



Being on dole degrades us, say jobless

■ Survey: Fás a waste of time and welfare better than low-paid work

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SIGNING on is dehumanising and degrading, there are few incentives to give up welfare benefits and job training courses are a waste of time, according to a survey of unemployed people.

Ministers' salaries, welfare services and a range of health and psychological problems associated with unemployment were also highlighted in the nationwide research conducted by University College Dublin.

The insight into the lives of those on the dole also found many were reluctant to give up welfare benefits to take up part-time or low-paid work.

Experiences of the training agency Fás were also negative, with all of those surveyed saying they did not find work after completing courses. Training courses were seen as expensive and a waste of time.

Fás officers and workplace programmes also came in for criticism, with accusations that companies were just making profits by using unemployed people as "cheap labour".

Social welfare offices were uniformly described as "chaotic and unpleasant environments". The experience of accessing welfare claims was described as "banging your head off the wall" and a "nightmare".

Welfare claimants said

they often felt like beggars, claiming they were bullied by welfare officers, and said the experience of signing on was dehumanising.

UCD researchers conducted 13 focus groups with unemployed people nationwide, including in areas where there had been large-scale lay-offs in Limerick (Dell) and Swords (SR-Technics).

Losing social welfare claims and benefits was a deep concern to participants. It was not rational to do part-time work and lose entitlements such as medical cards, rent allowances and welfare supports, many said. Participants described how short-term contracts and fewer hours meant that they were financially better off on the dole.

A range of health and psychological problems associated with unemployment were described, including excessive smoking, drinking and eating, as well as depression.

Catering to children's needs, including at Christmas and at birthdays, was also described as traumatic.

Giving up food, doctor and hospital visits, socialising, driving and even a cup of coffee were other sacrifices described by the jobless facing financial woes.

One jobless mother said:

"My daughter is saying: 'Go out, you have to go out socially or you will go mental in the head'. You would be sorry for going out the next morning."

The criticism of Fás and welfare services comes as the Government moves to break up the authority and join agencies to help those without work and on the dole.

Social Protection Minister Joan Burton is setting up the National Employment and Entitlements Service, which will provide a one-stop shop for people seeking to establish their benefit entitlements and those looking for a job and seeking advice on their training options.

The report, entitled *The Experience of Unemployment in Ireland*, is expected to be released by UCD's **Geary** Institute tomorrow.



Being unemployed

No incentive to work

RESEARCHERS in 13 focus groups from the **Geary** Institute at University College Dublin conducted a nationwide survey of the subjective experiences of the unemployed in 2010. The findings are due to be published tomorrow in a report called *The Experience of Unemployment in Ireland*.

The surveys included areas where there have been large-scale lay-offs, such as from Dell in Limerick and SR-Technics in Swords, Co Dublin. The report provides a real insight into the human tragedy of unemployment, especially those workers who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own.

Many were particularly critical of FÁS. No one reported finding work as a result of taking courses run by FÁS. "What's the point of doing it if you're not going to get work out of it?" one jobless person asked.

There is no incentive to engage in part-time work or short-term contracts, because those involved would lose entitlements such as rent allowances, medical cards and welfare support. Rather than encouraging people to work, the system is discouraging it.

As a result, the system seems as dysfunctional as FÁS itself, which is being replaced by SOLAS, a new education and training authority. It is imperative that this replacement represents not just a change of names, but also a radical change in attitude.