

## Impact Objective

- Build upon the wealth of existing research and data to identify what can be done to protect and enhance the wellbeing of workers, adult learners and those seeking work

# Fostering wellbeing

Kevin Daniels, Mark Bryan, Sara Connolly, Çigdem Gedikli, Olga Tregaskis and David Watson introduce their multifaceted research into wellbeing in work



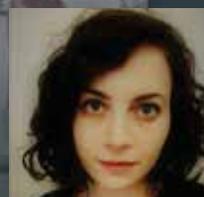
Kevin Daniels



Mark Bryan



Sara Connolly



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Olga Tregaskis



David Watson

### Can you introduce us to your research programme?

**KD:** Our programme is concerned with wellbeing in work, amongst those experiencing various states of worklessness and adults engaged in learning. It is part of the What Works for Wellbeing Centre. The programme spans the Universities of East Anglia, Essex, Reading and Sheffield in the UK. Like the other programmes of the Centre, we are a multidisciplinary team with a core formed around psychology, economics, social science and organisational science, and supported with input from educational research, political science, employment and equality law and medical science. We have a pragmatic focus on the evidence concerning actions that lead to better wellbeing. We have three main sub-programmes, focused on the wellbeing of those in work, the wellbeing of those without a job or transiting in and out of various states of worklessness, and adults in learning, including work-based learning.

### What are the key goals of your current work?

**CG:** Getting a job, changing jobs or losing a job all represent important changes to peoples' life circumstances and these can have notable effects on their wellbeing. Our goal is to provide the best possible, recent evidence from different countries to examine the effect of transitions in and out of work on wellbeing, and shed light on the possible variations in this relationship across different groups (for example, age, gender, family

status). Guided by evidence derived from a systematic review, we have also performed our own research on the effect of unemployment on wellbeing.

### From your perspective, what is exciting about this research and why?

**DW:** The potential of shaping the policy agenda around wellbeing, and providing practice orientated evidence that can help policy makers and other key stakeholders and influencers translate this well-founded ambition into reality.

### Can you discuss the issue of unemployment in the UK and its impact on wellbeing?

**SC:** Wellbeing is not a binary proposition when it comes to employment – having a job is one thing, having a good quality job is another. We know from our other evidence reviews and some of the other research we have conducted what a high-quality job looks like. Our research also suggests that work-based learning in particular, but also other employment practices such as fair performance management processes, supplement the effects of high-quality work on wellbeing.

### How would you explain the benefits of interventions for those who are unemployed?

**MB:** One of the best ways to increase the wellbeing of the unemployed is to help them get back into work, with the biggest boost

coming from a move into a secure, decently paid job. For young people, it is important to get into a job with good career prospects (for them, there is even some evidence that a bad job may lead to lower wellbeing than unemployment). Of course, people who are more employable (because they are more skilled and adaptable) are more likely to get back into work, but there is also evidence that they suffer less while they are unemployed. So, interventions to improve employability can have a doubly beneficial effect on wellbeing.

### Have you encountered any challenges in your work to date?

**OT:** The policy arena in the UK is complex because responsibility for wellbeing and wellbeing inequalities involves many stakeholder groups including, central government, regional and local government, service delivery groups, service users, employers, employees and citizens. Public dialogue on the significance of individual wellbeing to national wellbeing is in its infancy in the UK, but has been gaining momentum in the past three to five years. As a result, the policy landscape is changing and citizens and employees are shifting their expectations of employers and the state. Our research has provided a platform for multi-stakeholder dialogue to shape the agenda, to share the evidence base and challenge the questions that need to be asked of the evidence.



# Helping workers thrive

Research underway at the **University of East Anglia, UK**, is identifying practical interventions, tools and processes that can protect and enhance the wellbeing of workers

Given that many people spend a significant amount of time at work, this is bound to have an impact on wellbeing. However, with jobs varying significantly in their characteristics and job transitions occurring for a number of reasons, it is likely that absence of work might impact both positively and negatively on wellbeing.

Professor Kevin Daniels of Norwich Business School, University of East Anglia, UK, is Principal Investigator on the 'Work, Learning and Wellbeing' project. He is collaborating with many Co-Investigators, including Professor Sara Connolly, Professor Olga Tregaskis, Dr Çigdem Gedikli and Dr David Watson, who are also based at the University, and Dr Mark Bryan of the Department of Economics at the University of Sheffield, to address a plethora of questions surrounding the wellbeing of workers, adult learners and those not in work. The team's goal is to identify practical interventions, tools and processes to protect and enhance their wellbeing.

This project is part of the What Works for Wellbeing Centre, says Daniels. 'The Centre has four evidence programmes and is a UK Government initiative to provide evidence based solutions to the question of how to improve wellbeing in the UK and in other countries,' he explains. 'Much is made of the political and policy context of wellbeing, especially since the statement from former Prime Minister David Cameron in 2006, on improving wellbeing being the central political challenge of our time. The four programmes

that form the research base of the Centre were commissioned during the tenure of the Cameron-led government.'

## CONSULTING STAKEHOLDERS

The researchers' first research phase involved engaging with different user groups through public consultations with a view to identifying and refining priorities. They asked a range of stakeholders (e.g. general public, business leaders, trades unionists, occupational health and human resource management professionals) for their views on key factors that would improve the wellbeing of those both in and out of work in the UK. They found that the most salient theme was improving employment opportunities, as the consistent message coming from all those surveyed was that employment is good for wellbeing.

In the next phase, the team undertook a series of systematic reviews. One of these focused on 97 studies of the best possible, recent evidence on worklessness and wellbeing. They examined how the impact of worklessness on wellbeing varies across groups and types of worklessness, how the duration of a workless state impacts upon wellbeing and the impact of wellbeing upon the duration of a workless state and/or progression through states.

A key conclusion from this work is that unemployment is bad for wellbeing, and its effect goes well beyond loss in earnings. 'Unemployment has a persistent, damaging effect on an individual's wellbeing (highlighting the very damaging long-term effects of recessions),' confirms Gedikli.

The researchers also found that work-based learning is beneficial, as Tregaskis explains: 'Learning skills for wellbeing seems beneficial, but no one type of learning – such as learning relaxation techniques – seems necessarily better than another. It may be more a case of allowing employees to choose the learning that best suits them.'

## NUANCES OF WELLBEING

Although there is evidence associating learning with higher wellbeing, the researchers have encountered difficulties with identifying the causal mechanisms and nuances in the relationship between learning and wellbeing, which Watson explains. 'The research has addressed these challenges by exploring the impact of learning programmes and interventions on wellbeing, seeking to understand how features of the learning process translate into wellbeing and learning outcomes and how these are experienced differently for different groups,' he states. 'Selection bias, arising from either those with low wellbeing or low educational attainment choosing not to engage in learning, or early attrition in the learning process, is a recurrent issue that can obscure the true effect of learning on wellbeing. In our final review in the area of learning and wellbeing we are responding to this challenge by evaluating the effectiveness of interventions that aim to support engagement and/or progression in learning for those experiencing poor mental health or low wellbeing.'



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In addition to exploring the nature of social relationships in the workplace and the social atmosphere at work, the team has also considered the issue of job quality. 'There is overwhelming evidence from epidemiology that jobs that are secure allow work-life balances, have clear task requirements, allow workers input into decisions on how the work is done or on organisational changes, are good for mental health, physical health, wellbeing as well as innovation and other aspects of performance,' highlights Connolly. The researchers found that there also needs to be a concurrent improvement in other employment practices – such as training and performance management – in order for improvements in job quality to translate into improvements in wellbeing and performance.

**AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH**

The work is highly interdisciplinary and collaborative. 'For an applied psychologist like myself, being able to shape policy and practice at scale is incredibly exciting. We get to interact with a wide range of stakeholders from government departments, charities, local government, employers and trades unions – so we learn a lot from these interactions,' Daniels enthuses. 'Another great feature is the interdisciplinary nature of the work – although we do see disciplinary boundaries, we see this in a positive light as it allows us to appreciate the knowledge, access the expertise and learn from colleagues from different academic backgrounds. We are able to do this because we all share a commitment to the goal of the research, which is to improve wellbeing.'

For their evidence reviews, the team uses a systematic review methodology in order to bring together existing research and interpret it by making consensus evidence statements, as well as highlighting gaps in the evidence. 'In summarising the state of the evidence, it provides practical insight and identifies implications for policy and areas of further research,' Watson points out. 'Where possible we also use statistical techniques

to summarise the evidence captured in a review, known as meta-analysis.' Following the systematic review, the team extracts data from the studies identified during the review, including information about the methodology and key outcomes, as well as the study population. The data is then synthesised and summarised and, lastly, the results of the review are written up and disseminated.

**EXTENSIVE EFFECTS**

The team hopes that its work will have a far-reaching impact, benefiting end users ranging from workers to senior managers as well as high-level users such as policy makers (politicians), implementers (civil servants, charities), influencers (professional and trades institutions, trades unions) in the UK and elsewhere. 'Of course, the nature of our work should be interesting to researchers too, as we are identifying some key gaps in the evidence base, as well as getting to grips with some major issues that transcend individual academic disciplines, such as the nature of relationships between indicators of wellbeing that are suitable in one domain – such as job satisfaction as an indicator of workplace wellbeing – with indicators that capture the entire life space – such as life satisfaction,' Daniels says.

**WORK IN PROGRESS**

The next stage will see the researchers completing their evidence reviews and data analyses around progression into better jobs, adult learning and the role of wellbeing and related phenomena in building high performing workplaces that are robust to challenging economic conditions. In the longer term, says Daniels, their goal is to build wellbeing capabilities in user groups with a view to improving wellbeing at scale. 'The complexity and scale interventions we would like to see would mean taking into account policy and institutional contexts, so we would see comparative international studies as very valuable,' Daniels concludes.

**Project Insights**

**FUNDING**

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**PROGRAMME LEAD BIO**

**Kevin Daniels** is Professor of Organisational Behaviour in the Employment Systems and Institutions Group, Norwich Business School, University of East Anglia. He has 28 years' experience in research on worker wellbeing, health and safety. Daniels was principal or co-investigator on several projects underpinning the UK Health and Safety Executive Management Standards for Work-Related Stress, as well as projects from other UK and EU funding agencies. He is the editor of the *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, an associate editor of the *British Journal of Management* and series co-editor for Springer's handbook series in occupational health sciences.

