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Good intentions and Matthew effects: access biases in participation in active labour market policies

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this contribution is to investigate whether active labour market policies manage to reach the most disadvantaged individuals or are subjected to Matthew effects in the shape of access biases. We investigate this question for two typically disadvantaged groups of unemployed people: the low-skilled and immigrants. Our analysis is based on a systematic review of 87 evaluations of active labour market policies (ALMPs) covering 14 different countries and a time period of 15 years (1998–2013). We use information on participants and non-participants to ascertain whether or not access biases are present in these programmes. Our results provide evidence that a Matthew effect is present only in some programmes and in conservative welfare states but not in the Nordic countries. Our conclusion is that policies are generally explicitly targeted on the most disadvantaged (good intentions) but other factors limit their participation (Matthew effects), something which explains the mixed pattern that we observe.

KEYWORDS Access bias; active labour market policies; Matthew effect; social investment.

Introduction

Over the last few years we have witnessed the emergence of a new orientation in social policy based on the idea that help for disadvantaged individuals should take the form of enabling interventions, that for example facilitate access to the labour market and to better jobs. This perspective, commonly referred to as 'social investment', has been rather influential in social policy debates within international organizations, academics and, especially, the European Union (EU). According to many, it represents a promising avenue to reform European welfare states, though the approach is not without problems.

The main critique that has been formulated against the social investment approach is of being biased in favour of the middle class and as a result failing to reach the most disadvantaged. Cantillon (2011), for example, has shown

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that the employment gains of the pre-crisis 2000 have accrued essentially to households which already had a fair level of labour market participation. Jobless households, in contrast did not gain to any significant extent. Van Vliet and Wang (2015) found that increases in spending on social investment policies are associated with increases in poverty rates (though not in the Nordic countries). These studies suggest that social investment policies may be failing to reach those who would need them most.

This outcome is sometimes referred to as the 'Matthew effect' and is generally the result of a negative access bias to given services. Matthew Effects have been identified in public services such as health and education (Le Grand 1982) or family benefits (Deleeck *et al*. 1983), but also in typical social investment policies, such as subsidized childcare (Pavolini and Van Lancker 2017).

In this contribution, we are interested in the possible existence of access biases in a policy field that is crucial to the social investment approach: active labour market policies (ALMPs). The existing empirical evidence for access bias in ALMPs is very limited and focuses solely on specific single programmes. ALMPs play an important role in facilitating access to jobs for non-working individuals. They consist of a very diverse set of interventions, such as training or job-creation programmes, help in job search or subsidies to potential employers. ALMPs have been developed in Sweden in the 1950s, but have since spread across advanced welfare states (Bonoli 2010). Overall, ALMPs have a good reputation among both politicians and experts (Armingeon 2007). In the late 2010s, many Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries spend sizable amounts on ALMPs, most of them between 0.5 per cent and 1 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP; OECD 2015).

Theoretically, we can expect ALMPs to generate both positive and negative access biases for disadvantaged people. On the one hand, ALMPs are often explicitly targeted to disadvantaged unemployed and can be expected to be relatively immune to Matthew Effects and show a positive access bias instead. On the other hand, participating in ALMPs requires some capabilities; for example, in terms of cognitive and non-cognitive skills. This requirement, in contrast, may exclude some disadvantaged individuals. Moreover, when allocating limited slots in labour market programmes, case workers may decide to give priority to individuals who are relatively close to the labour market, a practice known as 'creaming'. This tendency may be exacerbated if performance indicators that put pressure to focus on the most promising jobseekers are used.

On a pure theoretical basis, it is rather difficult to make clear cut hypotheses with regard to the presence or absence of a Matthew effect in ALMPs, as there are equally good reasons to expect positive and negative access biases. As a result, it seems appropriate to turn to empirical analysis. In this

study we make use of numerous evaluations of labour market programmes. These studies in general describe the participant population and compare it to the eligible population. We collected these evaluations in a systematic way, and on the basis of the available data we assess whether or not there is an access bias in a given programme. Our dataset includes evaluation studies of all major types of ALMPs in 14 different countries over a period of 15 years (1998–2013).

We decided to focus on two known factors of labour market disadvantage as potential sources of an access bias: low-skill status and being a migrant. These two factors have been found to result in longer unemployment spells and a higher risk of labour market exclusion in several studies.[1] After discussing the presence or absence of access biases for disadvantaged individuals, we turn to the question of a possible relationship between access bias and effectiveness. In particular, we are interested in finding out whether or not the programmes that are more open to disadvantaged groups are as effective as the more selective ones.

The contribution proceeds as follows. First, we review the (limited) literature on access biases to ALMPs and formulate our expectations. Second, we present our method. Third, we discuss the access bias for low-skilled and migrants. Forth, we look at variation in access bias by welfare states. Fifth, we investigate the relationship between the types of access bias observed and programme effectiveness.

Literature and expectations

The term 'Matthew Effect'[2] is used in the social sciences to refer to situations in which initial advantages generate further advantage. The notion was first introduced in an article by Merton (1968) to describe rewards system in science. Since then the notion of 'Matthew effect' has been used in numerous publications, most of them in the field of the sociology of science, education and, of course, in social policy.

In social policy the notion of a 'Matthew effect' is used to indicate situations in which policies benefit disproportionately the middle and upper classes relative to other more disadvantaged groups (Gal 1998). This effect, which may be intended or unintended, has been identified in a large number of empirical studies. Among the first to point out this effect was Le Grand (1982: 129) in his analysis of the distributional impact of a range of public services, including health care, education, housing and transportation in the United Kingdom (UK). His verdict was unequivocal: 'Public expenditure, in about all the forms reviewed, is distributed in favour of the higher social groups.' Similar findings were obtained in Belgium by Deleeck *et al.* (1983), who found that child benefit provided a far greater advantage to middle- and upper-class families than to low-income families. Higher-income families tended to

have more children and their children tended to stay longer in full-time education, a condition to receive the benefit up to the age of 25.

Research on childcare usage reaches similar conclusions. Van Lancker (2013) found that in most EU countries access to childcare is biased in favour of the middle and upper classes. A more fine-grained analysis suggests that access biases are likely be to some extent context dependent. For instance, in Sweden use of, as well as public expenditure on, childcare are rather evenly distributed among families of different social classes (Van Lancker and Ghysels 2012). In contrast, strong access biases have been uncovered in Switzerland (Abrassart and Bonoli 2015; Schlanser 2011). In a more comprehensive analysis of 27 EU countries, Pavolini and Van Lancker (2017) show that factors at the micro as well as the macro level influence the existence of a Matthew effect in childcare usage.

Overall, the evidence supports the existence of Matthew effects in social policies in general, and in social investments policies in particular. However, things may be different if we focus more narrowly on ALMPs. As already mentioned, these programmes are often targeted on disadvantaged unemployed people by design, like training for unskilled workers or job subsidies for older unemployed people. In this respect, we can expect ALMPs to be relatively immune to Matthew effects and show instead a positive access bias, because of their targeted nature. We could therefore expect a positive access bias for these groups. At the same time, however, it may also be the case that within the overall disadvantaged target population, it will be the least disadvantaged who will be most likely to benefit from these policies. This for two reasons. First, many of the interventions that go under the rubric of ALMPs require some capabilities in the first place. This is clearly the case of job-related training, which may require a fair command of the local language, or some cognitive or non-cognitive skills (e.g., Heckman 2006). Pre-existing abilities may also be a requirement for benefitting from other interventions, such as employment programmes. Since these in general require deploying a minimum of productivity and behaviour compatible with the expectation of organizations, individuals with poor social and non-cognitive skills may be excluded from participation in these programmes.

Second, since the ultimate objective of ALMPs is to put jobless people into jobs, these policies may anticipate the selectivity of the labour market. Given the fact that firms are selective, it may be the case that ALMP institutions and/or street level bureaucrats anticipate labour market selectivity and allow participation in ALMPs only to jobless people who can be seen as promising in terms of labour market re-entry (Pisoni 2015). In other words, a case worker may decide that it is not worthwhile to send an older, long-term unemployed migrant to training, because his or her chances of getting a job, even after having completed training, seem very slim. This type of mechanism has been linked to strategies such as

cream-skimming that can be promoted by the use of performance indicators (Koning and Heinrich 2013; Pisoni 2015). If performance is measured by degree of success in putting people back in a job, it is possible that case workers will target resources on people who are relatively close to the labour market, while ignoring the rest.

As pointed out by Heckman and Smith (2004), gaining access to a social programme is a process that consists of several stages at which an access bias may or may not emerge.[3] Adopting a simplified version of their model, we can conceive access to labour market programmes as the result of a two stage process: eligibility and inclusion. Eligibility refers to the formal criteria that need to be fulfilled in order to be considered for participation. These tend to be favourable to disadvantaged groups as programmes are typically targeted on low-skill, long-term or older unemployed people. However, in order to be included in a programme, additional characteristics are required, such as knowledge of the local language, a given level of cognitive and/or non-cognitive skills, motivation. Unlike the first stage, this second hurdle is likely to limit access of the most disadvantaged. These features are also more difficult to target explicitly. This combination of opposing forces at different stages is found also in another study on access to ALMPs (Fertig and Osiander 2012). It has inspired the title of this piece ('Good intentions' at the eligibility stage combined with 'Matthew effects' at the inclusion stage). At the end, the result, i.e., a positive, a negative or no bias, will depend on the combined effects at these two stages.

In this respect, it would be unreasonable to expect access biases to be identical for different ALMPs. This notion, in fact, covers a very broad range of interventions which can generate different patterns of participation. Two dimensions of variation seem particularly relevant: the extent to which participation requires a given level of pre-existing skills (e.g., cognitive or language skills), and how close the interventions are to the labour market.

In particular, we expect training programmes to be more prone to a negative access bias for disadvantaged groups than job creation programmes, since the former require substantial pre-existing skills such as cognitive or language skills. We also expect a stronger negative bias for job subsidies, since these are closer to the labour market. In this situation, close contact with firms is required and jobseekers may be subjected to discrimination or anticipation of discrimination.

Finally, we can also expect the presence of an access bias to depend on the context in which a given programme operates (see also Kazepov and Ranci 2017). For example, a targeted programme operating in a context where disadvantaged people possess a fair level of cognitive skills (for example, provided by previous interventions), the positive access bias introduced at the eligibility stage is more likely to survive through the participation stage. In contrast, if the same programme operates in a completely different context,

where disadvantaged individuals tend to possess lower cognitive skills, then a Matthew effect at the inclusion stage may outdo the initial positive bias of the eligibility stage. In that sense we follow Pavolini and van Lancker (2017) and argue that Matthew effects are influenced by micro-level factors such as skill-level or migration background of a person, but factors at the macro-level, such as the policy design and broader welfare states arrangements, moderate the extent to which these characteristics produce a Matthew effect.

In a further step, we assess whether the accessibility of programmes included in our sample is related to their effectiveness. We hypothesize that more effective programmes are less accessible for disadvantaged groups. Effective programmes could require a higher level of cognitive/non-cognitive skills or they may be more expensive and hence reserved to better candidates. If disadvantaged groups are not only excluded from effective programmes but are in addition sent to ineffective programmes, this could generate even further disadvantage and a stronger overall Matthew effect. Auer and Fossati (2016) have shown for the Swiss case that immigrants are often assigned to less-effective programmes than Swiss nationals.

Method

Our analysis of access biases in participation in ALMPs is based on a dataset of evaluation studies of labour market programmes. This dataset was generated by a systematic review of the large number of such studies that are available. Their main aim is to assess the programme's effectiveness in terms of employment outcome for participants. In general, however, these studies provide also information with regard to who the participants are relative to non-participants. We use this information to ascertain whether or not there is an access bias in these programmes.

This strategy has some important implications. First, we cannot use evaluation studies based on random allocation of participants and controls. In this case, since individuals are randomly allocated, by definition there will be no access bias. Second, it is difficult for us to understand the sources of a given bias, as it can originate from eligibility conditions or the inclusion in the programme. In general, these studies provide only very limited information on the selection process in the programme. On the other hand, our strategy has the big advantage of allowing us to survey a large number of studies, covering a diverse range of ALMPs. We can, as a result, gain knowledge that is quite general in relation to access biases in ALMPs and not specific to one single programme. In addition, it allows us to examine the link between access biases and effectiveness, which we do in the last part of the contribution. The following section describes the approach we have followed in order to identify the relevant studies and build or database.

As a first step we defined the type of programmes on which we are focusing. We decided to follow Kluve (2010) and included studies focusing on the four most common programme types of ALMPs. The first programme type, training, consists of both classroom training as well as on-the-job training, and can focus either on general education or specific vocational skills. The second category is job creation programmes, i.e., public work that is additional to the jobs on the actual labour. The last programme is wage subsidies, which are paid to private sector employers if they hire disadvantaged jobseekers. Note that Kluve (2010) examines a fourth type of programme, job search assistance, which we decided to drop because of an insufficient number of suitable studies.

Next, we defined the criteria for labour market disadvantage in terms of skill level and migration background. Low skilled is defined as not having completed upper-secondary education. Migration background is defined as not having the citizenship of the country of residence.

Having defined which ALMP programmes and disadvantaged groups we focus on, we now turn to the identification of the relevant studies we included in our systematic review. Up to the year 2006 we relied on meta-analyses that identified primary studies for the evaluation of labour market programmes (Card *et al*. 2010; Greenberg *et al*. 2003; Kluve 2010). To include more recent studies, we conducted a systematic search with defined key words in relevant databases and archives of institutes that evaluate labour market programmes.[4] After the exclusion of duplicates and evaluations of programmes that we are not interested in, 245 studies remained. In a second step we kept only studies that: (1) concerned training, job creation or wage subsidies programmes; (2) provided nationality and educational level for treated- and non-treated individuals that allowed calculation of an access bias; (3) provided data for the non-treated before a matched control group was calculated.

This left us with 47 of the studies that could be included in the analysis. As some studies may evaluate more than one labour market programme, this results in 87 programme evaluations, covering 14 different countries and the time period from 1998 to 2013 that can be used for our analysis.[5]

All types of welfare states regimes are represented in the 14 countries covered in our dataset. Among the conservative welfare state regime, most studies concern Germany (23 out of 87). For the social democratic welfare state regime, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland are about equally represented in the sample. For the liberal and Southern welfare state regimes, we have only three studies each.

Based on this extracted information, we calculated an access bias for the two groups of interest, immigrants and the low-skilled. When the group of interest was underrepresented in the treatment group (negative access bias), this was coded as a −1. An overrepresentation in the treatment group

was coded as a 1 (positive access bias), and a non-significant difference was coded as a 0. The calculation of the access bias was either based on the proportion of low-skilled and immigrants in the respective groups or the estimated probability of programme participation.[6] The first approach has the disadvantage that it cannot control for the correlation between the groups of interest.

In a second stage, we also extracted information concerning the effectiveness of the programme. Programmes were considered as effective when they had a positive effect on the participant's employment probability. Unfortunately, the time span considered by the different studies varies, and it was not possible to harmonize this time span for all studies. However, most studies reported the employment effects between one and two years after the end of the programme.

Results – access bias

In this section we present the results concerning the access bias for three different types of labour market programmes: training; job creation programmes; and job subsidies for the low-skilled and non-natives.

Training

Training programmes are likely to generate a Matthew effect as they generally require some pre-existing cognitive or language skills and motivation.

In total we included 49 programmes, of which half display no access bias for low-skilled individuals as shown in Figure 1. For the other half, a negative

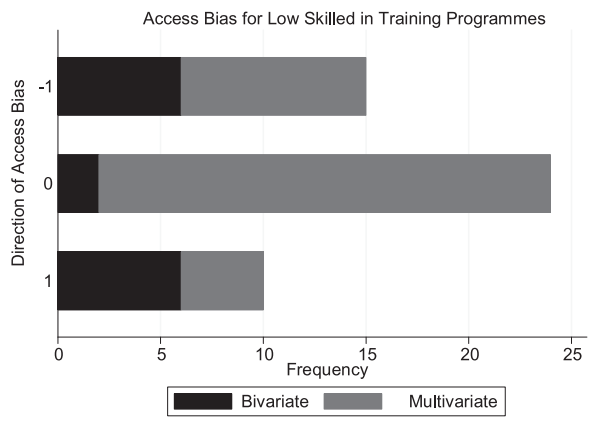

Figure 1. AB for low-skilled training. Source: Own calculation.

Note: Direction of access bias: 1 = positive access bias; 0 = no access bias; −1 = negative access bias. Bivariate: evaluation provided proportions, multivariate: estimates of the probability to participate.

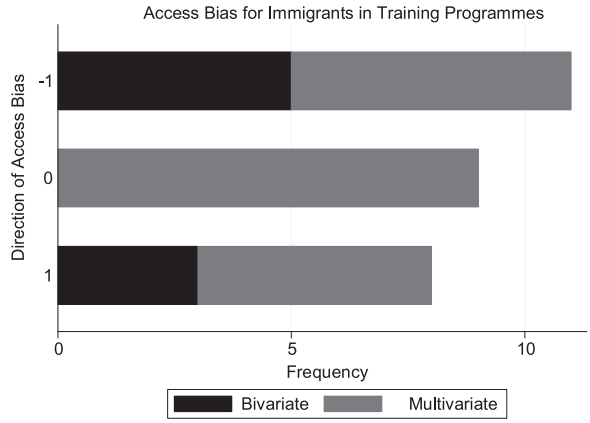

Figure 2. AB for immigrants training. Source: Own calculation.

Note: Direction of access bias: 1 = positive access bias; 0 = no access bias; −1 = negative access bias. Bivariate: evaluation provided proportions, multivariate: estimates of the probability to participate.

access bias is present more often than a positive one. For immigrants only 28 evaluations provide the numbers needed to calculate an access bias (Figure 2). Again, the number of programmes with a negative access bias exceeds the one for programmes with positive access bias. However, a third of the programmes do not display any access bias. Our results confirm the existence of both positive and negative biases in relation to both populations. However, negative biases are more frequent. This result is compatible with the hypothesis made in this contribution, that a positive bias sought by policy design may be undone by other factors, which can be subsumed under the label of Matthew effects.

Job creation programmes

These programmes are often targeted on hard-to-employ jobseekers. Since low-skilled and immigrants are overrepresented among these, we expect to find a positive access bias meaning that these two groups are overrepresented in these measures.

We identified 18 evaluations that provide details for the calculation of an access bias. The results show diverging trends between the two populations in which we are interested. While there is no negative access bias for the low-skilled (Figure 3), migrants seem considerably less likely to participate in these programmes. For them not a single programme shows a positive access bias.

More than half of the programme evaluations show that, compared to nationals, immigrants are systematically underrepresented in these programmes (Figure 4).

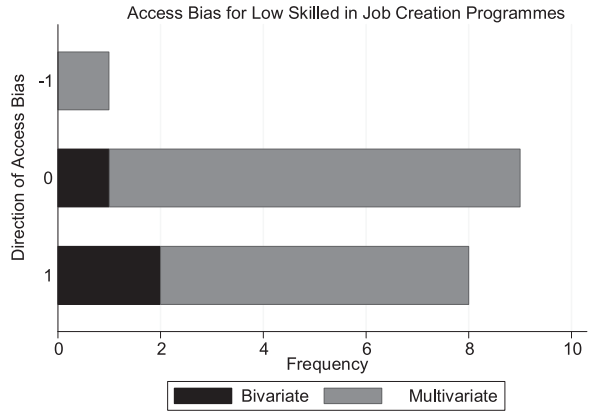

Figure 3. AB for low-skilled job creation. Source: Own calculation.

Note: Direction of access bias: 1 = positive access bias; 0 = no access bias; −1 = negative access bias. Bivariate: evaluation provided proportions, multivariate: estimates of the probability to participate.

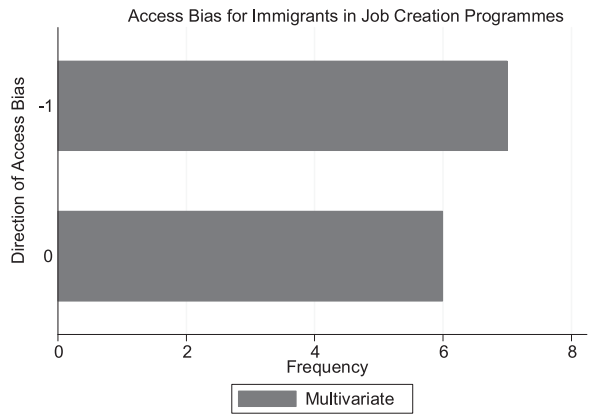

Figure 4. AB for immigrants job creation. Source: Own calculation.

Note: Direction of access bias: 1 = positive access bias; 0 = no access bias; −1 = negative access bias. Bivariate: evaluation provided proportions, multivariate: estimates of the probability to participate.

Wage subsidies

Wage subsidies are paid to private employers who agree to take on a disadvantaged unemployed person, typically defined in terms of unemployment duration, skill level or age. We would therefore expect a strong positive bias at the eligibility stage. However, the closeness to the labour market of this programme may make it more selective, and as a result a negative bias at the participation stage is to be expected.

As shown in Figure 5 it is very clear that the second, negative bias, prevails. In 6 out of 11 evaluations we find that the low-skilled are underrepresented in the treatment group relative to the non-treatment group. Only one evaluation

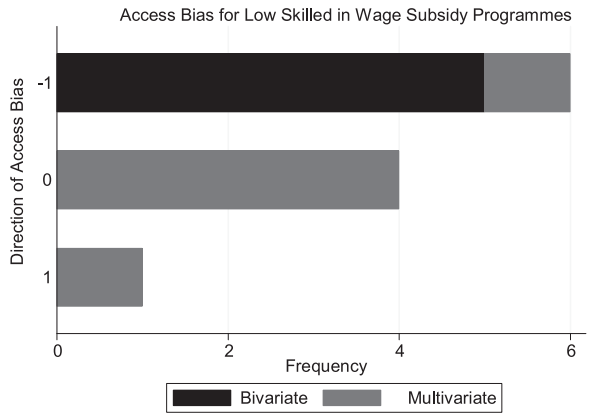

Figure 5. AB for low-skilled wage subsidy. Source: Own calculation.

Note: Direction of access bias: 1 = positive access bias; 0 = no access bias; −1 = negative access bias. Bivariate: evaluation provided proportions, multivariate: estimates of the probability to participate.

shows a positive access bias for low-skilled jobseekers, a wage subsidy programme in Germany specifically targeted on low-qualified unemployed. The other evaluations for Germany as well as those for Sweden and Norway, all provide evidence for the existence of a negative access bias. Low-skilled jobseekers were less likely to enter the programme or were underrepresented in the treatment compared to the non-treatment group. Finally, four evaluations, from Australia, New Zealand, Norway and Switzerland, found no differences in the chances of receiving a subsidy for those without, compared to those with, post-compulsory education.

The negative bias is even stronger for migrants (Figure 6). In six out of eight evaluations, immigrants had lower chances to be considered for a wage subsidy or were underrepresented in the treatment group. Only one

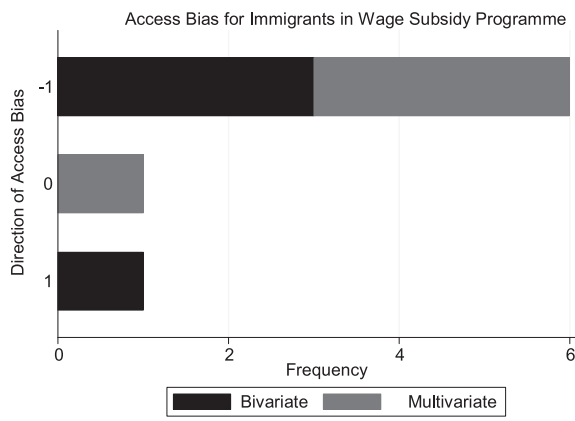

Figure 6. AB for immigrants wage subsidy. Source: Own calculation.

Note: Direction of access bias: 1 = positive access bias; 0 = no access bias; −1 = negative access bias. Bivariate: evaluation provided proportions, multivariate: estimates of the probability to participate.

evaluation of a wage subsidy in Sweden shows higher proportions of immigrants in the treatment than in the non-treatment group. Data from an evaluation conducted in Switzerland revealed no significant effect of immigrant background on the chances for programme participation. Taken together, the evaluations included in our review provide evidence for the existence of a strong negative access bias in wage subsidy schemes for both low-skilled and immigrants.

Results – variation by welfare state regime

Next we look at the influence of context on our results. We do that by relating our data on the access bias to the type of welfare state where the evaluation was carried out. More precisely, we consider separately evaluations done in conservative and in social democratic welfare states (Figures 7 and 8).[7]

Intriguingly, in spite of the small number of observations, one can clearly see that in social democratic welfare states one is more likely to find a positive access bias for both migrants and the low-skilled, while the opposite is true for the conservative welfare states.

This picture is mostly driven by training programmes, where we find most evaluations. In conservative regimes, 26 out of the 31 programmes have a negative access bias for the low-skilled. For the social democratic regime 11 out of 13 programmes have a positive or no access bias for the low-skilled. The picture is even clearer for migrants, as 16 out of 17 programmes show a negative access bias in conservative regimes while this is only the case for one out of nine programmes in the social democratic regime. But also job creation programmes show a similar picture. Three of the seven

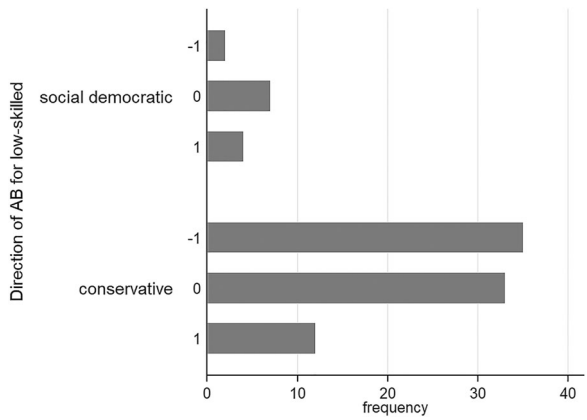

Figure 7. AB and the WFS-Regime low-skilled. Source: Own calculation.

Note: Direction of access bias: 1 = positive access bias; 0 = no access bias; −1 = negative access bias.

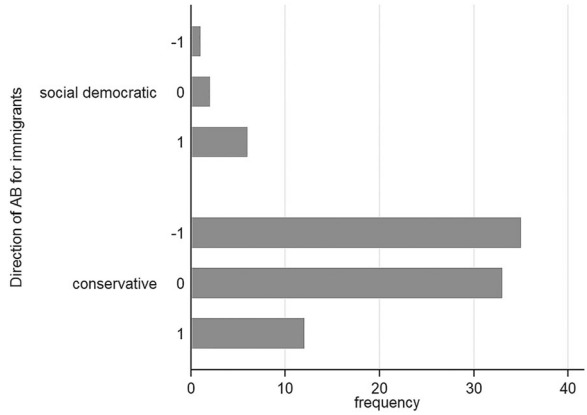

Figure 8. AB and the WFS-Regime immigrants. Source: Own calculation.
Note: Direction of access bias: 1 = positive access bias; 0 = no access bias; −1 = negative access bias.

programmes which have a negative access bias for migrants are one-Euro job programmes in Germany. Among the six evaluations that show no significant difference in the participation chances of immigrants and nationals two are from Denmark, two from Sweden and one from Switzerland and Germany each, suggesting that the context where a given programme operates might impact on the presence of a bias.

Results – access and effectiveness

The aim of ALMPs should not only be to reach the most disadvantaged groups but also to effectively increase their chances on the labour market. Our hypothesis is that disadvantaged individuals are sent to less effective programmes and tend to be excluded from the more effective ones. We therefore looked at the relationship between programme effectiveness, defined as a positive effect of the programme on the participants' employment probability, and the existence of a negative access bias.

For this analysis, we grouped all the programmes together and we also added job search assistance programmes, which were too few in our sample for a separate analysis. Training and job subsidies are more likely to be effective than job creation schemes and job search assistance.

The results are presented in Table 1. As expected, a negative access bias is more likely to occur in programmes that are more effective. The effect is significant at the 10 per cent level for the low-skilled, and not significant for migrants but clearly in the expected direction. This result can be explained in two different ways. First, disadvantaged unemployed people are sent to low-quality or less-ambitious programmes, either because they lack the cognitive skills or the motivation to participate in the more effective ones or are

Table 1. Relationship between programme effectiveness and access biases for low-skilled and immigrants.

	Low-skilled		Immigrants	
	No effect	Positive effect	No effect	Positive effect
Negative AB	8 (32%)	17 (68%)	11 (44%)	14 (56%)
No AB or positive AB	32 (54%)	27 (46%)	16 (65%)	9 (36%)
Total	40 (48%)	44 (53%)	27 (54%)	23 (46%)
	Pearson chi = 3.48 (Pr = 0.062)		Pearson chi = 2.01 (Pr = 0.156)	

Note: Numbers of studies, row percentage in parentheses.
Source: Own calculations

subjected to discrimination. Second, this result could come from reverse causality. Programmes that accept large numbers of highly disadvantaged people are less effective because it is more difficult to get these people back into jobs. Whatever the reason, the fact remains that disadvantaged unemployed people are less likely to participate in programmes that are effective.

Discussion and conclusion

In this contribution we investigated whether ALMPs are subject to an access bias or a Matthew effect. We expected a Matthew effect to be present in programmes that require a given level of cognitive skills, like training, and for those that are closest to the labour market, like wage subsidies. These expectations are confirmed for one of the two disadvantaged populations only, the low-skilled. The low-skilled suffer from an access bias mostly in relation to job subsidies and to a slightly lesser extent in the case of training. In contrast, insofar as job creation programmes are concerned, low-skilled unemployed are either overrepresented or at least equally represented as individuals with mid-to-high skills.

Things are different for migrants, who are underrepresented in each of the three categories of programmes we cover in this contribution. Surprisingly, however, the risk of being underrepresented is higher in job creation programme than in training. Given the low level of skill requirements for job creation programmes, we would have expected the opposite.

This result, however, is still compatible with our two-stage model of access to a labour market programme. Job creation programmes are generally not targeted on migrants, while the opposite can be true of some training programmes. As a result, migrants in job creation programmes do not benefit from the positive access bias at the eligibility stage. They are as a result tendentially excluded by the Matthew effect at the inclusion stage.

Moreover, we expected context to matter. Because of the limited number of observations, we were able to assess the frequency of access biases only in social democratic and conservative welfare states. The results are nonetheless insightful. Essentially, the observed negative access bias for both groups

concerns only programmes in conservative welfare states (essentially in Germany). In the Nordic countries, training seems to be much more inclusive. This can be owing to several reasons. First, it could be the case that programme design differs systematically between the two welfare regimes, and the Nordic countries are simply more successful in designing programmes that are accessible to the most disadvantaged. Moreover, different welfare states focus on different ALMPs and differ with regard to other social policies which might have a spill over effect on the accessibility and effectiveness of ALMPs. Alternatively, this result may be owing to the fact that the average disadvantaged person in the Nordic countries possesses better cognitive (and non-cognitive) skills than this is the case in a conservative welfare state. Studies on the cognitive skills of the adult population have shown that the low-educated in the Nordic countries possess higher level of cognitive skills than in other regions (Abrassart 2013; Nelson and Stephens 2012), possibly because of a more egalitarian school system. The same training programme may lead to a bigger or smaller access bias depending on the average level of cognitive skills possessed by the target population. We need further research to disentangle these effects. Ideally, one would compare similar programmes in different countries and analyse at what stage, eligibility or inclusion, of the programme access biases emerge. This would allow us to investigate to what extent factors at the micro and macro level contribute to the emergence of Matthew effects. In the second part of the contribution we focused on the relationship between access bias and programme effectiveness. While the small N of our sample does not allow us to produce robust results, it is clear that effective programmes are more likely to exclude low-skilled and migrant unemployed people. Disadvantaged unemployed tend to be assigned to lower-quality programmes that are more distant from the labour market and as a result less likely to produce a positive effect.

Our analysis has shown that unlike other social investment policies, in particular childcare (see Pavolini and Van Lancker, 2017) Matthew effects are not inevitable when it comes to ALMPs. Particularly, in the Nordic countries, labour market programmes are less likely to exclude disadvantaged unemployed people than they are in conservative welfare states. We have also shown that migrants are more exposed to the risk being underrepresented in most programmes. This may be owing to the fact that migrant status is seldom an eligibility factor, except perhaps for language training and a few other programmes. According to our two stage models, migrants do not benefit from a positive bias at the eligibility stage, but suffer from the Matthew effect as other disadvantaged populations. As a result, they are more likely to be excluded form labour market programmes than the low-skilled, who are more often explicitly targeted at the eligibility stage.

Notes

1. On the labour market disadvantages suffered by the low-skilled, see, for example, Abrassart (2013); DiPrete (2005); Solga (2002). On the disadvantages suffered by migrants, see Auer *et al.* (2017); Heath and Cheung (2007).
2. The reference is to a verse in the Gospel of Matthew: 'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away' (Matthew 25:29, English standard version)
3. Heckman and Smith (2004) have argued that the process of participating in a labour market programme is made up of a number of stages: eligibility; awareness; application; acceptance; and enrolment. Access biases at different stages may reinforce or, on the contrary, offset each other. The programme they study is voluntary, and in order to be eligible one must be considered as 'economically disadvantaged'. Interestingly, this highly targeted programme combines both positive and negative access biases for disadvantaged people. Low-skilled people, for example, are overrepresented at the eligibility stage, but their advantage is largely offset by underrepresentation at the stage of awareness, application and acceptance (Heckman and Smith 2004: 245).
4. See the Online Appendix for a more detailed description of the systematic review.
5. The extracted variables for each study can be found in the Online Appendix.
6. See the Online Appendix for a more detailed description of the calculation of the access bias.
7. Conservative welfare states include Germany (13 evaluations), Austria (1) and Switzerland (1). Social democratic welfare states include Sweden (3), Norway (2) and Denmark (3). For a theoretical justification of the notion of welfare regimes, see Esping-Andersen (1990).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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