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Making random assignment happen: Evidence from the UK Employment Retention and advancement (ERA) demonstration

**Robert Walker
Lesley Hoggart
Gayle Hamilton
Susan Blank**

Policy Studies Institute (PSI), the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) and MDRC

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Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 330

Making random assignment happen: Evidence from the UK Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) demonstration

Robert Walker, Lesley Hoggart and Gayle Hamilton, with Susan Blank

A report of research carried out by the Policy Studies Institute (PSI), the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) and MDRC on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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List of abbreviations

ASA	Advancement Support Adviser
BIF	Basic Information Form
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ERA	Employment Retention and Advancement programme
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
ND25 plus	New Deal 25 Plus
NDLP	New Deal for Lone Parents
NDPA	New Deal Personal Adviser
PA	Personal Adviser
SRA	Social Research Association
TA	Technical Adviser
WASC	Work Advancement and Support Center
WTC	Working Tax Credit

Glossary of terms

- Advancement Support Adviser** Employment specialist holding a position specifically created as part of Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA). These individuals provide ERA participants with ongoing advice and assistance intended to help them overcome obstacles to steady employment and find pathways to better job opportunities and higher wages.
- Basic Information Form** A form that collected information on each individual at the point they were randomly assigned, including demographic data, identifying information, and information on any barriers to employment that the customer was facing.
- Employment Retention and Advancement programme** A programme offering a combination of employment counselling services and financial supports to certain recipients of government benefits or lone parents claiming Working Tax Credit. Its purpose is to help people stabilise and improve their work situations.
- Jobcentre Plus** The UK governmental institution, an agency of the Department for Work and Pensions, which provides help and advice on employment and training for people who can work and financial support for those of working age who cannot.
- New Deal programme** The UK's main welfare-to-work initiative. New Deal services include the development of individual action plans outlining customers' work goals, and job search assistance and training to help them achieve these goals.

New Deal 25 Plus	Mandatory New Deal programme that serves longer-term unemployed people (mostly males) over the age of 25, specifically those who have been unemployed and receiving Jobseekers' Allowance (JSA) for at least 18 out of 21 months.
New Deal for Lone Parents	Voluntary New Deal programme that serves lone parents (mostly females) who are in receipt of Income Support (IS).
New Deal Personal Adviser or Personal Adviser	Employment specialists, working in Jobcentre Plus offices, who provide job advice and assistance to New Deal customers who were not randomly assigned to the ERA programme group.
Technical Adviser	Staff position specifically created as part of ERA. These individuals, posted in each ERA district, ensured that ERA services were delivered in accordance with the policy design and provided general support for the evaluation effort.
Working Tax Credit	Lone parents working less than 30 hours per week are eligible to receive this credit.

Summary

Random assignment is one of the most powerful tools available to researchers to determine whether a social policy works. By dividing people randomly into those who receive services (the programme group) and those who do not (the control group), any difference in outcomes observed between the groups – the programme's effect or 'impact' – can be confidently attributed to the new policy.

Despite its potential, this methodology has not been widely used in Britain to develop social policy. However, it is currently being applied in a six-district demonstration test of the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) programme. This initiative aims to help low-income lone parents and long-term unemployed people remain employed and advance in the labour market once they find work.

Over the course of about 15 months, Jobcentre Plus randomly assigned over 16,000 people, making the ERA evaluation the largest random assignment test of a social policy's effectiveness in the UK to date. What did it take to implement this methodology within local offices? How well did the random assignment process work? And what lessons does the ERA experience hold for the application of this technique to future social policy evaluations in Britain? This report, based on a special case study undertaken as part of the overall ERA evaluation, addresses these questions. It uses qualitative data collected primarily through on-site observations at Jobcentre Plus offices, telephone and in-person interviews with customers and staff, and staff focus groups.

The ERA programme and evaluation

ERA was conceived as a 'next step' in welfare-to-work policy, designed to help break the 'low-pay-no-pay cycle' common among low-wage workers. Whereas the current New Deal programmes concentrate on placing unemployed people who are receiving benefits into work and on short-term job retention, ERA aims to keep them working longer and help them advance.

ERA commenced on 27 October 2003 in six Jobcentre Plus districts (covering 60 local offices) in Scotland, Wales, London, North West England, East Midlands, and North East England. Together these areas encompass about six per cent of the UK's workforce. Three groups known to have difficulties in getting and keeping full-time work are eligible for ERA:

- out-of-work lone parents entering the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP);
- long-term unemployed people entering the New Deal 25 Plus (ND25 plus);
- lone parents working less than 30 hours a week and receiving Working Tax Credits (WTC).

ERA programme group members can receive a combination of employment-related assistance from an Advancement Support Adviser (ASA) – a new advisory position in the six Jobcentre Plus pilot districts – for 33 months, including in-work support. ASAs are to help their customers find suitable work, solve work-related problems, and advance in their jobs. Customers working 30 hours a week or more may receive a work retention bonus that pays up to £2,400 over their time in ERA. More financial support is available for training and to help with emergencies that might compromise an individual's ability to stay in work.

The ERA research will eventually determine whether people in these three target groups who are randomly assigned to the programme group remain longer in paid work and enjoy better pay and conditions compared with their counterparts in the control group. In addition to this assessment of the programme's effectiveness, the evaluation includes a detailed process study to understand how ERA is implemented, a cost study to establish the resources required to operate the programme, and a cost-benefit analysis to determine value for money. The evaluation is being conducted by a research consortium, which is working closely with the UK Department for Work and Pensions, the evaluation sponsor. The consortium includes three British organisations – the Policy Studies Institute (PSI), the Office for National Statistics (ONS), and the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) – and MDRC, a US-based non-profit social policy research firm that leads the consortium.

Key findings on random assignment

Given that the scale of ERA random assignment, which was conducted in 60 Jobcentre Plus offices, was unprecedented in the UK, random assignment proceeded well. This finding – a key one – helps assure that the results produced by the ERA evaluation will be trustworthy. In addition, more generally, it establishes that random assignment is practical in a UK context, and thus, has encouraging implications beyond ERA.

While there were no significant problems with ERA random assignment, the process was not without glitches, as might be expected given its scale. In the following sections, the issues encountered in ERA are used to point to ways that future random assignment studies in the UK can be improved.

- **ERA successfully met two critical random assignment challenges: (1) creating a sufficiently large research sample of virtually identical programme and control groups, and (2) doing so with most customers and staff viewing the process as justified and fair.**

For both New Deal target groups – the focus of this case study – the staff presented the ERA offer and explained random assignment during the same intake interviews in which they presented information on the New Deal programme. In the course of these interviews, staff were expected to encourage, but not coerce, eligible customers to agree to the random allocation procedures giving them a 50-50 chance of gaining entry to ERA. The fact that more than 16,000 people took up this offer attests to the appeal of ERA and indicates that random assignment did not dissuade them from applying for the programme.

A comparison of measured background characteristics of the people in the programme and control groups shows that, as intended, their characteristics do not systematically differ and provides evidence that the allocation of people to the two groups was, in fact, random. Some staff reported feeling disappointed when random assignment designated a customer to the control group whom they felt would benefit from ERA. In general, though, staff acknowledged the potential value of assessing ERA using this method. Notwithstanding some initial scepticism, they also believed that the assignment of people to the two research groups was truly random and thus fair. Similarly, many customers assigned to the control group felt some disappointment that they could not participate in ERA, but, overall, members of the control group believed that the process was fair.

- **There were tensions between ERA and the normal Jobcentre Plus job entry targets.**

The broader institutional context in which random assignment operates can potentially affect 'who' within the new policy's target group flows into the random assignment funnel. In the case of ERA, the Jobcentre Plus job-entry targets for New Deal customers had the potential to work at cross-purposes with the goal of recruiting as many customers as possible into the study. For example, New Deal Personal Advisers (NDPA) conducting intake, stood to retain or lose customers who might help or hurt their ability to meet job-entry goals. Thus, an Adviser might be tempted to de-emphasise the benefits of ERA to a job-ready customer if joining ERA would have meant that that person would move onto another staff member's caseload, because the original NDPA would not receive credit when the customer went to work. There is little reason to believe that this was more than a small problem or that it fundamentally compromised the extent to which the study's sample is representative of customers in ERA's target populations.

- **Integrating ERA discussions into intake interviews covering many other topics, plus the staff's interest in minimising the control group's disappointment, often left customers with an incomplete understanding of the ERA offer.**

Staff performing New Deal intake interviews who understood ERA well, especially ASAs, generally took a very positive view of the policy and found it easy to promote it. However, with all that they had to accomplish during the intake interviews, it was difficult to spend as much time on ERA and random assignment as they would have liked. Giving relatively full explanations of all topics in a single interview resulted in intake sessions lasting 90 minutes or more. More often, staff curtailed the time they spent explaining ERA or the time that customers spent reading an ERA fact sheet and/or the consent form for random assignment. In some instances, staff gave ERA only cursory coverage, sometimes introducing it only in the last five minutes of an intake interview.

The 'information overload' commonly experienced by customers during intake interviews, and the often-truncated explanations of ERA, left many customers with less than a full understanding of what exactly they were being offered at intake. Adding to this lack of clarity was the need for staff to balance, on the one hand, the need to 'sell' ERA in order to maximise the take-up, with a desire, on the other hand, to minimise the extent to which those allocated to the control group might be disappointed. This led in particular to the belief among most staff early in the recruitment period that they should not mention the programme's financial incentives component.

- **Although staff observed the formalities of the informed consent process, many customers did not fully understand to what they had consented. However, the design of the study was such that this did not put them at risk of obvious harm.**

Although staff in the focus groups felt that they imparted a great deal of ERA-related information in intake interviews, this was not the case in all the intake interviews observed. While the researchers confirmed that usually the formalities of informed consent were scrupulously observed, post-intake research interviews suggest that many customers remained unclear about what ERA offered when they signed the consent form. Many could not articulate the different consequences of being assigned to the programme or control groups. Most likely, this was because explaining the New Deal often took up the most time. Other reasons suggested by staff included the complexity of the information that they needed to convey, customer indifference and antipathy, and inadequate training for some New Deal staff.

From an ethical standpoint, the minimum information that a potential study participant must know before consenting to take part in a research study depends on the level of risk involved in participating. For ERA, that level was very low, because consenting to join the study and then being randomly assigned to the control group

would put people in a situation not substantially different from what they would have faced had they refused to participate. Thus, customers' incomplete understanding was probably sufficient to protect their rights as research subjects. While very little research has been done in this area, there is no reason to believe that the degree of pre-consent understanding in ERA was lower than in other research studies of this type.

- **Customers rarely objected to the idea or process of random assignment, and those assigned to the control group were not deeply troubled by this outcome.**

While many customers may not have clearly understood the consequences of the outcome of random assignment, they rarely objected to the idea of it. Overall, only 8.4 per cent of all ERA-eligible customers to whom the random assignment offer was made during New Deal intake interviews refused to take up the invitation to apply for ERA. In general, customers understood that they had a 50-50 chance of being assigned to the programme. And among those allocated to the control group, few protested, displayed anger, or were visibly upset by that result.

- **Implementing random assignment presented staff with many challenges for which they felt they had not always been fully prepared.**

All staff received basic training in the procedural aspects of the ERA intake, as well as information about the programme and ERA evaluation, including random assignment, and why ERA is a demonstration project. ASAs received an additional day's training on the content of the programme. In any type of training, however, the extent to which conveyed information is understood and absorbed is often less than intended. In this regard, ERA was no exception. Staff involved in this research and who conducted the ERA intake process were often uncertain about how to market ERA and respond to customers' questions; some staff were uncertain about how to manage customers' reactions to the result of random assignment.

- **Computer difficulties complicated the random assignment process.**

Technological problems often made it difficult for staff to complete the ERA intake interview in a timely manner. Before ERA was launched, the Jobcentre Plus Internet system was relatively slow running and, therefore, when the ERA form used to collect customers' demographic information needed to be accessed from the Internet, the system was unable to support this during the early part of the demonstration. This resulted in very slow running times, complicating efforts to collect information for random assignment and to make the assignment. If the Internet was not available, staff could contact another office or a Technical Adviser (TA) to continue the random assignment process, but this contingency plan, often requiring a lengthy phone call, could be time-consuming. These problems were reduced substantially later in the demonstration following Internet system upgrades in Jobcentre Plus.

Recommendations

Acknowledging the challenges faced in conducting random assignment in ERA while recognising the overall success of the process, the report's recommendations include the following suggestions:

- In designing a voluntary random assignment study, take steps to ensure that as much as possible, normal institutional performance targets do not undermine study participant recruitment.
- Provide clear guidance and careful training to staff on how to encourage participation in the study while respecting a person's right of refusal.
- Determine the minimum amount of information that candidates must know in order for them to give informed consent, and design procedures to ensure uniform communication of this information. (Further research into the degree to which participants in other studies understand what they are being asked to consent to, and why, would be valuable background.)
- Provide frontline staff with training that incorporates 'real-life' situations they are likely to encounter in explaining random assignment to customers, and address their questions and concerns about the ethics of the process.
- Whenever feasible, conduct a pilot test of random assignment procedures before launching full-scale random assignment. This would allow for corrective actions to be taken to improve systems, procedures, or staff training – before many people are enrolled in the study.
- Conduct ongoing systematic and comprehensive reviews of intake and random assignment procedures in all offices, to ensure that the random assignment process is working properly.
- Ensure that the IT applications and Internet access that frontline staff depend on are reliable and fast.

1 Introduction

Random assignment is one of the most powerful tools available to researchers to determine whether a social policy works. By dividing people randomly into those who receive services (the programme group) and those who do not (the control group), any difference in outcomes observed between the groups can be confidently attributed to the effect of the new policy.

In Britain, random assignment has been used in a few small social policy research studies, but it has seldom, if ever, been applied to a large-scale study of a social policy initiative. Furthermore, in the UK and even in the US, where random assignment in social policy studies is considerably more common than in Britain, comparatively little has been written about what it takes to implement it properly on a large scale. For example: What procedures must be set up? How should informed consent (the process of making certain that people agree to taking part in a study and understand what they are agreeing to) be obtained? How should frontline staff be trained? What monitoring efforts are needed? And how do staff and their customers respond to the whole process? This report explores these and other questions by taking a close look at the experience of launching the largest randomised control trial ever undertaken in Britain in the field of social policy – the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) demonstration, which is being delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

1.1 An overview of Employment Retention and Advancement

ERA is a bold new employment strategy, focused on **in-work** support. Until recently, policy in the UK has concentrated on assisting non-working people find jobs. In general, little advice or guidance is offered to them once they begin working. ERA tests a set of strategies for providing that post-placement support. The initiative, which builds carefully on welfare-to-work policies developed in Britain over the past 30 years, is viewed as a potentially important next step in the evolution of those policies.

ERA offers a combination of employment counselling services and financial supports to certain recipients of government benefits or lone parents claiming Working Tax Credit (WTC). Its purpose is to help them stabilise and improve their work situations. This assistance lasts for 33 months, including in-work support. The programme is being tested in six diverse districts across the UK in Wales, North West England, East Midlands, North East England, Scotland and London. These areas encompass about six per cent of the country's working population. In each district, the ERA programme is housed in Jobcentre Plus offices, which operate the New Deal programme, the UK's main welfare-to-work initiative.¹ New Deal services include development of individual action plans outlining customers' work goals, and job search assistance and training to help them achieve those goals.

The evaluation of ERA is being conducted by a research consortium, which is working closely with DWP and Jobcentre Plus. The consortium consists of three British organisations – the Policy Studies Institute (PSI), the Office for National Statistics (ONS), and the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), and one US organisation, MDRC, which leads the consortium. At present MDRC is also conducting random assignment evaluations of two other job retention and advancement demonstrations in the US. The simultaneous operation of the three studies offers unusual opportunities for transatlantic knowledge-sharing in this policy area.²

The ERA evaluation aims to determine, through a randomised trial, whether ERA succeeds in improving job retention and career advancement outcomes for low-income people. This evidence, as well as findings on the programme's operational feasibility and costs, will help policymakers decide whether ERA is a strategy that

¹ Early on in ERA, some of the Jobcentre Plus offices had not yet been 'rolled out', so ERA would have been housed in Jobcentre Plus offices.

² Launched in 1999, the US ERA project encompasses 15 demonstration programmes located in eight US states. The programmes' aims and target populations vary, as do the services they provide: Some of the programmes focus on advancement, i.e. helping low-income workers move into better jobs by offering services such as career counselling, education and training. Others focus on both placement and retention, and aim to help participants, mostly 'hard-to-employ' people (such as welfare recipients with disabilities or substance abuse problems), find and hold jobs. Finally, other programmes have mixed goals and serve a variety of populations. Another related project is the US Work Advancement and Support Center Demonstration (WASC). In an effort to help US workforce development and welfare systems meet the needs of low-wage workers and their families, MDRC developed the WASC demonstration. This project aims to establish WASC units – locations where staff would target low-wage workers for employment retention and advancement services in combination with education on and easier access to financial work supports – in 'one-stop' employment centres in several communities around the country. The establishment of WASC units began in 2005.

could be incorporated into ongoing national policy. The demonstration has another essential purpose as well: It is intended to help build the general capacity of British researchers and DWP staff to design and implement random assignment studies in this field. This report, which offers a candid case-study account of what it takes to implement random assignment in Jobcentres Plus, is part of that capacity-building effort. Chapter 2 presents information on the data and methods used in this case study.

1.2 Key principles in designing and implementing a random assignment study

At first glance, random assignment seems simple: A group of people eligible for a new programme are all given exactly the same chance of being placed into it, or into a control group that is not served by the programme. The allocation is made on a purely random basis, like the flip of a coin. This process is designed to ensure that the selection of people for the programme is completely unaffected by any characteristics of the applicants or by the predilections or inadvertent actions of the staff who are administering the process. With large enough samples, the programme and control groups will be similar, on average, on all observable and unobservable characteristics that might affect their success in the labour market. For example, the programme group will have the same proportion of highly motivated people, poorly skilled people, ethnic minorities, people with transport or health problems, and so on, as the control group. Consequently, if after random assignment the programme group has higher employment rates, works more hours, sustains employment longer, and achieves higher wages, these differences can confidently be attributed to the programme intervention; other potential causes can be ruled out.

In principle, then, random assignment is a powerful tool for determining causality. In practice, though, the challenges of implementing a proper random assignment study, and one that will meet high ethical standards, abound. Many things can go wrong. Getting random assignment 'right' in the context of real world programmes and institutions requires that such a study be designed and implemented with careful adherence to a certain key principles. Among these are the following:³

1.2.1 Design an appropriate intake process for the study

One of the central challenges of implementing a random assignment study is to balance research ambitions with operational realities. Striking the right balance will further two goals: (1) that programme staff 'buy into' the research effort and do not become overwhelmed or confused by complicated procedures and undermine the integrity of the experimental design, and (2) that the research provides a fair test of the policy under investigation – a test in which the policy implemented is consistent with the model envisioned on paper and reflects how the programme would actually operate if it were regular policy.

³ See, for example, Gueron, 2003 and Orr, 1999.

Achieving these objectives in a programme like ERA will depend substantially on how the upfront process for identifying and enrolling people into the study is structured. In designing that intake process, several guidelines are essential: First, the intake process should minimise any disruptions to normal programme operations. Second, the process should mimic the programme intake process that would occur if the programme were not part of a random assignment study. Third, the intake procedures should not put undue pressure on programme staff. Care should be taken to avoid requiring staff to collect too many data items or spend too much time solely on research activities. In addition, procedures should be put in place to prevent staff caseloads building up too quickly, and thus overwhelming staff, as random assignment progresses. Finally, in a multi-site study like ERA, intake processes should be similar across the districts and/or offices involved in the study. This will ensure that cross-district or cross-office comparisons of the eventual impact results (programme-control group differences) will not be affected by different intake procedures for the study.

1.2.2 Recruit a sufficient number of people for the research

Samples generated as part of a random assignment study should be large enough to allow the analysis of programme impacts to detect the effects of the intervention at accepted levels of statistical significance. If sample sizes are too small, programme-control group differences in outcomes (such as differences in eventual earnings levels) could occur by chance and would not represent a true programme effect. The randomly assigned research sample should also be large enough to permit separate analyses on the programme's effects for important subgroups of the target population, for example, for ethnic minorities, people with younger versus older children, people with more versus fewer educational qualifications, and so on.

1.2.3 Meet ethical standards

A random assignment study should be used only when there is no other way to obtain the same quality of information about the effects of a specific programme intervention or policy, and when there is a reasonable probability that the results of the study will be considered useful by policymakers and/or programme operators. When these conditions are met, the design of the study should be guided by several ethical standards:

First, it is imperative that a random assignment study does not deny people access to services that are universal entitlements, or reduce service levels below those normally available. Second, when inviting people to volunteer for a special programme as part of a randomised trial, it is critical to inform them about the special procedures for selecting participants, allowing them to avoid applying for the programme if they object to those conditions of selection and want to exercise any legal right to refuse to participate in a research study. Third, it is important to protect the confidentiality of data collected as part of the study. Finally, although the multiple learning objectives typically of interest in a random assignment study often make it difficult to calculate optimum sample sizes precisely, the number of people randomly assigned

should not exceed the number needed to determine the effects of the programme intervention with certainty.

1.2.4 Ensure that random assignment is a truly random process

The strength of a random assignment study hinges on the allocation of people to the programme and control groups entirely by chance. If the process is designed and carried out appropriately, the result should be two or more groups of people who do not differ systematically in terms of measurable and unmeasurable characteristics that might affect their future success in the labour market, such as their demographic characteristics, levels of motivation, skills, psychological dispositions and family situations. Thus, care must be taken that the allocation process is not inadvertently based on a faulty algorithm (i.e. the sequence according to which people are placed into the programme or control group) that can be predicted and, therefore, 'gamed' by programme staff or customers.

1.2.5 Ensure that, over time, the service differential between the programme and control groups is sustained

For a programme intervention or policy to get a fair test in a random assignment study, the services received by the programme and control groups must differ in substantial and meaningful ways. If the services are not distinct, or do not remain so, the study will not provide clear answers about the effects of a particular programme or policy approach. Thus, for the entire time the study is in process, it is important to keep track of who is in which research group, to set up procedures that minimise the chances that people will be inadvertently randomly assigned a second time, and to make certain that members of the control group are not mistakenly or purposefully given services similar to the intervention reserved for the programme group.

1.2.6 Be alert to evidence that programme or control group members are behaving differently because they have been randomly assigned to a special group

Some research experts also point to another concern in random assignment studies – that the random assignment process itself might affect the future behaviour of programme or control group members. Some hypothesise, for example, that people recruited for a new employment intervention might change their job-seeking behaviour simply because they were placed in a programme or control group and not as a reaction to the services they did or did not receive as part of the intervention being examined. While evidence of this type of reaction in prior studies is scarce, it is important that this possible phenomenon be considered.⁴

⁴ See Stafford, Greenberg and Davis (2002).

1.3 Assessing random assignment in Employment Retention and Advancement

The ERA random assignment process has, thus far, been successful in one important respect: It has allocated more than 16,000 people into two groups of approximately 8,000 people each that do not systematically differ in their measured characteristics. (See Appendix A.) This is a substantial achievement, especially considering that the process operated within six very different local districts, each with many different local Jobcentre Plus offices. Still, achieving this outcome, and adhering to the principles stated above, was not always easy, and important lessons have been learned along the way.

This report aims to capture those lessons. In doing so, it takes into consideration the following insights about the complexity of conducting random assignment in a real-world study of social policy:

- **The creation of equivalent research groups is not enough to establish how well the random assignment process worked.** As the above guidelines make clear, the fairness of the informed consent process – whether people freely assent to random assignment and understand what they agree to – is also an important consideration. So too is the extent to which the random assignment process is acceptable to staff (a factor that may influence how carefully they implement it) and to programme applicants, who must be willing to risk being assigned to the control group and should see this outcome as the result of a ‘fair’ process. Another criterion is that eligible people are not excluded from random assignment because of improper exercise of staff discretion, whereby some candidates are favoured by staff over others. There is also the issue of whether a sizeable group of people who are targeted for services, refuse random assignment, thus possibly reducing the generalisability of the study’s results to the broader population that might have volunteered for the programme in the absence of random assignment.⁵
- **Understanding how random assignment is implemented requires an holistic view of how it interacts with other programme processes.** In particular, it is difficult to assess random assignment procedures in isolation from the particular programme recruitment and intake processes with which they are inextricably bound. Thus, this report aims to examine how the ERA programme itself, along with random assignment, was marketed and explained to customers.

⁵ For further discussion of the perspectives on random assignment cited here, see, for example, Blustein, 2005; Cook and Payne, 2002; Gueron, 2003; Stafford *et al.*, 2002 and Wolff, 2000.

- **Deciding when consent to random assignment and participating in a research study is 'informed' requires careful judgment and attention to context.** No simple blanket rule can be applied to all evaluations to determine whether potential research subjects have sufficiently understood the nature of a study and their role in it. Rather, researchers and programme operators must be aware that people's levels of understanding of a concept vary, and demonstration managers must make decisions based on their own best judgements about how much depth of understanding is needed to justify including someone in a particular study.

1.4 Organisation of this report

The next two chapters of this report describe the ERA programme and the scope of the evaluation (Chapter 2) in further detail, and how the normal intake process within Jobcentre Plus had to be adapted to accommodate random assignment (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 focuses on how ERA and random assignment were marketed and explained to potential participants, while Chapter 5 hones in on a particular part of that experience: what Jobcentre Plus did to ensure that consent to participation was informed and how customers perceived the informed-consent process. Chapter 6 concentrates on two matters relevant to the post-random-assignment period: how customers reacted to their research-group assignments, and what efforts were made to protect the integrity of the experimental design even after random assignment was completed. The final chapter offers conclusions and recommendations for consideration when implementing random assignment in other social policy evaluations.

2 A closer look at Employment Retention and Advancement and its research

The previous chapter presented a broad-brush picture of the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) programme and the kinds of research and policy questions that it aims to answer. This chapter fills in that picture with more details about what ERA offers, its target groups and its research, and the methodology used for this special study of random assignment.

2.1 The Employment Retention and Advancement intervention

As noted in the previous chapter, ERA consists of both employment-related services for programme group participants and financial supports.

- **Employment-related services:** Participants can work with a group of employment specialists, called Advancement Support Advisers (ASAs) – a new advisory position in the six Jobcentre Plus pilot districts. ASAs offer participants **ongoing advice and assistance** intended to help them overcome obstacles to steady employment and find pathways to better job opportunities and higher wages. ASAs help participants: (1) find suitable work, (2) avoid pitfalls that sometimes lead people to leave jobs too quickly and (3) advance to positions with more job security and better pay and conditions.

- **Financial incentives:** Participants receive a retention bonus payment of £400 if they stay in work of at least 30 hours a week for 13 out of 17 weeks. They are eligible for up to six bonus payments, a maximum award of £2,400 during the 33 months they are on the ERA programme. In addition, participants who combine training with employment of 16 hours or more are eligible to receive a training bonus of up to £1,000 payable on successful completion of the training, at the rate of £8 per hour of study, and training fees, up to £1,000. Participants also have access to in-work emergency payments to overcome short-term barriers to retaining jobs.

2.2 Target population

ERA was offered as a voluntary scheme to three groups of people. The first two of these three target groups were:

- **Longer-term unemployed people mandated to participate in *New Deal 25 plus (ND25 plus)*.** The mostly male members of this group had been unemployed and receiving Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) for at least 18 out of 21 months.
- **Lone parents who volunteered for the *New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP)*.** These mostly female parents are in receipt of Income Support (IS).

The third target group was:

- **Lone parents receiving Working Tax Credit (WTC) and working less than 30 hours a week.**

The WTC group was not included in the observational component of the research undertaken for this random assignment study because they were recruited for ERA mainly via telephone, not in face-to-face interviews.⁶

In assessing how Jobcentre Plus customers experienced the ERA intake process and the possibility of taking part in the ERA research study, it is important to be aware that to participate in the ERA programme, they also had to agree to be involved in the research study. However, all three target groups could volunteer or refuse to participate in ERA.

⁶ While the research was not designed to cover observations of the WTC group, one observation was made and five members of the focus groups of staff – described in this section – had conducted intake interviews of members of the WTC target group.

2.3 Initial Employment Retention and Advancement design and mobilisation

ERA was designed by a team based in the Cabinet Office at the initiative of HM Treasury.⁷ In December 2002, responsibility for ERA was handed over to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which established an evaluation team and an evaluation steering group to oversee the research. Jobcentre Plus set up a project team responsible for implementing ERA, providing live running support, and monitoring its performance. DWP also selected the evaluation consortium through a competitive bidding process.

To support the implementation of ERA, existing local Jobcentre Plus Learning and Development staff trained the ASAs and New Deal Personal Advisers (NDPAs) who would be carrying out random assignment. In addition, DWP funded the evaluation consortium to recruit staff to fill a new Technical Adviser (TA) post for each district, designed to ensure that ERA services were delivered in accordance with the policy design and to support the evaluation effort.

Jobcentre Plus specified that, at the start of ERA, all intake clerks and ASAs were to attend training that was to cover how to complete the Basic Information Form (BIF), the concept of random assignment, how to encourage people to take part in random assignment and how to answer questions relating to the research and the random assignment process. Jobcentre Plus also specified that, as part of this training, all staff were to be told that they had to give everyone eligible the chance to participate in ERA and that they had to convey to every customer the information in ERA intake interview scripts that were prepared for them (Appendix B).

2.4 Employment Retention and Advancement research

The ERA evaluation includes four main components:

- an **impact study**, which will assess the effects of ERA on its customers, focusing on work-related outcomes (for example, incomes and terms and conditions of job service) and on non-work outcomes (such as housing conditions and family formation patterns);
- a **process or implementation study** – to show how ERA operated and why the observed outcomes may have arisen. The process study will draw on a wide range of data – both qualitative studies and quantitative surveys of staff and customers and observational data from offices, including monthly diaries kept by TAs. This report on the results of the special study of random assignment is an early product of the overall ERA process study;
- a **cost study**, which will show what it cost to operate ERA; and

⁷ See Morris *et al.*, 2004.

- a **cost-benefit study**, which will provide information on how those costs compare to any benefits produced by the programme. The cost-benefit estimate will take into account compensating gains from increased tax paid by workers and fewer benefits paid to unemployed claimants.

The random assignment practices discussed in this report support the ERA impact study. Whereas pilot projects have typically compared pilot areas receiving the new services with similar places receiving none, the ERA design calls for customers in the ERA pilot areas who were eligible for the new services to be allocated randomly – through a computer-based process – into two groups:

- a **programme group** that is offered the new ERA services and incentives; or
- a **control group** that is offered no ERA services or incentives but continues instead to receive its existing New Deal services or other schemes, or none, as appropriate.

This use of the control group will give the ERA evaluation the power to attribute any observed differences between programme and control group members to the effects of the ERA intervention.

2.5 Methodology used for this study of random assignment

This report draws upon research undertaken at a point late in the process of recruiting programme and control group members – from the end of October through December 2004. The fieldwork called for by the evaluation design was conducted by the TAs, under the guidance of the evaluators, who debriefed the TAs at the conclusion of their fieldwork and analysed the data they collected.

The research involved a combination of data collection techniques:

Customers

- observation of 50 intake interviews.

These observations were conducted by the TAs and their content was recorded through the completion of a standardised interview guide. This guide recorded information such as time the interview began and ended; sequence of dialogue; information given to customer; methods used to encourage participation, such as mentioning the financial incentives; evidence that customer did/did not understand; authorisation of consent; and response of customer to the random assignment outcome.

- semi-structured interviews with customers conducted immediately after the observation.

These interviews included customers assigned to the programme or control groups, and six customers who refused to participate in the demonstration. Topics covered included customers' understanding of the intake interview, the random assignment process, the choices they were offered, the implications of those choices, and of informed consent. Interviewers also asked customers about the purpose of the ERA evaluation, the reasoning behind their decisions in the interview, their response to the outcomes of the intake interview, and their views on their experience at Jobcentre Plus.

- telephone follow-up interviews with customers three to five days after intake.

The purpose of the interviews was to establish (1) whether these customers recalled having been randomly assigned and (2) the persistence of any attitudes they had about random assignment.

The number of observations and interviews conducted with each customer group is outlined in Appendix C.

Because the end of random assignment was staggered in the various ERA districts, and owing to the time and expense involved in visiting all six districts, two-thirds of the observations were concentrated in one district and the rest in the other five.

Jobcentre Plus staff

- semi-structured interviews with 39 staff members who conducted intake interviews.

The purpose of the interviews was to understand staff's overall strategies and perceptions of the customers' experiences of the intake interviews.

- six focus group interviews with on average six participants per group.

These were held with staff responsible for ERA intake after the observations and semi-structured interviews had been completed. Participants in these groups were selected from a range of offices across the districts. Findings from the focus groups allowed the researchers to learn more about variations in district practices, highlight examples of good practice, and draw lessons from any difficulties staff experienced.

To validate findings from the observations, interviews and focus groups, this report also draws upon some of the early findings from the overall evaluation of ERA, particularly its process study. Early implementation findings are summarised in a recently published report,⁸ referred to here as 'the implementation report'. In

⁸ (Hall *et al.*, 2005).

In addition, a few statistics from early returns from a customer survey, administered to a subset of research sample members roughly 12 months after they were randomly assigned as part of the overall ERA evaluation, are included in the report.

The report now turns to an account of how ERA random assignment and intake unfolded in Jobcentre Plus offices.

3 Adapting the normal Jobcentre Plus intake process to accommodate random assignment

As often happens when new social policies are evaluated using an experimental design, Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) random assignment did not take place in a rarefied atmosphere where the evaluation was the only focus of attention. Instead, it had to be incorporated into the ongoing procedures of busy offices with other complex programmes to operate. The procedures most affected by random assignment were the intake processes through which customers were initially told about and enrolled in the New Deal programmes. This chapter describes the standard New Deal intake process and how it was modified to accommodate ERA and random assignment.

3.1 Incorporating random assignment into Jobcentre Plus' normal operations

This section addresses two questions: First, what were the standard Jobcentre Plus intake procedures for members of two of the ERA target groups, New Deal 25 Plus (ND25 plus) and New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP)? And second, what procedures were put in place to integrate random assignment and ERA intake into those processes?

3.1.1 Standard procedures

ND25 plus customers are called into an initial meeting where they are formally mandated to participate in the New Deal. At that session, the Adviser⁹ outlines the requirements of the New Deal programme and explains its services. Lone parents are offered New Deal when they attend the Jobcentre Plus office for any number of reasons. For example, they may want to enquire about benefits, have general interest in getting help on employment matters, or specifically want to join the New Deal. The Adviser introduces these customers to NDLP, informing them that it is a voluntary programme and that they will be assigned to a particular PA who will help them while they are on it.

The precise content of each NDLP interview depends upon the reason the customer gives for coming to the Jobcentre Plus office. Generally, the Adviser informs customers that NDLP offers training and may then discuss training possibilities. The Adviser may also do a 'Better-Off Calculation', which shows whether a customer would be better off financially taking a particular job – either actual or hypothetical – than receiving a public benefit. In addition, the Adviser may do computerised job searches, help customers fill in application forms, counsel them about child care possibilities, and/or help them with benefit or tax queries.

3.1.2 Fitting Employment Retention and Advancement intake and random assignment into standard procedures

Within programme requirements and subject to overview and monitoring by the project team, the six districts were given a certain amount of autonomy to devise their own practices for operating ERA, and they exercised significant discretion in the way they could organise its recruitment, intake, and random assignment processes.¹⁰ Moreover, within a particular district, different staff members sometimes used somewhat different procedures, and over time, districts' procedures and structures were often adjusted in the light of experience. For example, all districts changed their practices to improve uptake rates of members of the Working Tax Credit (WTC) target group that were slower than anticipated at the start of the demonstration.

The ERA guidelines issued to the participating Jobcentre Plus offices estimated that the ERA intake process should take about 20 minutes. To fit in with the districts' organisational structures, the ND25 plus ERA intake interview was to be performed at the initial meeting with the customer. For NDLP customers, the interview could occur at that point or in a subsequent session. In both cases, it was left to the district to determine whether the New Deal appointment time of 40 minutes should be

⁹ Across the Jobcentre Plus offices covered in this study, most staff members conducting these intake interviews were Personal Advisers (PAs) or Advancement Support Advisers (ASAs).

¹⁰ (Hall *et al.*, 2005).

extended to allow extra time for ERA intake and random assignment. In some districts it was decided to lengthen ND25 plus interviews – typically by ten minutes, and in one case by 20 minutes. Other districts did not allow for extra time.

As will be discussed in more detail in the next section, Advisers could fit their explanations of ERA and random assignment into intake interviews either before or after discussing the New Deal. Regardless of how the discussion was sequenced, they were directed to use an intake script provided during their training for the project (see Appendix C for a copy of the script) to explain ERA and random assignment. The ERA guidelines did not require Advisers to read out the script or cover its topics in any prescribed order, but they did specify that the script's key messages should be incorporated into the intake interview.

Also during the intake interview, the Adviser was expected to fill out the ERA Basic Information Form (BIF). (See Appendix D for a copy of this document.) Its first sections asked for such data as demographic and identifying information and information on any barriers to employment that the customer was facing. (This same information is routinely sought in New Deal programmes that are not involved in ERA.) Rather than being a clerical form, the ERA BIF was designed to be accessed through the Internet at a special secure website, with the Adviser filling out the form online.

At the point in the interview when ERA and random assignment had been explained, the Adviser asked customers whether or not they wished to take part in ERA. If someone refused, the Adviser clicked in a box on the BIF, generating and printing a declaration of refusal form. The customer was asked to sign it, and in doing so knowingly refused any future participation in ERA.

If a customer agreed to ERA participation, the Adviser clicked in another box, generating an informed consent (declaration of consent) document to be read and signed. The signature did not mean that the customer was obligated to maintain participation in ERA. A customer could decide to withdraw at any time.¹¹ (See Appendix E for copies of the consent and refusal forms.)

If a customer was undecided, they had two weeks to come back and refuse or consent to take part. The BIF remained accessible for this two-week period once the 'Undecided' option was selected. After two weeks the BIF became locked for that customer.

¹¹ Technically, customers could withdraw just from the ERA programme and its services, or from the ERA study, with the latter type of withdrawal preventing evaluators from contacting the customer for information connected to their research.

When the Adviser clicked in the declaration of consent box, a Random Assignment button appeared in the BIF. When it was clicked, it generated notification that the customer had been assigned to a programme or control group. Finally, following random assignment, Advisers were instructed to fill out one last portion of the BIF, which asked for more detailed information on customers' dependent children and contact information that would be used to help researchers keep track of people enrolled in the study.¹²

3.1.3 Confronting technological difficulties

One problem in following the procedures related to the online BIF was that sometimes the Internet access failed: Either a particular office could not get access to the Internet or access was unavailable throughout the district. In other cases, it simply functioned too slowly, resulting in longer-than-intended intake interviews. In time, upgrades to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Jobcentre Plus Internet systems and software helped reduce these problems considerably.

Jobcentre Plus had contingency plans to deal with difficulty in accessing the Internet. If it was impossible to access it in one office, an Adviser was to call a staff member in a different office in the district and give that person the customer's information to enter into the BIF. The staff member with Internet access would then inform the Adviser of the random assignment outcome. If, exceptionally, the system was down nationally, an Adviser was instructed to call a Technical Adviser (TA), who would use the information from the paper BIF to do a clerical random assignment. In all, 8.1 per cent of all random assignments were completed through one of these contingency methods.

These contingency procedures were useful, preventing a freeze on random assignment when the Internet was not accessible. Unsurprisingly, the procedures also made random assignment much more cumbersome. For example, conveying information back and forth between offices added time to the intake process and TAs were not always immediately available to perform clerical random assignment.

3.2 Staffing random assignment and Employment Retention and Advancement intake

In some districts, Advancement Support Advisers (ASAs) were responsible for working with ERA programme group customers only after random assignment had taken place. In others they were also responsible, alongside New Deal Personal Advisers (NDPAs), for conducting intake interviews. Typically, ASAs in the latter

¹² In practice, some Advisers sought this information earlier in the interview and completed the section later and others missed this step altogether, assuming – sometimes mistakenly – that this information would be collected at a later point in the ERA process.

group handed over to NDPAs customers allocated to the control group and customers who refused to participate in ERA. However, ASAs occasionally continued to work with members of programme and control groups as well as customers who refused random assignment. This staffing pattern was used mostly in smaller offices, but in one district all NDLP cases were handled in this way.

3.3 The complications of introducing a new programme to which only some Jobcentre Plus customers will be randomly assigned

One important objective for Jobcentre Plus offices implementing random assignment was to keep the intake process for the New Deal groups as normal as possible. At first glance, it might appear that the most 'normal' approach would be to tell customers about the regular New Deal programme and then introduce, as an add-on to that discussion, extra information about ERA and random assignment.

The reality was more complicated. As noted, managers, supervisors, and Advisers in Jobcentre Plus offices had discretion about how to sequence explanations of ERA and the New Deal. In some offices, managers decided that it was best to begin with ERA when dealing with ND25 plus customers. The concern here was that leading with the New Deal would give the ND25 plus customers the mistaken impression that ERA, like the New Deal programme the person had just heard about, was mandatory. In contrast, some staff members, especially those advising lone parents, thought it was most logical to introduce the New Deal first and then present ERA as one of the options associated with joining the New Deal. Other Intake Officers adopted mixed strategies, adjusting their decisions about how to sequence explanations to the needs and circumstances of individual customers. (See Appendix F for further details on these sequencing decisions.)

Regardless of how the explanations were sequenced, the challenge was to give customers a clear picture of both random assignment (and the ERA programme that was its focus) and the New Deal. Most often (always in the case of ND25 plus customers), the topics were all to be covered in one intake interview. This meant that sometimes explanations were rushed or that one topic was covered in depth and another only lightly. On the whole, researchers' observations of the intake interviews make it clear that the amount of detail given to customers about ERA was quite limited unless customers asked questions, which comparatively few did. It was unusual for both the research and the programme to be explained fully, even rarer for Advisers to distinguish between the two, and in some cases the explanation of both was minimal.

When explanations were fuller, there was the danger of information overload, with customers failing to absorb all of what they were being told. One ASA described this problem:

R1: *'Honestly, they just wanted to get out of there because we had hour interviews...It was me talking, you know, I'm trying to be interesting, trying to keep it going, but hell it's me talking at them for 30 minutes, and yes they just signed, you know. I didn't actually get a lot of questions like you got. I think I must've just bored them to death.'*

Some customers left the sessions confused about what they were expected to do. For example, some customers thought that, like the New Deal, ERA was a mandatory activity. Also, many customers had only vague impressions of what ERA offered them. Both the observations of intake interviews and interviews with customers after those sessions suggest that when invited to participate in ERA, customers would generally have known only that some form of extra help was potentially available if they found work and that they had a 50-50 chance of receiving it.

Appendix F offers more detail on the challenges of explaining random assignment in the midst of introducing customers to other programmes and procedures. In retrospect, there might have been more clarity if these challenges had been more fully anticipated. For example, rather than relying primarily on staff's improvisations about how to structure these explanations, it might have been useful to supplement their basic scripts with fuller guidance on how to present the information, perhaps by providing more opportunities to 'practise' delivering the script during the training sessions and/or providing more written guidance on what to cover when explaining random assignment and how to do so.

3.4 Conclusion

As shown in this chapter, merging random assignment procedures into normal programme intake processes can present challenges. Computer applications and Internet access, if not reliable and fast, can make random assignment procedures cumbersome. In addition, depending on how random assignment is structured and how extensively staff are trained for it, explanations of the random assignment process and of the programme for which customers **may** be eligible, run the risk of leaving customers confused about what exactly they are being offered and whether, in fact, they are being invited or mandated to apply for a programme.

The report now turns to its examination of what happened in the intake interviews as staff tried to market and explain random assignment and ERA to customers and encourage them to agree to be randomly assigned.

4 Customers' agreement and response to random assignment

Random assignment itself is a mathematical and objective process, but the preliminary step of engaging potential research subjects in a random assignment study involves human interactions. Without coercing participation, staff in charge of random assignment must present the study and the services being tested in a way that people find meaningful and appealing – in effect, they must **market** the random assignment study. But in doing so, they must also convey that taking up the offer does not mean that applicants are guaranteed a slot in the programme – only that they have a 50-50 chance of being selected. Moreover, staff should encourage all eligible customers to volunteer to be randomly assigned, even those whom they personally believe might not take advantage of the programme or benefit from it.

This chapter examines how staff associated with Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) addressed the challenges of marketing ERA and random assignment, and how they adjusted their sales strategies to respond to different customer characteristics. The chapter also points to cross-pressures to meet other kinds of goals that could complicate efforts to sell random assignment.

4.1 Marketing Employment Retention and Advancement and random assignment

While the normal job of a New Deal Personal Adviser (NDPA) includes an element of 'selling' – that is, getting eligible individuals to take up the programmes and assistance offered to them – marketing ERA and random assignment added to the challenges of the usual recruitment tasks. When staff tried to sell ERA, they:

- had a dual obligation – to market random assignment to customers while also helping them understand their right to refuse to take part in it;

- faced guaranteed uncertainty in the outcome of their dealings with any given customer, since each customer had only a 50-50 chance of obtaining the service that the adviser was trying to sell;
- were expected to encourage **all** eligible target group members to be randomly assigned and have a chance to join ERA, even those who, in their judgement, would not benefit from the programme or whom they might like to see placed in the regular New Deal programme for other reasons;
- were under some degree of pressure to ensure that as many customers as possible participated in the random assignment process, until sample targets were reached.

How did the staff respond to this special set of challenges? To understand their responses, it is helpful to have a sense first of how they viewed the programme into which they were recruiting customers. The next section, thus, considers what the staff thought about ERA.

4.2 Staff views of Employment Retention and Advancement

Overall, staff viewed ERA positively. In the focus groups, they invariably characterised ERA as 'marvellous', comprising 'virtually all positives and no hidden negatives'. They were particularly pleased that their support could follow people into employment and hoped that this ongoing assistance could break the low-pay-no-pay cycle. Another feature of the programme that they saw as important was its capacity to offer customers training while they were working. For all of these reasons, Advancement Support Advisers (ASAs) viewed ERA as a programme that could be marketed without any inhibition and most were keen to do so.

At the same time, their views varied in accord with the target populations with which they worked. ASAs working with lone parents were generally more positive about ERA than staff dealing with New Deal 25 Plus (ND25 plus) customers.

Moreover, findings from the focus groups, the individual interviews, and the implementation report¹³ indicate that staff not trained as ASAs tended to be more muted in their praise of ERA, if only because they knew less about its details. It seemed 'almost too good to be true', which left some Personal Advisers (PAs) wondering whether it could really be as good as they had been told. Even so, only one purely negative reaction to ERA surfaced during the research. It came from a New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) adviser, who, feeling that ERA was a 'gimmick', thought that incentives would encourage employers to pay less and that if customers wanted to progress, they should be able to do so under their own steam.

¹³ (Hall *et al.*, 2005).

4.3 Staff views of random assignment

In ERA, frontline staff not only had to sell a potentially beneficial programme, they had to do so while at the same time informing potential customers that they might not be selected even if they volunteered. To meet both parts of this challenge well, staff had to follow procedures and explain clearly what the process meant and how it worked. It is common for staff in any random assignment study to feel some discomfort with this task. Therefore, it is critical that they view the process as ultimately fair and ethical.

The ERA research indicates that most staff did believe that random assignment was 'fair' and 'fine' and that they accepted the need to evaluate ERA. While many staff regarded ERA positively, they knew the programme was expensive and, thus, thought it was important to evaluate its effectiveness. As highlighted in the implementation report,¹⁴ staff strongly believed that under normal circumstances everyone should be able to get access to a service. But they also conceded that the provision of something 'extra' to only some could be justified by the need to evaluate a new treatment and by the customers' understanding of the purposes of such an evaluation. Most staff also saw the need for constructing programme and control groups to carry out an evaluation and intuitively appreciated the logic behind random assignment. When focus group participants were asked how they would defend random assignment, the main arguments were that it was the customers' choice to participate, that ERA was a research project that had been explained, and that 'nobody had to take part'.

But despite this general affirmation of random assignment, other more subtle feelings and reactions came into play as staff implemented random assignment procedures. As noted earlier, some staff were troubled by the denial of services to customers they considered 'deserving', especially when they believed that people assigned to the programme group would not take advantage of the ERA opportunity. Thus, while two-thirds of staff (16 of 24) interviewed after conducting intake sessions with ND25 plus customers considered random assignment to be either fine or fair, almost two-fifths (nine of 24) were disturbed that it *'didn't always pick the people who would benefit most'*. Two of these staff members went so far as to actively disagree with random assignment on these grounds, one arguing that ERA should be made available to everyone, the other only to people *'who could really benefit'*. In a similar pattern, interviews of NDLP staff indicated that while 12 of 15 interviewees thought that random assignment was fair, or at least the 'fairest' way to allocate the customers to the different groups, three had some kind of reservation. One Adviser said that she didn't like it *'as customers seem to think I have some kind of control over the outcome'*. The others regretted that random assignment didn't always pick people who would benefit most:

¹⁴ (Hall et al., 2005).

'I haven't got anything against it, and I understand why we are using it, but I just sometimes wish I could make some people programme group because I can see a definite benefit to them.'

One of these, referring to an objection that could apply to geographical area-based pilots as well, thought:

'It's an extremely unfair system but I know why it's done – we have to get on with it. It's unfair because everyone should be treated the same regardless of race, creed, colour, or geographical area, etc.'

Furthermore, regardless of whether staff saw random assignment as fair in theory, many were very sceptical, especially in the early stages of carrying out the process, about the impartiality of the procedures designed to produce two matched groups. For example, some could see no other reason for the Basic Information Form (BIF) system collecting personal information on customers if that information was not used for the purpose of defining the programme and control groups. Moreover, staff were often convinced that they could find patterns in the assignment results. Indeed, the focus groups featured heated debates between staff who were and were not convinced that assignment was random.

Some participants cited examples of staff actually trying to 'play the system', underscoring the importance of establishing safeguards to prevent this from happening. For example, staff at one Jobcentre Plus office wished to maximise the chance that two brothers who were planning to set up a joint business would both be accepted into ERA, thus doubling the financial resources they could secure. Concerned that the allocation system might prevent sequential allocations to the programme group from the same computer terminal or from the same staff member, it was arranged for different staff to complete separate BIFs on different machines. In fact, the brothers were assigned to different research groups, but staff involved felt that 'they had given it their best shot'.

Over time, the suspicions of most staff who doubted the randomness of the procedures were allayed, especially as any patterning that they perceived dissipated as more and more people were assigned. However, a few staff members remained unconvinced.

4.4 Ensuring that staff randomly assigned all eligible customers

The expectation for the marketing of ERA random assignment is that staff would use the same level of energy in recruiting all customers who were eligible for the study. There was, however, at least one reason why staff might have used their own discretion in deciding how hard to sell random assignment to certain customers: Jobcentre Plus job-entry targets. As will be discussed, so far it seems quite likely that this threat to the representative nature of the sample produced through ERA random assignment was contained. Nevertheless, because it is a kind of problem

that random-assignment studies need to guard against, it is useful to examine its manifestation in ERA.

The Jobcentre Plus target structure holds staff accountable for job entries. During ERA intake there were three sets of circumstances in which staff members' interest in meeting job-entry goals could have influenced their behaviour in marketing random assignment:

- If a PA succeeded in persuading someone who was already working to join ERA, that person would be transferred to an ASA's caseload, and the ASA, not the original Adviser who did the intake interview, would get credit for the customer's employment.
- If a PA sensed that someone was a **very poor** prospect for employment and thus would be unlikely to add a job placement to their record, the Adviser might wish to avoid having the customer on their caseload; instead, they would want to move that person to ERA and an ASA. A remark of one focus group participant points to this dynamic:

R4: 'The New Deal Adviser knew the person sat in front of them. If they knew they were an absolutely no-hoper of finding work, they would think "I'm going to get rid of you." And they would sell that programme (ERA) and sell it, and sell it, and sell it, hoping they'd press the button and they'd be in programme...'

- If an ASA judged an unemployed customer as a good bet for a job **and** thought that that person would stay on their caseload after joining ERA, there was reason to try hard to sell ERA. As another focus group participant put it:

R3: 'I think definitely it is a case of each Adviser. If you've got an excellent client who you know for a fact is going to get a job, you don't want to let go of that client. But purely it's based on stats because we have to achieve targets...'

Overall, when NDPAs undertook the interviewing, they had reason to encourage people with poor job prospects to join ERA (because in many cases they would move on to ASAs and off their caseloads) and those with good prospects to refuse (because they would keep them on their caseloads and get credit for a placement). When ASAs were involved in conducting intake interviews, they could have benefited from encouraging customers with poor employment prospects to refuse ERA and people with good prospects to join.

While the incentive structure that was just described was real and widely recognised, it is impossible to assess, with any degree of precision, how strong an effect it had on marketing strategies (and, thus, on the resulting make-up of the groups of customers who ended up being randomly assigned). What is known is that there was an institutional effort to prevent incentives from influencing random assignment: One of the responsibilities of the Technical Advisers (TAs) was running spot checks to identify and stop possible diversion of customers away from ERA as a result of perceived job-entry target prospects. The debriefing with the TAs confirmed that

they had uncovered such problems and intervened. Overall, at least thus far, there is little or no evidence that the influence of job targets was pervasive enough to erode the basic representativeness of the customers who were randomly assigned.¹⁵

4.5 Encouraging customers to try their luck with random assignment

As noted, because most staff supported the aims of ERA, they found it easy to make the case that the programme was in customers' best interests. Within this overall framework, staff used a combination of marketing strategies. One important approach, mainly applied to customers who already had jobs, was to focus on post-employment support. Staff found it easy to argue that ERA was in customers' best interests, in that it would allow staff to continue to offer positive support even after people had found jobs.

Many staff believed that their 'biggest sales point' was that customers were 'able to leave ERA at any time'. This feature of the programme allowed staff to say to customers that 'they had everything to gain and nothing to lose'. Another selling device was to refer to ERA as a 'once-in-a-lifetime opportunity'. Because people who refused random assignment were prevented from future participation in the study, staff could sometimes persuade indecisive customers by telling them that they only had one chance to accept and could not come back if they changed their minds.

Staff were also able to capitalise on the trust that they established with customers. In some cases that trust had been built up through years of contact; in others it could be the result of rapport established in a single interview. Lone parents, for instance, were often nervous about going to the Jobcentre Plus office and in an intake interview quickly warmed to an Adviser who was supportive. By building on these trusting relationships, staff were able to say, for example, 'I want the best for you', 'Trust me' and 'I wouldn't recommend it, if I didn't think it could help'.

Some staff even relied on reciprocity, asking customers for help: '*I've got a 100 per cent record [of acceptances]. Don't ruin it!*'. One NDLP adviser was visibly shocked when a customer initially refused to join ERA, telling the customer 'you are the first person to have ever refused it'. The customer eventually accepted – but in one illustration of mixed strategies, her decision to participate in ERA came after she was

¹⁵ The fact that Jobcentre Plus offices incorporated the random assignment procedures into their New Deal intake process in different ways, helped to minimise the effect that the job-entry target incentive structure had on the representativeness of the sample eventually randomly assigned. In other words, the fact that intake interviewing was done primarily by NDPAs in some offices and by ASAs in others, probably would have worked to offset the tendency (if there were one) for a disproportionate number of people with poor job prospects or with good job prospects to be randomly assigned as part of the study.

informed of the financial incentives and was told by her mother, who had accompanied her to the intake interview, that 'you have nothing to lose'.

Staff also acknowledged that some customers probably agreed to participate in ERA because they wrongly believed that it was mandatory or that it was an alternative to the New Deal regime. What is less evident is the extent to which staff consciously exploited this misunderstanding. Certainly, some staff said that they explicitly sought to ensure that customers did not dwell too much on the decision to participate, although this does not mean that they were deliberately trying to obscure the fact that ERA was voluntary. The question of how clearly the message that customers had to consent to ERA was conveyed is explored in more detail in the next chapter.

4.6 Emphasising the programme's positive features without precipitating disappointment in the control group

Part of the challenge of marketing random assignment is striking the right balance between stressing a programme's benefits without dwelling on them to the point that control group members are unduly upset when they learn they will not be eligible for those benefits. In ERA the tension between these two goals was reflected in how staff handled their explanations of financial incentives, and more generally in the way they presented the entire package of ERA services.

Financial incentives were clearly a potentially attractive feature of ERA. Indeed, besides the approach of telling customers that they had nothing to lose by participating in ERA, many staff thought that this aspect of the programme was one of the most important selling points in persuading reluctant customers to participate.

Nevertheless, staff described how managers and trainers had initially advised them to refrain from mentioning the incentives. This was because advisers and managers had voiced concerns in early consultations with the Project Team, prior to the start of random assignment, that customers assigned to the control group might resent not gaining access to ERA services. Staff reported that this guidance had subsequently been relaxed and staff felt that they then were able to be more explicit about what ERA offered if they wished. This change made some of them feel more confident about their ability to sell ERA to customers (although some of the increased confidence may have simply come from their becoming more comfortable with ERA after an initial bedding-in period).

Still, even after the point at which staff believed that the guidance had been relaxed, most staff generally avoided telling people the specific sums that they stood to gain by participating in ERA, and many staff – for example, Advisers in 23 of the 30 ND25 plus interviews witnessed – continued not to mention financial incentives at all unless explicitly asked. Reports from the observations of intake interviews for ND25

plus customers were that the incentives were brought up spontaneously in seven interviews, while in another four sessions they were covered in response to a specific question. And while no staff member who was observed declined to talk about incentives if asked, a number of them pre-empted this possibility by saying something along the lines of: 'All I can tell you about ERA at the moment is that it offers you new services'.

NDLP Advisers were less likely than Advisers of the ND25 plus target group to take the initiative to tell customers about the incentives: Of the NDLP staff observed in interviews, only one mentioned incentives (without citing the amount), while most of the NDLP staff members who were interviewed said that they never told lone parents about the incentives before random assignment.

One likely reason why NDLP Advisers followed this practice is that they did not need to use the prospect of the financial incentives as a marketing strategy because many lone parents were already agreeing to join ERA without them. Indeed a number of NDLP Advisers interviewed by researchers said they mentioned the incentives to lone parents only when they judged it was necessary to persuade them to participate.

Often, it appears, financial incentives were not used as an initial marketing strategy but as one that came into play when others seemed to be inadequate. Thus, when a customer was told, '*have a go, you have nothing to lose*', but still seemed to have doubts, the Adviser might mention financial incentives as a further inducement to joining. Also, according to some staff, the new guidance allowed them to mention incentives '*to overcome resistance*' of people '*who were simply refusing to complete the BIF*'.

Overall, then, it appears that most staff interpreted cautiously what they thought was the later advice to be more open about incentives, mentioning them primarily when asked, or perhaps to avert an impending refusal, for example, when customers were not sufficiently convinced by the argument that they had nothing to lose. For the most part, customers were simply told that ERA could offer them 'help' and 'support' after they obtained employment, and for most, this was enough for them to '*give it a go*'.

There is also evidence of some staff feeling inhibited by random assignment from vigorously promoting ERA:

R1: '*It does seem a bit unfair, but then it would be worse for us if we told them what was in it, because you would then need to say, "Oh no, you're not getting it." It's harder, so it's basically easier not to tell them so that they're not so disappointed... We were advised to start with [the rule] that we weren't to tell them.*'

As a sign of this focus on the feelings of their customers, some staff found that waiting to learn the outcome of random assignment was uncomfortable:

R6: *'I felt totally uncomfortable every time with that [random assignment]. I never got used it.'*

R5: *'Pretend you press that key to say "Random Assignment". Yes!'*

R1: *'I used to walk away and go to the photocopier to photocopy the consent forms so that I wouldn't be sitting there when it came up. But I'd tell them what to look for: "Programme, control; look." And I'd walk away. I just couldn't stay there.'*

R6: *'I hated it.'*

Besides the empathy that many staff felt for customers, another motive for their hesitancy to elaborate on the potential benefits of ERA may have been that they wanted to avoid antagonising any customers with whom they might continue to work after those people were assigned to the control group.

4.7 How much emphasis to place on research? A complex choice

Explaining ERA to potential customers involved discussing not just the random assignment process, but, more broadly, that applicants would be part of a research project. This could be another potential deterrent to customers agreeing to join ERA.

The interviews and focus groups generated mixed staff reactions on this point. Some staff were convinced that research was an impediment. They thought that the very word 'research' frightened people, that it smacked of hassle, tedium, and risk. They argued that customers were 'not comfortable with people researching their lives', especially if they had income other than Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). To address this perceived hostility to research, some of these staff members said that they stressed the study's confidentiality and anonymity, while others deliberately never mentioned research, or, in a compromise strategy, used the terms 'pilot' or 'project' and occasionally 'survey' rather than 'research'.

Other staff did mention the research element – for various reasons. Some brought it up simply because that is what they saw the project to be about. The following extract from one of the interviews observed with a ND25 plus customer illustrates this approach:

'Before we talk more about New Deal there is something else that you may be interested in. Because you are joining New Deal you have become eligible to also take part in some research. This research is looking at new services that are available and seeing if they work. What this means is that if you want to take part I will ask you some basic information and put it on the computer and the computer will decide if you get the new services – so you have a 50-50 chance. What do you think? It's entirely up to you.'

Another reason to talk about research was to help justify what was required of customers, for example, supplying contact names on the BIF to allow researchers to keep in touch with members of the research sample. The request for this information, which is otherwise not usually required for New Deal customers, proved to be a source of considerable contention, and some staff thought it helped to be able to ascribe the need for it to the research study. And naturally, mentioning research could help to legitimise random assignment: the need to have *'two groups – one to compare against – to see if the experimental programme makes a difference'*.

Some staff not only mentioned research but actively sought to persuade customers of its value, appealing to their altruism or intellectual interests. They would explain how the research study might change government policy, or help later generations of jobseekers or over the longer term, even the customers themselves. Depending on the customer, some staff also explained the methodological rationale of the study, its policy reasoning, the experience of using random assignment in such programmes in the US, and the government's interest in trying out the policy to see if it really worked. These sorts of remarks occurred especially in the observed NDLP interviews and in the NDLP sessions when Advisers felt that they were dealing with customers who had a good understanding of what was being offered to them.

Whatever the exact level of customer resistance to the overall concept of research, staff generally agreed that most were not put off by one of the key features of the study and random assignment – that a customer had only a 50 per cent chance of joining ERA. They felt that typically customers did not refuse ERA for this reason.

4.8 How willing were customers to be randomly assigned?

The preceding discussions of staff explanatory and marketing practices, and especially the discussions of how staff tried to tailor their messages to customers, have touched on customers' responses to ERA. This section shifts the focus more directly to customers, adding further detail to the account of their reactions.

After the initial stages of the demonstration, the great majority of customers who were given the option of random assignment accepted the offer. By the demonstration's end, the overall proportion of customers who had refused ERA participation was relatively low – only 8.4 per cent of the total number of people who were invited to join the study. The numbers of lone parents who agreed to participate in ERA built up swiftly – so much so that during summer 2004, one district had to call a halt to the recruitment to prevent caseloads from growing too large for ASAs to handle. But early in the intake period, the overall rate of refusal to participate was much higher than had been anticipated, largely owing to ND25 plus cases. Subsequently, after concerted efforts were made to respond to the problem, the trend was reversed, with refusal rates falling sharply over the random assignment period.

4.8.1 Why did most customers agree to join?

What persuaded customers to accept the offer to be part of the ERA study? For lone parents, one factor clearly was that they were already volunteering for the New Deal, and thus, were receptive to viewing ERA as a potentially valuable part of this experience. And one reason that ND25 plus customers appeared to take part in the programme was that they thought that it might help them find work or advance their careers or be of value to them in other unspecified ways. Also, some ND25 plus customers thought ERA was compulsory and a similar number were persuaded to 'give it a go' but thought that they could always withdraw at a later date.

Most broadly, for the overwhelming number of interviews that were observed, it appeared that customers, both lone parents and ND25 plus members, simply followed staff advice to accept the ERA offer. Few customers in observed interviews asked many questions about ERA, with the most common being ND25 plus customers asking whether it would affect their benefits. Very few of them put up marked resistance to joining the programme and at the same time, only three were actively won round. (Some staff noted that especially because they were accustomed to a mandatory regime, these customers were generally conditioned through routine to do what their Advisers asked of them.) Following much the same pattern, most lone parents in the observed interviews seemed quite indifferent to ERA, with few having questions, and only one actively won around.

Some customers who had agreed to participate in ERA and whom researchers interviewed following their intake interviews were able to offer specific reasons for why they had accepted the offer, mainly citing the extra supports ERA provides. But on the whole, interviewees were not explicit in explaining their acceptance. Nevertheless, customers who did accept and were subsequently assigned to the programme group were generally pleased with the outcome.

4.8.2 Why did some customers refuse or resist the offer?

As just discussed, when refusals did occur, they generally came from members of the ND25 plus target group.

ND25 plus customers

ND25 plus customers had a number of reasons to be more resistant to ERA than lone parents. To start with, they were mandated to participate in the New Deal and were sometimes puzzled by how the additional offer of ERA fitted into the mandate. In addition, many of these customers had been out of work for long periods of time, sometimes for years, so some of them found it difficult to focus on what might happen after they found a job, because this was an outcome that they and their Advisers thought rather unlikely. Others who could imagine getting a job in the near future did not welcome the idea of staying in touch with an organisation with which they had grown weary of communicating.

When asked in the focus groups and research interviews to categorise customers' reasons for refusal, staff generally drew on the individual cases that they had encountered that seemed imprinted on their memories – perhaps because once the initial stages of the intake period were over, those cases were rare (and were always so for lone parents). Still, some staff in the focus groups said that despite variation in the kind of people who refused, there was a set of interrelated attitudes found among some customers, and particularly ND25 plus customers, which was a good predictor that these customers would decline participation.

The mainly ND25 plus customers who held these attitudes were described as having a strong antipathy to government or feeling alienated from systems of support and governance, reacting against the labour market, and being resistant to change or taking risks, and *'preferring to stick with what they know'*. For example, in one observed intake session, a customer who had previously successfully appealed against participation in New Deal on the grounds of his caring responsibilities rejected all overtures to New Deal and then ERA: *'It's just another government stunt!'* Being told about the Retention Bonus of £400 every 17 weeks made no difference for, as the customer explained afterwards, *'it's just a few extra quid to try to stay in a job, this time. It may work for some but not for me'*. Nothing said convinced this customer that Jobcentre Plus had anything worthwhile to assist people in his position.

Still another possible reason for refusals among ND25 plus customers is that it might have been appealing to decline to do something in the context of a programme that was mostly mandatory. Thus, two customers interviewed after refusing to join ERA took obvious satisfaction in having been given this choice:

'I am aware it is research and there was a choice involved and I exercised that choice.'

'I knew it was some sort of random control experiment. It did not affect my decision to refuse. If they give me a choice then I am always going to refuse.'

Possible additional reasons for refusals

Staff who participated in interviews with researchers and focus groups advanced a few other ideas about why someone might turn down ERA. Some staff pointed out that a lone parent who was approaching Jobcentre Plus for specific advice about benefits, for example, tax credits, might refuse because they would not see the relevance of ERA. Staff also mentioned customers being engaged in benefit fraud as a possible reason for refusal. Some staff noted that, especially early on in the study period, their own interviewing skills fell short of what was needed, and that this could have been a deterrent to persuading people to accept ERA. For example, one staff member recalled an interview with a lone parent that went so poorly that she was unable to convince the customer to join New Deal, let alone ERA. Another explained how early on she had *'just tagged ERA on'* to the NDLP in her interviews and failed *'to do enough to convince'* customers that ERA was worthwhile. Since changing her approach, she had not had a single refusal.

Observations of one interview suggest that yet another reason for a refusal might be that a customer simply was not given enough information about ERA (although as noted, many customers who were given relatively sketchy information did agree to join). The customer in this session was already working 14 hours a week and wished to work more. The ERA Financial Incentives could well have been of interest to someone in this situation. The Adviser did allude to the Retention Bonus, but he did not specifically connect it to the customer's work needs or mention its amount. Moreover, when the customer refused ERA, the Adviser made no attempt to dissuade him from doing so. When the customer was subsequently interviewed by the researchers he reasserted his desire to work more hours but could not see how ERA would help him to achieve this. Asked what might have caused him to change his mind about participating, he replied:

'More time to think about it and possibly some upfront information may have helped. All this information came as a bit of a shock.'

Pointing to the complexity of factors that could influence the course of an intake interview, there is more than one possible reason why the Adviser chose to give this customer only minimal information about ERA. To start, the staff member explained that although he would mention the amount of the financial incentives associated with ERA if a customer asked him, it was his practice not to introduce this information into the session. The staff member also noted that he used a person's interest in ERA as a gauge of that person's motivation – and it is possible that he had judged that the customer who was working 14 hours a week was not really interested in working longer hours.

4.9 Conclusion

Staff developed a number of strategies to sell ERA, achieving a low refusal rate by the end of the demonstration's random assignment period. Thus, the vast majority of customers who were invited to join the study did so. Some staff found that mentioning financial incentives helped them market ERA, but on the whole, financial incentives were not central to marketing strategies. For the most part, customers followed the advice of staff to *'have a go, you have nothing to lose'*. Constrained by time and wanting to avoid disappointing customers assigned to the control group, staff generally offered only the information that they found necessary to secure successful recruitment. Thus, typically customers were told that the ERA programme offered help and support for them after they started a job; and that participation was voluntary. Staff also, however, tailored the information they conveyed according to the situations of the customers they were addressing. Customers had the opportunity to elicit further information through questioning the Adviser, but few chose to do so.

5 Securing informed consent

Obtaining the informed consent of participants to be randomly assigned and to allow agency-held data about them to be used to evaluate the programme is an important requirement of many experimental research studies, including the study of the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) programme. Yet very little research has been done that examines the extent to which people's consent to being part of a social policy random assignment study is truly 'informed'.¹⁶

The ethical guidelines of the Social Research Association (SRA) describe gaining informed consent as:

*'a procedure for ensuring that research subjects understand what is being done to them, the limits to their participation and awareness of any potential risks they incur.'*¹⁷

In essence, informed consent depends on two conditions being met: first, that consent is obtained fairly and without coercion, and second, that potential research subjects are given and understand enough information to allow them meaningful choice. This chapter examines how ERA sought to meet those standards, and what factors influence how much research subjects understand what they are told.

5.1 Assessing the informed consent process

As noted in Chapter 1, there is no universal standard to measure what level of understanding is 'enough' to ensure that consent is truly informed and freely given. In the words of the SRA guidelines:

¹⁶ In one such study that has examined this topic, Stratford et al. (2005) reported retrospective accounts of intake into the Job Retention and Rehabilitation pilots that also employed random assignment and expressed concern about the limited recall and diverse understandings of the consent process.

¹⁷ (SRA, 2003 [28]).

*'the principle of informed consent is necessarily vague, since it depends for its interpretation on unstated assumptions about the amount of information and the nature of consent required to constitute acceptable practice.'*¹⁸

Thus, for ERA, as for all or nearly all demonstrations, opinions on what and how much potential research subjects need to know are very likely to vary. However, an awareness of several principles or guidelines may facilitate the consideration of how much information was adequate in this particular case:

- In explicitly mentioning the need for informed consent to help people avoid any **risks** associated with research, SRA implies that this goal is more important than informing them of its potential **benefits**.
- The intake training script provided to staff contains key messages about ERA that it was believed were the most essential points to convey for reasons of equity. Those messages can be summarised as: ERA is a programme that offers work-related help; it is voluntary; allocation is random (50-50); and customers will still receive existing services if they do not end up in ERA.
- While the boundaries are by no means rigid, there is a distinction between being able to understand a choice sufficiently **to make an informed decision about it**, and understanding it well enough **to explain it to another person**.

This chapter examines informed consent from the vantage point of two interrelated questions:

- 1 Was consent freely given?** Here the focus is on whether the rules and policies governing informed consent were followed, and even if they were, whether any practices fell into a grey area of technically adhering to the rules but violating their spirit to the degree that there might have been some coercion.
- 2 Beyond adherence to formal rules and regulations, how clearly and fully were ERA and random assignment explained?**

5.2 Ensuring all customers received an acceptable level of information about Employment Retention and Advancement before joining

As noted earlier, staff had been given a simple script to follow to guide their explanations and marketing of ERA in the intake interviews. However, as was the case for staff decisions about how to sequence explanations of ERA and the New Deal, more generally staff found they had many choices in how to use the broad framework of the script. As a result, the content of intake interviews varied across offices and staff.

¹⁸ (Ibid).

In part, this variation was influenced by what staff themselves knew, and by their understanding of what customers needed to know. Often, too, the same staff member would present information differently depending on the type of customer they were serving and/or that person's comments or questions. For example, one New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) Adviser described how she waited to introduce ERA at the end of the intake interview so that she could tap into what customers had revealed as their 'chosen goals'. Other staff members, conscious of the 'negative baggage' that some New Deal 25 Plus (ND25 plus) customers carried about the New Deal, would give those customers a chance to criticise Jobcentre Plus schemes in general and then, if that criticism emerged, they would attempt to sell ERA to the customers by explaining why it was different from the rest of the New Deal.

In the focus groups, several staff members spoke articulately about how rather than being a completely scripted or static process, explaining and marketing ERA and random assignment called on them to be creative.

R4: *'But even in a small group like this, it's become quite obvious that people are interpreting things differently, and actioning things differently. So that in itself must have an impact on the random assignments as well, mustn't it? Or rather how you're selling it. And therefore the take-up, you know?'* [...]

R3: *'I think when you are dealing with people as individuals; you're never going to have uniformity.'*

R5: *'When we were given a script and told we had to do this, this, and this, you just think, "Well you can't because everybody's different". You can't tell one thing exactly the same to somebody else, you just can't.'*

Although, as suggested earlier, it might have been preferable to offer staff fuller guidance on how to conduct the intake interviews, their capacity to adapt a basic message and tailor it to individual customers' characteristics and needs can be seen as a sign of strength and confidence in the product. Moreover, as is the case with the possible influence of job targets on random assignment, there is little reason to believe that the ERA random assignment was fundamentally undermined by the variation in the approaches used to relay information about ERA within, and across, Jobcentre Plus offices and staffs.

In addition to information conveyed verbally about ERA, staff usually gave customers the ERA fact sheet – containing basic information – sometimes early in the interview or otherwise as reading material while the Basic Information Form (BIF) was being completed on the computer. (See Appendix G for a copy of this fact sheet; it was made available in 23 languages.) Some customers read the sheet in detail during the interview, and some referred to it when staff directed their attention to it. Most customers, however, gave this material only cursory glances. After random assignment, customers who had been placed in the programme group were also generally given another explanatory leaflet on ERA – the ERA Information Sheet – to take away. This provided further details on the ERA programme and what it offered. (See Appendix H for a copy of this leaflet.)

5.3 Employment Retention and Advancement informed consent procedures

As discussed in Chapter 3, the ERA demonstration required customers to give informed consent during the intake interview by signing a form generated during the process of completing the BIF.¹⁹ They were also asked to consent verbally to providing contact and other information that was to be used solely for research purposes.

Customers were given copies of their signed consent or refusal forms, and the guidelines stipulated that they had up to five days to reconsider their decisions (although as will be discussed, this guidance was not always followed).

In examining the role that this signature process played in the ERA process, it is useful to be aware that in the Jobcentre Plus environment, customers are accustomed to signing forms presented to them and may assume that the repercussions will be minimal if they do not read or understand them.

5.4 How did staff try to ensure that customers understood what they were consenting to?

Most staff interviewed in the focus groups believed that they had secured informed consent because they had asked customers to sign the forms. And the observations of interviews confirm that for the most part, this procedure was scrupulously followed. In all observed interviews, customers signed the consent or refusal form. Moreover, staff in the ND25 plus interviews read the form aloud in ten of the 23 interviews in which consent was given. In all but three observed interviews, ND25 plus customers were told that their involvement in ERA was entirely voluntary, and in around a third of the interviews, it was made very clear that they had the right to withdraw at any stage. Staff used or handed out the ERA fact sheets in at least 70 per cent of ND25 plus interviews observed.

Only 12 NDLP customers in the observed interviews were explicitly told that their participation in ERA was voluntary, but this was quite clearly implied when they were asked if they wanted to 'give it a go', an implication that was probably especially clear since New Deal itself is voluntary for lone parents. And in fact, in interviews most NDLP customers said they understood that ERA was voluntary.

Staff also sought to verbally confirm customers' understanding. In focus groups many staff said that at each point in the interview, they would ask (as the scripts they

¹⁹ In addition, verbal consent was required whenever customers were involved in research exercises associated with the evaluation (including the observations and interviews that were used as sources for this special report).

had received in training had instructed them to do) 'Do you understand?' or 'Is that OK?' – and usually customers would indicate they were following or agreed. One focus group exchange showcased the technique:

R7: *'You need to gauge their understanding as you go along. And if you need to reiterate, you reiterate at that stage.'*

*Q: *'So how do you do that?'*

R7: *'You just, I mean, you can ask them questions... "Right, OK, what is your understanding of this so far?" And... you know some people are not taking it in, so you would then go over it again, before you would go on to the BIF... I certainly wouldn't want anybody to go forward with something if they didn't have the understanding.'*

R4: *'That's right.'*

R7: *'And none of them, I would say none of them... well only about five of the people that I actually saw, signed the document at the end without even reading it... "Are you going to read that first?" "No, it's alright."'*

*Q: *'So you actually prompt them at that point?'*

R7: *'Yes.'*

R4: *'If you don't understand something, stop me straightaway.'*

Staff used up to four aids, often in combination with one another, to clarify their explanations to customers. These were the ERA intake script, the ERA fact sheet, the consent form itself, and finally, the online random assignment screen.

Many staff said they showed the online random assignment screen to customers and that doing so both made the random assignment process more real and emphasised the lack of control that advisers had over the decision. As two focus group participants observed:

R4: *'I think, too, they could see it on screen, that you're pressing the button and the computer was randomly assigning them.'*

R6: *'And you were explaining to them as you were going along: "Now we've got to this part we press this button, it's going to come up and I'll be able to tell you what is going to happen next". And you were talking them through it the whole time.'*

Some staff even encouraged customers to press the 'allocation button' for themselves.

There were, however, a few instances of incorrect procedures that were followed in presenting ERA. Two out of the 34 Jobcentre Plus offices covered in the study formally secured consent **after** random assignment, although explanations of the

process were given beforehand.²⁰ This approach required customers to supply information to be used for research purposes without formally consenting to it. This practice, however, appeared to be atypical.

Even when the formality of signing a consent form is followed, however, some practices undermine that signature to the point that consent is nominal and not freely given – or is on the boundary between true assent and some degree of coercion. A few such practices surfaced in the observations.

In two cases out of the 50 observed intake interviews, for example, the customers had difficulty understanding random assignment because of language barriers. In one of these cases, the customer, who did not speak English as a first language and was expressing doubt about joining ERA, appeared to be led directly into random assignment:

Customer: *'Not sure, because I do not understand well.'*

Staff member: *'OK, I will put your details on to the system and if you get on to the programme group you can take the leaflet away and then decide.'*

In the other case, one lone parent did not understand English and although her nephew was expected to translate, he acknowledged that his ability to do so was limited. In the subsequent interview with a researcher, the customer confirmed that she had signed without understanding, noting that although she had been assigned to the programme group, she did not want to participate. (PI06007LPp)

Staff in the focus groups also mentioned additional ways in which the concept of free consent could be compromised. For example, some customers did think that participation was mandatory, and some staff in the focus groups acknowledged that they exploited this misunderstanding. In some observed interviews, customers did not read the forms and/or were given insufficient time to read them. Although customers could have asked for more time if they required it, they did not. Also, even though customers were officially given up to five days to consider their decisions, it was not uncommon for staff to insist that the decision to participate had to be made immediately. For example, in one observed interview a staff member said:

²⁰ The system, which was devised because of staffing difficulties, involved all ND25 plus customers being told that they were to be 'put forward' for a programme being researched in the locality that offered additional support and financial assistance. They were also told that the project required the collection of background information, after which the adviser would conduct random assignment to determine whether they would receive the additional help. Customers were informed that they could withdraw at any stage but usually not until after the results of random assignment were known – at which point they were asked to sign the consent form.

'Ask me any questions you like but this has to be decided today.'

The 'once-in-a-lifetime' sales pitch, which staff found so useful, could also on occasion be construed as a form of persuasion. Similarly, in three ND25 plus interviews that were observed, customers were clearly hesitating about ERA, and staff made remarks such as *'Let's get this done...'*, *'I will put you forward...'* and *'Let's go for it, OK?'* In all three of these cases, customers did sign the form, but the staff engaged customers in the ERA process without asking a direct question about consent.

5.5 Did customers leave the intake interviews with adequate knowledge of random assignment?

Most customers whom researchers interviewed appeared to appreciate that they had been assigned to one of two groups (although two ND25 plus customers failed to realise that they had been allocated to the programme group). However, very few knew why there were two groups or how people had been allocated to them. Only four ND25 plus customers understood the rationale for two groups, and two other customers understood the groups differed in some way:

'To try it out; some don't get it.'

'For study comparisons so that they can see what ERA does and does it make a difference.'

A small majority of the ND25 plus customers volunteered that the assignment had been undertaken by computer. Five understood that the assignment had been random, including one who recollected that it had been '50-50'. Three of the ND25 plus customers interviewed were found to have entirely misunderstood the basis of the allocation to the programme and control groups, believing it to have been based on need and/or the information collected on the BIF:

'I think it had to do with if I needed extra help and they must have thought that I-'t.'

In a set of reactions similar to the ones from ND25 plus customers, most lone parents who were interviewed realised they had been assigned to one of two groups, but only six out of 21 understood the rationale for having them. Of these six, one lone parent had gained a very good understanding of the programme and the research before the interview from a friend who was already in the ERA programme group. She had also read both the leaflets before the interview.

Only one NDLP customer interviewed entirely misunderstood the random assignment situation. She seemed to believe that she had been allocated to the programme group on the basis of the number of hours she would be working and the ages of her children.

The interviewers also asked customers directly about the rationale for random assignment, even though the suggested scripts for ERA did not cover this; few customers were able to articulate them. Nevertheless, as noted previously, there were no complaints that the process had been unfair: Most interviewees seemed aware that they had the same chance as anyone else. Staff confirmed this impression. Describing customers' responses to random assignment most commonly as 'acceptance' – although sometimes 'apathy' – staff said they had witnessed few objections to the principle and that it had ultimately led scarcely any customers to refuse to participate in ERA. Some staff said they encountered initial hesitation about random assignment, but that it dissipated when it was explained why a comparison group was needed – and that, in any event, everyone had a 50-50 chance of being in the programme group.

In the focus groups, staff explained that when someone did object to random assignment, the source of the objection was often a suspicion that the process was not in fact random. This reaction was most often triggered or magnified by the Adviser's need to collect information (on the BIF) before conducting the random assignment. Focusing on this procedure, a customer would ask: *'Why do you need all this information first if it's random?'*. These doubts echo the ones that some staff expressed and thus, staff who received such a question, especially those who had their own uncertainties about the randomness of random assignment, found it difficult to answer.

Most objections that customers raised in the interviews focused on the use of a control group and the unfairness of denying people access to services even if it was for research purposes.

5.5.1 Additional evidence on what customers knew about Employment Retention and Advancement

The special study interviews with customers after their intake interviews suggest that compared to ND25 plus customers, lone parents were more aware that ERA was voluntary and more prepared to make educated guesses about its content. It is unclear, however, to what extent lone parents were able to distinguish between the New Deal and ERA, both voluntary programmes for them. And very few ND25 plus customers could be described as understanding what they were entering. Only four out of 27 ND25 plus customers were able to give a basic account of ERA and three of those had already been assigned to the programme group and, therefore, had been given further details about the services available after random assignment. This comment from one of the four interviewees illustrates what this basic level of understanding consisted of:

'It's a social research study. It is to assess what has been achieved so far. And how I can improve and what I am interested in.'

Two more New Deal 25 plus customers said that ERA had to do with getting people back to work, and two more knew that it had to do with research but they were not sure what the research was about. Nineteen said that they did not know or were

unsure what ERA was about, and of these, five were prepared to hazard a guess, such as:

'Honestly, I do not know. More help for people who need it? I've been on New Deal before but ERA is a new thing.'

The proportion of lone parents able to give a basic account of ERA was marginally higher (five out of 21), and all of those who could do so were in the programme group. One comment was:

'It was about trying to figure out whether it was best to establish whether helping people when in work would be better than the old way of not helping them when in work and use it as a learning experience.'

Five other lone parents, all members of the control group, showed some awareness of either the research or the programme but not as much as the five programme group members. For example:

'ERA is about getting people to look to the future, think of ambitions and increase qualifications.'

'Researching to see if we're getting the right help.'

Twelve lone parents said they did not know what the ERA research was all about. Two gave answers of some sort, although it is likely that they were not distinguishing between New Deal and ERA: *'to help get a job'*, *'helping people get off benefits and get back to work'*, *'to give people more help'*. Taking all these responses into account, therefore, approximately half the lone parents had some kind of understanding of what ERA consisted of.

5.6 Staff responses to customers' knowledge levels

Staff who participated in the focus groups generally believed that at the point when customers signed the consent form, they had fully understood what they were agreeing to – or at least that they 'knew enough'. There were a few exceptions to this viewpoint. For example, one staff member said:

R5: 'Some of them...who did agree...would just say "Yes" to anything ... not necessarily understanding what it's all about, but they would just say "Yes" to it anyway. And that's nothing against the client group...'

And another made a similar point in a staff interview:

'I complete NDLP first and then try and explain ERA in a way they cannot refuse. I will say something like "we will see if you qualify". I think the information given to customers at these interviews is just too much. Giving customers the option does not work.'

More usually staff followed a routine that achieved the desired result without necessarily acknowledging that customers did not really fully understand the nature of the decision that they were being invited to make. In some NDLP observations customers appeared to be recruited to ERA in a way in which they had little opportunity to refuse. Although the design allowed customers time to go away and think about whether they wanted to join ERA, such an option was not offered on these occasions.

On the whole, staff were genuinely surprised when told that some customers had little grasp of ERA and random assignment. The immediate response to hearing the research evidence about levels of understanding was to seek explanations for why it might be suspect or unrepresentative: Had customers forgotten? Unlikely, because the research interviews were conducted immediately following the intake interview. Was it only control group participants who did not understand? No. Were the observed intake interviews conducted only by non-Advancement Support Adviser (ASA) advisers? No. Were the interviews conducted before staff began telling customers about the financial incentives, or late in the intake period when staff may have lacked enthusiasm? No, they were at the end of the intake period when staff had polished their techniques, although it is possible that they had lost some of their focus on ERA.²¹

Once these kinds of questions had been raised and answered, staff began to remember and cite evidence from their own experience that fitted the findings. For example, ASAs reported that they often had to repeat the description of ERA when customers were passed on to them after random assignment. And staff recalled some examples of customers not knowing that they had been assigned to the programme group even after several meetings with their ASAs (perhaps, in part, because the pre-employment phase of ERA is much like the pre-employment phase of the normal New Deal programme that the control group receives).

There were also recollections about ND25 plus customers assigned to the control group who asked to receive the Retention Bonus and others who said that they had been told in the intake interview that mandatory components of New Deal were voluntary. (However, it could be that some of these customers did not so much misunderstand the rules but were seeking to circumvent them.)

²¹ It is also possible that customers understood more than what their interview responses to researchers revealed. The interviews were conducted immediately after a lengthy intake interview filled with information, much of it not directly related to ERA. Many lone parents clearly were in a rush to get home and answered researchers' questions very briefly. Aware of the time constraints, researchers did not probe in their interviews as much as they might have done in a home interview. Nevertheless, there was a consensus among the Technical Advisers (TAs) who conducted both the observations and the interviews with customers, and who were debriefed about what they had heard, that most customers truly did not have a good appreciation of ERA.

Many staff said that it would have been preferable to conduct random assignment in a separate session after customers had been inducted into New Deal. As it was, staff felt that some customers may have simply ceased listening and uncritically followed the advice of their Personal Advisers (PAs).

Staff also noted that while some customers were *'very clued up'*, others had attitudes that worked at cross-purposes with the need to absorb a large amount of information. According to staff, some customers *'just sat there'* waiting *'for whatever was going to happen'*, while others were focusing on what they themselves wanted from the Jobcentre Plus and did not listen to information about ERA. Still others were described as being *'quite blasé if their money was not affected'*. For the latter group, one staff member observed, *'signing a bit of paper was no great hardship; they were used to having to sign'*.

Another response to the research evidence from some focus group participants was that their fellow staff members had not been as competent as they themselves had been. This excerpt from an exchange between two focus group participants illustrates this tendency. One staff member offered an explanation why the levels of understanding revealed in the customer interviews were not higher:

R8: *'Because the Advisers are not doing their job.'*

R3: *'Yes.'*

*Q: *'The Advisers are not doing their job?'*

R4: *'Yes, they are not giving the full information at the right time.'*

Still another reaction that emerged as focus group participants pondered the research evidence was to highlight problems in the management of ERA. Staff thought that some managers neither understood ERA nor properly promoted it. In the words of one participant, some managers simply did not have the knowledge to ensure that ERA *'bedded in properly'*. According to some of these participants, staff who worked for these managers sensed their lack of engagement in ERA and did not give it the kind of priority that they might have otherwise done. In fact, the failure to add extra time to intake interviews to explain ERA in some offices could have been a sign of weak management *'buy-in'* to ERA – an assessment echoed in the implementation report, which found some evidence of this tendency.

Another institutional factor that was cited as a possible cause for why customers did not understand more, was a lack of formal training for PAs on the content of ERA. Some staff said that while they found it useful to be trained on how to use the BIF and the intake script, they would have welcomed guidance on *'how to sell ERA with objectivity'*, *'practical help with wording'*, and more specific advice on *'how to deal with the outcome of random assignment'*, all of which, they thought, could have imbued them with *'greater confidence'*.

5.7 Conclusion

The evidence presented in this chapter makes it clear that although the formalities of signing consent forms were generally observed, staff sometimes overestimated the extent to which customers understood ERA services and supports, the nature of the research, or the process of random assignment. As both this chapter and the preceding one have indicated, the likely reasons for confusion or imperfect knowledge are very diverse, encompassing staff behaviour, customers' attitudes and reactions, and institutional factors such as training and programme management. Overall, however, the research shows that with some exceptions, staff made a concerted effort to convey the four basic elements of information that were stressed in their intake interview scripts. In addition, the research shows that most staff probably made a concerted effort to communicate to customers that the allocation process was fair.

Clearly, a number of customers gave incomplete or vague explanations of ERA to researchers. But returning to one of the guidelines suggested at the start of the chapter – the distinction between having some understanding of a topic and being able to explain it verbally – what customers said may not be an infallible measure of whether they knew enough to make an informed decision about random assignment. Also, especially in light of the Social Research Association (SRA) stress on risks rather than benefits of participation, it should be borne in mind that the risk of participating in ERA was relatively low, with people allocated to the control group being in a situation not substantially different than they would have faced before.²² It may be that many ERA customers sensed that the stakes were not excessively high and thus, opted to process a fairly minimal amount of information about the ERA offer, concluding that they would sort it out later. The next chapter gives a brief snapshot of customer reactions once random assignment was completed.

²² Even though control group members would have received the same general Jobcentre Plus benefits and would have been no worse off in terms of ERA services than they would have been before, there was one difference: They would have known that they did not receive something they could have received, as compared to not knowing that something was available and not receiving it.

6 How customers responded to being assigned to the programme or control group

This chapter presents a fuller account of customers' reactions to being assigned to either the programme or control group. In addition to examining evidence from sources used in the rest of the report – the observed interviews, the researchers' interviews with customers, the staff focus groups, and researchers' interviews with staff members – the chapter draws on some early information from a survey of customers conducted approximately a year after they were randomly assigned. The chapter concludes with an assessment of whether Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) was vulnerable to threats to research integrity that can occur after random assignment.

6.1 Customer reactions immediately after random assignment

As would be expected in a treatment-versus-no-treatment evaluation, generally control group members were more disappointed with their random assignment status than programme group members. But as the following sections indicate, that overall statement does not capture all the nuances in reactions that the research points to.

6.1.1 Modulated reactions

In the focus groups, staff reported that they saw a range of emotional reactions to the outcome of random assignment, ranging from *'excited delight'* to *'tears of despair'*. And as some staff members described their own reactions, they would *'practically jump up and down'* exclaiming *'I have got one!'*

Notwithstanding these reports of strong emotions, the most common reaction in the observed interviews from both control and programme group members was indifference. Over half of the New Deal 25 Plus (ND25 plus) customers in these interviews – seven of the eleven assigned to the programme group and five of the nine to the control group – manifested no emotional response to the outcome. Researchers also reported that lone parents often seemed indifferent to how they had been assigned. Lone parents, however, were generally more enthusiastic about their assignments than ND25 plus customers.

At least two factors took the edge off the enthusiasm of people assigned to the programme group. The first was their lack of clarity about all the services and supports that ERA had to offer. For example, consistent with other evidence on levels of understanding that has been presented, in interviews with researchers held after the intake interviews, six of the 11 ND25 plus customers in the programme group recognised that they would receive extra help, but only one could begin to describe what it would consist of. One customer said:

'The Personal Adviser said I would get extra help, which seemed OK, but it was all a bit much to take in. I'll read the leaflets and that will help.'

Staff said that although some programme group customers were *'keen to pick up quickly on ERA'*, the *'penny often dropped'* only when reminded later about the incentives or when the *'money actually started'*.

A second possible dampener on enthusiasm was customers' realisation that they would benefit financially only when they found work. As one customer said:

'It's not going to make a great deal of difference. You can't get promotion if you haven't got a job.'

Similarly, only four of eight lone parents in the programme group understood that there was a difference between the services they would receive and what they would have received had they been assigned to the control group. If not having a full understanding of ERA curbed the enthusiasm of customers assigned to the programme group, it probably also contained the disappointment of control group members. Four ND25 plus customers (of nine) in the control group who spoke to researchers after the intake interview volunteered that they were foregoing *'something'* that *'might have been of help'*. Around a third of the ND25 plus control group customers who were interviewed (four of eleven) explicitly said that they were *'not bothered'* about having been assigned to the control group or had not thought about it because they *'did not know what was involved'* or *'what was going on'*. Some, however, said they were no worse off than if they hadn't tried:

'I knew I had nothing to lose. I am in the same place as I would have been at the beginning.'

Of the 13 lone parents in the control group whom researchers interviewed, five were aware they may have received 'more help' but were generally quite vague about what it might have consisted of. Nine of 13 expressed indifference about the outcome (although one of the nine actually gave a more mixed message, saying that she was 'not bothered but might have been if I knew the difference in the groups'.) And when lone parents did express disappointment, it was often vague and tinged with fatalism:

'I would have quite liked to get ERA but you can't have everything, so you have to be happy with what you get.'

Although it is not yet clear to what extent financial incentives induced customers to join ERA, significant numbers of staff argued that customers' reactions would have been much stronger had they known that they could have received these benefits.

6.1.2 Positive reactions

Not surprisingly, when customers did react emphatically to the outcome, it was programme group members who registered pleasure. Staff reported that their delight was particularly noticeable when these customers were for the first time told the size of the financial incentives. According to a staff member, one lone parent's '*mouth fell open*' after she was given the news. Another commented, '*Something good has happened at last*'.

Among the ND25 plus customers observed and then interviewed by researchers, one was particularly pleased '*to have got in [ERA] and be part of it*' because the support and incentives dovetailed with her immediate career plans. Another felt '*honoured*' and '*privileged*' to have been selected, knowing that participation was only possible in six parts of the country.

When researchers interviewed customers following random assignment, they found that fewer programme group customers were likely to be indifferent to random assignment than the observed interviews had indicated. Thus, seven of the eight lone parents who were interviewed said they were pleased at the outcome. Perhaps the difference was they were learning more about ERA and liking what they found out, or it could be simply that strong reactions were less on display in the observed interviews because people were reserved about showing their emotions to observers.

As members of the programme group moved from random assignment to other meetings with their Advancement Support Advisers (ASAs), many of them began to get a clearer picture of ERA as they were given more information on what ERA has to offer. Often the details of the benefits had to be repeated to them in more than one programme session. Nevertheless, staff reported that at this stage of participation, customers, who had often been made more aware of ERA benefits, were generally pleased and sometimes very enthusiastic that they were part of the programme.

6.1.3 Negative reactions

A minority of people in the observed interviews who were placed in the control group did express disappointment at the outcome, but it was relatively mild. And only one ND25 plus customer was unhappy enough to voice pronounced disappointment about a control group assignment in an interview with a researcher immediately after the intake interview. This person had been told about the in-work support in the intake interview and had asked the Adviser whether having this meant that he could get help if he had problems at his job. In response, the Adviser had hinted at the availability of incentives. In the interview with the researcher, this control group member said he was convinced that he had missed out on something valuable.

Leaving aside this one reaction, extremely pronounced or explicit disappointment about control group assignment did not occur in the observed interviews. However, staff in the focus groups did report cases of customers (most of them, apparently, lone parents) who were 'devastated' by this outcome. One lone parent had heard about ERA from a friend and knew precisely what supports would be unavailable to her. Moreover, staff cited some examples of lone parents who dropped out of New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) when they learned they had been assigned to the control group. In such cases, staff provided reassurance that customers had access to the full New Deal programme and that, office procedures permitting, they would not need to change Personal Advisers (PAs).

There were also rare, and unexpected, instances of a negative response to programme group assignment, which took the form of withdrawal from the study. Apparently there were at least two reasons why this happened: First, one customer withdrew immediately because he said that *'he did not want anyone getting in touch with any employer of his'* – and staff presumed that this reaction indicated that he was already working while claiming a benefit. The second reason was that some lone parents who had been recruited into NDLP and then assigned to the programme group declined ERA participation to avoid changing their PAs. Staff who spoke to researchers thought that the extent of withdrawals among programme group members, especially any customers who were aware of the level of financial assistance available through ERA, was probably quite limited. Notably, only 104 of the 16,387 randomly assigned customers (a fraction of a per cent) had formally withdrawn from the evaluation as of the end of September 2005.

6.2 Approximately one year after random assignment: results from a customer survey

Survey responses are now available from people randomly assigned during the first six months of the study. Consistent with evidence from interviews and observations conducted for this special study, the responses indicate that while many customers might not have been clear about the specifics of random assignment and their research group assignments, the majority of control group members thought they had had a fair chance of getting into the programme group.

Roughly 12 months after they had been randomly assigned as part of the ERA study, 98 per cent of the 449 interviewed Working Tax Credit (WTC) sample members, 94 per cent of the 1,340 interviewed NDLP sample members, and 85 per cent of the 1,108 interviewed ND25 plus sample members recalled that they had gone to a Jobcentre Plus office and been given a 50-50 chance of receiving new services to see if those services would help them find jobs or get on at work. However, between one-third and slightly over one-half of individuals in each of the three target groups who did recall having been randomly assigned could not remember or did not know the research group to which they had been assigned. Among those who recalled random assignment and believed that they had been placed in the control group, fewer than one in seven (14 per cent across the three target groups) felt that they had not had a fair chance of getting into the programme group; a clear majority (68 per cent) felt that they had had a fair chance of that assignment, and a substantial proportion (19 per cent) did not know or had no opinion. And notably, only 11 per cent of people who believed that they had been placed in the control group reported that they had been genuinely upset when they learned of their assignment.

6.3 Post-random-assignment threats to research integrity

Once random assignment has been completed, researchers must be alert to several ways in which their study could be weakened. For example, if they are unsure how to deal with the responses of members of the control and programme groups to their assignments, staff themselves might refuse to move ahead with delivering the programme treatment called for in the assignments. However, there is no evidence that this was a problem in ERA.

Another threat is **contamination**, meaning members of the control group get access to services that are supposedly available only to programme group members. Researchers examined the potential for contamination in individual interviews with staff and customers as well as in the group discussions, but heard little cause for concern. One reason is that ERA apparently has had a low profile in the community. For example, it appears that almost all customers' decisions about whether to participate were made solely on the basis of information from Jobcentre Plus staff, not what they learned elsewhere. And staff in the focus groups said they were surprised about how slowly news about ERA had travelled through customers' social networks (perhaps because of lags between recruitment, people securing jobs and the financial incentives coming into effect.) Staff did cite rare instances of siblings being assigned to programme and control groups – the kind of circumstance that could give a control group member enough information about the treatment to want to seek out similar services – but naturally, this was not a significant pattern. Overall, then, it is unlikely that beyond what control group members learned in the intake interview, they initially would have had enough additional information about ERA services to inspire them to seek out similar assistance. Moreover, even at the point when more programme group members start using ERA services and news of the treatment starts to spread, opportunities for control group members to secure

comparable services are likely to remain very limited. Because governance procedures are in place, it is highly improbable that control group customers would receive any financial incentives.

Another possible threat to the research is **attrition**, whereby members of either research group actively leave the study by withdrawing their consent. One cause for concern about attrition in this particular study is that in marketing ERA, Advisers relied quite heavily on the message that since the programme was voluntary, people could always withdraw from it at a later date. With Advisers making it clear that commitment to participate remained negotiable, it is conceivable that the initially high rates of participation in the study could eventually be offset by comparatively high attrition rates. In addition, since random assignment designs are especially sensitive to **differential attrition**²³ – in other words, more from either the programme or control group – it is also necessary to be aware of any ways in which the ERA study could be subject to this problem. For example, control group customers might have been more likely than programme group members to feel aggrieved since they had been denied ERA's perceived benefits.

Thus far, however, it appears that attrition will not be a significant problem for the study. Researchers will continue to monitor the attrition rates, but as of the end of September 2005, only a fraction of a per cent of the people randomly assigned as part of the ERA study had formally withdrawn from the evaluation. Furthermore, differential attrition seems unlikely because, for the most part, the loss of ERA was fairly inconsequential for customers assigned to the control group. Confirming evidence already cited about their mild response to their assignments, none of the 14 customers in the control group whom researchers contacted for telephone interviews several days after the intake interview, expressed annoyance or even disappointment at not having been selected for the programme group.

A final issue to monitor is whether the characteristics of the programme and control groups are generalisable to all customers. Random assignment ensures statistical equivalence between the programme and control groups, thereby ensuring unbiased estimates of the impact of ERA on customers who agree to participate. But to be confident about the applicability of those impacts to a larger population, it is necessary that research sample members be representative of all people who would receive the treatment on a broader scale.

If the proportion of people who agree to participate in the research is high, as in the case of ERA, such confidence is supported. Even so, it is useful to determine whether persons with certain characteristics are not represented in the sample. The evidence on refusals in ERA that was cited in Chapter 4 suggests that those few who declined to join may, in fact, differ in important respects from those who agreed to participate.

²³ (Orr, 1999; Stafford *et al.*, 2002; Thomas and Collier, 2001).

It is also quite probable, however, that the types of people who refused to join the research would also not be apt to volunteer for ERA services if they were ever nationally rolled out. It is reasonable to hypothesise that in the later stages of the intake phase the differences between those joining and refusing to join ERA may have changed as staff began to feel that they had more latitude to market the programme by mentioning the financial incentives. Specifically, ERA may have become more attractive to the customers whose behaviour was most likely to be affected by financial inducements rather than by other ERA features. Thus, there is the possibility that over the intake period the proportion of customers joining ERA to whom financial incentives were appealing would have risen, while the proportion of such customers among refusers would have fallen. However, even after the guideline on not mentioning incentives was relaxed, staff often did not highlight them. Consequently, it is likely that this change in intake policy did not cause a large shift in the types of people who refused to join over the course of the demonstration.

In sum, three factors – the overall low refusal rates, the fairly modest change over time in the marketing message, and the possibility that customers similar to those who did refuse would not in any case volunteer for a national programme – suggest that the ERA impacts would be generalisable to a national roll-out. This issue, however, will be studied in more statistical depth as part of the overall ERA study.

6.4 Conclusion

In response to being assigned to the programme or control group, the most common reaction among customers was acquiescence. This was partly because customers lacked clarity about all the services and supports ERA had to offer, and partly because customers realised that they could capitalise on ERA's financial benefits only if they found work. Overall, those assigned to the programme group generally appeared pleased at their random assignment outcome while those assigned to the control group generally exhibited little reaction or mild disappointment.

Early results from a customer survey administered roughly 12 months after people were randomly assigned were consistent with the evidence from this special study's interviews and observations. While many customers 12 months later were not clear about the specifics of the random assignment that had occurred a year earlier and, indeed, about which research group they had been assigned to, the majority of control group members thought that they had had a fair chance of getting into the programme group.

Post-random-assignment threats to the integrity of the ERA research appear to be few and weak: There is no evidence that control group members are accessing services that are supposed to be available only to programme group members (the contamination threat); overall attrition from the study to date is very low and there is no evidence as yet of differential attrition by programme and control group members; and data collected so far suggest that it is likely that the eventual ERA impacts would be generalisable to a national roll-out.

7 Conclusion and recommendations

The Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) evaluation was designed to ensure that the highest ethical and methodological standards for the research were maintained and that the integrity of the research design was not compromised. In large measure, these standards were met. Moreover, very few customers reacted negatively to the random assignment process or to its outcome, and similarly there is no evidence that participants changed their intentions or behaviour as a result of random assignment in ways apt to detrimentally affect the evaluation results.

Given that the scale of ERA random assignment was unprecedented in the UK, and that UK social service organisations lack experience in mounting random assignment tests, the evidence presented in this report suggests that the process proceeded exceeding well. Nevertheless, the experiences of implementing ERA and random assignment documented here raise important issues, and thus, can point to ways in which future demonstration and random assignment efforts can be improved. The following summary and analysis of these issues focus on two key themes raised throughout the report – informed consent and the implementation of the intake process.

7.1 Informed consent

Research ethics demand that people should participate freely in an evaluation and understand both what it entails and any potential risks. In ERA, potential research subjects gave their consent by signing either a consent or refusal form, and were given a copy of the form. Moreover, they were asked to give separate verbal consent to the collection of data for research purposes before random assignment.

Nevertheless, in a pattern also reported in studies of voluntary social policy programmes in the US, there was some tension between ERA goals for recruitment

and informed consent.²⁴ Staff who tried to recruit customers into ERA generally had a very positive view of its services and supports, and as most were keen to sell the programme and believed that customers should take it up, they were rarely marketing something they personally disagreed with. However, they often felt that the volume of information they needed to convey in an intake interview not solely confined to ERA, left them with too little time to be truly certain that people understood what they were consenting to. The pressure to recruit participants – in a timely manner and in an environment in which the explanation of ERA was often combined with an explanation of the New Deal – could work at cross-purposes with the interest in spending time giving detailed explanations of the ERA treatment and what it meant to participate in a random assignment study. Another factor that limited explanations was the guidance to downplay the role of financial incentives in ERA and, more generally, staff concern that customers eventually assigned to the control group, having received a full and glowing description of ERA services and supports, would be disappointed.

Although quite high rates of consent to the ERA study were eventually achieved, the evidence from the intake interviews suggests that few participants had a very clear idea of the exact nature of either the research or the programme's objectives and content. Researchers' observations of these interviews point to marked variability in the volume of information conveyed to potential study participants, but the observations generally indicated that staff supplied at least the minimum amount required to secure compliance. Quite often, staff led customers through the intake process and, if necessary, encouraged or advised them to join ERA since they had 'nothing to lose'. Beyond the explanatory leaflet, staff would typically supply further information only if asked or if customers were reluctant to participate.

One of the challenges of ethically operating a random assignment study is to decide how much information is sufficient to ensure that potential research subjects adequately understand what they are being asked to do. An important step to meet that challenge is to determine, at the outset, the minimum amount of information that needs to be conveyed to potential research subjects. In the case of ERA, this was established by providing staff with scripts. Staff were told that the scripts did not need to be followed exactly, but that their contents should be conveyed to customers.

7.2 Management of the intake process

This study points to a number of organisational factors that influenced how staff explained and marketed ERA and random assignment. For example, some Advisers felt that insufficient time was allowed for interviews and that separate ERA intake interviews, which were not scheduled for resource reasons, were the preferred option. Confirming these observations about time pressures, Jobcentre Plus offices

²⁴ (Brock, 1997).

varied in the extent to which scheduling of customer interviews took account of the need for ERA recruitment and in some cases no extra time was allotted.

While training was delivered to all staff involved in random assignment (with extra training given to Advancement Support Advisers (ASAs) on the content of the programme), focus group participants generally felt that non-ASA staff were given too little training on ERA, and that the training focused too much on the mechanics of completing the Basic Information Form (BIF) rather than on the programme's content and objectives.

Concern was also expressed about the staffing arrangements for ERA in some Jobcentre Plus offices. Some staff believed, erroneously, that ERA's original design called for separate ERA intake teams in all offices, which would deal exclusively with the assignment of customers to programme and control groups, and then all customers would pass on to ASAs or Personal Advisers (PAs) as appropriate. Moreover, most staff thought that, from their perspective, such a strategy would have been preferred.

Finally, job-entry targets could have affected the way in which ERA was marketed to customers. The problem arose when staff could be involved in both the New Deal and ERA, creating a number of conflicting incentives – for example, to divert job-ready customers away from ERA in order to take credit for a job entry or to convince customers who were not job-ready to join ERA and thus, be removed from a regular New Deal caseload. Although there is no reason so far to believe this happened to a degree that will seriously compromise the generalisability of the ERA impact findings, the experiences reported here underscore the importance of guarding against such possibilities in random assignment studies.

Policy evaluation juxtaposes the principles of good research with the practicalities of policy administration. Some compromise is inevitable. ERA demonstrates that random assignment can be implemented as a voluntary programme on a very large scale with no apparent loss to the internal validity of the design: Comparisons between the outcomes for ERA programme and control groups should yield unbiased estimates of ERA impacts. However, the complexity of the ERA study, which is embedded within other complex policies, combined with resource limitations and concern about the reaction of customers to being assigned to the control group, may in some instances have constrained the clarity and quality of information conveyed to customers whose participation was being sought.

7.3 Recommendations

The experience of implementing random assignment in the ERA demonstration holds important lessons for researchers, administrators, and policymakers seeking to implement future random assignment demonstrations in the UK. Both the successes of the ERA process and the challenges encountered point to a number of recommendations for future efforts:

- **In designing a voluntary random-assignment study, take steps to ensure that normal institutional performance targets will not improperly influence the way frontline staff recruit participants and market random assignment.**

As this and other reports on random assignment studies have noted, implementing random assignment in the context of a voluntary programme presents some special challenges. In some cases, when a new programme is being tested within the context of a larger institution with a broader mission, there may be institutional disincentives for programme staff to enrol customers in the random assignment study. In the case of ERA, staff had to operate under normal performance targets (i.e. the Jobcentre Plus job-entry targets) that made it in their interest sometimes to avoid randomly assigning certain members of the study's target groups. It is thus important, where feasible, to build in procedural safeguards to help staff avoid these temptations.

- **Provide clear guidance and careful training to staff on how to encourage participation in the study while respecting a potential participant's right of refusal.**

Frontline staff must often be upbeat and assertive in encouraging people eligible for a voluntary study to agree to take a chance with random assignment. At the same time, they must avoid exerting undue pressure or coercion to participate, or leave candidates with the mistaken impression that a voluntary programme is mandatory. This is not easy to accomplish in an intake process in which staff are required to present – and customers are expected to absorb – a huge amount of complex information. Thus, the intake process must be carefully structured, and staff must be carefully trained on how to strike the right balance between 'selling' participation in the study and helping candidates understand that they can opt out.

- **Determine the minimum amount of information that candidates must know in order for them to give informed consent, and design procedures to ensure uniform communication of this information.**

How much a potential study participant must know before consenting to take part in a research study depends on the level of risk involved in participating. In the case of ERA, that level was very low, because consenting to join the study and then being randomly assigned to the control group would put people in a situation not substantially different than what they would have faced if they had refused to participate. Moreover, there were no obvious disadvantages to being randomly assigned to the programme group. Nonetheless, it is important to identify, upfront, the information each potential participant needs to know to make an informed decision, and to establish uniform procedures for how the information is to be consistently communicated.

Procedures that can maximise the chances of consistent communication of uniform information about the study are:

- ensure, whenever possible, that the intake processes for the study and the programme are kept separate, or that the stages of intake are clearly demarcated. This separation will prevent people getting confused between the details of the study and of government programmes, and will minimise the amount of information that they need to absorb in one sitting;
- train **all** staff in the offices involved in the study on the intake procedures, to minimise the chance of misinformation being communicated;
- expect staff to read study consent forms aloud, and to make frequent verbal checks on whether people fully understand the content of what is being read;
- build scripts that explain the study into random assignment computer routines, to foster more consistent explanations of the study.
- **Before random assignment begins, provide frontline staff with training that incorporates 'real-life' situations they are likely to encounter in explaining random assignment to customers, and address their questions and concerns about the ethics of the process.**

Frontline programme staff are generally unfamiliar with both random assignment studies and actual procedures. Such a study calls for them to assume responsibilities that add to their normal work, and to interact with customers in a way that may leave them feeling quite uneasy. In preparing them to take on these new functions, they must be carefully taught the concepts and rationale behind random assignment, why in particular circumstances it is ethical and fair, and how to address the kinds of issues they are likely to confront when explaining it to customers.

Securing strong local management buy-in to the random assignment study before it begins is also important. Managers should convey the agency's commitment to conduct random assignment properly, and to hold staff accountable for the accurate and fair administration of the special actions it requires.

- **Whenever feasible, conduct a pilot test of random assignment procedures well before the full-scale random assignment begins.**

Even in the best of circumstances, formal training may not fully prepare staff to address all of the issues they are likely to encounter after random assignment begins. Perhaps the best way to prepare them to do so is to let them 'practise' with these procedures while the new programme being evaluated is getting started. In ERA, for a variety of reasons, including the long lead time needed to develop an online system to support random assignment, both random assignment and the programme intervention itself were started on the same day. Although this cannot always be avoided, it is not optimal. It means that at least for early enrollees in the sample, the study's measure of a programme's impacts will reflect the effectiveness of a programme before it matures and staff become skilled in administering the intended treatment. It also means that many people in the sample will undergo random assignment as administered by staff with no previous experience.

A better option, when feasible, is to set up a pilot phase of random assignment (as is done in many US studies) lasting, perhaps, one to three months. During this period, only a small number of participants would be recruited into the study. In working with those customers, frontline staff and managers would acquire a more concrete understanding of what administering random assignment procedures entails. They could then bring their new questions and concerns to follow-up training sessions that would teach them how to address those issues. A pilot period would also allow the study designers to make adjustments in the intake process, make more robust calculations of the number of staff needed to implement the random assignment process, and adjust the guidance prepared for staff to address glitches or other unanticipated issues before subjecting large numbers of customers to random assignment.

- **Conduct ongoing systematic and comprehensive reviews of study procedures in all offices, to ensure that the random assignment process is working properly.**

Whether or not a pilot phase of random assignment is implemented, it is essential to monitor the implementation of the study's procedures closely and frequently. Problems will almost certainly arise and call for corrective intervention. Sometimes this will mean that the procedures themselves will need to be fine-tuned. In other cases, these reviews will show that staff will need further training.

- **Ensure that the computer systems and software that frontline staff will depend on are reliable and fast.**

In many studies, random assignment procedures are computer-assisted. In ERA, for example, the BIF was completed online. During intake interviews with customers sitting in front of them, staff called up a secure website and entered background information into the computer as questions appeared on the monitor. As they proceeded in completing this form, one screen would move automatically to the next. The computer also generated the informed consent form and, in the end, the assignment to the programme or control group. Occasionally, however, the system was intolerably slow, sometimes taking ten minutes to switch from one screen to the next. And on the occasions when the Internet was not available, staff had to rely on contingency procedures. Fortunately in ERA, these problems were addressed early on in the study with IT system upgrades in Jobcentre Plus. But they point to three important lessons:

- the technology for supporting a random assignment system should be easy for staff to use and understand;
- good contingencies need to be in place to support staff when inevitably, IT systems are down;
- when building Internet systems that are dependent on host agency systems, a realistic assessment is needed of the capacity of the existing system to cope with the additional traffic.

Appendix A

Selected characteristics of the members of the programme and control groups at the time of random assignment

Table A.1 Characteristics of programme and control group members at the time of the random assignment

Characteristic	Programme group %	Control group %
Gender		
Male	36	36
Female	64	64
Age		
Younger than 25	11	12
25 to 29	17	18
30 to 34	19	19
35 to 39	19	19
40 to 44	14	13
45 to 49	9	9
50 and older	11	10
Ethnicity		
White	83	83
Other ethnicity	16	16
No information	2	

Continued

Table A.1 Continued

Characteristic	Programme group %	Control group %
Education (highest obtained)		
Degree or equivalent	6	6
A-levels	5	5
GNVQ	2	2
GCSE	27	27
NVQ	14	13
Other	19	20
None	27	27
Housing tenure		
Homeowner	17	17
Social tenant	52	53
Private tenant	16	15
Other tenure	15	15
Has driving licence	46	46
Has access to vehicle	35	35
Has barriers to work	64	66
Sample size	8,206	8,178

Notes: Table includes those randomly assigned from October 2003 through April 2005.

Source: Calculations from the ERA Baseline Information Form.

Appendix B

Employment Retention and Advancement intake interview script

Employment Retention & Advancement Scheme

Key messages (Scripts) to ALL Customers

Background

- ✓ Jobcentre Plus is running a Research project to test new services to see if we can help people get better jobs and stay in them longer.
- ✓ There are only 6 Jobcentre Plus Districts where this is happening across the country. The project is called the Employment Retention & Advancement Scheme.
- ✓ As you live in an area where this research is taking place, you can volunteer to take part, as you are eligible for:
 - ✓ New Deal 25 Plus.
 - ✓ New Deal for Lone Parents.
 - ✓ Working Tax Credit and are a Lone Parent working over 16 hours but less than 30 hours per week.

What is ERA?

- ✓ ERA services are designed to help us find out what we can do in the future to help people when they get into work
- ✓ ERA will provide a package of measures including an Advancement Support Adviser for up to 33 months to help customers find work and when/if already in work (WTC), continue to support them

How to Take Part

Explaining Random Assignment

- ✓ We will ask you questions about yourself, which we will put onto a form.
- ✓ You will be asked to sign the form indicating whether you agree or do not agree to take part.
- ✓ If you agree to take part, you will be allocated **at random** by computer. You have a 50/50 chance of receiving ERA services.
- ✓ If you **ARE** allocated **you will still receive** your existing services/provision (ND25 Plus/NDLP/WTC) **plus ERA services for 33 months.**
- ✓ If you are **NOT** allocated **you will receive** your existing services/provision (ND25 Plus/NDLP/WTC). **You will NOT receive ERA services.**
- ✓ **Once the computer selection is made neither I nor anyone else can change the result. It is important you understand and accept this when you agree to take part.**
- ✓ We may in the future, contact you to ask about your experiences of finding a job and working. Your details will be passed to a research organisation and you **may** be selected to take part in a survey. If you agree to take part in the survey, any information you give us about you will be kept secret.
- ✓ You can decide at any point that you no longer wish to take part in ERA.

[Please issue the ERA Customer Fact Sheet]

Employment Retention & Advancement Scheme

Key messages (Scripts) to All Programme Group Customers

- ✓ I will make you an appointment with your Advancement Support Adviser who will explain in more detail about the ERA Services you can get
- ✓ This leaflet tells you more about ERA. Please keep it for future reference.

Additional information to:

Programme Group – New Deal 25 Plus Customers

- ✓ ERA is **not an alternative to New Deal 25 Plus**. If you are joining the ND25 Plus and have volunteered for the ERA Project you will still be expected to take part in the New Deal 25 Plus and **follow the rules in the usual way**.

[Please complete the name and telephone number of the ASA on the ERA Information sheet & give to customer]

Key messages (Scripts) to All Control Group Customers

- ✓ Thank you for agreeing to take part in ERA.
- ✓ You have been randomly selected by computer to join the control group. This means that you will not be receiving ERA services, but your progress will be carefully monitored as part of the research for the project. We **value greatly** the part you will play in the ERA research.
- ✓ We would like you to take part in future surveys so that we can see what helps people stay and progress in work. This is entirely voluntary.
- ✓ If you are **selected** to take part in a future survey and you agree, you will be paid for your time.

Additional information to:

Control Group – New Deal 25 Plus & New Deal Lone Parent Customers

- ✓ You will continue to receive all the services currently provided by the New Deal 25 Plus/New Deal Lone Parents.

Appendix C

Number of observations and interviews conducted, by customer group and staff position

Table C.1 Number of customer observations and interviews conducted, by customer group

Type of data collection	ND25 Plus customers	NDLP customers	Total
Observation	29	21	50
Face-to-face interviews	27	21	48
Telephone follow-up interviews	11	11	22
Total sources of information	67	53	120
Total cases	29	21	50

Table C.2 The number of staff interviewed, by position

Type of data collection	ASA	NDPA	Total
Semi-structured interview	Not available	Not available	39
Focus group	21 (includes one without formal training)	15	36

Appendix D

Basic Information Form



ERA Data Capture System

Basic Information Form (BIF)

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Part 1: Customer Details

Client Group NDLP ND25 Plus WTC

District Renfrewshire, Inverclyde, Argyll, and Bute

LMS Mnemonic
Office Code

South East Wales

Manchester

North East London

Gateshead and South Tyneside

Derbyshire

NI Number

Date of Birth

Title Mr

Mrs

Miss

Ms

Other

Surname

Other Names

Any other surname you have been known by

Other Surname

Address

Post Code

STD Code

Number

Daytime telephone number

Evening telephone number

Prefix

Number

Mobile telephone number

Part 2: Further Information

Gender Male Female

Marital Status Single Married Divorced Separated
 Widowed Living together Prefer not to say

Ethnic Origin

White British
 Irish
 Other

Mixed White and Black Caribbean
 White and Black African
 White and Asian
 Other Mixed

Asian or Asian British Indian
 Pakistani
 Bangladeshi
 Other Asian

Black or Black British Caribbean
 African
 Other Black

Chinese or Other Ethnic Group Chinese
 Other Ethnic Group

Prefer not to say

Highest Academic, Occupational or Vocational Qualification

None 1-4 GCSEs/O Levels A-C/Standard Grades 1-3
 Foundation GNVQ 5+ GCSEs/O Levels A-C/Standard Grades 1-3
 Intermediate GNVQ Highers
 Advanced GNVQ A Levels
 Level 1 NVQ/SVQ NC
 Level 2 NVQ/SVQ HNC
 Level 3 NVQ/SVQ HND
 Level 4 NVQ/SVQ Diploma
 Level 5 NVQ/SVQ Degree or higher
 GCSEs/O Levels D-G/Standard Grades 4-7 Other

Driving Licence Yes No

Access to a car Yes No

Part 3: Housing Details

Current Housing Status

- Living with parent(s)
 Living with Other Relatives/Friends
 Local Authority Tenant
 Housing Association Tenant
 Private Tenant
 Owner/Occupier
 Other
 Prefer not to say

Part 4: Paid Work History

To enable ERA to be successfully evaluated it is essential that we gather as much information as possible about the customer's current and previous paid work history.

Are you currently in paid work? Yes No

Go to Part 4a Go to Part 4c

Part 4a: Current Paid Work History

How many paid jobs do you currently have? 1 2 3 4 5

How many hours in total do you work per week in your current job(s)?

- 1 to under 5 hours
 5 to under 10 hours
 10 to under 16 hours
 16 to under 20 hours
 20 to under 25 hours
 25 to under 30 hours
 30 hours and over

Fill the following sections according to the number of jobs that the customer currently has, then go to **Part 4b**

When did you start the 1st of your current jobs?

Are you paid weekly or monthly? Weekly Monthly

How much are you paid on average before stoppages?

When did you start the 2nd of your current jobs?

Are you paid weekly or monthly? Weekly Monthly
 ▼ ▼

How much are you paid on average before stoppages?

When did you start the 3rd of your current jobs?

Are you paid weekly or monthly? Weekly Monthly
 ▼ ▼

How much are you paid on average before stoppages?

When did you start the 4th of your current jobs?

Are you paid weekly or monthly? Weekly Monthly
 ▼ ▼

How much are you paid on average before stoppages?

When did you start the 5th of your current jobs?

Are you paid weekly or monthly? Weekly Monthly
 ▼ ▼

How much are you paid on average before stoppages?

Part 4b: Previous Paid Work History

Previous to your current job(s) have you been in paid work? Yes No
 Go to Part 4d Go to Part 4e

Part 4c: Previous Paid Work

Have you ever been in paid work? Yes No
 Go to Part 4d Go to Part 5

Part 4d: Previous Paid Work Details

How many hours per week did you normally work in your most recent previous job?

- 1 to under 5 hours
- 5 to under 10 hours
- 10 to under 16 hours
- 16 to under 20 hours
- 20 to under 25 hours
- 25 to under 30 hours
- 30 hours and over

When did you start your most recent previous job?

Were you paid weekly or monthly?

Weekly

or Monthly



How much were you paid on average before stoppages?

Were you in paid work before this?

Yes

No – Go to Part 4e

How many hours per week did you normally work in the job that you had before the one you have just told us about?

- 1 to under 5 hours
- 5 to under 10 hours
- 10 to under 16 hours
- 16 to under 20 hours
- 20 to under 25 hours
- 25 to under 30 hours
- 30 hours and over

When did you start the job that you had before the one you have just told us about?

Were you paid weekly or monthly?

Weekly

or Monthly



How much were you paid on average before stoppages?

Part 4e: Past 3 year Paid Work History

In the last 3 years how many paid jobs have you had? Include your current job(s) if you are currently in work. Please select

- 0 ► Go to Part 5
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- Over 10

In the last 3 years approximately how many months did you work? Please select

- Up to 6 Months
- 7-12 Months
- 13-24 Months
- 25-36 Months

In the last 3 years approximately how many hours per week did you work? Please select

- 1 to under 16 hours
- 16 to under 30 hours
- 30 hours and over

Part 5: Barriers to Work

The definitions of these barriers to work can be found in existing Jobcentre Plus guidance.

Does the customer consider any of the following as barriers to work or advancement ?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Housing Problems | <input type="checkbox"/> Transport Problems |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Childcare Problems | <input type="checkbox"/> Health Related Problems |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Problem with Basic Skills | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

Part 6: Customer's Decision

It is essential that we fully explain the purpose and implications of ERA to the customer.

Is the customer willing to participate
in the ERA Project ?

Yes Ask the customer to read and sign the
Declaration of Consent and Confidentiality
Statement in **Part 7**

Confirm that Part 7 has been signed
and proceed to **Part 9**

No Ask the customer to read and sign the
Declaration of Refusal - **Part 8**

Confirm that Part 8 has been signed
and that Parts 2 to 5 have been
destroyed

Part 9: Random Assignment

The customer been assigned to: Programme Group Control Group

Name of the member of staff who completed the BIF

Date

Part 10: Children's Details

Does the customer have any dependent children living with them ? Yes No - Go to Part 11

Number of Children ?

Dates of birth of the customer's dependent children:

Child 1 Child 2

Child 3 Child 4

Child 5 Child 6

Child 7 Child 8

Child 9 Child 10

Part 11: Contact Information

Contact information to be used for survey purposes only

Part 11a: Contact 1

Contact's Relationship to customer

Surname Address

Other names

PostCode

Daytime telephone number STD Code Number

Evening telephone number

Mobile telephone number Prefix Number

Part 11b: Contact 2

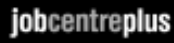
Contact's Relationship to customer	<input type="text"/>	
Surname	<input type="text"/>	Address <input type="text"/>
Other names	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
	PostCode	<input type="text"/>
Daytime telephone number	STD Code <input type="text"/>	Number <input type="text"/>
Evening telephone number	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Mobile telephone number	Prefix <input type="text"/>	Number <input type="text"/>

Part 11c: Contact 3

Contact's Relationship to customer	<input type="text"/>	
Surname	<input type="text"/>	Address <input type="text"/>
Other names	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
	PostCode	<input type="text"/>
Daytime telephone number	STD Code <input type="text"/>	Number <input type="text"/>
Evening telephone number	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Mobile telephone number	Prefix <input type="text"/>	Number <input type="text"/>

Appendix E

Informed consent and refusal forms



Part of the Department
for Work and Pensions

Part 7: Declaration of Consent with Confidentiality Statement

CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT

This information will be used as part of the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) Scheme.

To help us measure the success of the scheme, we may add what you tell us to other details about you held by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Inland Revenue.

Any details you give will be kept secret, as data protection laws require. Only our research team will be able to see this data and it will only be used for research purposes.

When we write the research reports no person or household will be identified.

A special leaflet tells you about the personal details that DWP holds. You can get the leaflet from any Jobcentre or Social Security Office or from the Department's website (www.dwp.gov.uk) – ask for leaflet GL33.

For purposes of the Data Protection Act, DWP is the Data Controller.

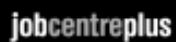
- I have read the fact sheet and I understand it.
- The Random Assignment process has been explained to me. I understand that I will be put into one of two groups - either a group that will receive ERA services or a group that will not. The group to which I am allocated will be picked at random.
- I understand that if I'm not chosen for ERA I will still get any regular Jobcentre Plus services that I may be eligible for.
- I understand that information on this form and other details about me held by the DWP or the Inland Revenue, may be passed to independent researchers working on behalf of DWP and they may contact me about taking part in interviews for research purposes.
- I have had the chance to ask questions.
- I have had enough time to make my decision.
- I understand that if I sign this form I agree to take part in the study.
- I understand that I am free to pull out of the study at any time.

Full name

NI number

Participant's signature

Date



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for Work and Pensions

Part 8: Declaration of Refusal

- The ERA Scheme and Random Assignment have been clearly explained to me and I understand what participation in the ERA Scheme involves.
- I do not consent to taking part in this research scheme or to being randomly assigned.

Full name

NI number

Customer's
signature

Date

If this section has been completed, Parts 2 to 5 will need to be destroyed. Confirm this has been done by ticking the appropriate box in Part 6.

Appendix F

Explaining random assignment in the context of explaining the New Deal and Employment Retention and Advancement programmes

This appendix describes staff decisions about different sequencing explanations of the New Deal and the Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) programme and random assignment and discusses some of the reasons for the choices.

F.1 Reasons to introduce the New Deal first

One reason that offices and staff gave for introducing New Deal before ERA relates to concerns about random assignment. Some Advisers did not want to first sell the virtues of ERA and then explain to members of the control group that they would need to make do with the standard New Deal provisions.

Some offices and staff members decided to introduce the New Deal first. The rationale for this, when administering New Deal 25 Plus (ND25 plus), was to make it clear that ND25 plus was compulsory – that is, if customers wanted to avoid being subject to benefit sanctions, they would need to pursue ND25 plus irrespective of whether they participated in ERA. Indeed, some staff in the focus groups cited confusion created when ERA had been introduced at the beginning of the intake interview because customers extrapolated from its voluntary nature and presumed that ND25 plus was also voluntary.

Intake interviews for lone parents could also follow a New Deal-first pattern. This is understandable because, given New Deal for Lone Parents' (NDLP) voluntary nature, it was logical to introduce lone parents to ERA as one of a suite of many voluntary NDLP services. (When they introduced NDLP first, some Advisers later explained to customers that they had done so to establish that the customers would volunteer for NDLP before offering them ERA.) And staff sometimes presented ERA as a 'carrot' for the NDLP programme. For example, if it was learned that a lone parent was keen to find work with training, the Adviser might suggest that were the customer to join NDLP, she might also have access to ERA, which provides financial support for in-work training.

There is also some evidence that a decision to lead with the New Deal could be influenced by considerations about meeting performance targets for customers who found jobs (sometimes called 'job-entry targets'). It was reported in the focus groups that lone parents quite frequently visit a Jobcentre Plus office only when they have already secured a job, are about to start work, and require advice on benefits. In this situation, some Advisers did lead with ERA, explaining that joining this programme could mean that the customer could secure extra resources as soon as she began work and stood to gain more if she became eligible for a retention bonus. But other Advisers deferred mentioning ERA and first ensured that the working customer was enrolled in NDLP, thus registering a job entry that counted towards performance targets.

F.2 Reasons to introduce ERA first

Some arguments for leading with ERA were connected to staff's ideas about how doing so would influence **customer reactions to New Deal services**. For example, some Advisers thought that if customers heard about ERA first, they would not be overwhelmed by all the detail of the New Deal process and could more readily comprehend the ERA choice. And while some ND25 plus Advisers led with the New Deal because they wanted to get the mandatory nature of the program on the table, others thought that first presenting the New Deal as mandatory could lead customers to misunderstand **ERA**. These staff reasoned that if ND25 plus customers were introduced to ERA before a discussion of mandates, they would not be confused about whether ERA was voluntary or mandatory and so would not be coerced into participating by an unjustified fear of sanctions. And in a third pattern, some Advisers adopted an ERA-first strategy to reduce the number of refusals that they anticipated would be triggered by some customers' reluctance to participate in anything to do with New Deal that was not compulsory.

Staff also advanced ERA-first arguments that centered on **procedural issues** – in other words, how this approach could facilitate the flow of activities in the office. For example, it was pointed out that the outcome of random assignment had to be determined before customers could be correctly matched with their long-term New Deal Advisers – and the choice of that Adviser, particularly whether that person would be an Advancement Support Adviser (ASA), depended on whether or not the

customer wanted to take advantage of ERA. In the case of ND25 plus customers, another procedural reason cited for an ERA-first approach was that for this group, the ERA intake process generally had to be completed during the first interview, whereas the explanation of the New Deal could, if necessary, be deferred until subsequent interviews.

F.3 Mixed styles

Some NDLP advisers commented that they did *'not stick to the same way'* of sequencing the two explanations, changing their approaches depending upon the customer's characteristics. (The observations of intake interviews confirm these comments.) It was also not uncommon for Advisers to adopt a hybrid approach in a single interview. One Adviser, for example, mentioned ERA early on in the interview and then returned to it towards the end, specifically connecting customers' aims and aspirations of the customers to the provisions of ERA.

F.3.1 Time constraints

Staff who tried to give relatively full explanations of all topics in a single interview regularly talked of sessions lasting 90 minutes or even more. One ND25 plus interview observed, lasted 85 minutes and another 75 minutes, while the longest lone parent interview lasted 95 minutes and another 75 minutes. Staff frequently had to curtail the time that customers were spending reading an ERA fact sheet or the consent form for random assignment for reasons that seemed to have more to do with managing an appointments list than with rationing information.

Sometimes, staff telescoped either the ERA or New Deal explanation. As noted, ND25 plus interviews were expected to cover both the New Deal and ERA in a single session, but the observations showed that when staff led with ERA, the sessions were shorter because they contained less information about the New Deal. And in some instances when staff introduced the New Deal first to lone parents, ERA was given only cursory coverage – sometimes being introduced only in the last five minutes of an interview (though besides time constraints, another reason for limiting the explanation to this brief amount of time appears to have been that staff did not want to elaborate on ERA services and then unduly disappoint volunteers with assignment to the control group). In the early months of intake, lone parents were commonly given a leaflet about the ERA demonstration and told to return if they were interested, a practice that persisted in some offices.

F.3.2 How much information was given to customers?

In most of the intake interviews observed with **ND25 plus** customers, staff typically explained that ERA was a scheme to assist people after they had found jobs, that it was voluntary, and that it did not replace New Deal. In about half the interviews, staff noted that ERA provided extra support, help, or incentives, and sometimes mentioned that this help would last for 33 months. They gave few if any, other details.

The policy rationale for ERA was covered in about a third of interviews with ND25 plus customers that were observed. Similarly, ERA was introduced explicitly as a pilot or research project in just over a third of those interviews. In the remaining interviews, staff seldom mentioned the research nature of ERA and its research objectives. Most staff, not surprisingly, referred to random 'selection', rather than random 'assignment', with around half explaining that customers had a 50-50 chance of being selected to receive ERA support services and a similar number noting that the allocation would be determined by computer. Only a minority attempted to describe the rationale for random assignment, and very few mentioned that researchers might subsequently contact customers to try to interview them.

In approximately half of the observed **NDLP** intake interviews, staff concentrated on explaining the details of the ERA programme, telling customers about extra support and incentives that would be available to them. In other interviews, staff focused on explaining the details of the ERA research. A few customers asked about the types of services ERA offered and were given more information. In one case, for example, the customer asked a number of questions about what she would receive, then commented '*OK, that sounds good*', and agreed to take part. Fewer than half the NDLP interviews had a strong focus on research, with only four of the Advisers providing a full explanation of both the research and the programme. And in the NDLP interviews where the focus was on the details of ERA as a research project, it was quite usual for the details about the programme to be glossed over.

The observations indicated that probably owing to their greater knowledge of ERA and higher comfort levels with the programme, ASAs tended to give clearer explanations of the research than Personal Advisers (PAs). This was the case for both customer groups.

As illustrated by the following remarks, some staff in the focus groups agreed that non-ASAs gave less information than ASAs:

R2: '*Yeah, but they're [non-ASA staff] just not in full possession of all the facts. What they've got is a brief overview that you've given them.*'

R4: '*That's right because you can't tell them much more than you've already told them because that's left up to the ASA to go through. So I couldn't tell the customer in front of me all the things that they need to know about ERA because I'm not an ASA... We do explain that... "it will be gone through in a lot more detail with your Advancement Support Adviser... and if you decide that you don't want to be on the project or the programme then you can come back to us."*'

Appendix G

Employment Retention and Advancement fact sheet

Employment Retention & Advancement Scheme
**Customer
Fact Sheet**



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From 27 October 2003, Jobcentre Plus is undertaking a new research project designed to help people stay in work longer and progress in their job. It is called the Employment Retention and Advancement Scheme.

New customers joining one of the following:

- New Deal 25 plus;
- New Deal for Lone Parents; **or** receiving
- Working Tax Credit (Lone parents working more than 16 hours and less than 30 hours per week) and living within the areas covered by the following six Jobcentre Plus Districts:

- South East Wales
- Manchester
- Derbyshire
- Gateshead & South Tyneside
- Renfrewshire, Inverclyde, Argyll & Bute
- North East London

may be given the chance to volunteer for Employment Retention and Advancement.

What happens when customers volunteer

Customers who volunteer will either join a group who receive standard New Deal services, if this is what they would normally receive, or a group that gets New Deal services and Employment Retention and Advancement services as well.

So we can find out about how the Scheme compares with existing services, customers who volunteer to take part in the research will have a 50/50 chance of being in either group. A computer will allocate customers at random into one of the two groups. The selection is based on chance rather than things like age, gender or education.

What are the Employment Retention and Advancement Services

Customers randomly selected to receive Employment Retention and Advancement services will be working closely with an Advancement Support Adviser to find, retain and advance in work. Advancement Support Advisers will provide help for up to 33 months as part of a package of support.

Survey of Employment Retention and Advancement volunteers

As the Employment Retention and Advancement Scheme is a research project, people who volunteer for the Scheme may also be asked to volunteer to take part in a survey in the future. This is so we can measure how much the services provided by the Scheme help people to stay in work and progress. The Office of National Statistics and the Policy Studies Institute will collect the survey information for Jobcentre Plus.

- All personal details will be kept in confidence and will only be used for the purposes of the Employment Retention and Advancement Scheme.
- By agreeing to take part in the research, customers will not lose any benefits.
- Customers can stop taking part at any time.

To find out more about the Employment Retention and Advancement Scheme why not pop into your local Jobcentre Plus office.

Appendix H

Employment Retention and Advancement information sheet

Employment Retention & Advancement Scheme
Customer Information



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Your Advancement Support Adviser will explain the Employment Retention and Advancement Scheme services in more detail and answer any questions you may have.

Your Advancement Support Adviser is:

.....
(name)

You can contact them on telephone number:

.....

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Welcome to the Employment Retention & Advancement Scheme

You have been randomly allocated by computer to receive Employment Retention and Advancement Scheme services.

What services will I be offered:

- An Advancement Support Adviser will work with you for up to 33 months to help you find work, if you are not already in work. If you are already in work, they will help you stay in work and advance in your career.
- Help from your Advancement Support Adviser to draw up a plan of steps you will need to take to achieve your career goals.
- A Retention Bonus, if you find work of 30 hours per week or more and remain in employment for 13 weeks in a 17 week period. You can qualify for up to 6 payments of £400 totalling a maximum of £2400.
- Tuition fees can be paid (up to £1000) for any agreed training you complete when you are in work for 16 hours or more per week.
- A training bonus of £8.00 will be paid for every hour of course study you do (up to a maximum of £1000) of agreed training, when you are in work of 16 hours or more per week. This will be paid when you complete your training.

How will this affect my benefits?

Any money you receive from the Employment Retention & Advancement Scheme is not taken into account as part of your income for Income Tax, National Insurance contributions, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit, Tax Credit purposes or if you make a claim for Jobseeker's Allowance or Income Support. The payments will also not be taken into account as part of your capital for one year after the date on which you receive the payment.

Can I change my mind about taking part?

The Employment Retention Advancement Scheme is voluntary, you are free to stop taking part at any time.

New Deal 25 Plus customers ONLY

The Employment Retention and Advancement Scheme is **NOT** an alternative to New Deal 25 Plus. You must **continue to comply** with the New Deal 25 Plus rules. For more information see leaflet 'Your opportunities and responsibilities while on the New Deal 25 plus'.

Please keep this leaflet for to remind you about the Scheme.

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