

# Low education in a high skills society – job quality among workers at risk

## Summary

During the past decades, the rhetoric and the policy vision on what is often termed “the high skills society” has largely come to realization in many advanced economies. As the emphasis on the knowledge economy, upskilling and the formalization of skills has achieved hegemony in the public discourse, the demand for educated workers has steadily increased. Even if vocational education is sought after in parts of the labour market, those without a university or college degree are left with fewer opportunities in terms of job quality, pay and status. In this thesis, I address the relationship between skills and job quality among workers that are the most at risk of falling behind in a high skills society: those without a higher education background.

In this thesis, I highlight two central aspects of job quality: job autonomy and job learning. I ask: What are the opportunities for job autonomy and job learning for workers without higher education, and how do these opportunities differ according to different institutional contexts? I focus on both workers who have not completed upper secondary school, and workers who completed upper secondary school – with or without vocational qualifications – but who have no credentials from higher education. The research I have conducted is partly comparative across countries, and partly embedded in the Norwegian setting. Employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, I explore opportunities and limitations for these workers in Norway, contrasted with other Western countries, and with other education groups. This broad approach has enabled me to highlight a diverse set of factors that contributes to the understanding of job quality within the context of the high skills society.

The thesis consists of four articles addressing institutional contexts at different levels – state, educational system, workplace and trade. The relationship between formal education and job quality is explored in Articles 1 and 2. These articles have a quantitative design based on data from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). The articles demonstrate how job autonomy vary between educational groups, but also suggest that the penalty of not having higher education vary between countries. Both the relationship between education

and job quality within countries and between countries are studied. Previous research has stated that Scandinavian workers are fortunate when it comes to job autonomy, Article 1 contributes to this research by focusing specifically on workers with no education above upper secondary school. The selection of countries in the study is motivated by employment regime theory and the differences between Scandinavian countries on the one hand, characterized by their relatively strong trade unions, collective agreements, and compressed wage structure, and the liberal countries of the UK and Ireland on the other. The study suggests that in Scandinavia as well as the UK, workers without higher education seem to be selected into occupations offering relatively little informal job learning. The study suggests that the high job autonomy of Scandinavia also benefits workers without higher education. As a comparison, UK and Irish workers without upper secondary school experience the least job autonomy in the study.

This finding is also reflected in Article 2, where seven countries are compared: Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Germany, Austria, the UK and Ireland. The choice of countries is motivated by skill formation theory and differences in the national system for vocational education and training (VET). In this article, the focus is on vocationally-educated workers, and an assumption, as suggested by previous research, is that these workers will be more autonomous in countries with VET systems emphasizing a broad skill base. We find that Irish workers with vocational education experience less job autonomy than workers with a university or college education. Contrary to our expectations, however, we find no such difference in the UK. Nevertheless, vocationally skilled workers in the Continental and Scandinavian countries enjoy higher autonomy than their counterparts in England and Ireland do. Benefits from vocational education in countries emphasizing a broad skill base are particularly high for Austrian workers with vocational education at higher levels. Article 2 also presents analyses on the relationship between cognitive skills and job autonomy. An important finding is that in the UK and Ireland, there is a relationship between cognitive skills and job autonomy independently of educational level. This is a finding that warrants further research.

While the two first articles present snapshots of job quality, the process of upskilling is the main theme of Articles 3 and 4. In Article 3, I try to fathom the complexity of reasons and motivations that underlie formal upskilling at the institutional level. I draw on previous research about the process of professionalizing the cleaning occupation in Norway, where the tripartite body,

consisting of two collective actors and the state, were the central stakeholders involved. I interpret this specific case in the light of both skills theory and new institutionalism, a theoretical framework which emphasizes educational transfer. In line with the educational transfer framework, I interpret a change in educational skills – the introduction of the trade certificate for cleaners – as a way of legitimizing an occupation with a poor reputation, by “borrowing” legitimacy from the educational system. I suggest that the stakeholders’ strategy was founded on a reliance on knowledge society narratives: that education and skills yield complexity, productivity and job quality. However, this change in ‘formal structure’ did little to change job quality within the cleaning industry, which was subjected to a strict tender-based regime where price generally outweighed skills. A general application of a collective wage agreement was necessary to improve job quality, demonstrating the limits of upskilling for changing work design, even in a collective bargaining system. The article confirms the arguments posed by power resource theory: that strong trade unions contribute to job quality.

Article 4 has a qualitative design and is based on interviews with young workers who obtained formal qualifications within carpentry or child- and youth care through a specific Norwegian education scheme called the experienced-based trade certificate programme, where workers can obtain vocational skills based on work experience. It explores a case of formalization of skills, focusing on the individual participants motivation to obtain formal vocational qualifications as adults. This study demonstrates how adults can benefit from other routes to formal education than the standard school-based route. Furthermore, even in cases where the formalization of work experience was not important for the performance of the job, the study underlines that this formalization can be valuable for the individual. To the individual workers, the prospect of getting a formal education was an important motivation: The formal trade certificate demonstrated that the job required skills, and the formal papers brought with them increased self-esteem on behalf of the job.