

Job Quality In The European Employment Strategy

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?

This policy brief reviews how job quality has gained more attention within the EU's policy strategy, but that the concept still lacks clarity and definition. It presents several recommendations as to how this problem could be addressed.

Introduction

A plethora of institutional efforts within the European Union (EU) have raised the profile of employment policy, ever since the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 and the International Labour Organization's (ILO) launch of its concept 'Decent Work'. The academic literature has argued that it is the quality, not just the quantity of jobs that determines to which extent employment will solve, for instance, social exclusion or poverty. Despite these institutional and academic attempts, the quality of jobs remains a contested concept which has not sufficiently penetrated practical policymaking at the EU level or at the level of individual governments.



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This paper reviews institutional perspectives of job quality in the context of the policy debate within the EU with the objective of explaining why the issue remains on the political backburner. We undertake an extensive document analysis of EU publications and policy debates. As a complement to this analysis, we also review progress made by other international organisations, specifically

the ILO and OECD, as their approaches and EU policy debates have been mutually influential.

We contribute to this debate by proposing a conceptual framework that defines different levels of analysis which can be applied to job quality. The objective is to introduce much needed accuracy and simplicity into current EU policy

debates, and by doing so help clarify which dimensions should be included in a conceptual definition of job quality. We argue that placing concerns about job quality high on the policy agenda has a much better chance of success if a conceptually coherent and relevant definition can be operationalized in a manner suitable for cross-national comparisons at the EU level.

Evidence and Analysis

From the review of EU documents and policy debates, including those from the ILO and OECD detailed in the paper which underlies this policy brief, we can conclude that three interlinked reasons interfere with progress on the issue of job quality, two are political and one is conceptual. First, the different labour market realities of the EU's Member States lead to different perspectives on whether governments should prioritise the flexibilization of labour markets, or whether they should secure high levels of job quality.

Second, the rivalling interests of the EU's social partners also prioritise different labour market aspects, such as economic productivity and regulatory flexibility, or union rights, or fiscal sustainability – depending on their point of view.

Third, the conceptual confusion generated by definitions of employment quality that encompass too many variables from different perspectives of the labour market also complicates matters. Between them, these three complex problems generate a highly problematic vicious circle: to inform political debates appropriately we need evidence on the respective outcomes of policies that further job quality. Yet without a precise conceptualisation

and definition of what we mean by 'job quality', we cannot inform this debate. Furthermore, without such a definition, the EU cannot propose specific guidelines for a more integrated European Employment Strategy (EES) that takes job quality into account, and accords the issue the importance we think it deserves.

“Based on our findings from the institutional efforts and academic literature, we illustrate how job quality can be defined in a more conceptually coherent manner.”

An analysis of the academic literature reveals the extent to which multiple and relatively diffuse job quality concepts have developed in parallel. The theoretical inconsistencies found reflect the complexity of a multi-dimensional concept that can be analysed from many, often rivalling academic, political or ideological perspectives.

Specifically, these multiple perspectives tend to mix characteristics of individual workers, with those of the jobs themselves, the regulatory environment, welfare provisions or the labour market environment in a single conceptual definition. Such approaches not only require internationally comparable data that at present do not exist, but

also preclude the measurement of job characteristics at the level of the individual worker, which also limits their comparability across groups of workers, countries and over time. They also hinder the formulation of concrete policy measures as the scope of interest is simply too broad and may even generate conflicting recommendations. Therefore,

one of the unresolved issues in the literature on job quality involves deciding which variables should be part of a measurable conceptual definition. Based on our findings from the institutional efforts and academic literature, we illustrate how job quality can be defined in a more conceptually coherent manner. For this purpose, we develop a simple but useful framework for its analysis (Table 1). We distinguish between five different levels of analysis, and provide examples of the kind of variables that would fall into each category.

Table 1: Levels of Analysis in the Measurement of Job Quality

Levels of analysis	Examples of Variables
Workers	Age, child labour, forced labour, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, level of education, skills, job satisfaction.
Jobs	Wages, employment contracts and job security, working time arrangements, work intensity, health and safety issues, accident rates, conditions related to the work environment, worker autonomy.
Structural features of the labour market	Unemployment, employment, participation and inactivity levels, transition rates between labour market statuses or employment contracts, vacancy rates, unionisation rates, levels of inequality, macroeconomic environment.
Legal framework	Dismissal and employment protection legislation, antidiscrimination and equal opportunity legislation, regulation relating to unionisation and collective bargaining rights.
Welfare policy	Pensions, unemployment and health insurance, active labour market policies, childcare services.

To integrate job quality analysis better into a comparative social policy framework, it is necessary to

define and consider carefully what the relevant dimensions of job quality are, on which level the analysis should

focus and to ensure that these choices are consistently applied in the analysis and cross-national comparisons.



Policy Implications and Conclusions

History has taught us that successful indicators which have a significant impact on policy makers must not be too complex, both in terms of their methodology and the quantity of variables included (Ward, 2004). Of the institutional efforts described above that have attempted to define job quality, the OECD's is the only one that is both relatively simple, and conceptually well defined in that it does not mix up different analytical levels in its framework for analysis. Such conceptual clarity and practical operationalization are vital pre-requisites for including job quality in any employment strategy that the EU may put forward in the future. In addition, for EU policy purposes, the concept of job quality must be defined and measured, as this is the pre-requisite for the European Union Council to establish employment

guidelines and for Member States to write their own national action plans.

Thus, our recommendations based on the paper on which this brief is based include, first, generating an EU wide consensus on conceptual clarity as to how to define and measure job quality. Second, the boundaries that delineate what job quality is (and what it is not) should be clearly defined. Third, initiatives

to measure job quality must originate directly from within EU policymaking bodies to have a much greater chance of guiding common policy formulations. Only with advances on all of these fronts will we be able to focus necessary attention on the improvement of people's working lives that could parallel the attention that other indicators of human development have received. ■

Further reading

For a more detailed discussion of the arguments presented in this paper and a list of references, see the complete papers on which this policy brief is based:

Agnieszka Piasna, Brendan Burchell, and Kirsten Sehnbruch. 2019. "Job quality in European Employment Policy: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?", Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research, Volume 25, Issue 25: 165–180
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1024258919832213?journalCode=trsa>

Agnieszka Piasna, Brendan Burchell and Kirsten Sehnbruch. 2017. "Job quality: conceptual and methodological challenges for comparative analysis" in Damian Grimshaw, Colette Fagan, Gail Hebson and Isabel Tavora (eds.) Making Work more Equal: A New Labour Market Segmentation Approach, University of Manchester Press.

