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Changes in the quality and inequalities of work in Britain: New measures and emerging trends

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CHANGES IN THE QUALITY AND INEQUALITIES
OF WORK IN BRITAIN:
NEW MEASURES AND EMERGING TRENDS

ABSTRACT

This article outlines new approaches to, and measures of, the quality of work. These have been used in surveys of workers carried out in Britain over the last twenty years. These surveys have measured the skills workers use at work, the discretion and autonomy they enjoy, the effort levels they expend, and the extent to which they are committed to employment in general and the organizations for which they work in particular. Using data from around 22,500 workers, the article examines how age, gender and regional inequalities in the quality of work have changed over the last two decades.

Key words: *quality of work, skills, discretion, commitment, inequality*

INTRODUCTION

A strong theme of the last three Labour governments in the UK was promotion of social justice and fairness in society. Before Labour's election to office in 1997, wage inequality had grown substantially for two decades beginning in the 1970s (Machin, 2003). While the lowest earners saw their real hourly wage rates rise, they grew more modestly than those received by those higher up the wage distribution. As a consequence, the distance between the lowest and highest wage earners widened – the material inequalities of work grew. However, by the time Labour lost electoral power in 2010, the growth in wage inequality had been halted, but not reversed and still historically high (ONS, 2008). Tackling inequality is also a de-

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clared feature of the new Coalition government's agenda which took power in May, 2010 (Cabinet Office, 2010).

Despite this record, some forms of inequality have fallen. For example, the employment rate of older people has improved over the last decade. In 1997 in the UK 48% of 55-64 year olds were in work but by 2008 this had risen to 58% (by comparison, the employment rate of older people in Greece over the same period barely changed, remaining at around 42%). This places the UK well ahead of the target set by the European Commission for at least 50% of 55-64 year olds to be in work by 2010 (and Greece well below). Other inequalities have also fallen. The difference between the median hourly wages for men and women fell with the female to male ratio rising from 81% in 1998 to 88% ten years later (Barnard, 2008).

Of course, the worry is that recessions tend to hit the weakest and poorest in society hardest and that the 2008-2009 recession may have put many of these gains into reverse (Stafford and Duffy, 2009; Muriel and Sibieta, 2009). However, it is too early to test this suggestion thoroughly. More importantly, for this article, these measures of inequality are relatively narrow since they focus on the material rewards of, and participation in, work. To address this relative neglect, additional ways of examining inequalities in quality of work are offered and some trends over the last twenty years presented in what follows.

The article, therefore, proceeds accordingly. In the following section, we outline the source of our data and our analytical approach to gathering robust material on the quality of work. The main section of the article outlines the measurement basis of the data presented. These aspects of employment include skills used at work, the scope for discretion and autonomy, levels of work effort, and organizational and employment commitment. The section also provides data on how each aspect of employment has changed over time and examines, in particular, whether age, gender and regional inequalities have grown, diminished or stayed the same. The article concludes by urging Greek social scientists to mimic and/or adapt the British example in order to gather more labour market data on the quality of jobs in addition to official data collected on access to employment and pay levels.

DATA SOURCES

The macro-level evidence typically used to measure and track material inequality focuses on differential access to employment and the variation in monetary rewards received by particular social groups. This evidence is

usually taken from official surveys – such as the Labour Force Survey – which are regularly carried out in the UK, Greece and, in fact, in all member states of the European Union. However, these surveys provide few insights into the changing quality of jobs themselves beyond collecting pay data. Yet the importance of the quality as well as the quantity of jobs is enshrined in the European Commission’s aim of “delivering stronger, lasting growth and creating more and better jobs” (CEC, 2005: 7) and is reflected in the goals set out in the revised European Employment Strategy (Dieckhoff and Gallie, 2007). This article provides some of the measures and data to address this neglect in Britain.

The data used for this article are drawn from five nationally representative sample surveys carried out in Britain in 1986, 1992, 1997, 2001 and 2006. The surveys used are: the Social Change and Economic Life Initiative survey carried out in 1986 (Penn et al., 1994); the Employment in Britain survey carried out in 1992 (Gallie et al., 1998); and the three Skills Surveys carried out in 1997, 2001 and 2006 (Ashton et al., 1999; Felstead et al., 2002; Felstead et al., 2007). These five cross-sectional surveys allow us to chart the quality of jobs in Britain.

All five are sample surveys of individuals in employment aged 20-60 years old (although the 2006 survey did additionally sample those aged 61-65). Each has a large sample size: the 1986 survey has information from 4,047 respondents; the 1992 survey from 3,855 individuals; the 1997 survey from 2,467 interviewees; the 2001 survey from 4,470 individuals; and the 2006 survey from 7,787 individuals (see Felstead et al., 2007). For each survey, sample weights were computed to take into account the differential probabilities of sample selection according to the number of dwelling units at each issued address, the number of eligible interview respondents, the over-sampling of some areas and the slight under-representation of certain groups. All the presented analyses use these weights.

This allows us to outline age, gender and regional inequalities in terms of job quality and to assess how these have changed over the last twenty years. For the most part, we focus on identical questions that were asked of respondents in at least three of these five surveys. On this basis, we are able to comment on how some of the skills and employment experiences of workers have changed over the last two decades, paying particular attention to women workers, those in later life and those working in different parts of Britain (for more detail, see Felstead, 2010 and 2009; Felstead et al., 2007). In sharing the results of this research with readers of the *Greek Review of Social Research*, it is hoped that Greek researchers will be able

to borrow, use and mimic the British example in order to examine inequalities in the quality of work in Greece using similar techniques.

NEW MEASURES AND EMERGING TRENDS

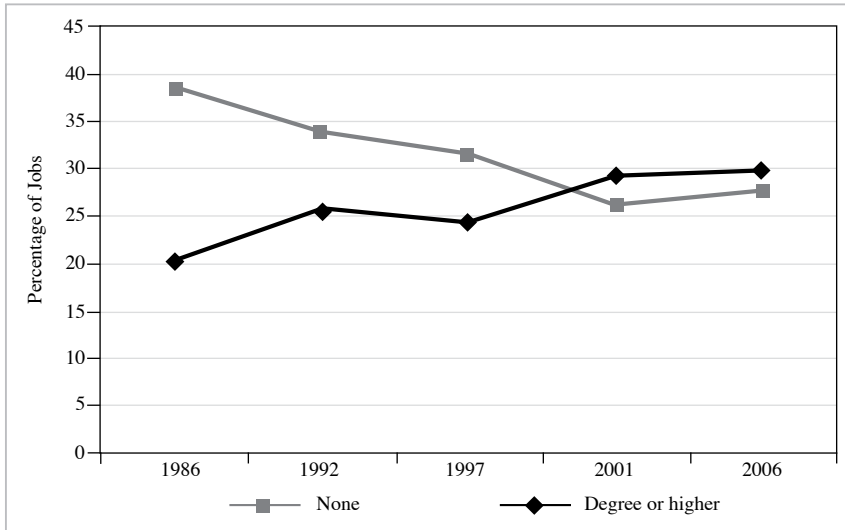
Despite the keen interest in how skills have changed over time, how they are distributed, and how the trends and patterns compare with competing nations, there is surprisingly little agreement about what “skills” constitute. Despite different emphases and nuances, however, many studies have focused on the nature of the job, including the abilities and techniques required, the intricacies of the tasks involved, and the knowledge of equipment, products and processes needed for competent performance. In this article, the complexity of jobs is measured by asking respondents what attributes are required for the job. These broad attributes include: the required qualifications; the length of training required; and the time taken to learn to do the job well.¹

Each respondent to the five surveys was asked to judge what qualifications would now be required to get his or her current job. They were asked: “If they were applying today, what qualifications, if any, would someone need to get the type of job you have now?” Respondents were placed into one of five categories according to the highest qualification they mentioned. These categories ranged from zero to four. As a summary measure of the entire scale, the Required Qualifications Index was derived from these responses. On average, one in five (20%) jobs required degrees or higher for entry in 1986, but by 2006 this had risen to three out of ten (30%). The same pattern was repeated at the other end of the scale, where there was an eleven percentage point drop in the proportion of jobs requiring no qualifications for entry over the twenty year period (see Figure 1).

Our second broad skill measure is based on responses to a series of questions on the length of training time required for the particular type of work carried out by respondents. It is based on the premise that the training time required for different jobs reflects various ability levels and knowledge demanded by contrasting types of work. Respondents were asked: “Since completing full-time education, have you ever had, or are you currently un-

1. The surveys reported here also collected data on the generic skills demanded of those in work. These were measured by asking job-holders to rate the importance of particular activities to their work. However, limitations of space prevent discussion of these results (see Felstead, 2010 and 2009; Felstead et al., 2007: chapter 3).

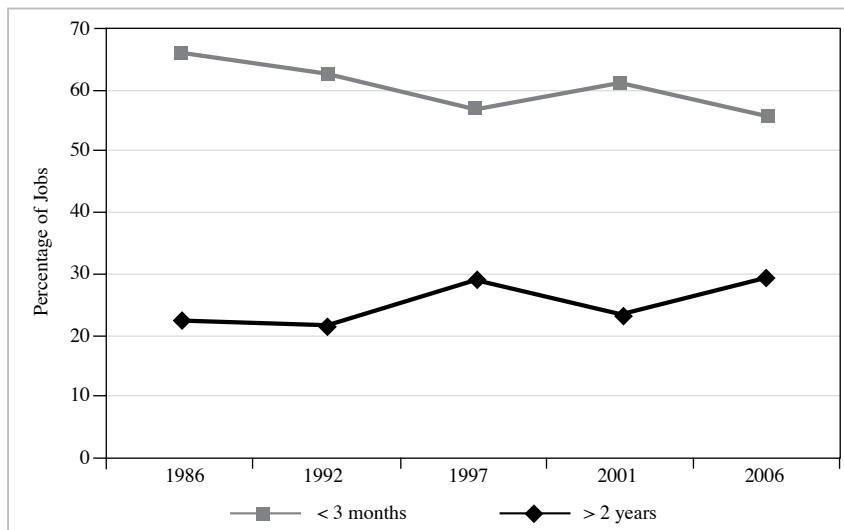
FIGURE 1
Trends in broad skills: Required highest qualification, Britain, 1986-2006



dertaking, training for the type of work that you currently do?” If “yes”, “How long, in total, did (or will) that training last?” If training was still ongoing respondents were asked to estimate how long it would take. For the purposes of presentation, we examine the proportions reporting “short” (less than three months) and “long” (over two years) training times i.e. the points at either end of the continuum. Overall trends for this indicator also suggest that skills demanded at work have risen. Comparing the results in 1986 with those in 2006 shows that training times have, on average, lengthened – greater proportions of the employed workforce reported that training periods for the type of work they were now doing lasted over two years, while smaller proportions reported that their training lasted less than three months. “Long” training time rose from 22% in 1986 to 30% in 2006, while “short” training time fell from 66% to 56% over the same period (see Figure 2). Later in the article we use a summary measure of the complete range of options allowed, ranging from zero to six, entitled the Training Time Index.

The third broad skill measure is constructed in a similar fashion. Respondents were asked: “How long did it take for you after you first started doing this type of job to learn to do it well?” If they answered “still learning” they were asked: “How long do you think it will take?” Again, for

FIGURE 2
Trends in broad skills: Training time, Britain, 1986-2006



the purposes of presentation, we examine the proportions at either end of the continuum – “short” learning time denoting less than one month and “long” denoting over two years. Trends in this indicator suggest that jobs in 2006 took longer to learn than those carried out in 1986 (see Figure 3). The Learning Time Index is a summary measure of all the answers given ranging from one to six, and is used when examining patterns of inequality (see below).

On each of these indicators women have closed the gap on men. Over the last two decades, women’s broad work skills have risen faster than men’s with skills growth being particularly rapid for women part-timers. As a result, both the overall gender skills gap and the skills gap between women working part-time and those working full-time have narrowed substantially. This is shown in Figure 4 where skills growth for women and women part-timers in particular has outstripped growth rates for men according to all three broad skill measures (note the relative height of the bars). So, for example, between 1986 and 2006 the proportion of jobs requiring no qualifications on entry has declined from 48% to 27% for women and from 31% to 28% for men. Thus, the gender gap for broad work skills has virtually disappeared.

FIGURE 3
Trends in broad skills: Learning time, Britain, 1986-2006

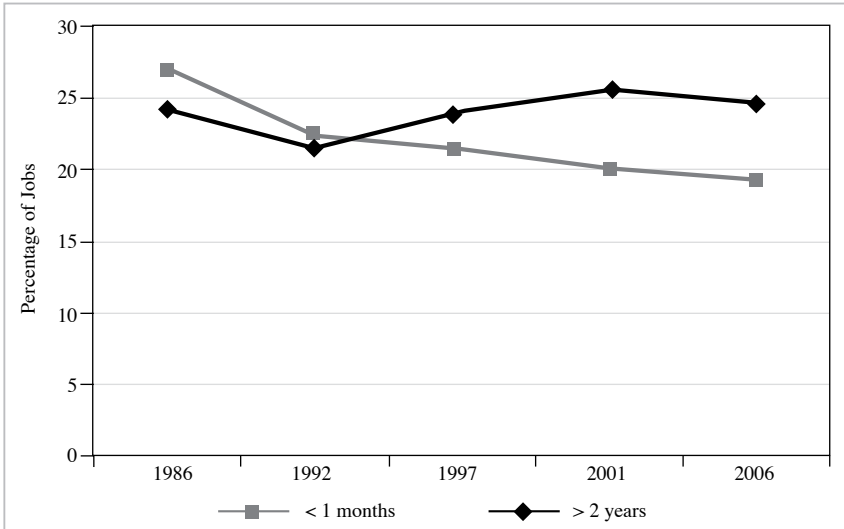


FIGURE 4
Skill change by gender and contract status, Britain, 1986-2006

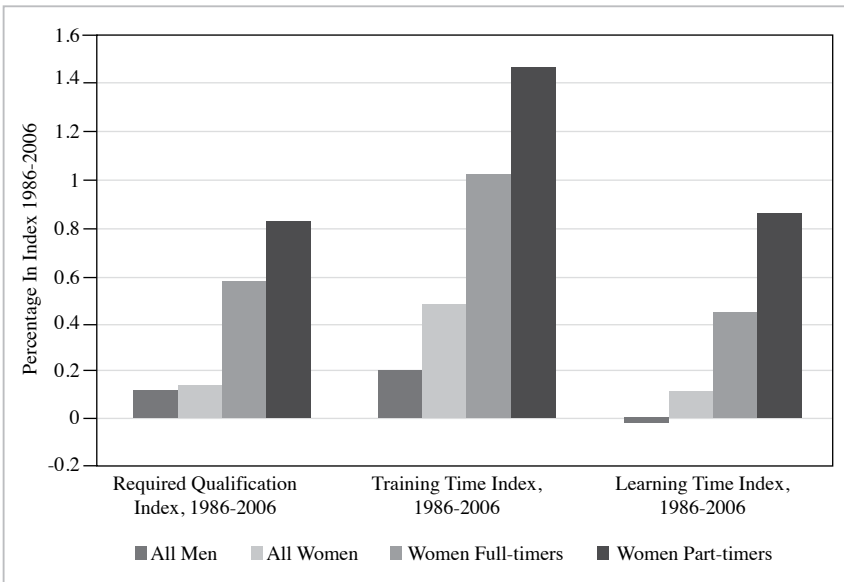


TABLE 1
*Trends in broad skill indices by age and gender, Britain,
 1986-2006*

	1986	1992	1997	2001	2006
Scores					
<i>Men</i>					
Required qualification index:					
20-34	1,88	2,10	1,89	2,18	1,97
35-49	2,14	2,21	2,15	2,27	2,21
50-60	1,71	1,95	1,99	2,11	1,95
Training index:					
20-34					
35-49	2,65	2,57	2,72	2,26	2,40
	2,52	2,61	2,94	2,49	2,70
50-60	1,94	1,76	2,35	2,14	2,31
Learning index:					
20-34					
35-49	3,72	3,62	3,57	3,50	3,38
50-60	4,07	4,01	4,03	4,18	4,12
	3,57	3,64	4,07	4,04	3,86
<i>Women</i>					
Required qualification index:					
20-34	1,55	1,86	1,86	2,03	2,07
35-49	1,34	1,72	1,72	2,01	2,17
50-60	1,04	1,49	1,68	1,76	2,01
Training index:					
20-34					
35-49	1,55	2,04	2,41	2,21	2,44
	1,32	1,82	2,26	2,34	2,82
50-60	1,18	1,61	2,08	1,87	2,66
Learning index:					
20-34					
35-49	2,68	2,90	2,95	3,03	3,01
	2,67	2,96	3,26	3,25	3,47
50-60	2,37	2,83	2,89	3,32	3,51

Similarly, while older workers (those 50-60 years old) of both sexes used to occupy relatively low skilled positions in the labour market, this was no longer the case by 2006. According to all three broad skill measures, in 1986 men and women aged 50-60 years were in jobs that, on average, required lower qualifications for entry, were associated with shorter training times and were quicker to learn. As a result, all three broad skill indices – regardless of sex – were lower for older workers than for the young (see Table 1). However, by 2006, parity or better had been achieved with the youngest workers in the labour market; in fact, older men and women were in more skilled jobs than younger workers according to one and two of the measures respectively, but were still in lower skilled jobs than middle-aged workers.

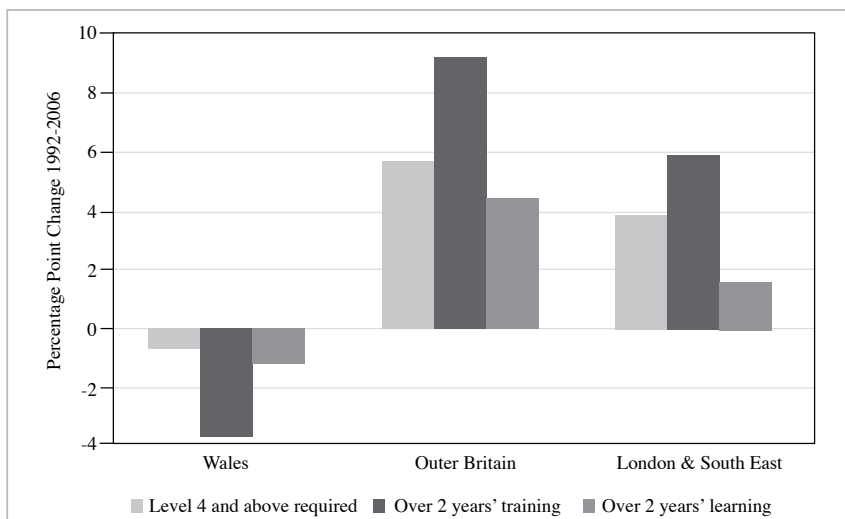
Another aspect of variation and difference is location with several authors pointing out that aggregate analyses fail to capture differential processes at work in different parts of the country (Rees, 2007; Felstead, 2002). In particular, the situation in London and the South East may be very different to what is happening in “outer” parts of the country (i.e. beyond the buoyant South East corner of England). The data presented above have therefore been analyzed to assess how skills have changed in different parts of Britain over the 1992-2006 period.²

The analysis suggests that in 2006 Wales had proportionately fewer “high skilled” jobs and proportionately more “low skilled” jobs than other parts of the country, especially compared to London and the South East (see Felstead, 2009 for more detail). So, for example, around a quarter of jobs in Wales (26%) required a degree or higher on entry compared to approaching two-fifths (38%) of jobs in London and the South East. On this measure, jobs in Wales in 2006 were significantly less skilled than those in and around the English capital ($p < 0.01$). Similarly, jobs in Wales, on average, required shorter periods of training than jobs elsewhere – the Training Time Index was lower in Wales than in either the rest of the “outer” parts of the country or London and the South East. However, the required skills of jobs as measured by learning time differed little by geographical location.

While the evidence suggests that the skills content of jobs in Wales may be of a poorer quality than jobs elsewhere in Britain (and hence may help to account for the greater prevalence of low pay in Wales compared to Britain as a whole, Sloane et al., 2005), the trend data suggests that the

2. In this article we focus on Wales because it is, on many measures, one of the poorest parts of Britain.

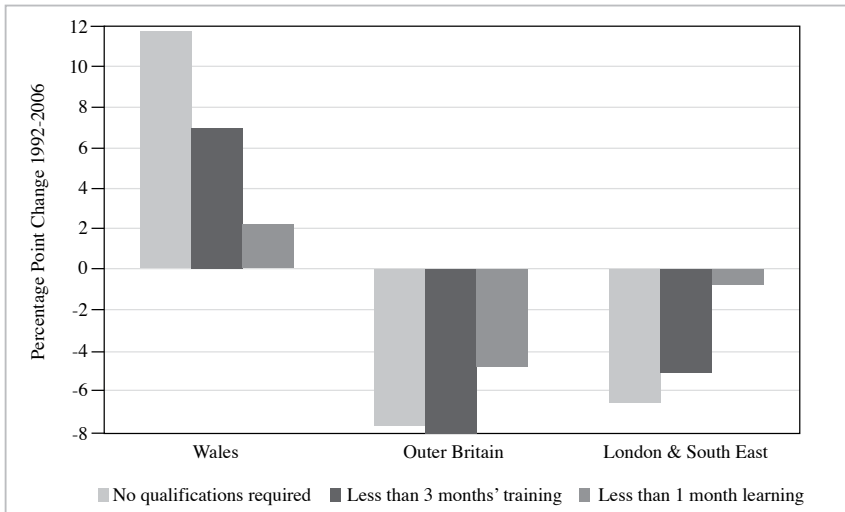
FIGURE 5
*The rise and fall of “high skilled” jobs in Wales, “Outer” Britain
 and London and the South East, 1992-2006*



skill level of Welsh jobs may actually be falling at a time when it is rising elsewhere. This finding is based on a comparison of the proportion of jobs recorded in each of the top broad skill categories in 1992 with the proportion of jobs in each of these categories 14 years later. Figure 5 presents the percentage point change for Wales, the rest of “outer” Britain and London and the South East. What is immediately striking is the fall in the proportion of jobs in Wales that we might regard as “high skilled” compared to the rise in the proportion of such jobs in London and the South East (as we might expect) and the rest of “outer” Britain.

On the other hand, “low skilled” jobs have become more prevalent in Wales over the last 14 years, while they have become less prevalent in other parts of Britain. In Wales, jobs needing no qualifications on entry have grown by almost twelve percentage points, those requiring training periods of less than three months have risen by seven points and those jobs that can be done well in under a month have expanded by a couple of points. This compares to falls of between five and eight percentage points in the proportions of jobs in other parts of “outer” Britain characterized as “low skilled” according to these measures. The falls in London and the South East have been a little less dramatic, but the proportion of “low skilled” jobs has fallen nonetheless (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 6
*The rise and fall of “low skilled” jobs in Wales, “Outer” Britain
 and London and the South East, 1992-2006*



Unlike the quantity of jobs which is relatively easy to count and measured, other aspects of “job quality” are also difficult to measure. This is because individuals value some aspects of work differently to other individuals. The value they place on work attributes may depend on their personal circumstances (such as age, gender and family composition) and outlook on life. In addition, “quality” indicators tend to be more attitudinal and perceptual in nature. Large quantitative surveys commissioned by government tend not to focus on these issues, concentrating on more objective indicators instead. Evidence on “job quality” therefore tends to come from less frequently conducted surveys of the sort reported here.

These surveys have showed that increasing proportions of workers agree that they are required to “work very hard”. There was substantial work intensification between 1992 and 2001, but since then it has remained on a plateau (Green, 2006). Since stress and anxiety are thought to be the product of excess work effort and increasing work pressure, we combine the responses to a number of survey questions in order to identify jobs that are the subject of “high strain” (Karasek, 1979). These are those in which workers report high work effort in the context of low job control. These are defined as those jobs where respondents report that they “strongly agree” or “agree” with the statement that “my job requires that I work very hard”

and they have little say over at least one of the following: work intensity; task selection; task execution; and quality standards.

The pattern of results by age suggests that older workers have seen their exposure to “high strain” jobs increase from around a fifth of the male and female cohorts in 1992 to over a quarter (28%) of men and a third (36%) of women in 2006 (see Table 2). However, this rate of growth is similar in magnitude to that experienced by younger age groups. Moreover, in relative terms little appears to have changed; in 2006 as in 1992 older workers were relatively advantaged in terms of their lesser exposure to jobs most likely to reduce well-being and raise levels of depression (Green, 2008). So, although workers of whatever age have experienced an intensification of work and a decline in autonomy over the last decade and a half, age differences remain with older workers under relatively less strain than their younger counterparts.

TABLE 2

High effort, low discretion jobs by age and gender, Britain, 1992-2006

	1992	1997	2001	2006
<i>Men</i>				
20-34	27,0	38,8	43,6	41,2
35-49	22,2	29,8	30,7	30,0
50-60	19,7	22,3	28,7	28,2
<i>Women</i>				
20-34	25,7	35,7	40,0	44,2
35-49	21,3	31,5	34,5	32,6
50-60	21,7	34,8	35,2	35,8

However, increasing work pressure appears to have had a greater effect on the organizational commitment of older workers than that of their younger counterparts. It is often assumed that older workers are more committed to the organizations they work for. This commonplace assumption can be found in popular discourse and has received support in earlier research (e.g., Taylor and Walker, 1994). The evidence presented here suggests although this may have been the correct in the past, this is no longer the case.

Organizational commitment is defined as “feelings of attachment to goals and values of the organization, one’s role in relation to this, and at-

tachment to the organization for its own sake rather than for its strictly instrumental value" (Cook and Wall, 1980: 40). From this, survey questions have been developed which tap employees' attitudes towards their organizations and the nature of the behaviours employees exercise within the organization. The four surveys reported here ask respondents six questions widely used to derive levels of organizational commitment – three relating to employee attitudes and three relating to employee behaviours. Respondents were asked to indicate, on four-point Likert scale, their level of agreement or disagreement with six statements. Such statements included "I find that my values and the organization's values are very similar" and "I would turn down another job with more pay in order to stay with this organization". For the analysis, we first awarded values of +2 for "strongly agree", +1 for "agree", -1 for "disagree" and -2 for "strongly disagree" for the responses given. Then, we created an index of organizational commitment by adding the scales and dividing by six. Statistical tests confirm that the resulting measure captures a reasonable proportion of the inter-correlation between the six-item index (the Cronbach's alpha is 0,79).

The evidence suggests that the organizational commitment of older workers remained relatively high throughout the 1990s, but that it fell sharply in the new millennium. Hence, not long ago there appeared to be some substance in the claim that older workers had a greater attachment than younger workers to the organizations for which they worked. However, the age differences have become negligible for men and only slight for women (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
Organizational commitment by age and gender, Britain, 1992-2006

	1992	1997	2001	2006
<i>Men</i> ^{1,2}				
20-34	0,176	0,171	0,221	0,207
35-49	0,270	0,382	0,351	0,297
50-60	0,453	0,458	0,253	0,229
<i>Women</i>				
20-34	0,253	0,248	0,287	0,182
35-49	0,288	0,346	0,329	0,284
50-60	0,539	0,539	0,382	0,270

One possible explanation is that – irrespective of their employment experiences – workers who entered the labour market in the 1960s were less deferential and more independently minded than previous generations. However, there is little support for this explanation in the data. Those born in the 1960s, and hence aged 50-60 in the 2006 survey, had lower – and often significantly lower – organizational commitment scores than those aged 45-55 in 2001, 41-51 in 1997 and 36-46 in 1992 (a technique known as pseudo cohort analysis). This suggests that falling levels of organizational commitment among older workers cannot be explained by generational change alone; that is, the replacement of a more committed generation with a less committed group of workers born in the 1960s.

Another explanation is that older workers perceive the increased skills content of their jobs negatively rather than positively and are more resentful of the increased work pressures all employees face at work regardless of age. Older workers may regard both as particularly unwelcome burdens at their time of life, hence the steep fall in loyalty levels towards the organization they hold responsible. To test this further, we examine how workers commitment to working in general has changed over the same time period. To gauge their employment commitment, we asked: “if you were to get enough money to live as comfortably as you would like for the rest of your life, would you continue to work, not necessarily in your present job, or would you stop working?” Those who answered that they would continue working were asked: “Ideally, how many hours a week would you like to work if you didn’t need the money?” Despite the steep fall in the organization commitment of older workers reported in this article as well as by White (2009), employment commitment has remained remarkably stable. Over half of those in their fifties would remain in work even if they had no financial need to work (see Table 4). Employment commitment does decline with age, but the pattern has changed little over the 1992-2006 period with those aged 20-34 the most likely to stay in work regardless of their financial circumstances (three-quarters of them report wanting to remain in work). These patterns apply to both men and women. However, there has been a steep decline in the commitment to full-time employment. Whereas in 1992 employment commitment among men was spilt more or less equally between full-time and part-time work across all age categories, by 2006 part-time working was favoured by two out of three male workers who said that they would continue working even if they did not have to do for financial reasons. This shift occurred more or less equally across all three age groups. The attraction of part-time working for women – already

TABLE 4
Employment commitment by age and gender, Britain, 1992-2006

	1992	2006
<i>Men</i>		
Commitment to continue working:		
20-34	74,4	75,3
35-49	64,7	63,4
50-60	57,6	56,4
Commitment to continue working as full-timer ¹ :		
20-34	39,0	22,7
35-49	36,3	21,3
50-60	28,1	15,0
Commitment to continue working as part-timer:		
20-34	35,5	52,6
35-49	28,4	42,1
50-60	29,5	41,4
<i>Women</i>		
Commitment to continue working:		
20-34	76,0	73,8
35-49	64,9	65,0
50-60	50,4	54,5
Commitment to continue working as full-timer:		
20-34	17,2	9,2
35-49	11,7	5,8
50-60	10,1	5,9
Commitment to continue working as part-timer:		
20-34	58,8	64,7
35-49	53,2	59,2
50-60	40,3	48,6

Note:

1. Full-time was defined as 30 hours or more a week; part-time work was defined as 30 hours or less.

relatively high in 1992 – also increased over time, albeit less sharply than for men. In 1992, four out of five women in their fifties who said that they would carry on working even if they had enough money to live on would do so by working part-time. By 2006 the proportion had risen to nine out of ten. The attractions of working full-time for both men and women of all age groups fell between 1992-2006, although the attractions of work itself changed little over time. Taken together, these results suggest that older workers of both sexes have become far less committed to their current employers since the early 1990s and would prefer – like young and middle aged workers of either sex – to reduce their hours of work if they could.

CONCLUSION

The notion of “fairness” is an important feature of the European Employment Strategy (Dieckhoff and Gallie, 2007) and is one of the central planks around which the new Coalition government in the UK seeks to be judged (Cabinet Office, 2010). We can assess progress towards reducing inequalities in the labour market through evidence on who gets what jobs and what how much do they get paid. However, jobs vary in other ways too. The “skills” and “quality” content of jobs, for example, are not readily measurable concepts since they have a number of dimensions and the measurement instruments adopted vary. The article has therefore sought to provide evidence on the various dimensions of these concepts and the ways in which they have been measured in individual-level surveys conducted in Britain over the last twenty years. Despite this multiple source approach, the findings presented here tend to reinforce one another and therefore give validity to the overarching messages that emerge.

These results suggest that gender and age inequalities have narrowed, but that some geographical inequalities have widened. The results also indicate that not all aspects of job quality are moving the same direction. For example, skills used at work are rising at the same time as high strain jobs are growing and commitment to full-time work is falling. It is difficult, therefore, to provide an emphatic judgement on whether job quality as a whole is rising or falling and how different social groups are faring in particular – as always in social science, the story is complex and multi-faceted.

It should also be pointed out that in this article we have only been able to present a taste of the type of job quality data that can be collected from worker-surveys. This has given British social scientists a wealth of data

on which to draw in tracking how the quality of work is changing as well as identifying who are the losers and winners. Data for the next survey in the series – funding permitted – is due to be collected in 2011-2012. This will allow us to assess the full impact of the 2008-2009 recession and, in particular, allow us to examine whether any of the gains (and losses) identified here have been reversed as a result of the economic downturn. We hope that overseas researchers, such as readers of the *Greek Review of Social Research*, will see merit in the measures and approaches outlined here and will endeavour to mimic and/or adapt these survey instruments, questions and techniques in order to gather survey data on the quality of jobs in their societies. The hope is that this article in particular may go some way to inspire Greek social scientists to pursue such an exciting and policy-relevant research agenda.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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