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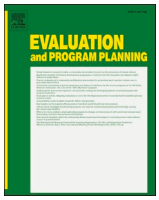

Framing the shift to supported employment: Exploring the impacts of a person-centred programme evaluation approach through peer led participatory research

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ABSTRACT

Employment support programs play a crucial role in assisting the unemployed in overcoming challenges to achieve their employment goals. The experiences of participants with multiple challenges provide insights into programme effectiveness in achieving personalised goals of employability, social development, and inclusion. This study contributes to the evaluation of supported employment by presenting a peer-derived framework grounded in participants lived experiences. Interviews with twelve participants revealed themes around employment barriers, participation opportunities, one-to-one support, achievements, and recommendations. Findings highlight the value of flexible, personalised pathways that not only enhance employability but also build confidence, motivation and support social inclusion. The developed framework including personalised support, meaningful activities, and self-perceived progress offers guidance for designing inclusive employment programmes and their evaluation. A key recommendation is the need for ongoing support to sustain employment among disadvantaged individuals managing social, mental, and physical health challenges. From an evaluation perspective, the framework demonstrates how participant-informed mechanisms—such as confidence and empowerment—drive employability and social skills, consistent with the Context–Mechanism–Outcome logic of realist evaluation. By situating peer-led evaluation within realist, empowerment, and utilisation-focused traditions, this study refines programme evaluation and strengthens its practical relevance. It shows how outcome-focused fidelity models, which capture structural quality, can be complemented by peer-led approaches capturing experiential quality. Together, these perspectives provide a holistic and transferable evaluation model that speaks to both programme design and lived experience. Beyond the local context, lessons learned highlight the value of inclusive, participatory evaluation methods in generating credible, stakeholder-driven insights and advancing more effective employment support practices globally.

1. Introduction

A range of disadvantages and reasons for being socially excluded can make it difficult for some people to gain access to employment, including a lack of experience, limited education, physical and mental health conditions, and insufficient work-related professional skills (Audhoe et al., 2018; Wanberg, 2012). Additionally, the absence of regular social networks, peer interaction, and social support - which provide encouragement, valuable information about new job opportunities, and useful advice – can further hinder employment opportunities (Pohlan, 2019). The lack of social connections and support, combined with these multiple barriers, makes it increasingly difficult for individuals to access labour market opportunities, improve their employability and job skills, and break the cycle of unemployment (Wanberg, 2012). Effective and inclusive support is therefore crucial to help people overcome these challenges and prevent them from becoming trapped in long-term unemployment, social exclusion, and mental health problems (Thern et al., 2017; Wanberg, 2012).

Prolonged unemployment and repeated experiences of rejection can lead to a loss of confidence, job search self-efficacy, and motivation, further exacerbating the challenges faced by individuals (Mcquaid & Lindsay,2002). These issues negatively affect their ability to apply for jobs, perform well in interviews, and present skills effectively. Conversely, according to Maddy Iii et al. (2015) increasing job

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self-efficacy empowers the unemployed to feel confident and in control of their situation, becoming more proactive in their job search by building employability capabilities, setting realistic goals, and taking actionable steps towards employment. To empower and assist the unemployed, especially those struggling to find or retain a job, individuals experiencing social and/or economic exclusion need support from employment programs that help build employability skills, maintain optimism, and keep them motivated throughout the job search process, ultimately facilitating sustainable employment opportunities (Van Den Broeck & Vansteenkiste,2023).

An employment support program commonly recognises the diversity of jobseekers, the wide range of challenges they face, and their need for different types of support (Beyer, 2012; Card et al., 2018; Perkins, 2007). While a particular program or intervention may be effective for one subgroup of the population, it may not for another (Biewen et al., 2007; Burns et al., 2007; Greenberg et al., 2003). For example, some people may need psychological counselling to deal with depression during unemployment, while others may require help with job search skills (networking, interviewing and negotiating a job), financial planning or time management (Hanisch, 1999). Those who are more vulnerable, such as individuals with multiple mental health problems (e.g., learning difficulties, autism) and physical disabilities, may require flexible and more personalised support to find and maintain employment (Beyer, 2012).

These findings suggest that effective employment support programs require a variety of opportunities to be offered in various forms (e.g., a wide range of workshops or services) so that individuals can choose what best suits their needs (Hanisch, 1999). Evidence indicates that 'one size fits all' solutions are ineffective, and tailored or individualised approaches are more likely to be successful (López et al., 2021; Roulstone et al., 2014). These approaches address specific needs to achieve better employment outcomes (Juvonen-Posti et al., 2002; Van Den Broeck and Vansteenkiste, 2023). A narrow focus on specific populations or needs can overlook the potential benefits of a more inclusive approach to employment support. Such an approach considers the individual circumstances of each person to ensure that everyone receives the support they need to overcome their specific barriers to successful employment or sustainable re-employment.

The literature reveals a wide range of employment support approaches and interventions aimed at improving unemployed people's access to labour market opportunities and increasing their inclusion in employment and in the wider community (Peláez-Fernández et al., 2019; Whelan et al., 2018). For example, Individual Placement and Support (IPS) is a supported employment approach developed to enhance employment inclusivity for people with severe mental illness (Whitworth et al., 2024). Additionally, supported employment (SE) methods provide ongoing support to people with long-term health problems or disabilities (e.g., intellectual disability) to help them secure paid work and improve their social inclusion (Meltzer et al., 2016). JOBS II is another intervention program designed to prevent poor mental health during unemployment and promote re-employment by enhancing job search skills, self-esteem, a sense of control, job search self-efficacy, and preparedness against setbacks (Vinokur et al., 1995). Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a psychological intervention technique that helps improve the mental health of unemployed individuals, enhance job-seeking activities, and increase success in job-finding (Arena et al., 2023; Himle et al., 2014). The unemployment literature is rich in policies and implementations of vocational and non-vocational employment-related services, highlighting diverse strategies to support individuals in overcoming barriers to employment.

To understand how programs and interventions achieve their employment inclusivity goals, the effectiveness evaluation literature explores questions such as "What type of program worked better?", "What did not work?", and "For whom?" (Martin & Grubb, 2001). For example, Whelan et al. (2018) demonstrated that career guidance interventions effectively helped individuals with long-term unemployment build psychological capital and perceived employability. This includes improvements in self-esteem, hopefulness, resilience, and career self-efficacy, leading to more sustainable employment. A follow-up assessment by Rose et al. (2012) indicated that a vocationally oriented CBT program increased mental health, self-esteem, optimism, and positive attitudes toward work for individuals who were very long-term unemployed. And Moore et al. (2017) found that job-club interventions could reduce depressive symptoms, particularly for unemployed individuals at higher risk of depression. In a randomised controlled trial among individuals with severe mental illness, Areberg and Bejerholm (2013) found that IPS increased scores of quality of life, empowerment, and work motivation. Additionally, some evidence suggests that supplementary interventions, such as work-related social skills and cognitive training, can enhance the vocational outcomes of IPS (Boycott et al., 2012).

At the same time, there is evidence of heterogeneous effects (Lechner & Gerfin, 2000), mixed or unsuccessful outcomes among programs or interventions (Whelan et al., 2018), and weak support in terms of re-employment, work participation, and reducing mental distress among the unemployed (Audhoe et al., 2010). For example, while evaluations of training programs have shown larger effects for women compared to men and youth, these effects do not appear to increase over time (Greenberg et al., 2003). A systematic evaluation analysis found that 'job club interventions' were more effective in reducing depressive symptoms compared to CBT, emotional competency training, expressive writing, guided imagery, and debt advice (Moore et al., 2017). Additionally, programs seemed more effective in the short term compared to sustained or longer-term effects (Biewen et al., 2007). These findings underscore the need for continuous evaluation and monitoring of employment support programs to effectively respond to the diverse needs and experiences of the unemployed.

In effectiveness evaluations of programs and interventions, considerable attention is often given to evaluation techniques such as randomised controlled trials (RCTs), systematic reviews, and meta-analyses of effect evaluations (Moore et al., 2017). Longitudinal studies, post-evaluations, and follow-up results indicate which effects facilitate positive outcomes or fail to be effective, and among which sub-samples of targeted groups (Moore et al., 2017; Whelan et al., 2018). Research often focuses on evaluating metrics such as how quickly unemployed individuals find a job or re-enter employment, their ability to perform job-related tasks, their sense of empowerment in managing their job search, career development, mental health, and their persistence in job search efforts despite rejections. Examining these factors provides a quantitative snapshot of outcomes, rather than a narrative of the unemployed experience with personalized support (Martin & Grubb, 2001) and the wider changes experienced by individuals along the way.

A qualitative exploration of users' experiences within employment programs is essential to gain a comprehensive understanding of the individualised support approach (Gustafsson et al., 2018; Wistow and Schneider, 2003). This method captures "experiences in seeking employment, getting a job, being in work, and the support they received" (Wistow & Schneider, 2003., Page, 166). Understanding support systems and fulfilment from the user's perspective provides valuable insights into the impact of the programs on participants' lives, promoting employment goals and enhancing inclusion while unemployed (Meltzer et al., 2016). This approach offers a broad understanding of the various needs and support indicators that influence individual experiences. However, research is often limited to the effectiveness of a particular type of intervention, focusing on its specific positive outcome(s).

1.1. The Going the Extra Mile (GEM) project

In this study, we focus on the experiences of unemployed individuals within the Going the Extra Mile (GEM)[1] project in Gloucestershire, UK (GOV.UK, 2019). Initially funded for three years by the UK's Big lottery and the European Social Fund (ESF), the aim of the GEM project was to create opportunities that reduce barriers for jobseekers who are out of work and need support to (re-)enter employment, training or education and foster social development (COURTNEY et al., 2022). The GEM programme involved a partnership of over 30 voluntary and community sector organisations and employed a participant centred approach, providing comprehensive support to help participants become resilient during periods of unemployment, improve their employability, secure and maintain competitive employment, and develop social goals and health and well-being aspects. Employment inclusivity was central to GEM's development strategies, offering opportunities to all unemployed individuals referred voluntarily by social services or through self-referral. In GEM, all participants received one-to-one support from a navigator developer, who helped them progress and access various opportunities and developments. From a research perspective the GEM project offered ideal conditions to examine the effects of different types of individualised support approaches in improving employability and social development. Due to its success the project eventually ran from late 2016 to late 2022 and supported over 2000 participants. The research reported here was undertaken between 2019 and 2021.

Investigating participants' perspectives on support can enhance our understanding of how employment support programs can best be tailored to help jobseekers overcome their specific challenges and achieve their goals of employment, inclusion and mental health. By shifting power from professional evaluators to participants, the process reflects participatory evaluation principles (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998) and empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 2001), ensuring findings reflect lived experiences and theory that is co-developed with participants by identifying mechanisms (Chen, 2022; Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Weiss, 1997). This makes evaluation more inclusive, and increases the relevance, ownership, and use of results (Patton, 2008). The findings may reveal why some programs are more effective for certain individuals than others, highlight existing challenges, and provide valuable insights on making the inclusion and integration of all population groups into the labour market more sustainable.

Our aim in this study is to develop a unique framework for employment support programs based on the experiences of participants involved in the GEM project. We identify participants' experiences using a peer-led research approach. In this context, "peer" refers to a fellow GEM participant who is either currently undergoing, or has previously undergone, a similar journey through the program. By focusing on the identification of key themes (Wistow & Schneider, 2003), we create a holistic framework that addresses support systems and fulfilment from the users' perspective. In so doing this research responds to calls from the UK Government's *Get Britain Working* white paper (GOV.UK, 2024) for evaluations to prioritise personalised approaches rather than adopting a 'one size fits all' model and addressing health inequalities through inclusive growth (Whitty, 2023).

The remainder of this paper presents the research methodology, analysis and study findings. In concluding it provides a novel evidence-based framework that has demonstrated success in supporting and promoting employability, health, and social inclusion through a person-centred participatory approach.

[1] Case study: Going the Extra Mile: a project to help those furthest from work. https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/going-the-extra-mile-a-project-to-help-those-furthest-from-work

2. Data collection method: The peer-led participatory approach

To explore the experiences and stories of participant experiences in a way that both reflected and enhanced the spirit of inclusivity and skills development of GEM, a peer-led participatory research approach was employed. Peer-led research is an innovative, participatory method where members of the target group are actively involved in various stages of the research project, including survey design, data collection, analysis, and writing up the results and findings (Guta, Flicker, & Roche 2013; Harding, Whitfield, & Stillwell 2010). The significance of using peers in this project lies in participant empowerment, providing opportunities for developing new skills, building problem-solving and decision-making capacities, and fostering inclusive experiences (Fetterman, 2001). Additionally, involving the target population to contribute to the evaluative framework allowed for a deeper understanding of their true needs and realities, resulting in high-quality data and valid findings (Guta, Flicker, & Roche 2013; Harding, Whitfield, & Stillwell 2010).

Initially, a pilot method was conducted with three GEM participants to co-design the interview schedule. This co-design process ensured the formulation and refinement of questions based on a participant-centred design approach, contributing to a comprehensive view of the project from the users' perspective, in turn reflecting the utilisation-focused evaluation (Patton, 2008) approach to ensuring that findings are relevant to practitioners and participants. It also helped to ensure the appropriate use of accessible language to fit the cohort. With the assistance of navigator developers, interested GEM participants were invited to take part in the GEM monitoring and evaluation project, either as interviewers or interviewees for peer-to-peer interviews (from October 2019 to June 2021). Participants received a one-off high street voucher upon satisfactory completion of at least one interview and submission of the interview recording. Although only one voucher was payable, interviewers were encouraged to conduct multiple interviews to build their skills and confidence.

Five interviewers conducted twelve individual interviews, including both male and female peers, with two finding it a particularly valuable experience for their CV development and confidence. One of the interviewers took on an active co-researcher role in the peer-led research project and was subsequently recruited to collaborate with the monitoring and evaluation team in all facets of the research project. The navigator developers and support staff provided the interviewers with voice recorders and assisted with meeting arrangements.

Interviewee participation was voluntary, and they were free to withdraw from the interview at any time without providing a reason. Both interviewers and interviewees signed consent forms addressing the practical and ethical aspects of the interviews and data usage before the interview. Additionally, interviewers signed an agreement form outlining their commitment to the tasks and were instructed to report any emerging issues or challenges resulting from the interviews to the evaluation team.

A half-day informal peer research methods workshop was conducted by the evaluation team for interested participants. The aim was to provide them with information about the interview process, ensure they understood their roles in the project, and help them view themselves as members of the research team. During the interviews, they were instructed to introduce themselves as co-researchers, explain that they are current or former GEM participants, share how long they have been involved in the program, and describe the nature of their involvement to date. They were asked to gather stories about the journey of study participants before and during GEM, and their aspirations for after the program. Additionally, they were requested to probe for details about participants' relationships with their Navigator Developers and how these relationships influenced their GEM experience, as well as explore further relevant questions during the interviews.

Interviewers were asked to assure study participants about the confidentiality of their conversations, emphasising that their stories

might be included in the research while maintaining their anonymity. The peer researchers were instructed to explain that, although the research team may use some quotes from the interviews, none of the discussed content would be attributed to them personally. It was important for the peer researchers to ensure that interviewees were comfortable with the voice recorder being switched on and to explain its significance in accurately capturing the interview.

3. Data analysis

This research draws on the voices and quotes of study participants from the twelve interviews. Each audio-recorded interview was transcribed for data analysis and coded using NVivo. The length of the transcriptions ranged from 5 to 26 pages. We employed the constant comparative method for data analysis, as outlined by Maykut and Morehouse (2002): "inductive category coding and simultaneous comparing units of meaning across categories, refinement of categories, exploration of relationships and patterns across categories and integration of data yielding and understanding of people and settings being studies" (Page., 124).

Using this approach, we began by coding the data to identify the emerging concepts from each interview. These codes were then analysed, compared, and grouped into thematic categories. Table 1 provides an illustration of the coding used in the data analysis. The quality of the coded data was discussed among the peer researchers and the monitoring and evaluation team throughout the entire process of data gathering and analysis.

To maintain anonymity, we used the terms 'peer researcher' and 'study participant' throughout data presentation and description, avoiding the use of gendered pronouns like 'he', 'she', 'him' and 'her'. Additionally, when study participants mentioned their navigators by name or used gendered pronouns, we replaced these with 'my navigator'. Quotes from the interviews are presented in passages of italic text, either as single extracts or within a passage. To improve readability, we have removed filler phrases ('and so', 'you know', 'so yes', 'I think'), filler words ('so', 'like', 'therefore'), filler sounds ('umms', 'uhs'), stutters (e.g., 'In- In- In- In fact'), and non-verbal communication cues (e.g., 'laughter', 'pauses'). Repetitions, false starts (incomplete sentences), and irrelevant topics are denoted by […]. Additional information is presented in ['].

3.1. Interviewer background and context

Some participants were referred to GEM through a social prescribing approach, primarily by local services including job centres, family support services and mental health counsellors. Other participants discovered the GEM project through self-referral, often learning about it from a friend, family member, personal Facebook, or being introduced by navigator developers. The study includes both current GEM participants (10 individuals) and ex-participants (2 individuals) and peer interviewers (5 individuals). Current participants were those actively engaged in the GEM project with one-on-one support from a navigator developer at the time of the interview, while ex-participants were individuals who had moved on to paid or voluntary work and had completed their involvement with GEM.

Table 1
Illustration of the constant comparative method of the interview transcripts.

QUOTES	Experiences	Themes
We'll basically just sit down, read through the application	Job related support	Personalised social support
It's giving something back to the community as well.	Social participation	Participation in meaningful activities
I'm confident enough to speak to them	Enhanced confidence in social interactions	Self-perceived progress and improvements

Some participants were at the beginning of their GEM journey (less than 6 months), while others had been involved for much longer (around 9 months, a year, or a year and a half). The significance of having participants with varying lengths of involvement allowed the research to capture a wide range of stories, experiences, and insights. This diversity also helped to understand the different ways in which GEM had supported them and how the programme - and future interventions - might continue to assist individuals in achieving their goals.

Participants discussed several barriers to their employment. Many of these limitations were related to mental health issues such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), autism, Asperger's, dyspraxia, anxiety, and depression. Additionally, some participants faced physical health conditions such as Cauda Equina Syndrome (CES), disabilities, or blindness, which further limited their employment opportunities. Other challenges included a lack of work experience, unclear career paths, and a shortage of relevant job opportunities, all of which contributed to feelings of despair in their job search.

4. Findings

Three prominent areas of one-to-one employment support experiences emerged from the peer-to-peer research data: personalised social support, participation in meaningful activities, and self-perceived progress and improvements. Each of these areas is described in more detail below to illustrate the impact that GEM had on its participants. Commensurate with the aim of using the findings to develop a unique conceptual framework to help facilitate the design of future employment support programmes, reference is made to the literature throughout the discussion of findings, to provide further theoretical and evidence-based context, and to help situate the emerging framework in the wider literature. Illustrative quotes are used throughout, to provide depth and colour to the stories of change and experience revealed through the interviews.

4.1. Personalised social support

Terms such as "personalised support," "person-centred support," and "personalisation" are used interchangeably in the literature to describe "placing service users at the centre of service provision to ensure that the support they receive is individually tailored to meet their needs, hopes and goals" (Neale et al., 2018., Page 734). Social support, which includes assistance from friends, family, online resources, communities, and networks, has been shown to positively influence jobseekers' job search intensity and reduce job search anxiety (Magagula, 2017; Teye-Kwadjo, 2023). In this context, personalised social support reflects the tailored assistance provided to participants by a one-to-one Navigator Developer throughout the project.

Different aspects of support were discussed based on participants' needs and reasons for referral to the project. Those who self-referred primarily sought employability support to move directly into a job. In contrast, those referred by support organisations, such as mental health services (e.g., Combat Stress, the UK's leading charity for veterans' mental health), counsellors, and therapists, focused on progress towards employment and staying on track rather than immediate job placement. These referrals aimed to address participants' emotional, informational, social, and life needs to help them gradually overcome their barriers (e.g., social anxiety) and increase their employability.

> *My therapist pushed it on to the next stage in a way to see what else other than therapy I could do to help and start getting back out with people and not isolating myself so much. (participant 1)*

> *Because moving directly to the nuts and bolts of employment is not the appropriate or useful thing for me to be doing, at this stage. (participant 3)*

4.1.1. Job related support

Support with job searching was exemplified by the provision of individualised assistance in identifying vacancies, completing applications, conducting mock interviews, arranging work experience, and accompanying participants to their interviews. The impact of personalised social support in the job search process is evident as Navigator Developers worked closely with participants, helping them navigate the often frustrating and isolating experience of job hunting. This comprehensive support is further discussed below:

> *We'll basically just sit down, read through the application, look at the person specification and if I do get invited for interview, [My navigator developer] will go through interview questions with me, so we'll do like a mock interview, that kind of thing that's really helpful. (participant 5)*

4.1.2. Technology access and use

Accessing and knowing how to use technology is often seen as a barrier for those looking for work, particularly the older generation. This disadvantage affects their ability to acquire work-related skills and manage labour market opportunities effectively (Van Rooy et al., 2003). Participants reported receiving the necessary support to learn key skills for an online job search, including navigating job search websites, writing and uploading CVs and cover letters, and following up on job applications.

> *I've always found my own jobs before but as I've got older I just needed someone's support [.], it's quite tricky applying for these jobs online, because they need your CV and so you've got to know how to upload the CV for potential employers, so we've done that. (Participant 6)*

4.1.3. Setting goals

Another notable aspect of personalised social support was setting career goals. Goal setting is crucial for developing a coherent plan to guide the job search process and stay on track (Zikic & Klehe, 2006). In the context of unemployment, goal setting involves creating an 'activity plan' which outlines the necessary activities and strategies to improve job prospects (Van Hooft & Noordzij, 2009). Social support in setting career goals helps refine these goals and strategies, increasing the likelihood of finding the right job and achieving sustainable employment. The program was described as assisting participants in identifying jobs that interest them, setting ultimate employment goals, and taking steps to move closer to their desired job, rather than getting stuck in unclear career directions. The following are some of the participants' experiences:

> *It was another conversation on exactly that topic, lets think about training, lets think about what it might be [] things like, CCS cards and the most likely outcome are things like forklift truck licences and things like that, so vocational kind of courses that aren't necessarily big long scale things, but things like fork lift truck driver, if you've got that qualification, then that means you slot very neatly in to the job of working in a stock control or warehousing kind of direction. So that's the conversation we're having specifically. (participant 3)*

> *I am getting there with my goals that my navigator developer set (participant 9)*

> *I want to do [job's name] for the rest of my life, so yes it's definitely help set that up (participant 12)*

4.1.4. Pursuing goals

The pursuit of career goals can be particularly challenging for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, who often face numerous personal and health-related obstacles (Hollywood et al., 2012). Tailored social support is a crucial external resource that helps individuals remain focused and persistent in achieving their goals (Wang & Qu, 2022). The interview data reveals that the project provided additional support and resources, enabling disadvantaged participants to overcome these challenges and pursue their career goals and plans more effectively.

> *[My navigator developer]'s there to go that extra mile to make sure I get my achievement done and I'm really grateful for that, in fact, its been actually 100 % positivity. Its really helped me go that extra mile to get on to my career. (participant 9)*

4.1.5. Finding social opportunities

Social connections during unemployment help individuals feel valued and respected, contributing to their psychological and emotional well-being (Wanberg, 2012). Subjective perceptions of social connections can be categorised into formal involvement, such as participation in clubs or organisations, and informal involvement, such as engaging in social activities, maintaining contact with friends, and the perceived ability to ask for help (Pohlan, 2019). Participants shared their experiences of social connection opportunities through community events, activities and outings to cafés with their Navigator developers.

> *[My navigator's] helped me find the Veterans Breakfast Clubs that are on once a month, or twice a month, so I go and participate in that. (participant 1)*

> *We go out for a coffee once a week and that just helps me with my anxiety, because it's going out to a café, and having to do the simple things, like just ask for a cup of coffee that sometimes is too hard (participant 10)*

4.1.6. Providing emotional and practical support

During times of unemployment, access to social support can be crucial for coping with the stress of job loss, gaining access to valuable information, and receiving practical help with life's challenges (Rözer et al., 2020; Wanberg, 2012). Participants emphasised the support provided by Navigator developers through regular weekly meetings and updates on potential directions and opportunities. This consistent support helped participants manage their difficulties more effectively, offering both practical and emotional assistance that is often lacking during periods of unemployment.

> *Its given me lots of support like sees me most weeks. We chat. very supportive. [My navigator] is really good. Really helpful, hands-on and sort of helps look up things and find out what's available, could be available. [My navigator developer] is happy to sit there and listen to what I need to say sometimes and get it off my chest how I'm feeling. (participant 1)*

> *GEM has helped a lot of stuff for me, my Dad died in middle of last year and [my navigator developer] helped with a lot of organising stuff and knowing what / who to contact through that process, so that was helpful as well. (participant 11)*

4.2. Participation in meaningful activities

Meaningful activities, as opposed to merely passing the time or avoiding boredom, encompass a range of social, physical, and leisure activities that are structured and tailored to the individual's needs (Scanlan et al., 2011). The interview data reveals that participants engaged in various types of activities, including employability-related pursuits (such as attending courses, workshops, and training sessions, and volunteering) and personal leisure activities (e.g., photography, crafts, allotment gardening, and going to the gym), based on their reasons for referral to the project.

According to Jahoda's theory of latent deprivation, engagement in meaningful activities provides latent social and psychological benefits that unemployed individuals typically lack, such as social interaction, identity and social status, and time structure (Kamerāde & Paine, 2014). Participation in meaningful activities serves as a 'meaningful alternative' to employment (Penny & Finnegan, 2019) and can be an effective

coping strategy to reduce the negative experiences associated with job loss and social exclusion (Waters & Moore, 2002).

The following illustrates how participation in meaningful activities within the project has contributed to fulfilling the latent social and psychological functions needed during periods of unemployment.

4.2.1. Social interaction

Social interaction is an essential part of human life and can be significantly disrupted by unemployment (Anczweski and Anczewska, 2015; Pohlan, 2019; Rözer et al., 2020). The following are examples of meaningful social interactions that participants experienced through their involvement in the Confidence Building course and CV workshop. These activities provided opportunities for participants to meet people and engage in social interactions, helping to mitigate the isolation often associated with unemployment.

> *I've met a lot of people from different walks of life […] its been positive, really positive. […] That will always stay with me. That's something that I took so much from that particular course. (participant 6)*

> *I attended a CV workshop and that was through Bridging the Gap and that was really interesting and that was sat with people and going through how to create your CV. (participant 6)*

4.2.2. Real-world socialising

Especially for individuals lacking human interaction and seeking to overcome isolation, the genuine social integration facilitated by engaging in meaningful activities was emphasised. Participants appreciated interacting directly with others through activities like allotment gardening. This contrasted with socialising via social media, which has become a prevalent means of interaction today (Parrott, 2010). Below, their experiences highlight the value placed on these real-world social connections.

> *Having the human interaction, is important and it's at the centre of what I need now really, because I'm deeply fed up of being isolated […]. The big part of what we do is real sociability/ genuine conversations about whatever, passes our mind, with genuine people and it's not contrived, so literally the opposite of being socially isolated (participant 3)*

4.2.3. Connecting peers

Research indicates that peers, who share similar experiences, can effectively support each other through periods of unemployment (White et al., 2020), a support particularly valued by disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (Kaehne & Beyer, 2013). Meaningful activities facilitated within the GEM project have facilitated peer connections. Participation in social activities such as allotment gardening, Veterans Breakfast Clubs, council participant meetings, and GEM summer parties has provided opportunities for peers to meet and share experiences, as detailed below.

> *It's nice to meet people who are job searching alongside you, it was nice to meet everyone at the party, it was nice to meet people who had been through that process before you (participant 5)*

> *I did come with other GEM participants and I got on with them. I got on, I mingled with others, I was talking to other people, so I enjoyed it. I had a wonderful experience. (participant 9)*

> *I met quite a lot of people there [the participants meeting]. I spoke to quite a few people. I was quite fortunate to be able to speak a few different languages as well, which included Arabic and, of course, Persian and yes it was incredibly enriching. (participant 8)*

> *Having this space here where we can actually involve and engage with other people and talk about ideas, practical activities, is a way we find our way forward (participant 3)*

4.2.4. Social participation

As work plays a central role in social participation, unemployed individuals often experience a lack of belonging and contribution to society (Piškur et al., 2014). The following excerpts illustrate how participation in the food pantry project and allotment gardening was valued as meaningful involvement, providing a sense of working towards a common goal and contributing to fostering a sense of social participation during discussions between participants and interviewers:

> *What I like about it as well is that it's giving something back to the community as well, I know that there are all sorts of plans in terms of provide food for the food pantry, and using the skills that we've got, we've learnt here, to maybe take them elsewhere (peer researcher - interviewer 1)*

4.2.5. Routine and time structure

Engaging in meaningful activities while unemployed can impart a sense of daily structure and routine (Waters & Moore, 2002). The interview data underscored how participation in such activities not only provided this structure but also offered effective alternatives for managing their time.

> *It gives some routine to your life, you are going to be going here at a certain time, and you don't have to think about what you have to do in order to fill the time for that period of time. ((peer researcher – interviewer 2)*

> *It has been very constructive and I've been able to have a structure to my week as well rather than just having a week where everything is the same as last week before. (participant 8)*

> *My days were a bit empty before I started going the GEM project. (participant 11)*

4.2.6. CV development

Meaningful activities offer unemployed individuals opportunities to acquire and develop new personal and professional skills, enhancing their CVs. Engaging in such activities demonstrates proactivity and the ability to foster personal growth and transferable skills like communication, problem-solving, and time management (Penny & Finnegan, 2019). These experiences significantly bolstered participants' CVs, particularly those whose confidence had been affected by lacking formal employability skills and experiences.

> *I'm always adding things to my CV. Most of the opportunities that I've had over the past year have been because of GEM, whether it's volunteering, or doing courses, I obviously wouldn't be doing those (participant 5)*

> *I don't know if my CV would look better if I wasn't involved, because I'd probably just be sat at home probably. (participant 2)*

4.2.7. Networking opportunity

Expanding on the benefits of meaningful activities, one participant highlighted how volunteering served as a powerful tool for connecting with new people, networking, and creating future opportunities. Research also supports that during periods of unemployment, interacting with others and broadening one's social networks can provide new perspectives and ideas (Hällsten et al., 2017).

> *I was volunteering as well, which helped me to get more, like I got a PhD offer on the basis of that. (participant 5)*

4.2.8. Psychological distraction

Engaging in meaningful activities can lead to various psychological benefits, including improved mood and reduced depressive symptoms associated with unemployment (Tuncay & Yildirim, 2015). As shown

below, participating in allotment gardening helped participants distract their minds from the everyday concerns of joblessness and repetitive negative thoughts. By fostering outdoor activity and social interaction in natural settings, gardening supported participants in managing and maintaining their mental health (Malekinezhad et al., 2020), ultimately highlighting the therapeutic potential of everyday interactions with green spaces. These findings underscore the therapeutic potential of everyday contact with green spaces, particularly for those facing the challenges of unemployment.

You can get yourself into cyclic thinking […]. This project is something that's helpful because it is not directly connected, but just by virtue of doing what we do here, allow you to improve your mood, which means that you're less likely to get trapped in negative cycles. (participant 3)

It's just helpful to actually be doing things rather than sitting at home and just worrying about not having a job. (participant 5)

4.2.9. Being physically active

In addition to the benefits for mental wellbeing, engaging in meaningful activities outside the home naturally increases physical activity levels and contributes to overall fitness (Langham-Walsh et al., 2023). For instance, spending time actively in allotment gardening, such as cultivating plants, digging, and raking, significantly boosted participants' physical activity levels, as described below:

I also feel that it has actually improved my fitness level. I'm sort of flexibility and to some extent sort of strength in my legs, because I'm moving around and walking about, rather than spending long periods of time not doing a lot. I'm hoping that I actually will. (participant 3)

4.3. Self-perceived progress and improvements

The most commonly reported self-perceived progress and improvements since participating in the program include enhanced confidence in social interactions, increased career confidence, greater community engagement, reduced anxiety, improved motivation for proactive job hunting, and the development of career optimism and pursuing aspirations. Participants attribute these positive changes to their involvement in the GEM project and its outcomes. The following reflection examines these positive outcomes in jobseekers' attitudes and behaviours, highlighting their significance as key personal and social development outcome experiences within employability support programs.

4.3.1. Enhanced confidence in social interactions

Developing confidence in social relationships is crucial for establishing a supportive network that fosters sustainable employment (Wanberg, 2012). Confidence in social situations helps maintain connections within one's social circle, enhances self-esteem, and fosters a sense of belonging and engagement (Pettersson, 2012; Wanberg, 2012). According to interview data, participants expressed increased confidence in engaging with others and participating in social activities, which they had struggled with before joining the program.

I feel like my confidence is building, especially when talking to people, so that's something that I was quite nervous about doing before and like actually approaching people by myself, so it's definitely helping that. (participant 5)

I no longer feel that I'm walking into a space of all these people in front of me, staring at me and I don't know what to say. I'm confident enough to speak to them. (participant 10)

It brings me in to contact with other people when normally I would not do so. (peer researcher)

The things I've worked so far with GEM is building my confidence up (participant 9)

4.3.2. Increased career confidence

Extended periods of unemployment can erode individuals' confidence in their career prospects, particularly in a dynamic labour market marked by technological advancements and generational changes (Hillman and Knill, 2018; Van Rooy et al., 2003). The longer someone remains out of work, the harder it becomes to regain confidence in reskilling, re-entering the workforce, and embracing new opportunities (Mcquaid & Lindsay,2002). One participant in the GEM program, who had experienced prolonged unemployment, began volunteering at the GEM office. This experience not only allowed them to practice new skills but also helped rebuild their confidence and willingness to take on challenges.

I'm always nervous about new things, but once I got started and I got into the work, my confidence grew really. I wasn't really used to answering the phones and things. I feel more confident now than I did two years ago and more prepared to take risks. (participant 11)

They helped me look for work, they built up your confidence, […] I've applied for some jobs as well. I'm happy with that and I'm having a go. (participant 6)

4.3.3. Greater community engagement and reduced anxiety

Unemployment often exacerbates social anxiety due to reduced social interactions that come with employment, such as daily communication with colleagues and participation in meetings and events (Anczweski & Anczewska, 2015). Engaging with others outside the home can help individuals develop coping strategies to manage social anxiety and discomfort in social settings (Virgolino et al., 2017). The following examples illustrate how the GEM project supported participants in overcoming anxiety and becoming more engaged in their communities.

I've now joined a F.o.D. Camera Club and I wouldn't have done that before because my anxiety was too much. I spoke to them myself over the phone. Things wouldn't be like that if I hadn't come to GEM project. I couldn't speak on the phone to them because the anxiety was too much for me. (participant 10)

I was very anxious, so that was one of my challenges to face, getting over my fear of anxiety and meeting other people. […]. A lot has actually improved. I'm getting out more into the community. (participant 9)

4.3.4. Improved motivation for proactive job hunting

Motivation refers to "a psychological condition where an individual gets encouraged by someone or something in a particular way" (Omolu, 2017., Page 33). It plays a crucial role in sustaining job search efforts and significantly influences the well-being and attitude of unemployed individuals towards employment (Van Der Vaart et al., 2022). A supportive and encouraging social system can mitigate the psychological impact of setbacks and positively influence an individual's motivational beliefs (Van Der Vaart et al., 2022). The following reflects on the outcomes of the support provided, which empowered participants to feel less discouraged and motivated them to take proactive steps in their job search efforts:

I was encouraged to apply for a job at [name of restaurant] then within two hours they gave me a phone interview, then they invited me to [name of their branch] for a discovery session where I would experience what it is like to work at that branch and I would then do some of the duties of some of the staff and I found it very nice, it looked like a job that I would like to do […] I've been more motivated.[…] I have been more pro-active in searching for employment on the internet (participant 8)

4.3.5. Development of career optimism

Career optimism is rooted in the "self-regulatory model of goal-seeking behaviour, which examines how outcome expectancies affect

goal-setting behaviours such as those required to achieve career outcomes" (Rottinghaus et al., 2005., Page 5). Individuals with high levels of career optimism maintain a positive outlook on achieving their career goals, viewing barriers as temporary challenges on the path to success (Eva et al., 2020). As illustrated below, feelings of despair in job hunting transformed into optimism about future career prospects.

> *It was just positive of the fact that I was finally able to feel that there's hope, that unemployment would soon be over and that I would be employed and be on a part-time basis and be able to pursue my hobbies even more […] It does instead of just feeling like am I going to be unemployed, it's now I feel that I now have a light at the end of the tunnel in a sense. (participant 8)*

4.3.6. Pursuing career aspiration:

Career aspirations are defined as "an individual's expressed career-related goals or choices" that significantly influence job performance and career success (Wang et al., 2022). These aspirations represent long-term career goals that are typically specific and focused. The findings indicate that participants were able to make strategic decisions about their careers by maintaining a clear sense of direction. This clarity allowed them to formulate detailed plans of action and steps towards achieving their career goals emphasising solutions over limitations. The interview data below illustrates these points:

> *I'm looking for a volunteering job, just to start me off, and then I want to try and work on getting / like voluntary first, work experience, then apprenticeship, then part-time, then full-time. My aim of the goal is I want to get / I want to be full-time working and not be on benefits any more. So that is my goal. […] I want to become a [job's name], and run my own [name of business], so I'm on a course now to try and help me get to my career opportunity. (participant 9)*

> *I can see that it's having an effect, positive effect, that will enable me to be able to do more direct work related things better, I'm wanting to sort of further concentrate on this and further build on the benefits I'm perceiving of this (participant 3)*

> *I'm happy with where I am at the moment, just doing what I am now, but I don't want to let it stagnate and go back to what I was doing before. (participant 11)*

4.3.7. Discussion: Situating peer-led findings within evaluation theory

These findings highlight the value of a peer-led, participatory evaluation approach in capturing employment support programme impacts that extend beyond conventional employment fidelity outcomes. Four strands of evaluation theory provide a lens for understanding the significance of the peer-derived framework developed here and the processes that generated it.

First, based on the utilisation-focused evaluation (Patton, 2008), which holds that the primary criterion for judging an evaluation is its usefulness to intended users, the integration of peer evaluators within a participatory action research framework advanced this aim by enhancing both the relevance of the evaluation process and the uptake of findings. Because individuals with lived experience shaped the evaluation questions, methods, and interpretations, the insights produced were closely aligned with stakeholder priorities. Peer-generated perspectives—such as the importance of meaningful activity and self-perceived progress—proved directly useful for refining programme support strategies, while participants recognised the evaluation as a legitimate reflection of their experiences. In this way, the peer-led approach not only strengthened the practical utilisation of results but also demonstrated how participatory peer evaluation can operationalise and extend UFE principles within large-scale employment inclusion initiatives.

Second, the study resonates with the empowerment evaluation framework (Fetterman, 2001), which positions stakeholders as active evaluators to enhance ownership, foster self-determination, and build evaluative capacity. Peer evaluators with lived experience not only contributed data but also shaped evaluative judgments, shifting participants from passive subjects to active knowledge producers. This process strengthened participants' sense of agency and empowerment, which in turn produced outcomes of improved employment readiness. By framing peer involvement as an enactment of empowerment evaluation rather than merely a methodological device, the study demonstrates how empowerment-oriented participatory approaches can be effectively operationalised in complex programme settings.

Third, the peer-derived framework developed in this study (personalised support, participation in meaningful activities, and self-perceived progress) can be understood through theory-driven evaluation (Chen, 2022; Weiss, 1997). It represents an emergent grounded theory of change (Baker & Courtney, 2018) co-constructed with participants, and based on lived experience. This perspective situates participant experiences as mechanisms of change and moves the evaluation beyond description to theory-building in employment inclusion, in turn demonstrating how participatory approaches can inform both practice and future evaluations.

Fourth, the study aligns with realist evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997), which seeks to explain "what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why." Participant experiences can be interpreted as mechanisms of change that are activated in specific contexts: for example, personalised support enhancing confidence and self-efficacy among those facing barriers to employment, or meaningful activity fostering motivation and community integration where labour market opportunities are limited. These mechanisms, combined with contextual factors such as programme design, participant background, and local resources, lead to outcomes of self-perceived progress and improved wellbeing. Framing the findings as context–mechanism–outcome (CMO) configurations shift the analyses from describing impacts to explaining how change occurs, increasing the transferability of results to other employment inclusion programmes.

Together, by embedding lived experience within the evaluative process, this study advances understanding of how peer-led participatory evaluation approaches can enhance utilisation, foster empowerment, generate theory, and explain mechanisms of change. This theoretical integration strengthens the evaluation literature while highlighting lessons of broader relevance for international supported employment evaluation programmes.

4.3.8. Lessons learned: Peer-led participatory design

This peer-led participatory evaluation provides an adaptable framework offering transferable insights for other evaluation practices, namely:

- **Trust through Peer Involvement:** Peer evaluators increase trust and candour, producing richer and more credible data, especially with marginalised groups.
- **Self-perceived Outcomes Matter:** Beyond job entry and tenure, outcomes such as confidence, motivation, social participation, and wellbeing are vital for evaluating employment support programmes.
- **Complement Fidelity Measures:** Peer-derived frameworks should complement, not replace, established tools like IPS, offering a fuller picture of programme impact.
- **Adaptable, Not One-Size-Fits-All:** In response to (GOV.UK, 2024)'s call for more personalised approaches, the GEM peer-led research domains (See Fig. 1) —personalised support, meaningful activity, and self-perceived progress —show that flexible, participant-centred approaches outperform one-size-fits-all models and can be adapted across diverse contexts.
- **Inclusive Policy Impact**: Peer-led evidence can inform policies that address not only employment but also health inequalities, social exclusion, and community participation.

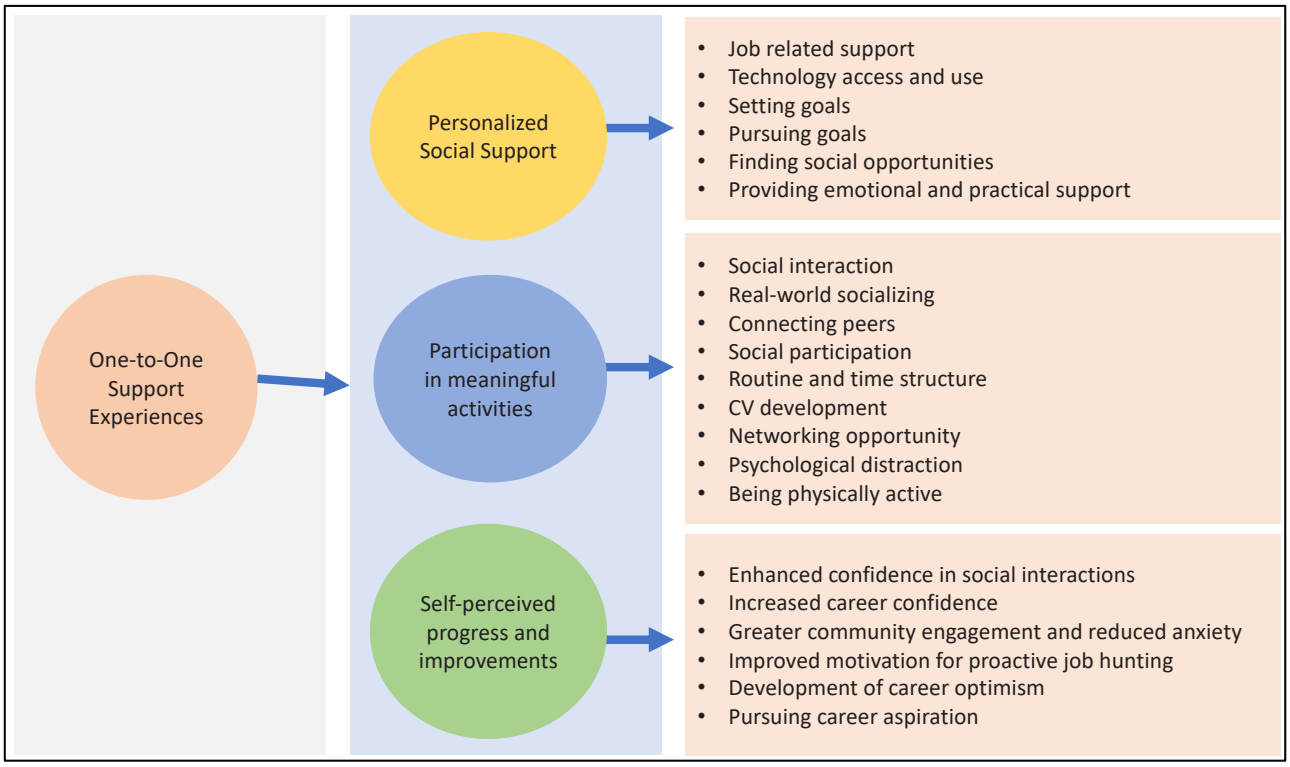

Fig. 1. Conceptual framing of impacts arising through one-to-one employment support.

5. Conclusions, limitations and implications

The peer-researcher findings underscore the success of GEM in providing tailored support to participants, enabling them to navigate unemployment effectively. One-to-one support throughout their journey emerged as crucial, particularly in addressing specific challenges based on how participants were referred to the programme. The significance of personalised support was evident across various areas, helping participants overcome obstacles and progress in developing employability skills and social capabilities.

Individuals facing multiple barriers to successful employment recommended ongoing project support and urged continuity beyond the first job to maintain engagement and build employability skills (Sanders et al., 2020). They emphasised that a one-off programme limits their ability to re-engage if they face job loss, and highlighted the challenge of maintaining employment due to ongoing mental and physical health conditions. Participants emphasised the need for ongoing support during employment in order to make sustained progress and secure sustainable employment.

In addition to impacts arising through the personalised support, which forms the core of the GEM model, two further dimensions of change are notable: participation in meaningful activities, which has a strong social dimension, but is also important for elements of practical skills such as CV development, as well as physical and mental health; and self-perceived progress and improvements, which captures the improvements to self-confidence and motivation as a result of GEM that are a striking element of the programme.

The three domains of impact that have emerged from the peer-led interviews are summarised in Fig. 1, which we put forward as a high-level conceptual framework to inform the design of future employment support programmes, along with their accompanying evaluation frameworks.

The above framework was developed using a peer-led model involving 12 peers. More interviews and more conventional interviewing methods may have produced a slightly different framework, especially if combined with quantitative assessments. However, the peer-led approach enabled interviewees to be more candid, less intrusive, and to convey their stories and experiences to like-minded individuals using language that enables a clearer understanding of how GEM affected change.

For policy makers, we can identify two evidential shifts arising through the GEM experience evidenced here – a shift from employment support to *supported employment*, and a shift from a 'one size fits all' approach to a *person-centred* approach. Making these high-level shifts in the way we think about supporting people along their personal and professional journey will open a myriad of doors to the wealth of possibilities documented here – from the building of agency and resilience in individuals to carve their own future, to building a strong civil society that enables communities to harness the power of their own local context. Indeed, the GEM model – itself built around a relational approach to fostering inclusive change for individuals – is applicable to everyone who requires some form of personal or professional support, and not only to those most excluded from society. It can indeed be even more *inclusive*; the main caveat being that it remains person-centred and true to local contexts.

This person-centred approach to supported employment speaks directly to recent calls for a more explicit recognition of the interrelationship between health and work, whereby being in employment is deemed to be protective of health, and vice versa (Whitty, 2023). The findings described here not only support this claim, but the framework developed through the research should help take this agenda forward, and amongst other things facilitate Whitty (2023)'s call for exploring ways that health inequalities may be tackled through inclusive growth.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Courtney Prof Paul: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Fahimeh**

Malekinezhad: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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