

Foreword

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The question of job quality has emerged as a key challenge for researchers and policy-makers in the 21st century. The realisation that job quality is central to addressing myriad social and economic problems – from economic development, to family formation and social integration, to poverty and inequality, to individual wellbeing – has put this age-old topic on the front burner for social scientists around the world. It is now widely recognised that people are likely to remain in jobs if they are of good quality, thereby increasing the employment rate and avoiding the revolving door of unemployment. The far-reaching consequences of job quality are becoming better understood, though more research is still needed on how jobs affect health, family life, social integration and other aspects of life.

Addressing the issue of job quality raises a number of important challenges. One is to reach agreement as to how to conceptualise what is meant by job quality. It is generally agreed that job quality is a complex, multi-dimensional construct that consists of both objective characteristics (such as level of earnings or safe working conditions) and subjective aspects such as the degree of meaning and challenge people want and obtain from their jobs. The latter underscores that the notion of good jobs in particular is a normative construct that is gendered, contested, fluid, contingent and evolving. The multi-dimensional nature of job quality emphasises that conceptualising it calls for a multi-disciplinary effort, with contributions needed from sociology, economics, industrial relations, management, law, psychology and political science, among others. At present, the identification of the dimensions of job quality is contested, differing across as well as within disciplines.

Advancing the understanding of job quality also requires some concord on how to measure this concept. Measures of the quality of jobs differ in their methodologies, complexity, dimensionality as well as levels of analysis. Some studies rely exclusively on objective indicators (such as administrative data, labour statistics, policies and laws), some use subjective measures such as perceptions of job characteristics, for example adequacy of pay, degree of challenge or overall assessments of satisfaction and happiness at work,

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and some use both objective and subjective indicators. Moreover, some researchers have sought to develop measures of the overall quality of jobs while others maintain that the quality of the various dimensions of jobs can only be assessed separately.

Explaining differences in job quality also presents challenges since the consensus on a theory or model of what differentiates good and bad jobs has not been arrived at. While it is clear that job quality depends on characteristics of both jobs and people, studies have tended to emphasise one or the other, often ignoring social factors such as class, gender and race. Thus, better multi-level models are needed that integrate macro and micro approaches that explain how work is structured (among occupations and organisations, for example) and how people respond to (and change) those structures. A better appreciation of how country differences generate job quality also must be gained. National employment regimes, government policy, trade union power, and cultural norms are among the salient aspects of countries that shape the quality of jobs.

Understanding the nature and causes of job quality is important for social science research, as well as for social policy and business practice. As noted above, enhancing job quality is a pressing issue, given the centrality of work to both economic performance and individual wellbeing. Yet the future of work is by no means certain, as governments and companies have considerable latitude in the choices they can make about what kinds of jobs are created. Thus, it is possible that the future of work in some countries may be, alternatively, good jobs that are relatively secure and well-paying, or bad jobs that are precarious and characterised by large numbers of poor workers, or a polarised economy in which there is a wide gap between good and bad jobs.

Job Quality in Australia: Perspectives, Problems and Proposals speaks to all of these topics. Its chapters draw on a diverse, multi-disciplinary literature to address the conceptualisation, measurement, explanations and possible policy interventions related to job quality in the context of Australia. Doing so considerably advances appreciation of the challenges associated with these aspects of job quality generally and helps to inform appreciation of structures and processes in Australia such as the role of labour laws and the award structure in shaping the quality of jobs. This book thus represents a timely and welcome contribution to the current dialogue about job quality.

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