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Working Paper

Should unemployment benefits decrease as the unemployment spell lengthens?

Bank of Finland Discussion Papers, No. 23/2001

Provided in Cooperation with:

Bank of Finland, Helsinki

Suggested Citation: Saarenheimo, Tuomas (2001) : Should unemployment benefits decrease as the unemployment spell lengthens?, Bank of Finland Discussion Papers, No. 23/2001, ISBN 951-686-753-7, Bank of Finland, Helsinki,
<https://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:fi:bof-20140807590>

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BANK OF FINLAND DISCUSSION PAPERS

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Tuomas Saarenheimo

Economics Department

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benefits decrease as
the unemployment spell
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Suomen Pankin keskustelualoitteita
Finlands Banks diskussionsunderlag



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ISBN 951-686-753-7
ISSN 0785-3572
(print)

ISBN 951-686-754-5
ISSN 1456-6184
(online)

Suomen Pankin monistuskus
Helsinki 2001

Should unemployment benefits decrease as the unemployment spell lengthens?

Bank of Finland Discussion Paper 23/2001

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Abstract

It has become a conventional wisdom in economic policy debate that in order to minimise adverse effects on employment, unemployment benefits should decrease with the unemployment spell. This paper, using a series of simple search models, shows that the theoretical result regarding the optimality of a declining unemployment benefit profile is largely a result of specific modelling assumptions and fails to hold in a more general setting. While any pure reduction of unemployment benefits always improves employment, a redistribution of unemployment benefits from the long-term unemployed in favour of the short-term unemployed can either increase or decrease unemployment and unemployment benefit expenditure. The direction of the effect depends, inter alia, on the structure of unemployment and on the extent to which employed workers can reduce their lay-off probability.

Key words: unemployment benefit, unemployment, search models

JEL classification number: J64

Tuleeko työttömyyskorvauksen pienenä työttömyyden pitkittyessä?

Suomen Pankin keskustelualoitteita 23/2001

Tuomas Saarenheimo
Kansantalousosasto

Tiivistelmä

Talouspoliittisessa keskustelussa on yleistynyt näkemys, jonka mukaan työttömyysturvan haitalliset kannustinvaikutukset voidaan minimoida järjestelmällä, jossa työttömyyskorvauksen taso laskee työttömyysjakson pitkittyessä. Tässä tutkimuksessa osoitetaan yksinkertaisia etsintämalleja hyväksi käyttäen, että teoreettinen tulos ajan myötä vähenevän työttömyyskorvauksen optimaalisuudesta on pitkälti seurausta tietyistä rajoittavista oletuksista, eikä se yleisty monipuolisempaan mallikehikkoon. Siinä missä työttömyyskorvauksen aito pienentäminen parantaa työllisyyttä kaikissa tilanteissa, voi uudistus, joka suurentaa työttömyyskorvausta työttömyysjakson alussa ja pienentää sitä pitkäaikaistyöttömien osalta, lisätä tai vähentää työttömyyttä ja työttömyyskorvauksista syntyviä kustannuksia. Vaikutuksen suunta riippuu muun muassa työttömyyden rakenteesta sekä siitä, missä määrin työlliset työntekijät voivat vaikuttaa irtisanomistodennäköisyyteensä

Avainsanat: työttömyysturva, työttömyys, etsintämallit

JEL luokittelu: J64

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1 Introduction

“[T]he mission sees considerable merit in returning to a system of gradually declining unemployment benefits over the duration of the unemployment period to encourage swift job search before skills erode” (IMF Staff, Concluding Remarks to the Article IV Consultation on Finland, 2001)

In its Concluding Remarks the IMF mission restates what seems to have become a consensus view in economic policy debate: in order to minimise the negative effects of unemployment benefits on employment, the time sequence of benefits over the unemployment spell should be front loaded, ie declining over time. Indeed, a reform of the unemployment benefit system towards that direction has been on the Finnish economic policy agenda for some time. The proposed reform would stagger the unemployment benefit profile (presently flat for the first two years) by increasing benefits during the first months of the unemployment spell and reducing the benefit level correspondingly for the latter part of the two-year period. The reform is intended to be cost-neutral: it seeks to redistribute benefits over the unemployment spell rather than reduce the general benefit level. The aim is to encourage job search and thereby improve employment.

The proposal seems to find some support from economic theory. The result that the optimal unemployment benefit profile decreases with the unemployment spell was first established in the seminal article by Shavell and Weiss (1979) and is based on the assumption that finding a job requires costly search effort from the worker — a search effort which the government cannot directly monitor. The higher the expected present value of future unemployment benefits, the less the incentive for the representative unemployed to invest effort in job search. To improve this incentive, the government can reduce the expected present value of his future benefits by switching to a declining benefit profile. This can be done without reducing the overall utility of a representative unemployed if the benefits are correspondingly increased earlier in the unemployment spell. Alagoskou et al. (1995) goes so far as to suggest that unemployment benefits be paid as a “lump-sum payment on job loss” (Alagoskou et al. 1995, p. 106).

Despite the fact that the view quoted at the start of this paper has, to certain extent, reached the status of an accepted conventional wisdom, the implications of theory are, in reality, more nuanced and complex than this. Take, for illustration, the proposition to pay a lump-sum unemployment payment

on job loss (which, to be fair, Alagoskou...s et al. in fact meant as a thought experiment rather than as an actual policy recommendation). Stepping outside the simplistic model structure for a while, it is easy to see where such a scheme would fail. Obviously, it would make job loss a highly profitable event. There would, consequently, be an incentive to exploit unemployment benefits, in a mutual consensus between the employer and employee, for a variety of schemes that would involve short unemployment spells. Firms could periodically lay off and re-hire their employees in response to seasonal demand variation or simply as a means to provide extra holidays for workers. Hence, in all likelihood, the scheme would give rise to a lot of very short unemployment spells. If the aggregate amount of funding for unemployment benefits was kept unchanged, the lump-sum amount would have to be reduced accordingly. The cost would be carried by those who after a job loss face true difficulties to find new employment and therefore go through a prolonged unemployment spell — i.e. exactly those that the UI system is intended to insure.

This example highlights well the two angles from which this study examines the effects of changes in benefits profile. The first angle is the multiplicity of moral hazard problems associated with UI benefits. Job search effort is just one — albeit the most widely analysed — of the incentive problems which the optimal design of UI benefits has to take into account. Its obvious counterpart is job retention effort, the existence of which can lead to quite opposite implications regarding the optimality of benefits profile. The second angle is heterogeneity of labour force. The same policy action can have opposite incentive effects on two unemployed which differ regarding their preferences or the degree of control which they have over their unemployment duration.

This paper does not attempt to derive general results. Rather, it presents a series of special, yet plausible, cases in which the consensus view — optimality of declining benefit profile — may fail to hold. Its purpose is to show that the dominant view is, to a large extent, the result of the simplifying assumptions in the research tradition, and that in less specific settings, no general theoretical result can be derived. The effects of a redistribution of benefits among unemployed always depends on the specific structure of the prevailing unemployment.

The lack of generality of the theoretical optimality of front-loaded unemployment benefits is not an altogether novel result. The reality of economic research in the field has always been more diverse than the perception. While Shavell and Weiss (1979) are often credited for being the first to show the optimality of a declining benefit scheme, it is seldom mentioned that this was the result in just one of their three model variations. Of the other two, one pro-

duced a constant, the other an increasing, optimal benefit scheme. There are numerous other similar examples. For example, Wang and Williamson (1996) generate an optimal benefit profile in which unemployment benefits initially increase for a short while and decrease thereafter.

Hence, the question of the effect of benefit profile and benefit reforms on employment is an empirical one. Identifying the kind of reform that would most benefit employment in a particular country is no easy task and cannot, in general, be based on macro-level analysis. It requires a careful, micro-level empirical analysis of the structure of unemployment and the true incentives and opportunities faced by different groups of present and potential unemployed.

Next section presents the general dynamic model which is used in section 3 in slightly modified forms to examine the effects of loosening certain assumptions. Section 4 concludes the paper.

2 The model

The theoretical model used in this study is a continuous-time dynamic search model in the tradition of Pissarides and Mortensen (1999) (see also Baily, 1978, and Flemming, 1978). An unemployed worker receives an unemployment benefit $wb(s)$ where w is the wage rate and s is the duration of unemployment. We denote the initial replacement ratio by b and assume that as the unemployment span lengthens, the replacement ratio decreases steadily according to

$$b(s) = be^{-\alpha s}; \quad b > 0; \alpha \geq 0;$$

Job opportunities arrive at random and follow a Poisson process with a hazard rate that depends on the search effort by the unemployed. To simplify the model, we assume that the decision on job search is binary: the unemployed can, at each instance, only choose whether or not to engage in job search, but cannot otherwise choose the intensity of the search effort. For an unemployed engaged in search, the hazard rate of finding a job is λ , for one not engaged in search, the hazard rate is zero.¹ Engaging in job search is associated with a cost l , which can either be interpreted as the value of lost leisure or as the cost of

¹This assumption is a departure from the tradition. However, we believe little is lost in terms of intuition while a great deal is gained in terms of simplicity. Without some such simplifying assumption, a model without a steady state gets virtually intractable. Sinko (2001) chose to allow a continuum of effort levels, but had to simplify the calculations by reducing the rationality of the agents: in his model, when making instantaneous decision of search effort, an unemployed cannot foresee subsequent changes in his optimal effort level but (incorrectly) assumes that the effort level chosen at that instance is maintained indefinitely.

search. Below, we will use the first interpretation. Job offers are homogenous and always accepted by the unemployed. As always in this modeling tradition, we assume that the government cannot monitor the search effort and therefore cannot condition UI benefit on it.

It is easy to show that with the assumed monotonically (weakly) declining replacement ratio ($\beta \leq 0$), the optimal profile of the search effort is one in which the unemployed first enjoys leisure for an initial period (of possibly zero length) and engages in job search thereafter. In other words, the optimisation problem is reduced to one of choosing the optimal starting moment $k \geq 0$ for job search. In this simple model, unemployment rate is directly linked to k — higher k means higher unemployment.

The problem of maximising and the value of unemployment $U(0)$ at the start of the unemployment spell can be written as

$$U(0; k) = \max_k \int_0^k e^{i r s} [f - w b e^{i \beta s} + l] ds \quad (1)$$

$$+ \int_k^\infty e^{i r s} w b e^{i \beta s} ds + e^{i r T} W \int_0^\infty e^{i \pm T} dT$$

where W denotes the value of an employment contract and r is the interest rate. Here, the first integral represents the known present value of benefits and leisure until the start of the effective search, the second one the expected combined present value of benefits and the eventual employment contract. The last term $\int_0^\infty e^{i \pm T} dT$ represents the density function of the distribution of the waiting time until the arrival of a job offer.

The present value of a job can be written as

$$W = \int_0^\infty \int_0^\infty e^{i r s} w ds + e^{i r T} U(0) \pm e^{i \pm T} dT \quad (2)$$

where \pm is the exogenous constant instantaneous probability of being laid off. This simplifies to

$$W = \frac{w}{r + \pm} + \frac{\pm U(0)}{r + \pm} \quad (3)$$

Solving the optimisation problem in equation (1) for the optimal k gives the first-order condition

$$l + \frac{w b}{\beta + \pm + r} e^{i \beta k} - \frac{r W}{r + \pm} = 0 \quad (4)$$

The first-order condition shows some features that are obvious and some that

are less so. It is straightforward to show that if there exists a finite optimal k^* , it is increasing in the initial replacement ratio b and decreasing in the rate-of-decline parameter θ ; increasing the generosity of unemployment benefit, either by increasing the initial replacement ratio or by reducing the rate at which the benefit decreases as the unemployment spell lengthens, postpones the start of job search. Equally intuitively, a higher valuation of leisure l means a longer period without search effort.

A less obvious relation — revisited later in section 3 — is the one between the hazard rate λ , i.e. the likelihood of job search being successful, and the start of job search. It is easy to see that for very small values of λ , that is, when the likelihood of finding a job is very small, the first order condition in (4) cannot hold and hence there is no interior solution. Such an unemployed is "discouraged" and never engages in job search. Provided that the value of leisure is not too high ($l < rW$), there exists a threshold value of λ above which there exists a finite optimal k^* . When λ increases further, k^* first declines and then starts to increase, approaching a finite value as λ goes to infinity.

We shall use this model to analyse the effects of the UI benefit reform presently under discussion in Finland. This suggested reform would consist of staggering unemployment benefits in a cost-neutral manner so that, in comparison to the present situation, benefit level would increase for the short-term unemployed and decrease for the longer-term unemployed. Within the parameters of the model of this paper, this reform could be approximated as a simultaneous increase both in the initial replacement ratio b and the front-loading parameter θ .

An important feature of the reform under consideration is that it is intended to be neutral in the sense that it should maintain the average benefit level and have no effect on aggregate benefit expenditure. Such neutrality is, however, a difficult concept. The main question is, is neutrality supposed to apply before or after the behavioural changes are taken into account? The reform is, after all, intended to change incentives and thereby affect the scale and structure of unemployment. To the extent such changes are realised, they will certainly affect both the average benefit as well as the aggregate expenditure. Is the change in benefit parameters supposed to anticipate and neutralise any such ensuing effects?

Here we take the view that neutrality must be understood in relation to the given initial structure of unemployment. In other words, when balancing the changes in the benefit parameters against each other, the government acts as if those changes had no effect on unemployment. We find that assumption justified since, in reality, the effects of reforms on the structure of unemploy-

ment are uncertain, come with a lag, and are intermingled with many other factors affecting unemployment, so that factoring those into the reform is not a realistic task. Hence, an expenditure-neutral benefit reform is actually neutral only in the ex ante sense — in general unemployment expenditure will be affected ex post. Finally, where it makes a difference, we will consider a reform in which the change in the benefit parameters is larger than infinitesimal. This means that effects which are second order at the margin may have an effect on the outcome.

In model terms, a neutral benefit reform is a change in parameters b and β which leaves the expected present value of unemployment benefits $UB(0)$ at the start of the unemployment spell unchanged:

$$\frac{\partial UB(0)}{\partial b} \Phi_b + \frac{\partial UB(0)}{\partial \beta} \Phi_\beta = 0 \quad (5)$$

where $\Phi_b, \Phi_\beta > 0$ and

$$UB(0) = \int_0^{\infty} e^{-\rho s} w b e^{-\beta s} ds + \int_{k^a}^1 \int_{k^a}^T e^{-\rho s} w b e^{-\beta s} ds \int_{k^a}^T e^{-\rho T} dT \quad (6)$$

In case of heterogeneous population, we require that, given the initial structure of unemployment, a neutral benefit reform leaves the aggregate unemployment benefit expenditure unchanged.

Hence, we apply the following definition:

Definition 1 An ex-ante expenditure-neutral front-loading of unemployment benefit profile is a combination of an increase in the initial benefit level and an increase in the rate of decline of benefits over the duration of the unemployment spell, calibrated so as to keep the aggregate unemployment benefit expenditure constant for the given scale and structure of unemployment.

3 Effects of benefit reform on unemployment

In this section we will use a series of variations of the model presented above to analyse the effects of a neutral benefit reform on employment. In addition to the basic model, we study three simple extensions of it. For each of the extended models, we construct a situation in which a benefit reform of the type defined above can actually increase unemployment.

3.1 Basic model

We first analyse the effect of the benefit reform in the basic model with homogenous labour force and no additional moral hazard problems beyond the one associated with job search. We assume that the parameters are such that the first-order condition (4) has an interior solution $k^u > 0$. Hence, after being laid off, the representative unemployed enjoys leisure for a period k^u and engages in job search thereafter.

It is straightforward but somewhat tedious to show that a benefit reform such as defined in Definition 1 always improves employment (see Appendix) as long as there is initially any voluntary unemployment; that is, as long as $k^u > 0$. It also improves the utility of the representative unemployed and reduces government expenditure. Hence, the model confirms the traditional result obtained in similar settings (see e.g. Sinko 2001). In this setting, the optimal unemployment benefit structure would be the one suggested by Alagoskouros (1995): a lump-sum payment on job loss. With such a system, all workers would start job search immediately after being laid off. The amount of the lump-sum payment has no effect on job search activity, so it could be determined purely on the basis social considerations.

We summarize the result of the basic model as follows:

Conclusion 1 In the basic model with homogenous workers and with moral hazard related only to job-search effort, an ex-ante expenditure-neutral front-loading of unemployment benefits reduces unemployment and aggregate benefit expenditure.

3.2 Heterogenous workers I: differing search success probabilities

The first attempt towards more realism is to release the assumption of homogenous labour force. Specifically, we shall assume that workers differ with regard to the parameter ρ , ie their probability of finding a job when engaging in job search. Figure 1 plots the relation between ρ and the start of job search for representative parameter values. As Figure 1 illustrates, and as mentioned in the previous section, there is a non-monotonic relationship between job-finding probability and search effort. Unemployed with a very small probability of finding work are discouraged and do not actively search for job. The reason is obvious: the likelihood of finding a job is too small to outweigh the loss of leisure resulting from job search. Unemployed with a moderate ρ are the first to start job search; job-finding probability is sufficient to warrant

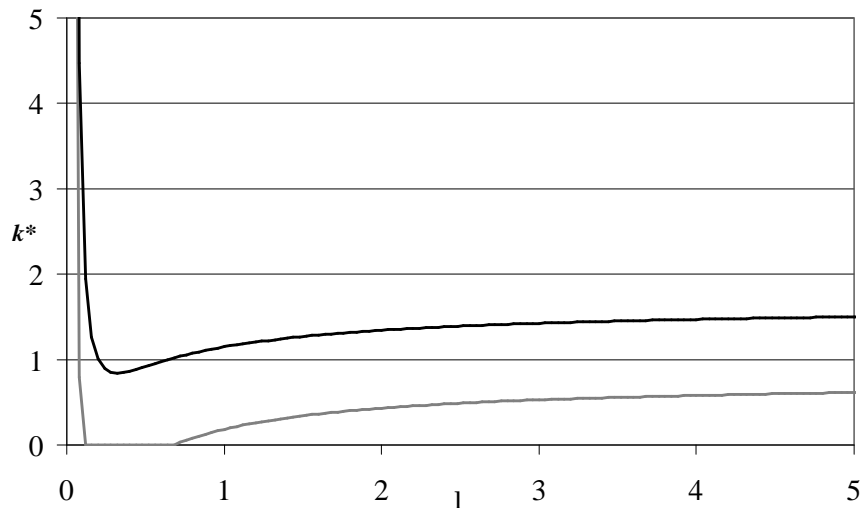


Figure 1: Job search effectiveness and search effort

job search while at the same time, the risk of involuntary prolongation of unemployment is high enough so as not to allow postponing the start of the search. Finally, unemployed with a very high β can rely on finding a job very quickly so they can afford waiting a bit longer before starting to look for a job.

To illustrate the specific issues that heterogeneity may create we will consider a highly stylised situation. We assume that in the economy, there are two types of workers which differ with regard to the value of their probability of finding a job. Type 1 workers are characterised by a β equal to zero. These workers are discouraged and once laid off, will remain unemployed. Hence, their k^* is infinite. Conversely, type 2 workers are characterised by an infinite β ; these workers, when unemployed, will find a job immediately after engaging in job search. We denote their optimal starting point of job search by k_2^* . To create a sensible equilibrium structure of unemployment in this model a set of additional assumptions regarding population dynamics would be needed. We choose to take a shortcut by assuming that the interest rate term r also includes a measure of the probability of death, and that the share of type 1 workers of the inflow to unemployment is constant at $\alpha \in [0, 1]$.

A newly unemployed type 1 worker is expected to stay unemployed indefinitely and hence carries an expected unemployment benefit cost of $wb = (b + r)$. Correspondingly, a newly unemployed type 2 worker will find work at moment k_2^* and will thus cost the unemployment insurance system $wb = (b + r)(1 - e^{-(r+b)k_2^*})$. The aggregate expenditure on unemployment ben-

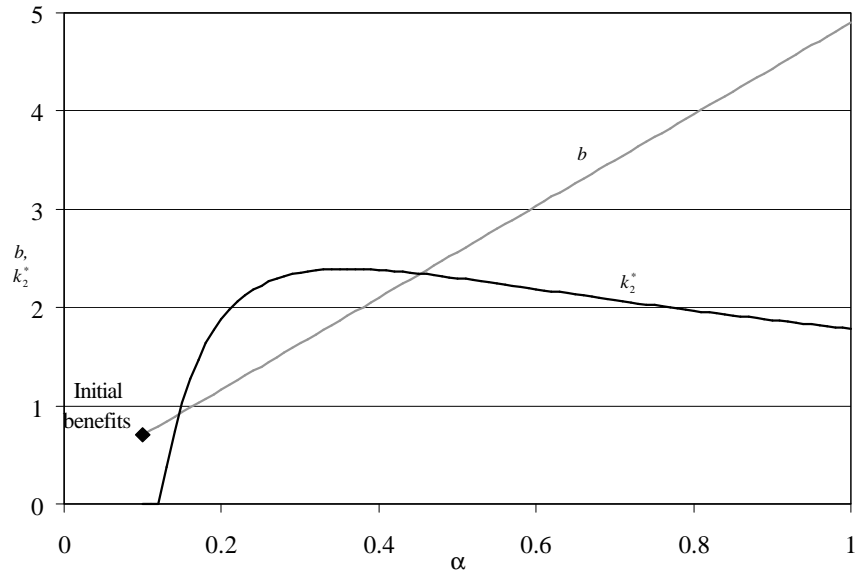


Figure 2: Job search effort by type 2 workers.

effort is thus proportional to

$$nwb = (\bar{r} + r) + (1 - n)wb = (\bar{r} + r)(1 - e^{-(r + \bar{r})k_2^s}) \quad (7)$$

In order to be expenditure-neutral at the aggregate level, any benefit reform that increases the initial benefit but reduces benefits to long-term unemployed must reduce the expected benefits for type 1 unemployed and increase them for type 2 unemployed. Such a reform will not have any effect on the behaviour of type 1 workers; their job-finding probability is zero, so they never engage in job search regardless of unemployment benefits. Hence, to discover the effect on aggregate unemployment we only need to consider type 2 workers and the effects of the reform on k_2^s .

For type 2 workers, the net effect of the reform depends on the exact parameter values. It is shown in the appendix that for low enough initial k_2^s (essentially for low enough pre-reform b) an expenditure-neutral reform will increase k_2^s and hence unemployment.

Figure 2 illustrates the relation between the benefit parameters and the search effort by type 2 workers for particular parameter values. Before the reform, the initial replacement ratio b is 0.7 and its rate of decline \bar{r} 0.1.² The

²The rest of the parameters in the example are $l = 0.2$ (value of leisure relative to the wage rate), $r = 0.05$; and $\bar{z} = 0.01$:

parameters are chosen so that prior to the benefit reform, there is no unemployment among type 2 workers, ie $k_2^a = 0$. The horizontal axis of Figure 2 represents the the post-reform value of \bar{b} . The locus b depicts the combinations of \bar{b} and b that would constitute a revenue-neutral reform: it connects each value of \bar{b} to the value of b that is required to keep aggregate benefit expenditure unchanged ex ante. The second curve shows how k_2^a , and hence unemployment, changes as the two benefit parameters are adjusted in a revenue-neutral manner. The figure shows that as b and \bar{b} increase beyond a threshold value, k_2^a starts to rise; ie unemployment among type 2 workers emerges and starts to increase. Unemployment reaches its maximum at around $\bar{b} = 0.35$ and declines thereafter. As \bar{b} approaches infinity — that is, as unemployment benefit becomes closer and closer to a lump-sum payment — k_2^a approaches zero again.

The intuition behind this result is fairly simple. The benefit reform reduces the attractiveness of long-term unemployment. However, the only long-term unemployed in the model are by assumption irreversibly discouraged, so this change in incentives has no effect on their labour supply. On the other hand, the reform increases the attractiveness of short-term unemployment for those that do have a choice. As a consequence, type 2 workers, who can control the duration of their unemployment, see their benefit opportunities increase. Unlike the first group, this second group is responsive to changes in incentives, and reacts to higher benefits by postponing the start of job search. The result is an increase in aggregate unemployment and, ex post, after behavioural changes, also in aggregate unemployment expenditure.

In this example, type 1 unemployed are a lost cause and the only challenge for the government is to keep type 2 workers at work. This can be done with any benefit scheme that does not involve a too high initial benefit level. More specifically, for non-increasing unemployment benefits ($\bar{b} \geq 0$) it suffices that

$$wb + l < w; \quad (8)$$

ie the initial benefit plus the value of leisure should not exceed the wage level.

The results of this model extension can be summarised as follows:

Conclusion 2 If workers differ in terms of their ability to find a job, an ex-ante expenditure-neutral front-loading of unemployment benefits may increase or reduce aggregate unemployment and benefit expenditure.

3.3 Heterogenous workers II: differing valuations of leisure

The extension considered next can be given two alternative interpretations. The one used below is that the unemployed differ in terms of their value of leisure parameter l . However, as l defines the value of leisure only in relation to the market wage, an equivalent story could easily be constructed for a case in which unemployed have identical valuation of leisure but differ with respect to their market wage w . This present example is analysed to a large extent along the same lines as the previous one. Again, to avoid unnecessary complexity and to highlight the intuitive point, we concentrate on a highly stylised situation in which there are only two types of workers. Type 1 workers have a higher value of leisure than type 2 workers, ie $l_1 > l_2 > 0$. We further simplify the analysis by assuming that both types of workers have $\beta = 1$, ie all unemployment is voluntary. This assumption is not necessary for the results but it reduces complexity drastically.

From (4) it follows that

$$l_i + wbe^{i \otimes k_i^u} - rW = 0 \quad (9)$$

for the two types of workers $i = 1; 2$. It is immediately obvious that $k_1^u > k_2^u$; type 1 workers start their search effort later than type 2 workers. We assume that the initial benefit level b is equal to $1 - l_2 = w$; ie the initial unemployment benefit is equal to the wage rate minus the value of leisure of a type 2 worker. This means that initially, a type 2 worker has an interior optimum at $k_2^u = 0$, ie he is indifferent between taking up a new job immediately after being laid off and postponing the search infinitesimally (see Appendix). Therefore, the whole unemployed population consists of type 1 workers.

Now consider the effects of an ex ante expenditure-neutral front-loading as in Definition 1. Since initially all unemployed belong to type 1, an ex ante expenditure-neutral benefit reform would be one that maintains unchanged the present value of unemployment benefits over an unemployment spell of length k_1^u . It follows directly from Conclusion 1 that such a reform would reduce unemployment among type 1 workers. On the other hand, it is easy to see that any reform that raises the b from its initial level $1 - l_2 = w$ will give rise to unemployment among type 2 workers. Whether the developments in aggregate unemployment are dominated by the decrease in unemployment among type 1 workers or the increase in unemployment among type 2 workers depends on the shares of the two types of workers in the total population. Clearly, for any

values of model parameters there exists a threshold value for the share of type 2 above which the reform will increase aggregate unemployment.

As in the previous case, the reform improves job-search incentives for the actual unemployed but reduces them for potential unemployed. To predict the effect of a particular reform on total unemployment, one needs to be able to quantify relative importance of these two effects.

Hence we have:

Conclusion 3 If workers differ in terms of their valuation of leisure relative to the market wage, an ex-ante expenditure-neutral front-loading of unemployment benefits may increase or reduce aggregate unemployment and benefit expenditure.

3.4 Dual moral hazard; endogenous job-loss probability

Here we will return to a homogenous worker population and will instead release the assumption of an exogenous lay-off probability. We assume that an employed worker's probability of being laid off depends on his job retention effort c . The instantaneous probability of being laid off is a decreasing function of job retention effort $\pm(c)$. The worker's in-job optimisation problem can be written as choosing c to maximise

$$W(c) = \int_0^{\infty} e^{-rt} (w - c) dt + e^{-rT} U(0; k^u) \pm(c) e^{\pm(c)T} dT \quad (10a)$$

$$= \frac{w - c}{r + \pm(c)} + \frac{\pm(c)U(0; k^u)}{r + \pm(c)} \quad (10b)$$

where, the present value of unemployment at job loss, $U(0; k^u)$ is as in equation (1).

Let us consider first an incremental benefit reform in which the change in b and Φ is infinitesimal and expenditure neutral ex ante. By Conclusion 1, such a reform reduces k^u . The effect on the optimal job-retention effort c depends on the behaviour of $U(0; k^u)$. By the virtue of the expenditure neutrality, the direct effect of the reform on $U(0; k^u)$ is zero. However, by the envelope theorem, also the indirect effect via the change in k^u is zero. Hence, the reform does not affect $U(0; k^u)$ and therefore also leaves the optimal work retention effort unchanged. As the reform reduces k^u but leaves c unchanged, it is established that the net result of an infinitesimal reform must be a reduction of unemployment.

However, this is not the end of the story. In the real world, reforms are not infinitesimally small. When we leave the realm of the infinitesimal, the

envelope theorem ceases to apply and the second order effects start to play a role. In this case the reasoning goes as follows. Consider a discrete change in the unemployment benefit system, designed so as to leave the aggregate benefit expenditure unchanged for the given structure of unemployment. Of course, in reality behaviour is affected and so is the structure of unemployment. By adjusting their behaviour to the new optimum, workers will obtain a higher utility level than prior to the reform. A discrete change in benefit system prompts a discrete change in behaviour which, in turn, results in a discrete increase in the present value of unemployment. Higher present value of unemployment reduces investment in job-retention effort and thereby creates higher inflow to unemployment. Whether or not this higher inflow to unemployment outweighs the higher outflow from unemployment due to earlier job-search effort (established above), depends on the model parameters in a complicated way.

To illustrate the situation, we consider a numerical example. We assume that the job-retention effort c reduces the lay-off probability according to $\lambda(c) = \lambda_0 - c$, the initial replacement ratio is 0.8 and the unemployment benefit decreases at a rate equal to 0.1.³ Figure 3 plots the optimal job-retention effort c (which can be thought of as reflecting the inflow to unemployment) and the start of search k^u (a proxy for the duration of unemployment) for different post-reform values of the parameter β . For each value of β , the initial benefit level b is adjusted so as to maintain ex-ante expenditure neutrality. The figure shows that k^u always decreases as β increases: the more front-loaded the benefit structure, the shorter the expected duration of an unemployment spell. Job-retention effort is (by the envelope theorem) at its maximum at the initial benefit structure. However, the larger the benefit reform, the larger the ensuing increase in the attractiveness of unemployment, and the smaller the resulting job-retention effort, resulting in higher inflow to unemployment.

Figure 4 plots the behaviour of the equilibrium unemployment rate — ie the rate of unemployment at which the inflow to unemployment $\lambda(c)(1 - U)$ equals the outflow from unemployment $\mu[U - k^u\lambda(c)(1 - U)]$ — as a result of the benefit reform. Initial equilibrium unemployment rate is a little above 31%. Since any reform that reduces β increases both the inflow to and the duration of unemployment, it obviously increases unemployment. For small increases of β , the shortening duration of unemployment more than offsets the increasing inflow, so that unemployment first decreases to reach its minimum at around

³The other parameter values used in this simulation were $\mu = 2.7$, $r = 0.04$, $l = 0.3$, and $\lambda_0 = 0.002$.

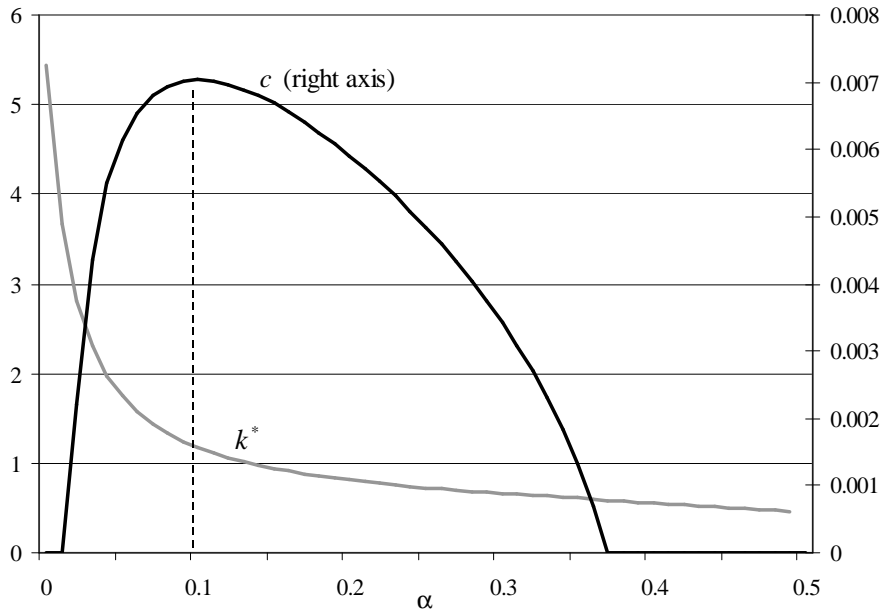


Figure 3: Job-search effort k^* and job-retention effort c after a benefit reform.

$\beta = 0.17$. For higher values of β , the inflow effects start to dominate and the equilibrium unemployment rate increases to exceed the initial unemployment rate for values of β greater than about 0.25. Unemployment reaches 100% at both at $\beta = 0$, as well as for high values of β . In the former case this is because with an unemployment benefit that stays constant infinitely, an unemployed worker has never an incentive to start searching for job. In the latter case, each unemployed worker starts job-search relatively early, in order to bring the benefit level back to the initial level, but employment spells have zero length: once the unemployment benefit counter is reset, the worker invests so little job-retention effort as to be immediately laid off.⁴

Finally, Figure 5 presents the ex-post level of benefit expenditure associated with the benefit reform. Benefit expenditure behaves in a similar way as the unemployment rate. Minimum benefit expenditure is reached at about $\beta = 0.16$ while the pre-benefit expenditure level is exceeded for β greater than about 0.22.

The results of this section can be encapsulated as follows:

⁴This, of course, is only possible because in this model, even an infinitesimally short employment spell suffices to reset the unemployment clock and bring the benefit back to its initial level. In reality, a minimum employment spell is needed between unemployment spells. Including this in the model would reduce the equilibrium unemployment in all situations in which the optimal k^* is finite.

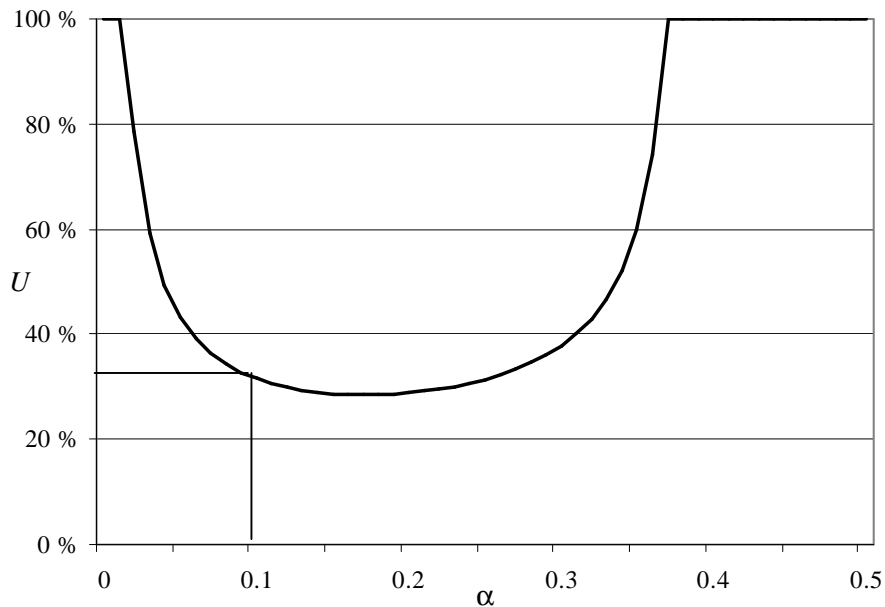


Figure 4: Equilibrium unemployment rate after a benefit reform.

Conclusion 4 If lay-off probability depends on costly job-retention effort by the worker, an ex-ante expenditure-neutral front-loading of unemployment benefits by a non-infinitesimal amount may increase or decrease unemployment rate and the expenditure on unemployment benefits.

It is important to notice that this conclusion is of a nature different from those reached in the two previous model variations dealing with heterogeneous workers. Here, unemployment benefits should decrease over time. In fact, the optimal unemployment benefit structure — optimal in the sense of minimising unemployment rate or unemployment expenditure for a given level of utility of an unemployed at job loss — is a lump-sum payment at job loss. The problem for the government is that in order to achieve that goal, the benefit reform would have to be designed so as to correctly anticipate the ensuing behavioural changes. In practical terms, the lump-sum payment would need to be substantially smaller than the present value of expected benefits prior to the reform. Besides being more challenging to design, such a reform would create a perception of a weakening of unemployment benefits and could therefore be politically a harder sell.

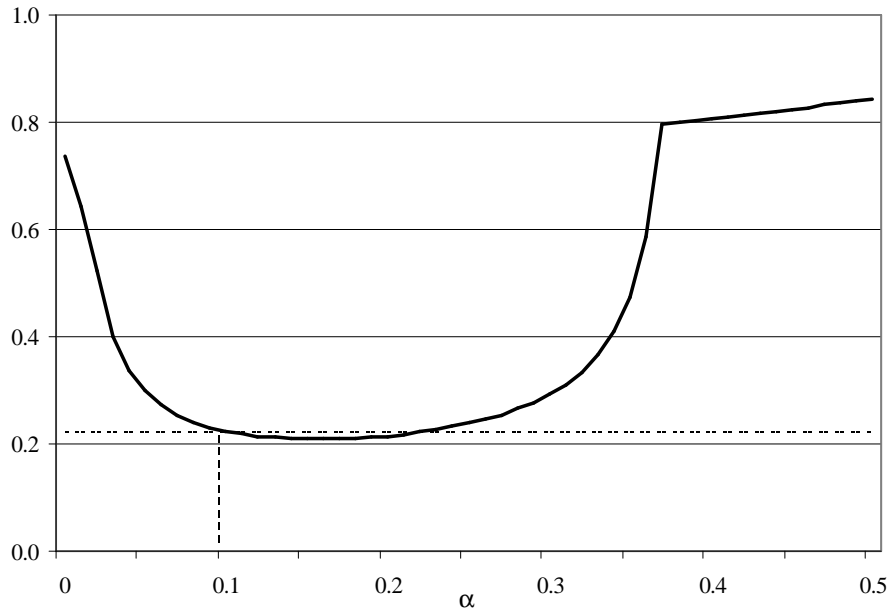


Figure 5: Unemployment expenditure after a benefit reform.

4 Conclusions

The Finnish debate on the needs to reform the unemployment benefit system has, to a large extent, been based on the presumption that shifting unemployment benefit expenditure from the long-term unemployed to the short-term unemployed improves incentives and thereby increases employment. The purpose of this paper has been to show that this result lacks generality and does not survive a variety of extensions to the basic model.

The extensions considered in this paper are twofold. First, it is shown that heterogeneity of the labour force may create a situation in which front-loading can increase unemployment and the cost of the benefit system. Broadly speaking, a reform fails if it targets the wrong segment of labour force: ie if it improves job-search incentives for those whose job-search effort is least likely to produce results while weakening job-search incentives for those for whom incentives play a more consequential role. The second extension is to consider an additional source of moral hazard in the form of a costly job-retention effort. Such an extension may cause a benefit reform to result in higher unemployment if it fails to correctly anticipate the behavioural changes induced by the reform and factor them into the reform design .

There are a large number of further considerations that may affect the optimal design of the unemployment insurance system. For example, in this paper, as in most of the literature, the handling of the insurance aspect of benefit design has been rudimentary. The utility of a worker was measured by the discounted value of expected income. A more realistic modeling framework would involve risk aversion and possibly imperfect access to financial markets. In such a framework, the insurance dimension of unemployment benefits would involve not only insurance against the occurrence of unemployment but also against involuntary prolongation of unemployment. Obviously, the more front-loaded the benefit structure, the less insurance it provides against the latter type of risk.

There are other extensions that would tend to tip the scale in favour of front-loaded benefits. One extension that has been mentioned is the deterioration of the market value of the worker over a prolonged unemployment spell. This argument would seem to speak for more front loading, although again, the generality of such a result is not entirely obvious. Further, a similar phenomenon could be modelled as a time-declining effectiveness of job-search, which could actually lead to quite opposite conclusions regarding the virtues of benefit front-loading. Still, there are undoubtedly numerous arguments in both directions.

The general lesson is that balancing the incentive effects of unemployment benefits against social and insurance considerations is all but a simple task. It is easy to predict that reducing unemployment benefits reduces unemployment; it is much more difficult to predict how a redistribution of benefit among different groups of unemployed affects unemployment. One should seek to identify and target those segments of unemployed (actual and potential) that are most receptive to incentives and have the greatest control over their employment situation. The resulting optimal benefit structure is likely to differ from one situation to the other. In all cases, finding the optimal structure requires a careful micro-level analysis of the structure of unemployment and the actual situation in the labour market.

A Appendix

A.1 Basic model

The following is the proof that in the basic model, a small ex-ante expenditure neutral front-loading of unemployment benefits reduces unemployment:

Taking the total differential of the first order condition (4) yields the following condition for a change in the benefit parameters \bar{b} and b to leave k^u (and hence unemployment) unchanged:

$$-b \frac{1 + k^u(\bar{r} + r + s)}{(\bar{r} + r + s)^2} e^{i(\bar{r} + r + s)k^u} d\bar{b} + \frac{s}{\bar{r} + r + s} e^{i(\bar{r} + r + s)k^u} db = 0;$$

which simplifies to

$$\frac{db}{d\bar{b}} \bigg|_{dk^u=0} = b \frac{\mu}{k^u} + \frac{1}{\bar{r} + r + s} \quad (11)$$

Correspondingly, the condition for a benefit reform to leave unemployment benefit expenditure unchanged can be solved by differentiating the benefit expenditure function (6):

$$\begin{aligned} & -b \frac{1}{(\bar{r} + r)^2} + b e^{i(\bar{r} + r)k^u} \frac{1 + k^u(\bar{r} + r)}{(\bar{r} + r)^2} - \frac{1 + k^u(\bar{r} + r + s)}{(\bar{r} + r + s)^2} d\bar{b} \\ & + \left(\frac{1}{\bar{r} + r} e^{i(\bar{r} + r)k^u} + \frac{e^{i(\bar{r} + r)k^u}}{\bar{r} + r + s} \right) db \\ & = 0; \end{aligned}$$

which can be written as

$$\frac{db}{d\bar{b}} \bigg|_{dUB=0} = b \frac{\frac{1}{(\bar{r} + r)^2} e^{i(\bar{r} + r)k^u} \frac{1 + k^u(\bar{r} + r)}{(\bar{r} + r)^2} - \frac{1 + k^u(\bar{r} + r + s)}{(\bar{r} + r + s)^2}}{\frac{1}{\bar{r} + r} e^{i(\bar{r} + r)k^u} + \frac{e^{i(\bar{r} + r)k^u}}{\bar{r} + r + s}};$$

In order for a expenditure-neutral reform to reduce unemployment (ie re-

duce k^a) it is necessary and sufficient to show that

$$\begin{aligned}
 & \frac{db}{d^{\mathbb{R}}} \Big|_{dUB=0} < \frac{db}{d^{\mathbb{R}}} \Big|_{dk^a=0} \\
 &) \quad \frac{\frac{1}{(\mathbb{R}+r)^2} i e^{i(\mathbb{R}+r)k^a} \frac{1+k^a(\mathbb{R}+r)}{(\mathbb{R}+r)^2} i \frac{1+k^a(\mathbb{R}+r+\omega)}{(\mathbb{R}+r+\omega)^2}}{\frac{1 i e^{i(\mathbb{R}+r)k^a}}{\mathbb{R}+r} + \frac{e^{i(\mathbb{R}+r)k^a}}{\mathbb{R}+r+\omega}} < k^a + \frac{1}{\mathbb{R}+r+\omega} \\
 &) \quad \frac{\frac{1}{(\mathbb{R}+r)^2} i e^{i(\mathbb{R}+r)k^a} \frac{1+k^a(\mathbb{R}+r)}{(\mathbb{R}+r)^2} i \frac{1+k^a(\mathbb{R}+r+\omega)}{(\mathbb{R}+r+\omega)^2}}{\frac{1 i e^{i(\mathbb{R}+r)k^a}}{\mathbb{R}+r} + \frac{e^{i(\mathbb{R}+r)k^a}}{\mathbb{R}+r+\omega}} < k^a + \frac{1}{\mathbb{R}+r+\omega} \\
 &) \quad \frac{1}{\mathbb{R}+r} i 1 i e^{i(\mathbb{R}+r)k^a} < k^a + \frac{1}{\mathbb{R}+r+\omega} i 1 i e^{i(\mathbb{R}+r)k^a} \\
 &) \quad \frac{1}{\mathbb{R}+r} i \frac{1}{\mathbb{R}+r+\omega} (1 i e^{i(\mathbb{R}+r)k^a}) < k^a
 \end{aligned}$$

Noting that $1 i e^{i(\mathbb{R}+r)k^a} < (\mathbb{R}+r)k^a$ for all $\mathbb{R}; r; k^a > 0$, for the above to hold it is sufficient that

$$\begin{aligned}
 & \frac{1}{\mathbb{R}+r} i \frac{1}{\mathbb{R}+r+\omega} (\mathbb{R}+r)k^a < k^a \\
 &) \quad \frac{\omega}{\mathbb{R}+r+\omega} < 1;
 \end{aligned}$$

which holds for all $\mathbb{R}; r; \omega > 0$ and hence completes the proof.

A.2 Heterogenous workers I

An expenditure-neutral front-loading needs to leave the expenditure function (7) unchanged. Differentiating and arranging yields

$$\begin{aligned}
 & \frac{db}{d^{\mathbb{R}}} \Big|_{dUB=0} = \frac{b}{(\mathbb{R}+r)} i \frac{(1 i n) b e^{i(r+\mathbb{R})k_2^a} k_2^a}{n + (1 i n)(1 i e^{i(r+\mathbb{R})k_2^a})}
 \end{aligned}$$

From (11), noticing that $\beta_2 = 1$, a reform that leaves k_2^a unchanged is characterised by

$$\frac{db}{d\beta} \bigg|_{dk_2^a=0} = bk_2^a:$$

We intend to establish that for low enough b , an expenditure-neutral reform increases k_2^a . For that to be the case, it is sufficient to show that

$$\frac{db}{d\beta} \bigg|_{dUB=0} > \frac{db}{d\beta} \bigg|_{dk_2^a=0};$$

ie an expenditure-neutral reform raises the initial benefit level more than a reform that maintains k_2^a . Hence, from the above, it is required that

$$\frac{1}{(\beta + r)} > \frac{(1 - \beta) e^{i(r+\beta)k_2^a} k_2^a}{n + (1 - \beta)(1 - e^{i(r+\beta)k_2^a})} > k_2^a:$$

Noticing that as b decreases, k_2^a goes to zero, it is sufficient to show that the above inequality holds as $k_2^a \rightarrow 0$. This is obvious since the inequality approaches

$$\frac{1}{(\beta + r)} > 0$$

as $k_2^a \rightarrow 0$. This completes the proof.

A.3 Heterogenous workers II

To establish that $b < 1 - l_2 = w$ makes type 2 individual indifferent between taking up a job immediately at job loss or postponing the search infinitesimally it suffices to show that the first-order condition holds at $k_2^a = 0$.

From (1) and (3) it is easy to solve that if $k_2^a = 0$ and $\beta = 1$, then $U(0) = W = w = r$. Substituting these into the first-order condition

$$l_2 + \frac{\beta w}{\beta + \beta + r} e^{i\beta k_2^a} - \frac{r - W}{r + \beta} = 0$$

yields $l_2 + w - 1 = 0$. The result follows.

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