

A statistical measure of the design and nature of work undertaken by graduates

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Research Domains

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Abstract

The provision of fair work across the economy is a key policy matter in all nations of the UK. One of the dimensions of employment quality is the design and nature of work. This captures elements such as the sense of purpose work provides and the extent to which one is able to use their attributes, alongside opportunities for progression. Across the UK, a policy goal in higher education is for graduates to have fulfilling lives in which they can meet their career aspirations and apply their skills in the economy. These therefore align closely with the design and nature of work concept. Using the Graduate Outcomes survey, we begin to address the paucity of evidence on the quality of employment undertaken by graduates by developing a composite variable on the design and nature of work. Additionally, we outline early findings on how this correlates with graduate mobility.

Full paper

Over the past decade, governments across all nations of the UK have placed increased consideration on the quality of work available across the economy. In England, the previous Conservative administration led by Theresa May commissioned the Taylor Review in response to the rapid technological change occurring in the labour market, accepting most of the recommendations made in the final

report. More recently, Boris Johnson has announced a Future of Work review, which will seek to build on the existing commitments already noted in response to the assessment delivered by Matthew Taylor. The Programme for Government in Wales for 2021 to 2026 has highlighted an aspiration to develop an economy based on providing fair work, while Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation also outlines a similar desire. In Northern Ireland, when the executive was restored in 2020, it was emphasised that the provision of good jobs should form a key part of public policy. Focusing specifically on higher education, while this is a devolved matter across the four nations of the UK, there is a shared ambition to see graduates find fulfilment and meet their career goals, alongside applying the skills they acquire in the economy.

The increased attention on fair work has led to questions around how best to quantitatively capture job quality in the UK, with it being recognised that this is a multi-faceted concept. The Measuring Job Quality Working Group identified eighteen indicators of employment quality, spanning seven dimensions. One of these seven components relates to the design and nature of work, encompassing aspects such as whether work provides a sense of purpose and offers opportunities for progression, as well as if it allows an individual to effectively apply their skills. These elements of the design and nature of work dimension therefore align closely with the policy aims of higher education and what studying at this level should enable graduates to achieve after they complete their course. Despite this, there is limited information on the design and nature of work undertaken by graduates.

Graduate Outcomes is a relatively new questionnaire, designed by the Higher Education Statistics Agency. It supersedes the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey and collects data on the outcomes of graduates fifteen months after they finish their programme of study. One of its new features are the 'graduate voice' questions, where respondents are asked on a five-point likert scale the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statements;

- My current work is meaningful
- My current work fits with my future plans
- I am utilising what I learnt during my studies in my current work

The Measuring Job Quality Working Group noted the potential value in developing a composite measure for each of the seven dimensions, particularly to assist with the communication of statistics on job quality. Utilising quantitative methods, we therefore firstly explored whether there was any evidence to suggest these three questions tapped into the same underlying construct. Having found that this was the case, we then examined - using data reduction techniques - whether a single composite variable could be formed on the design and nature of work, as well as how this should be formulated if so.

Our analysis concluded that a single index for the design and nature of work was appropriate. We show statistically why it is feasible to assume that the three questions are continuous variables and why taking a mean of the three values is appropriate in this instance.

Having created this composite measure, we have started to analyse the factors associated with the design and nature of work, including graduate mobility. Our preliminary analysis has focused on comparing those who are employed in the same region that they were residing in prior to higher education ('stayers') with graduates who have moved from their original region of domicile for work ('movers'). Looking at the UK as a whole, we find that 'movers' report significantly higher scores than 'stayers'. When breaking down the investigation by region of employment, we see the same result emerge across nearly all regions of England. However, significant differences are not observed in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland. In future research, we intend to undertake a more detailed study into the correlation between fair work and graduate mobility by focusing on more granular levels of geography than region.

References

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