

The Impact of the ‘Preparing for the Labour Market’ Status on the Employment Prospects of Older Jobseekers of the Lithuanian Employment Service

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Summary. A person’s status of ‘preparing for the labour market’ (PPLM) is a new instrument applied by the Employment Service to support individuals facing barriers to labour market participation, with the provision of integrated case management support. Older unemployed people are particularly disproportionately assigned to the status. By employing the semi-structured interviews with older PPLM status holders alongside an analysis of Public Employment Service (PES) statistical data, this paper examines changes in the situation of older (55+) jobseekers following the introduction of the PPLM status. The analysis of normative documents, institutional data, and PES jobseekers’ responses indicates that the meaning and purpose of the status is often misunderstood by its holders, while the limited number of case managers restricts the effective implementation of the intended support model. The availability of PES services and measures for PPLM jobseekers is lower compared to those applicable to the PES jobseekers with the ‘usual’ unemployed status. Thus, the PPLM status can create a risk of further alienation from the labour market for older people.

Keywords: ‘preparing for the labour market’ status, categorisation of the unemployed, older jobseekers, distance from the labour market.

Darbo rinkai besirengiančio asmens statuso poveikis Lietuvos užimtumo tarnyboje registruotų vyresnio amžiaus asmenų įsidarbinimo perspektyvoms

Santrauka: Statusas „darbo rinkai besirengiantis asmuo“ (DRBA) yra nauja Užimtumo tarnybos priemonė, skirta padėti asmenims, susiduriantiems su kliūtimis dalyvauti darbo rinkoje, teikiant jiems integruotą atvejo vadybos pagalbą. Vyresnio amžiaus bedarbiai šiam statusui priskiriami neproporcingai dažnai. Šiame straipsnyje, derinant pusiau struktūrizuotus interviu su vyresnio amžiaus DRBA statusą turinčiais asmenimis

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ir Užimtumo tarnybos statistinių duomenų analizę, nagrinėjami vyresnių nei 55 metų ieškančių darbo asmenų situacijos pokyčiai po šio statuso įvedimo.

Normatyvinių dokumentų, institucinių duomenų ir ieškančių darbo asmenų atsakymų analizė rodo, kad patys asmenys dažnai klaidingai supranta šio statuso prasmę ir tikslą, o ribotas atvejo vadybininkų skaičius trukdo efektyviai įgyvendinti numatytą pagalbos modelį. Nustatyta, kad Užimtumo tarnybos paslaugų ir priemonių prieinamumas DRBA statusą turintiems asmenims yra mažesnis, palyginti su asmenimis, turinčiais bedarbio statusą. Taigi, DRBA statuso suteikimas vyresnio amžiaus asmenims gali kelti papildomą riziką dar labiau atitolti nuo darbo rinkos.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: darbo rinkai besirengiančio asmens statusas, bedarbių kategorizavimas, vyresnio amžiaus ieškantys darbo asmenys, atstumas nuo darbo rinkos.

Introduction

Despite the favourable economic situation, older residents of the country often face obstacles to finding employment. This is particularly challenging for people who have experienced periods of unemployment or economic inactivity. Barriers to employment often arise due to social, economic, or systemic reasons that job seekers are often unable to overcome on their own. In Lithuania, as well as in other EU countries, individuals can contact the Employment Service, which offers retraining and upskilling programs, employment counselling, and employer incentives (PES, 2025). However, in some cases, the psychosocial condition of older unemployed people prevents them from taking advantage of these services and requires social, health, or other specialised support. In recent years, Lithuania has been striving for greater convergence between employment and social services, and the introduction of the status of a person preparing for the labour market at the Employment Service is considered one such step.

The Lithuanian Employment Service (hereinafter referred to as the PES) introduced the status of a person preparing for the labour market (hereinafter referred to as PPLM) on July 1, 2022, as a measure aimed at creating conditions for closer institutional co-operation between the Employment Service and municipal institutions. This status is based on an assessment of barriers to employment, which determines a person's readiness to participate in the labour market. It is based on the provision that persons who are not ready to work due to certain barriers require a transition period during which they can overcome these barriers with the help of specialists. The Employment Law of the Republic of Lithuania defines five barriers to employment on the basis of which PPLM status is granted: lack of social skills and/or motivation to work, need to care for and/or nurse a family member or cohabitant, limited access to financial resources, inability to travel from their permanent place of residence to their place of work, alcohol addiction, drugs, psychotropic and other psychoactive substances, or gambling (Employment Law of Lithuania, 2022).

It is appropriate to examine in more detail the reasons for introducing the PPLM status, the characteristics and dynamics of PES jobseekers with this status, and the experiences of persons with this status. Since older people make up more than a half of those

who have been granted the PPLM status, this study examines the group of people aged 55+ who hold this status. This study aims to assess the situation of older persons (aged 55+) registered with the Employment Service after the introduction of the innovation, within the period from July 2022 to January 2025.

The objective of the study is to identify changes in the situation of the group of older (55+) jobseekers registered with the Lithuanian Employment Service following the introduction of the status of a person preparing for the labour market.

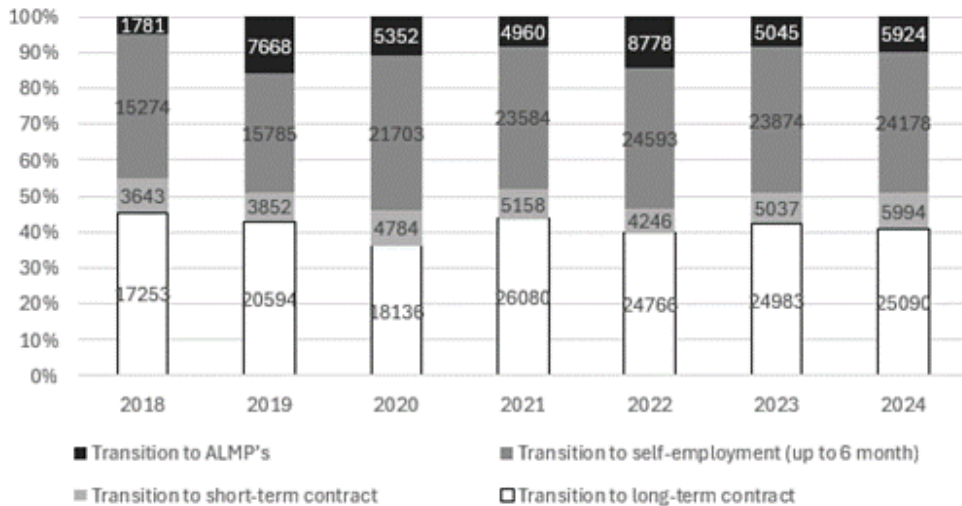
Research methods. To assess the changes in the situation of older PES jobseekers, the study is based on data retrieved by request from the Lithuanian Employment Service, categorising the group of employment jobseekers aged 55+ according to their status. A semi-structured interview method is used to analyse subjective assessments of changes related to the attainment of the status. Twenty older persons with the PPLM status were interviewed. The presentation of the dynamics of the situation of older people in the labour market is based on data from PES. Descriptive statistics was applied to time-series data on unemployment, the status of individuals within the PES, and their transition into employment or active labour market programs (ALMPs).

1. The Situation of Older Jobseekers of the Employment Service

The dynamics of older unemployed persons largely mirror the overall unemployment trends. In recent years, individuals aged 55+ have comprised approximately one-quarter of all registered unemployed persons; however, their representation among the long-term unemployed is considerably higher (39%), and they account for more than a half of unemployed persons with disabilities (54%) (Public Employment Service data, early 2025). Despite the relatively favourable labour market conditions in recent years, transition of older unemployed individuals into employment has remained virtually unchanged (Fig. 1). Re-employment is often temporary, involving short-term activities under a business certificate, fixed-term contracts, or participation in active labour market policies (ALMPs).

Research on barriers to employment among older persons consistently identifies health, working conditions, education, and qualifications as key determinants (Skučienė et al., 2015; Eurofound, 2017; OECD, 2020; Andersen et al., 2020; Aidukaitė & Blažienė, 2021; Zitikytė, 2021; Butrica & Mudrazija, 2022; Turek, 2020–2022). In Lithuania, older individuals face additional challenges, including discrimination, stereotypes, skills mismatches, and particular difficulties in returning to work after a period of unemployment (Brazienė & Mikutavičienė, 2015; Brazienė et al., 2017; Zitikytė, 2019, 2021; Navickė & Straševičiūtė, 2023; Humboldt et al., 2023). Evidence also shows that multiple barriers frequently coexist, compounding reintegration difficulties (OECD, 2018). Macroeconomic factors – such as declining vacancies and structural mismatches between labour supply and demand – further increase the vulnerability of older persons in Lithuania within the EU context (EC, 2025).

Figure 1. **Transition of 55+ y.o. PES jobseekers into employment or ALMP's (% and N during the period)**



Source: PES data retrieved by request, 2025

Nevertheless, labour market interventions primarily target supply-side barriers through subsidies, training, counselling, and support for mobility or entrepreneurship. Many other obstacles (e.g., health problems, stereotypes, or lifestyle factors) require coordinated action with local authorities and social services.

In 2019, implementation of the “*Model of Employment Promotion and Motivation for Unemployed Persons and Persons Receiving Social Assistance*” (LR SADM), 2019-05-14, No. 7652) was launched. The Model aimed to integrate long-term unemployed persons into the labour market by aligning employment promotion, motivation services, and monetary social assistance, while strengthening coordination and cooperation among state and municipal institutions. By 2023, all municipalities were expected to apply the cooperation practices tested under the Model.

The employability-limiting factors identified during implementation – such as communication difficulties, harmful habits, low work motivation, lack or mismatch of qualifications, insufficient work experience, high employer requirements, low self-confidence, health issues, indebtedness, caregiving responsibilities, undeclared work, return from imprisonment, and insufficient Lithuanian language skills – formed the basis for determining the PPLM status (Vencius, 2024). However, the Employment Law defines the PPLM status by using only five criteria, and no comprehensive justification for this selection could be identified. The following section outlines the procedure for granting a PPLM status to unemployed persons.

2. Categorisation of the Unemployed according to their Labour Market Readiness

Public employment services (PES) in EU countries typically classify unemployed persons and jobseekers according to their “distance from the labour market” or employment prospects to allocate limited resources more efficiently. The most common categories include: a) labour market ready, where barriers are minimal and easily addressed; b) moderately distant, including persons with qualifications misaligned with the labour market needs, certain health limitations, or care responsibilities; and c) distant, comprising individuals facing complex barriers and requiring intensive support (Konle-Seidl, 2011).

To assign these categories, PES applies several profiling methods: a) caseworker (soft) profiling based on professional judgment and structured interviews; b) rule-based or point systems using questionnaires and scoring rules; and c) statistical profiling, including classical models such as logistic regression or hazard models predicting unemployment risk or duration. More recently, automated statistical profiling using machine-learning techniques (e.g., random forests, boosting, decision trees, and neural networks) has been increasingly adopted. In practice, these approaches are often combined, by integrating algorithmic assessments with caseworker evaluation (Desiere et al., 2019).

In Lithuania, a mixed profiling approach is applied, combining a statistical profiling model (introduced in 2021) with PES specialist assessments. Employment opportunities are evaluated based on qualifications, competencies, work experience, health status, unemployment duration, job preferences, motivation, social skills, and related factors. Based on these data, jobseekers are classified into three categories: limited, medium, or high employment opportunities.

PES provides employment support services including counselling, information, individual assistance, training, skills development, and employment support measures (PES, 2025). Access to these services is regulated by the Employment Law and depends on the individual’s registered status, reflecting a rule-based profiling system. Persons with an unemployed status receive compulsory health insurance, vacancy referrals aligned with their qualifications and preferences, access to training and employment events, individual career consultations, and, if eligible, unemployment social insurance benefits and retraining opportunities.

In 2022, a new category, specifically, persons preparing for the labour market (PPLM), was introduced for individuals not ready for work. This status applies to persons facing specific barriers, including lack of social skills or motivation, caregiving responsibilities, financial constraints or indebtedness, limited mobility, or addiction to alcohol, drugs, psychoactive substances, or gambling (Employment Law, TAR, 2016, No. 18825). Eligibility requires individuals to acknowledge these barriers. Unemployed persons who lose their unemployment status due to non-compliance may lose certain benefits. In contrast, PPLM status ensures access to targeted assistance (Table 1).

Table 1. Statuses of PES jobseekers, conditions for granting, and availability of labour market services and measures

| Persons ready to work | | | |
|---|--|---|---|
| <i>A person with an unemployed status</i> | | | |
| <p>A person is independently looking for work.</p> <p>A person looking for work with the help of the Employment Service.</p> | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covered by compulsory health insurance; • Vacancies offered according to qualifications, experience, and job preferences; • Access to Employment Service events, training, and job fairs; • Individual career counselling provided as needed (e.g., interview and CV preparation); • Eligibility for unemployment social insurance benefits if requirements are met; • Opportunity for (re)training. | |
| Persons not ready to work | | | |
| <i>A person who has lost their unemployed status</i> | | <i>A person gained the status of a person preparing for the labour market</i> | |
| <p>Unemployed status is terminated if the unemployed person refuses the offered suitable job twice within 12 months without valid reason, or violates the procedure for paying for an independent job search twice within 6 months.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not covered by compulsory health insurance; • Vacancies are offered in line with qualifications, work experience, and job preferences; • Access to Employment Service events, training, and job fairs; | <p>Lack of social skills and (or) motivation to work;</p> <p>Need to care for a family member or a person living with them;</p> <p>Funds under restricted control;</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covered by compulsory health insurance; • Comprehensive support provided to address unemployment barriers; |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual career counselling provided as needed (e.g., interview and CV preparation). | <p>No opportunity to commute from their permanent place of residence to their workplace;</p> <p>An addiction to alcohol, narcotics, psychotropic and other psychoactive substances, and gambling.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eligible for mobility support and employment promotion measures. |

Note. Compiled by the author in accordance with the Employment Law, PES information. 2025

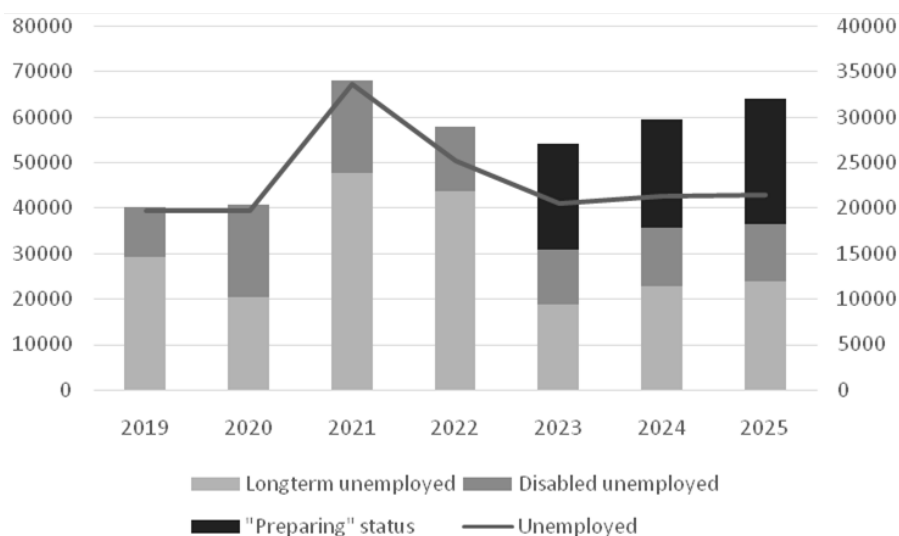
The PPLM status is intended as a transitional phase between unemployment and employment, enabling the removal of employability barriers through coordinated and

individualized support. Where multiple barriers are identified, case management teams are established, and services are delivered in cooperation with municipalities. PPLM individuals receive tailored counselling from PES career specialists and external professionals, including psychologists and legal advisors, with up to 15 free consultations available (PES, 2025).

3. Older PES Jobseekers with a New Status

On 1 January 2025, those PPLM accounted for 11.7% of all PES jobseekers, the vast majority of whom were older people (PES, 2025). The share of 55+ y.o. PPLM has been increasing since the new status was introduced. Recent trends show that the share of unemployed has remained stable due to the introduction of the PPLM status, but not due to transition into employment (as noted above, the transition of 55+ y.o. PES jobseekers into employment has remained virtually unchanged).

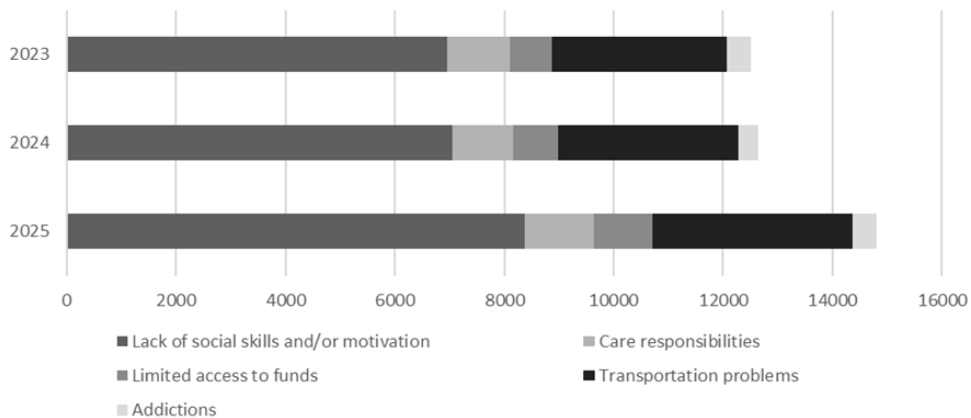
Figure 2. **Number of 55+ y.o. PES jobseekers** (beginning of the year, the left axis is for the unemployed)



Source: PES data retrieved by request, 2025

Trends in unemployment among older people, against the backdrop of a rising PPLM, show that PPLM distorts unemployment statistics. The registered unemployment rate is not increasing in line with an increase in the total number of people registered with the PES under different statuses.

Figure 3. **Number of 55+ y.o. people with PPLM status by the reason of status acquisition** (multiple choice, beginning of the year)



Source: PES data retrieved by request, 2025

More than a half of the older PPLM (56.76%) lack social skills and/or motivation to work. One in four (24.8%) are unable to commute from their place of residence to their place of work, 7.2% have limited access to financial resources, 8.5% have to look after and/or care for a family member or a person living with them, and 2.9% have harmful addictions (PES data retrieved by request, 2025). For some people, more than one of the presently mentioned obstacles was identified. It should also be noted that women are more likely than men to be faced with the responsibility of caring for a family member or a cohabitant, and therefore have much more limited opportunities to re-enter the labour market. Residents of remote districts are more likely to face transport difficulties, which makes it more difficult for them to participate actively in the labour market. Addictions to alcohol, drugs, and other psychoactive substances, as well as gambling, often go unrecognised. Most clients avoid talking to a service provider and asking for help (PES data retrieved by request, 2025).

When analysing the situation of PPLM, it is necessary to assess not only individual, but also institutional obstacles that have a direct impact on the quality of assistance. One of the main ones is the excessive workload of case managers.

According to the data of the Employment Service, as of October 1, 2025, 117 case managers worked in Lithuania, in the context of 23.9 thousand people having the status of a person preparing for the labour market. Thus, one manager had, on average, about 204 jobseekers to work with. In addition to these persons, persons with disabilities can also register with case managers if they wish. This means that these specialists work not only with jobseekers with a PPLM status, but also with people who often need complex, long-term assistance, covering not only employment but also social integration issues, and thus the number of jobseekers served may potentially skyrocket by several hundred

more. This situation further increases the workload and emotional stress on employees. Such a disproportion shows that the individual approach, which should be the essence of a PPLM status, often becomes difficult to implement in reality. Although most of the study participants positively assessed their managers and emphasised their humane approach, empathy, and willingness to help, they nevertheless indicated that meetings are rare, information about possible measures is not always clear, and some of the assistance is more formal than practical. Excerpts corroborating this assumption from respondent interviews can be sourced: “The case manager is very good, she helps, but there are so few of them [meetings] that sometimes I don’t even get a meeting”. “It seems that they [case managers] are trying, but they are simply not able to cover everyone.” This relationship between PES employees and jobseekers raises questions about the accessibility, continuity, and quality of assistance. If each manager has more than two hundred jobseekers, it is impossible to ensure deeper, individualised work, especially with those who experience complex obstacles, i.e., more obstacles than just one, but, in some cases, even all five of them. In addition, the distribution of case managers by region is uneven; in some territories, there is a desperate shortage of them, and, consequently, one specialist may need to cover even more people. This is especially relevant in rural areas, where the share of PPLM jobseekers is high, and the infrastructure (transport, social services, training) is prohibitively limited. Although the PPLM model provides for an individual and person-centred approach, real-life practice often becomes a formal procedure due to the desperate lack of human resources.

4. Results of Research with Older Jobseekers Preparing for the Labour Market

Research Methodology. The study employed purposive sampling. The research participants included individuals aged 55 and older who are registered with the Employment Service and have been granted the ‘person preparing for the labour market’ (PPLM) status. Contact with the respondents was established through cooperation with case managers from the Employment Service. Adhering to confidentiality principles, the case managers informed potential participants about the ongoing study. Those who agreed to participate gave their explicit consent for the case manager to share their contact details with the researchers.

A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted. This sample size was sufficient for qualitative analysis, as data saturation was reached: later interviews did not generate substantially new insights, and recurring experiences confirmed the established themes.

The interview data were analysed by using thematic analysis. The process included transcript familiarisation, initial coding, identification of themes, and their grouping into broader analytical categories. Data organisation and coding were conducted manually by using *MS Word*, ensuring systematic and transparent analysis.

The study adhered to academic ethical standards, with particular attention to the vulnerability of participants due to age and dependence on public services. The participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and data use, and provided verbal or written consent. Participation was entirely voluntary, and refusal or withdrawal had no impact on the respondent's access to Employment Service support. The respondents were assigned codes (e.g., R1–R20), and identifying information such as names or specific locations was removed to ensure anonymity.

Table 2. Characteristics of the research participants

| Code | Gender | Age | Duration of unemployment (years) | Residence (Urban/Rural) | Code | Gender | Age | Duration of unemployment (years) | Residence (Urban/Rural) |
|------|--------|-----|----------------------------------|-------------------------|------|--------|-----|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| R1 | Female | 58 | 4 | Urban | R11 | Male | 62 | 5 | Urban |
| R2 | Female | 55 | 5 | Urban | R12 | Male | 59 | 4 | Rural |
| R3 | Female | 57 | 2 | Urban | R13 | Male | 61 | 7 | Rural |
| R4 | Female | 60 | 3 | Rural | R14 | Female | 56 | 2 | Urban |
| R5 | Female | 59 | 5 | Urban | R15 | Female | 63 | 3 | Rural |
| R6 | Male | 56 | 6 | Rural | R16 | Male | 55 | 1 | Urban |
| R7 | Female | 61 | 1 | Urban | R17 | Female | 58 | 5 | Rural |
| R8 | Male | 60 | 4 | Rural | R18 | Female | 60 | 4 | Urban |
| R9 | Female | 58 | 3 | Urban | R19 | Male | 62 | 6 | Rural |
| R10 | Female | 57 | 2 | Rural | R20 | Female | 57 | 2 | Urban |

The following *interview questions* were used:

1. How did you first learn about the PPLM status?
2. How do you assess your communication with the case manager?
3. Do you feel that you received enough support from the Employment Service?
4. How do you understand what “a person preparing for the labour market” means?
5. What advantages (if any) have you received from this status?
6. What difficulties or limitations have you encountered while being a PPLM?
7. What are the greatest difficulties preventing you from returning to the labour market? What is the barrier to your PPLM status?
8. What support measures do you think would be most useful for you?
9. Do you feel stigmatised or discriminated against because of this status or your age?
10. What do you think should be changed in the PPLM system to make it more helpful for older people?
11. Are there any plans to work?

The data obtained were processed by using the thematic analysis method. The following main categories and subcategories were identified:

- Experience with the Employment Service (positive, critical, mixed);
- Perception of one's PPLM status;
- Benefits and limitations of assistance;
- Barriers to participation in the labour market;
- Emotions and social impact;
- Proposed changes in the system.

Each category was formed based on recurring statements and expressions of the respondents, summarised into thematic groups.

Since only 20 people participated in the study, the results do not reflect the entire population of the PPLM group, but rather provide a deep and authentic understanding of the experiences, emotions and challenges of older people in the Employment Service system.

4.1. Experience with the Employment Service

The analysis revealed that persons preparing for the labour market (PPLM) have diverse experiences with Employment Service case managers. Some respondents expressed positive views, emphasising empathy, sincere communication, and moral support. Statements such as “the manager really understands my problems” (R3), “we communicate well, she always gives advice” (R14), and “she is very good, pleasant, and caring” (R18) indicate relationships based on trust and respect. This reflects social inclusion principles, where individualised and dignity-preserving communication is essential.

Meanwhile, the interview data suggest that emotional support often serves as a stronger motivator than formal measures. Participants noted that the manager “lifts their spirits” (R5), “gives confidence” (R9), and creates a positive interaction experience (R20). This highlights the importance of the human(e) dimension, particularly for older or long-term unemployed persons who may experience isolation.

However, critical experiences were also reported. Some respondents perceived services as repetitive or ineffective, by noting that the Employment Service “just sends people to courses” (R6), “offers the same thing repeatedly” (R13), or does not provide real job opportunities (R19). Others mentioned lack of feedback or communication (R12). Practical barriers, such as inaccessible premises, health limitations, or inconvenient access, were also identified (R8), indicating insufficient adaptation to the needs of older persons.

Overall, the experiences are mixed. While communication with case managers is often described as supportive, institutional measures are sometimes perceived as formal or limited. These findings suggest that effective labour market integration depends not only on formal interventions but also on trust-based relationships between jobseekers and case managers.

4.2. Understanding of PPLM Status

The findings indicate that most of the older respondents do not clearly understand the purpose or meaning of their PPLM status. Despite being enrolled in the program, some participants reported limited awareness, stating, for example, “I don’t know what status I have” (R10), “I don’t know about that status” (R11), or “I can’t explain what it means” (R1). This suggests insufficient communication regarding the rights, objectives, and opportunities associated with the status.

Other respondents perceived their PPLM status as a preparatory stage, involving training, psychological support, or attempts to return to employment. They described it as “preparation for the employer” (R7), “being in training” (R14), or “trying to return to the market” (R3). Some emphasised practical benefits such as acquiring skills, receiving advice, and maintaining social contact (R5), indicating its role in promoting activation and social inclusion.

A further interpretation associated the PPLM status with health limitations or social protection. Some respondents linked it to disability or health barriers (R6, R12, R17), perceiving it as an intermediate form of assistance rather than active labour market integration. Overall, the understanding of the PPLM status is fragmented: some view it as meaningful support, others as a formal obligation or an unclear administrative category. This indicates insufficient clarity and communication regarding its purpose.

4.3. Advantages and limitations of assistance

The respondents reported that their PPLM status provided access to educational, psychological, and social activities, although its impact on employment remained limited. Many participants attended training, psychological consultations, or community activities, and evaluated these positively: “I attend courses, see psychologists <...> I am satisfied” (R5), “they offer training and advice” (R14). These services contributed to social inclusion, motivation, and psychological well-being.

Nevertheless, many respondents emphasised that such measures rarely led to employment. One participant noted: “They don’t offer jobs, they just send you to courses” (R6). This suggests that PPLM functions more as a support and maintenance mechanism rather than an effective pathway to employment.

Some participants reported improved confidence and communication skills through counselling (R3), while highlighting emotional benefits even without direct employment outcomes. However, structural barriers – such as limited regional job opportunities, transport constraints, and proximity to retirement – reduced motivation and perceived relevance of services. As one respondent stated, “I’m just waiting for my pension” (R15). Overall, the PPLM status provides social and psychological benefits, but structural constraints often limit its effectiveness in facilitating employment.

4.4. Barriers to labour market participation

The respondents identified multiple barriers to employment, primarily related to health, age, physical limitations, and regional factors. Poor health, disability, pre-retirement age, and limited mobility were frequently mentioned (R6, R12). Living in rural areas with few job opportunities and limited transport further restricted access to employment: “Health, age <...> I live in a small town – there’s no way to get to work” (R4). Age discrimination was also reported (R15).

Skills deficits, particularly in digital competencies, were another barrier: “When they taught us computers, it was very difficult” (R10). Notably, respondents rarely referred directly to the official PPLM barriers defined in legislation, although related issues – such as caregiving responsibilities (R17) or transport limitations (R8) – were indirectly mentioned. This suggests limited awareness of how their barriers are formally classified. Overall, the participants emphasised health, age, qualifications, motivation, and transport as key obstacles but did not associate them with the official PPLM criteria.

4.5. Emotional and social impact

Participation in Employment Service activities and a PPLM status had significant emotional and social effects. Positive experiences included communication with case managers, group activities, and psychological consultations, which strengthened self-confidence and reduced isolation. As one participant noted, such activities helped them “feel like a person <...> not just sit at home” (R5). These findings indicate that a PPLM status can promote social inclusion even without immediate employment outcomes.

However, some respondents expressed frustration and passivity due to the lack of tangible employment results. Participation in programs was sometimes perceived as formal or ineffective (R6, R13), reinforcing feelings of marginalisation. Experiences of stigma and age-related stereotypes were also reported, negatively affecting self-esteem and emotional well-being (R12, R15). Others, however, accepted their PPLM status as a supportive and necessary form of assistance (R7).

These findings demonstrate that emotional and social dimensions are integral to labour market integration. Without trust, respect, and social inclusion, formal assistance alone is insufficient.

4.6. Proposed changes to the PPLM system

The respondents emphasised the need to strengthen and expand support measures to make them more individualised and effective. Psychological and motivational support was considered valuable but too limited in duration. The participants highlighted the need for long-term counselling, particularly for those with health problems or prolonged unemployment (R5, R6, R13).

Negative employer attitudes toward older workers were also identified as a major barrier. The respondents suggested strengthening employer incentives, including subsidies or tax benefits, to promote hiring of older persons (R19). Regional disparities, especially lack of transport and employment opportunities in rural areas, were frequently mentioned (R4, R8, R12). The participants also emphasised the need for flexible and part-time work options suitable for older individuals (R17).

Social inclusion activities were viewed as important for reducing isolation and maintaining motivation. The respondents recommended expanding community events and opportunities for social interaction (R3, R18, R20). Overall, the participants emphasised that the PPLM system should be more flexible, individualised, and responsive to structural barriers such as health limitations, transport constraints, and age discrimination.

Discussion and Conclusions

The introduction of the PPLM status in 2022 represents an important attempt to provide more integrated employment and social support to those individuals who are most distant from the labour market, involving not only the PES but also a wider network of municipal and specialised service providers. However, the analysis of the status-granting process, the criteria used, and the perspectives of PPLM status holders reveals conceptual and practical weaknesses in the profiling approach applied by the PES.

First, the study highlights that the PPLM status creates unequal access to PES measures. While PPLM jobseekers are offered case management, they simultaneously lose access to training and most ALMP measures available to unemployed persons. Given the limited capacity to provide high-quality case management, the PPLM status may unintentionally reinforce labour market detachment. Risk has already been recognised in Poland, where excluding low-employability groups from ALMPs was deemed discriminatory (Zieleńska & Sztandar-Sztanderska, 2020).

Second, the PPLM framework reflects an institutional assumption that barriers such as motivation, caregiving, debt, transport, or addiction must be resolved before an active job search can begin. Yet, the transition back to an unemployed status is voluntary and not time-bound, legitimising prolonged disengagement from job seeking. While this may benefit individuals voluntarily choosing inactivity, interviews with older respondents show that some continue searching for work without realising that reduced job offers may be linked to their new status.

Third, the analysis shows that the five official criteria for granting a PPLM status do not fully reflect the main determinants of employability identified in empirical research. Factors such as health limitations, skill deficits, self-confidence, and mental health are particularly underrepresented. The literature demonstrates that subjective health evaluations (Alavinia & Burdorf, 2008; Schuring et al., 2007), mental health conditions (Levinson & Kaplan, 2014; Johansson et al., 2020; Picchio & Ubaldi, 2025; Shiri et al., 2025), and low self-perceived employability (Raemdonck et al., 2014; De Battisti et al., 2016; Zacher, 2013) are critical barriers to employment for older people. Meanwhile, PPLM

assignment relies heavily on the broad and ambiguous category of “social skills and motivation”, which neither specifies the nature of the barrier nor supports targeted intervention design.

Fourth, the process of granting a PPLM status requires individuals to self-declare sensitive barriers such as addiction or financial hardship. While subjective recognition may generate additional insights, it can also discourage disclosure due to stigma or psychological discomfort. As the findings suggest, undisclosed issues may be masked under the broad motivation category, raising questions about accuracy and fairness in decision-making. In this context, professional discretion and the responsible use of sensitive information become crucial, as caseworkers must fit unique jobseeker situations into legally prescribed categories.

Finally, the study shows that the PPLM status is most frequently assigned to older jobseekers, many of whom face multiple vulnerabilities, including declining health, limited digital skills, employer bias, low confidence, and psychological strain. Despite positive evaluations of caseworkers, the high workload of more than 200 PPLM jobseekers per case manager, supplemented by jobseekers with disabilities who may opt into case management, limits the depth and continuity of support. For a PPLM status to become an effective tool for integration into the labour market, it is necessary to strengthen case management capabilities, ensure an even distribution of employees, and give them more time to work with the person.

The PPLM status is better structured as a social support mechanism than as a labour market integration instrument. The measure does not demonstrate clear progress in improving proximity to employment for older jobseekers. Systematic monitoring of exits from a PPLM status is necessary to determine whether the instrument facilitates or inhibits reintegration into the labour market. Strengthening its effectiveness will require a clearer conceptual framework, refined eligibility criteria, a more balanced access to ALMP measures, and an increased institutional capacity for case management.

Author Contributions

Inga Nomeikienė: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft preparation, writing – review and editing.

Julija Moskvin: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft preparation, writing – review and editing.

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