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The foundation of good evidence-based policy is robust and timely data. Without it, predictions of the future are little more than guesses. For this reason, the UK government needs to take a lead in putting in place the necessary data infrastructure to track the impact that macro-level changes are having on the day-to-day working lives of its citizens. These changes include the impact of Covid-19 and the associated economic recession, the exit of the UK from the EU, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Academic theories, such as skills-biased and effort-biased technological change, help to highlight the ways in which technology may have an impact on the quality of jobs. But robust and timely data are needed to support or challenge predictions based on theories.¹ The importance of good/fair work also features in discussions about productivity and levelling up the economy. It is also central to initiatives launched in Wales and Scotland as well as those in London, Manchester and Liverpool.²

The need for robust and timely data has never been higher. The UK, however, is facing a perfect storm – an increased need to know how the world of work is changing alongside a weakening evidence base on which to track and understand change.

- Brexit means that the UK will not be included in future EU's surveys such as the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS). A total of 37 countries were due to take part in the seventh EWCS in 2020, but the fieldwork for the survey was stopped due to the outbreak of Covid-19. The data has until now been collected through face-to-face interviews. Data collection will resume in all countries in 2021 using telephone and online methods. However, the use of different modes of data collection does not offer a robust basis on which to make comparisons over time.³ Furthermore, as a non-EU member state the UK will not be automatically included in future rounds of this or other EU surveys.
- Nevertheless, there are home grown surveys carried out across Britain which track changing job quality and its determinants. But they do not have core funding. Instead, their continuation relies on groups of academics seeking financial support for each survey wave. The Skills and Employment Survey (SES), for example, has been carried out every five years or so since the mid-1980s.⁴ It now comprises seven surveys. The last survey was in 2017 when 3,300 working adults were asked questions about their working lives in interviews lasting an hour. The survey covers various aspects of job quality as well as the extent to which computers are used by respondents in their jobs, the sophistication of their use and the prevalence of computerisation in the workplace. The data are a public resource accessible via the UK Data Service.⁵ The last two surveys in the series have been downloaded nearly 700 times and over 90 publications have been produced using the data since 2014.
- Similarly, the Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) has a long history and was first carried out in 1980. It consists of interviews with managers and employee representatives in each of the workplaces selected, and a postal survey is sent out to a randomly selected group of employees.⁶ The most recent WERS was carried out in 2011 and, like the SES, it is a well-used data resource.
- All three surveys discussed so far – EWCS, SES and WERS – are based on random probability sampling principles. This ensures that participants have an equal chance of

being selected to take part and that the resulting data paints a representative picture of the population studied. When focused on those in employment, random probability surveys offer a robust statistical basis on which to estimate the quality of jobs across the population and between different socio-economic groups such as sex, age and occupation. Furthermore, when the same questions are asked as part of a repeated series, changes in the various dimensions of job quality can be tracked and hypotheses tested using other information collected from the same respondents such as the use of technology at work.

There are, however, less robust, but cheaper, ways of collecting data. These are either based on quota samples where only those meeting certain criteria are allowed to complete the survey or based on uncontrolled sampling where anyone can take part. The UK has examples of both these approaches.

- The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)'s UK Working Lives Survey, for example, is a quota based survey of around 6,000 workers. The survey has been carried out annually since 2018.⁷
- Data can also be collected by inviting all those who wish to provide information on their working lives. This is the approach adopted by the www.howgoodismyjob.com quiz which is based on a five-minute version of the 2017 Skills and Employment Survey. Over 50,000 individuals have taken part.⁸

It is widely acknowledged that 'there is a strong policy need for better measures of job quality' in order to improve workers' well-being, increase productivity and competitiveness, and boost societal welfare.⁹ The UK government has gone a step further by agreeing to 'report annually on the quality of work in the UK economy and hold ourselves to account'.¹⁰ Yet, official data on job quality remains thin on the ground.

- Nevertheless, some modest progress has been made. Two additional questions on career progression and employee involvement in decision-making, for example, have been added to the Labour Force Survey and the data will be available in 2021.¹¹ However, a total of 18 new additional questions were proposed by a task and finish group set-up by the Carnegie Trust/RSA and chaired by Matthew Taylor. The group was convened in response to the Taylor Review's recommendation that 'more effort has to be placed on measuring quality of work through agreed metrics and better data'.¹²
- However, none of the Carnegie Trust/RSA's suggested questions focus on the intensity of work. This is a serious drawback since work-related stress has been shown to be highest in situations where work intensity is high and job-holders have little or no control over the work process. Furthermore, technological change can sometimes be effort-biased in that it can be used to closely monitor workers' performance and it may therefore be a stress inducer.¹³
- While limited progress has been made, more needs to be done. The challenge is particularly evident when one compares the UK's data infrastructure with other countries where monitoring job quality and digitalisation is much better resourced. Finland, for example, has carried out eight surveys of working life stretching back to 1977. The survey series is funded by Statistics Finland and the 2018 survey includes a battery of questions on the impact of digitalisation on work conditions.¹⁴ In Germany, a large telephone survey of workers has been carried out every six years since 1979. The latest survey was carried out in 2018 and involved 20,000 workers.¹⁵ In France, too, a

large survey of working conditions has been carried out since 1978. In 2016 around 21,000 workers were interviewed.¹⁶ Like the Finnish survey, both the German and French surveys are underwritten by a government agency. Similarly, a large scale survey is carried out in Italy with around 16,000 workers taking part in telephone interviews in 2019.¹⁷ The equivalent British surveys are modest by comparison – the latest SES carried out in 2017 interviewed just over 3,300 workers.

Nevertheless, the ESRC in the UK has taken a leading role in investing in major research infrastructure projects about working life.¹⁸ These produce results of great value to both the research and policy-making communities, and provide high quality, individual-level surveys for secondary analyses. However, none of the robust datasets reviewed here – SES or WERS – have a secure funding base and they are relatively small in comparison to other countries' efforts. Furthermore, following the UK's departure from the EU other sources of robust data – such as EWCS – will no longer be available for the UK in the future. Modest attempts have been made to insert job quality questions into existing official government surveys. But they are not sufficient to the challenge of preparing the UK for changes in the world of work and do not examine the challenges of digitalisation. Nevertheless, there are existing surveys – most notably SES and WERS – which could be expanded, developed and funded by DWP and other government departments (such as BEIS). Taking such action would plug an important gap in the UK's data infrastructure and allow policy makers robust and timely data on which to better prepare the UK for changes in the world of work.

¹ Felstead, A, Gallie, D, Green, F and Henseke, G (2019) '[The determinants of skills use and work pressure: a longitudinal analysis](#)', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 40(3): 730-754; Green, F, Felstead, A, Gallie, D and Henseke, G (2020) '[Working still harder](#)', *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, early view online; Felstead, A, Gallie, D, Green, F and Henseke, G (2020) '[Getting the measure of employee-driven innovation and its workplace correlates](#)', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 58(4): 904-935.

² Irvine, G (2020) (ed.) *Can Good Work Solve the Productivity Puzzle? Collected Essays*, Dunfermline: Carnegie Trust; Welsh Government (2019) *Fair Work Wales: Report of the Fair Work Commission*, Cardiff: Welsh Government; Scottish Government (2016) *Fair Work Framework 2016*, Glasgow: Scottish Government; Johns, M, Raikes, L and Hunter, J (2019) *Decent Work: Harnessing the Power of Local Government*, Manchester: Institute of Public Policy Research North.

³ Eurofound (2020) *Living, Working and COVID-19*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, p7; Felstead, A (2020) 'Are online job quality quizzes of any value? Selecting questions, maximising quiz completions and estimating biases', *Employee Relations*, early view online.

⁴ <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/ses2017>

⁵ <https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=8589>

⁶ <https://www.niesr.ac.uk/wers>; van Wanrooy, B, Bewley, H, Bryson, A, Forth, J, Freeth, S, Stokes, L and Wood, S (2013) *Employment Relations in the Shadow of the Recession: Findings from the 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Survey*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁷ Williams, M, Zhou, Y and Zou, M (2020) *CIPD Good Work Index 2020: UK Working Lives Survey*, London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

⁸ Felstead, A, Gallie, D, Green, F and Henseke, G (2019) '[Conceiving, designing and trailing a short form measure of job quality: a proof-of-concept study](#)', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 50(1): 2-19.

⁹ OECD (2017) *OECD Guidelines on Measuring the Quality of the Working Environment*, Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, p14.

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-response-to-the-taylor-review-of-modern-working-practices>, p13.

¹¹ http://doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/6721/mrdoc/pdf/labour_force_survey_newsletter_april_2020.pdf

¹² Irvine, G, White, D and Diffley, M (2018) *Measuring Good Work: The Final Report of the Measuring Job Quality Working Group*, Dunfermline: Carnegie Trust; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/627671/good-work-taylor-review-modern-working-practices-rg.pdf, p102.

¹³ Felstead, A and Green, F (2017) '[Working longer and harder? A critical assessment of work effort in Britain in comparison to Europe](#)', in Grimshaw, D, Fagan, C, Hebson, G and Tavora, I (eds) *Making Work More Equal: A New Labour Market Segmentation Approach*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

¹⁴ https://www.stat.fi/meta/til/tyoolot_en.html

¹⁵ <https://www.bibb.de/en/15182.php>

¹⁶ http://beh.santepubliquefrance.fr/beh/2018/12-13/2018_12-13_2.html

¹⁷ <https://www.indagineprofessioni.it/>

¹⁸ For example, the ESRC has been the majority funder of five out of the seven Skills and Employment Surveys. Other funders have included central government departments and agencies, the devolved administrations and universities.

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