability; victim of domestic violence/victim of human trafficking, etc.; people who leave the placement centers; people released from detention centers/on probation. The data reveal the burden generated by the intersection of the risk factors for labour market integration. The following sub-themes address specific groups of unemployed people.
Sub-theme 1.2: People with low educational status	Types of barriers to labour market integration: (A) barriers related to skills and habituses relevant for job integration (e.g. minimum required formal education, specific skills and professional training, health status); (B) barriers related to inequalities of opportunities (inequalities of access to the labour market, but also inequalities of access to education, health services, etc., with long-term effects on labour integration); (C) specific barriers, at the intersection of vulnerabilities (the intersectionality between low education level and various variables such as rural areas, single parent status or caregiver status, victim of domestic violence, ethnic minority etc.).
Sub-theme 1.3: People with low income	Types of barriers to labour market integration: (A) barriers related to insufficient financial means to participate to Second Chance or training; (B) barriers related to inequalities of opportunities (inequalities of access to the labour market, but also inequalities of access to education, health services, etc., with long-term effects on labour integration). Residence in remote rural areas is an additional risk factor for this group.

Sub-theme 1.4: NEETs	Type of barriers to labour market integration: (A) barriers related to the specific sub-category of NEETs that are not registered in official records and statistics; (B) barriers related to the educational and skills level relevant for a job; (C) barriers related to intergenerational transfer of poverty. Among the additional risk factors for this group are low educational and economic status, rural area residence, ethnicity.
Sub-theme 1.5: People with disabilities	Type of barriers to labour market integration: (A) barriers related to legislative regulations; (B) barriers related to social attitudes towards people with disabilities; (C) barriers related to limitations regarding working conditions; (D) other barriers.
Sub-theme 1.6: Women	While gender itself does not seem to have major implications for labour market integration, the intersection of gender with other variables proves essential. Thus, parental status represents the main barrier to women's labour market integration in the context of reduced accessibility to childcare and education services and labour market demands (e.g. work schedule). Other important variables are age, level of education, belonging to a rural area, belonging to ethnic minorities, and household income level.
Sub-theme 1.7: Unemployed people over 45 years old	Regarding people over 45 and up to around the age of 55, data reveal their desirability on the labour market. Barriers to labour market integration seem to manifest for people over 55 years old and mainly consists of: (A) barriers regarding skills level relevant for the new jobs created; (B) attitudes regarding active life in general and, in particular, attitudes regarding life-long learning; (C) barriers regarding health; (D) barriers consisting of inequalities of opportunities (job availability, transport etc.) – especially at the intersection of vulnerabilities (e.g. rural area); (E) barriers regarding the financial strategies of employers.
Main theme 2: Socio-economic changes in the last 5 years	The data revealed changes on the labour market that impact all unemployed people.

Sub-theme 2.1: Increase share of GenZ in the workforce	The increasing share of Generation Z youth in the total working-age population, with different attitudes towards work compared to previous generations (e.g. higher expectations regarding remuneration, work schedule and working conditions, management style).
Sub-theme 2.2: Extra EU migration	Intensification of the labour force migration from outside the EU to Romania (people with specific attitudes related to work such as lower expectations regarding remunerations and working conditions compared to the active population in Romania).
Sub-theme 2.3: Inflation	Inflation - effects on enterprises financial optimization strategies (e.g. the decrease in the number of employees and the increase in the workload for employees), - effects on employees: decrease in the standard of living - no observed effects.
Sub-theme 2.4: Technological green and technological development	Green technologies and technological development in enterprises, while reducing highly polluting industries – effects on mismatch between demand and supply on the labour market.
Sub-theme 2.5: Job destruction/creation	High dynamic of job creation and job destruction.
Sub-theme 2.6: Unpredictability of the labour market	The unpredictability of the labour market future changes, with effects on the anticipation of demand for skills.
Sub-theme 2.7: COVID-19 pandemic	The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted the Romanian labour market by suspending economic activities considered non-essential - increase in the number of unemployed people receiving benefits.
Main theme 3: Actions/ measures for labour market inclusion	The theme included measures to increase job integration, with a focus on four active labour market programs.
Sub-theme 3.1: Counselling and job-search assistance	(A) Positive and efficient aspects of counselling and job-search assistance; (B) Biases and inefficiencies of counselling and job-search assistance (e.g. human and material resources).
Sub-theme 3.2: Training	(A) Positive and efficient aspects of training; (B) Biases and inefficiencies of training (e.g. anticipation of the demand for skills, discontinuity of financing).
Sub-theme 3.3: Incentives for employers	(A) Positive and efficient aspects of incentives for employers; (B) Biases and inefficiencies of incentives for employers.

Sub-theme 3.4: Incentives for employees	A) Positive and efficient aspects of incentives for unemployed individuals that find a job; (B) Biases and inefficiencies of incentives for unemployed individuals who find a job.
Main theme 4: Feasible and desirable outcomes of the ALMP	The interviewees mentioned as main feasible and desirable outcomes: acquisition of job relevant skills, labour market integration, reduction of deprivation (the last outcome being mainly mentioned by social workers).

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