European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

Convergence and divergence of working conditions in Europe: 1990–2005

Executive summary

Introduction

In 2005, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) undertook the fourth wave of its European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), which began in 1990. During this 15-year period, the European Union has experienced significant changes at various levels. The 12 EU Member States of 1990 have since been joined by 15 new countries. Consequently, the 2005 EWCS covers the 27 EU Member States (EU27) as well as Croatia, Turkey, Norway and Switzerland. However, changes in the EU have also been more structural, concerning the whole organisation of the European economy, labour markets and working conditions.

Thus, the content of the EWCS has significantly evolved in this period; it now includes more questions and has expanded from focusing on more traditional ergonomic risks to encompassing the numerous issues related to a multidimensional approach to working conditions and, more generally, quality of working life. This report primarily aims to investigate two research questions. First, it seeks to observe through the various waves of the EWCS the existence of relative movements of convergence or divergence over time concerning the quality of working life. Second, it explores whether similar movements are visible between European countries during the period.

Policy context

Structural changes in the EU have been reflected to a certain extent in the design of European and national policies, notably through the European Employment Strategy and the Lisbon Strategy. However, various recent studies show a mixed picture of the situation regarding job quality in Europe, indicating that, although some improvements are notable, such as with regard to accidents in the workplace, certain other dimensions of job quality – such as the intensification of work or access to training opportunities – have not really improved. This assessment was already made by the European Commission in the 2003 follow-up Communication on quality in work, and has been restated more recently in the strategic report on the renewed Lisbon Strategy.

These studies are based on various sets of data and indicators, using either a purely academic approach or a more policy-driven one, such as the conceptual framework and indicators agreed at the Laeken European Council in December 2001. One significant gap in the European framework on quality in work is the absence of any indicator related to working conditions. This report reviews from a job quality perspective the trends in working conditions as reflected through the various EWCS waves covering the last 15 years.

Key findings

The investigation of quality of work and employment highlights four main dimensions: career and employment, health and well-being, skills development and work–life balance. Each of these dimensions includes subtopics that together encompass all of the issues covered by the EWCS questionnaires and the field of European labour and social policies as a whole. Examining these areas – as well as job satisfaction in general – in order to assess job quality in its broadest sense, the survey findings reveal a relative divergence in Europe with the joining of the 12 new Member States (NMS) in 2004 and 2007. On average, these countries so far show poorer performance in terms of job quality, but the results also confirm that they are reducing the gap.

Among the older Member States (EU15), the convergence process appears to be moving not towards the optimal or higher results but more towards the average, with the improved performance in terms of job quality of the Anglo-Saxon group of countries balanced by a deterioration of the Scandinavian group. Meanwhile, the Continental and Southern groups remain relatively stable.

Internal diversity within the country groups and within the countries can be augmented by different public policies and also by diverse economic specialisations. The development of the services sector – accompanied by the decline in industrial and agricultural activities – has impacted differently on the various countries and this could partly explain dissimilarities between countries and groups of countries.

The national results presented in this report show that, within each group, a high degree of variability emerges. Finland is increasingly different from the other Scandinavian countries, but differences between Denmark and Sweden are also more marked nowadays than 10 or 15 years ago. In the Continental group, the Netherlands and, to a lesser extent, Austria are also diverging from the other countries of the group. In the Southern group, Spain is further from Italy than before, while Portugal and especially Greece appear more dissimilar from the other countries of the group than in the 1990s.

At national level, negative patterns of job quality, such as exposure to health hazards, weekend and night work, are declining almost everywhere. Workers' rights have improved in terms of consultation and information about risks. However, other negative job quality patterns – such as jobs with poor learning opportunities and poor access to training, shift work or non-fixed working schedules, greater work intensity and health-related absenteeism – are on the increase in almost all countries.

The lack of training opportunities in the workplace is of particular concern. Despite the emphasis on lifelong learning in the European discourse and policies, and the specific open method of coordination on education and lifelong learning, much progress is needed in order to reach the goals set at Lisbon in 2000.

Policy pointers

- For an overall improvement of working conditions in all countries, greater efforts are needed with regard to training and lifelong learning.
- Other risk factors and work-related outcomes in the EU27 countries requiring attention include the intensification of work and increasing absenteeism rates.
- In-depth information on the economic and social developments in the NMS is still fragmented or of narrow scope and further research is needed in this regard.
- With 27 EU Member States, it is difficult to analyse trends country by country and therefore clustering (grouping of Member States based on similarities) is a viable alternative. However, clustering can hide internal diversity and lead to over-interpretation. Therefore, it is important at the same time to conduct a country-by-country analysis, given the increasing diversity within the existing clusters.

Further research

- Eurofound, given its mission and resources – such as surveys, observatories and funding of secondary research – could play a role in fostering synergies and in the establishment of a transversal task force or a working group on clustering.
- Increasing the size of the national samples would help to improve the next wave of the EWCS, enabling a deeper analysis at sectoral and regional levels, for example.
- Improving the national samples in the EWCS is a precondition for a better use of the EWCS for policy monitoring purposes, as this exercise is based on a soft benchmark of national performance.

Further information

The report on *Convergence and divergence of working conditions in Europe: 1990–2005* is available at http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef08104.htm. Data, reports and secondary analysis of the European Working Conditions Surveys are available on the European Working Conditions Observatory website at http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/surveys/.

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