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# **It's not just 'what works': The evolution of the Pathways to Work Evaluation Programme ISPA Research Conference**

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**Kasey Treadwell Shine**



# Introduction

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**1. Pathways to Work (PtW) Evaluation Programme**

**2. Evaluation of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA)**

**3. Learning so far...**

**4. Next Steps**

**5. Reflections for Evidence-informed policy making**



# Pathways to Work Evaluation Programme

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## Background

- The *Pathways to Work* strategies set out a comprehensive reform of the State's approach to helping unemployed jobseekers return to work.
- Initiated in 2012 and with the latest strategy running from 2016-2020, it has introduced or reformed a wide range of processes and programmes in the D/Social Protection (e.g. Intreo), as well as reforms in other Government Departments (DES, SOLAS, DJEI)
- From 2015, includes commitment to a rolling programme of evaluation of these reforms using counterfactual econometric techniques
- Draws from an innovative administrative database, the Jobseekers Longitudinal Database (JLD).

# Pathways to Work Evaluation Programme

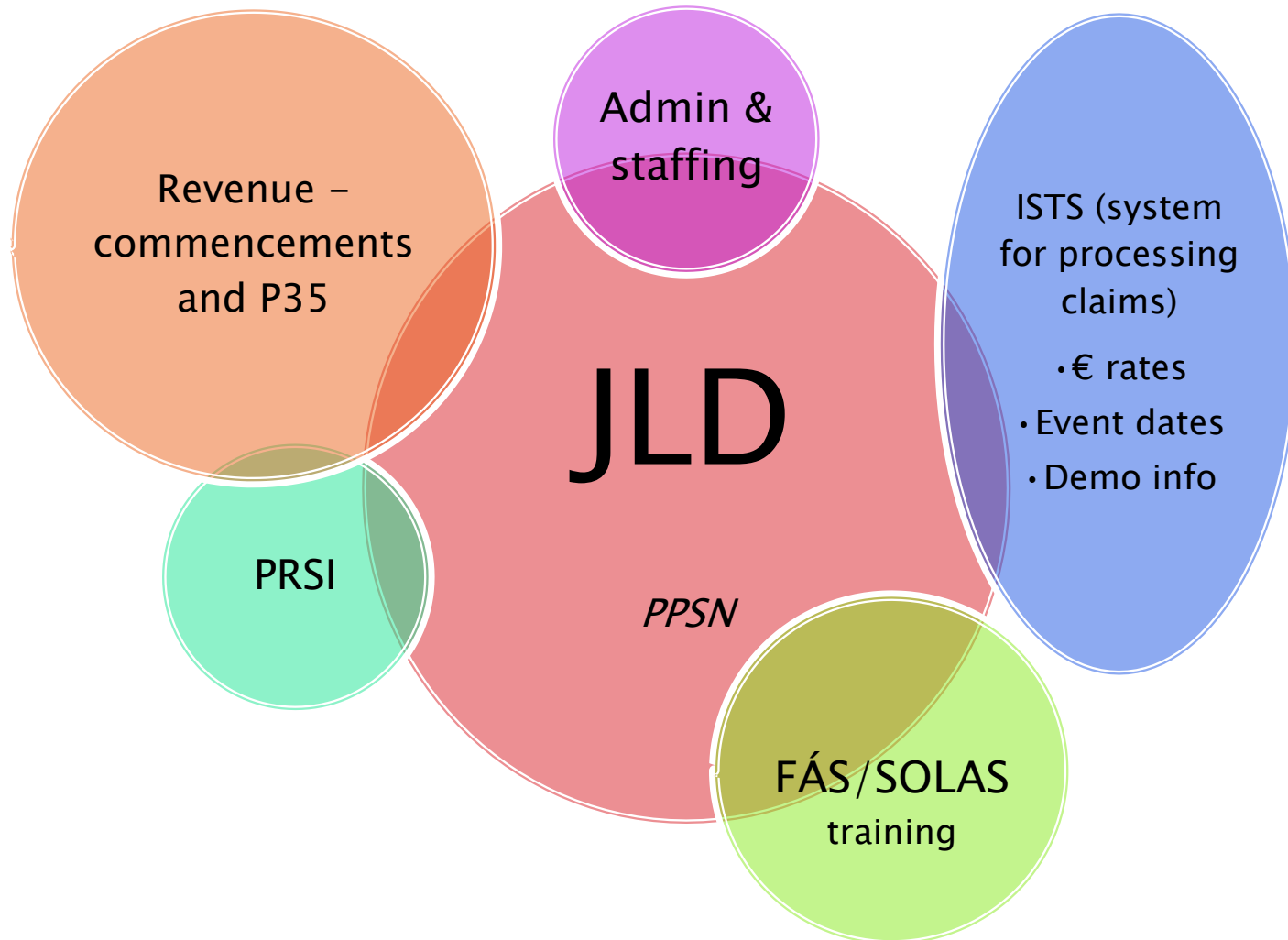
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## The JLD

- An episodic view of all jobseekers' labour market histories from 2004 linking admin data from DSP claim episodes, FAS/SOLAS episodes and periods of employment
  - Approximately 13 million episodes
- On-going development, documentation
- Available to researchers (similar to RMF CSO protocols)
- Not perfect! – Key data missing (more on this later...)
- First Evaluation: Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) (published November 2015)
  - 'Proof of concept' test of JLD to see if it could support rigorous counterfactual econometric techniques
  - Commissioned by D/Social Protection, conducted by the ESRI

# Data sources in Jobseekers Longitudinal Dataset (JLD)

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# Evaluation of BTEA

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## Methodology: Counterfactual Impact Evaluation (CIE)

- Used the JLD to identify a matched 'control' and 'treatment' group of similar individuals: those in the control group did not do BTEA; the 'treatment' group did.
- Want to know what would happen to unemployed individuals had the BTEA programme not been in place (i.e., unemployed person did not participate in a BTEA option) → want to estimate the counterfactual
- CIE tests the differences in outcomes of the control and treatment groups to estimate the impact of the intervention

# Evaluation of BTEA

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## **Control and Treatment Groups**

- Treatment group: Those in receipt of a jobseeker's payment starting in Sept/Oct 2008 a second level option (SLO) or a third level option (TLO) BTEA programme
- Control group consisted of individuals in receipt of a jobseeker's payment who had similar unemployment durations to the treatment groups BUT who continued to be unemployed in September/October 2008

## **Outcomes tested**

- Separate evaluations conducted for SLO and TLO BTEA options
- Evaluated in terms of Live Register (LR) status in June 2012 and June 2014 (in employment or still on the LR)
- DSP re-ran analysis to 2015

# Evaluation of BTEA

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## Key Findings

- People who took up a second level course were 38% less likely to be in employment in 2012 and 30% less likely in 2014.
- People taking up a third level course were 23% and 14% less likely to be in employment in 2012 and 2014 respectively.
- DSP analysis of 2015 data suggests:
  - Those availing of a third level option have almost caught up with the control group, in terms of employment probability; and probably have surpassed them in terms of earnings.
  - Those availing of a second level option still approximately 20% less likely to be in employment.
- *Why* employment outcomes so negative cannot be determined, but some clues....





# The evolution of the PtW evaluation programme

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## The BTEA study has show shortcomings in

- Administrative data gaps in the JLD
- Model design challenges
- Understanding drivers for observed outcomes
- Identifying specific policy changes for reform
- Perceived usefulness of findings and therefore contestation of methods and approach

Recognising that the BTEA evaluation was intended primarily as a 'proof of concept' project, it has...

**... provided learning for the next rounds of PtW evaluations**

# The evolution of the PtW evaluation programme

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## Learning 1: Data Gaps

- The JLD relies on administrative data sources: DSP; FAS/SOLAS; Revenue
- Such data are generated and collected for specific administrative purposes: challenging to re-configure these for evaluations needs
- Some data are generated from legacy systems which are gradually being replaced: requires keeping historical data to maintain episodes
- Some data are not centrally collected (or are still on paper files!)
- Additional data needs are continually identified – some available, some not
- Some data are entirely missing: *there is NO linkable educational administrative data available for the JLD*

# The evolution of the PtW evaluation programme

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## Learning 2: Model design challenges

- Policy design rarely starts with evaluation/data needs
- CIE evaluations generally estimate impacts for individuals, not for population: The overall impacts might be nil if...
  - the treatment group benefits at the expense of the control group
  - the treatment group has negative impacts but this benefits the control group in other ways
  - For example: Did BTEA participants taking themselves out of the labour market create an opportunity for similar individuals in the control group to get into employment?
  - Depends on the nature of the scheme, potential interactions between control/treatment groups
- Implications for identifying specific, appropriate policy change
- Solutions?
  - Test changes in control and treatment groups before and after a policy innovation (Difference-in-Difference)
  - Meta-analyses of overall programme/process effects

# The evolution of the PtW evaluation programme

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## Learning 3: Methods

- The PtW evaluations aspire to the 'gold standard' of CIE and DSP is working closely with international networks and experts to share learning
- BUT, data gaps are a significant challenge!
- BTEA evaluation also showed the need to understand drivers of observed outcomes identified by CIE
- Subsequent evaluations have therefore:
  - Incorporated 'process' or intermediary variables in the model design and/or used these to conduct a separate descriptive analysis
  - Incorporated mixed-methods approaches: surveys, focus groups and other qualitative methods, in order to bridge some knowledge gaps (due to data issues) and also to shed insight into drivers of observed outcomes
  - This provides important contextual information

# The evolution of the PtW evaluation programme

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## Learning 4: Policy needs

- BTEA evaluation seen as a 'black box': It was not possible to work backwards from outcomes to test intermediate variables' effects
  - Attendance not recorded centrally: if it was, could see if negative outcomes were correlated to participants not attending courses.
- Therefore could not identify specific policy changes required
- Subsequent evaluations have:
  - Shared model specifications with DSP, where externally commissioned
  - Been conducted in-house (by IGEES economists) to build technical expertise and capacity
  - Built upon shared learning and expertise to develop more nuanced models
  - This provides (quantitative) data-driven explanatory power for observed outcomes, and the possibility to look more closely at outcomes (over time, by individual characteristics)

# The evolution of the PtW evaluation programme

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## Learning 5: Cognitive and Framing Needs

- Issues above contributed to many policy makers and others contesting the findings, both in content and in methods
- Some of this was positive – led to further recommendations and suggestions for change
- Some was negative or indifferent
- Still learning...
  - Data sharing efforts
  - Mixed methods approaches: Giving depth and breadth to CIE findings
  - Working groups to share knowledge and learning, raise awareness of evaluation methods and approach, build buy-in
  - Protocols and processes to improve response rates, promote best practices

# Next Steps

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- Three evaluations currently underway (JobBridge, Intreo process reforms, BTWEA), one initiated (Qualitative study of BTEA to understand drivers)
- Up to seven planned for the next two years
- An iterative process – continuous learning curve!
- First large-scale CIE programme undertaken in Ireland – attracting attention in Europe
- Challenges and opportunities for putting forward a comprehensive evidence base for policy-making

# Reflections for evidence-informed policymaking

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## Some thoughts...

- Without knowing 'what works': anecdote, experiential learning prevail
- Without know 'why' it works (or doesn't): Cannot identify drivers of outcomes, specific policy changes to make: Revert to anecdote, experiential learning EVEN IF it runs counter to the 'evidence'
- Implications for evidence-based policymaking: Without understanding wider dynamics/overall effect/context, sharing knowledge, improving receptiveness to methods and approach, generating shared ownership... possibly will get worst case scenario: policy-based evidence making





**Thank You.**

[Kasey.shine@welfare.ie](mailto:Kasey.shine@welfare.ie)