

The United Kingdom: National report on future socio-economic trends

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Quality is an innovative, quantitative and qualitative research project that aims to examine how, in an era of major change, European citizens living in different national welfare state regimes evaluate the quality of their lives. The project will analyse international comparative data on the social well-being of citizens and collect new data on social quality in European workplaces in eight strategically selected partner countries: UK, Finland, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Hungary and a candidate country for EU enlargement, Bulgaria.

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Introduction

Background

This report presents the findings from the 'Expert Group' scenario planning event organised by the UK Quality Team.

Objectives of work package 6

To gain insight into the future socio-economic trends and public policies in relation to quality of life and work of male and female citizens in the eight partner countries;

To gain insight into the ways in which the quality of life of individual citizens can be protected by public and organisational policies;

To develop a number of policy recommendations for public policy-makers and organisations that may help them to improve the quality of life of European citizens.

Identifying and organising the expert group

Criteria for inclusions

The main criteria for identification of the Expert Group was that members had a strong employment/gender focus and that there was some track record in developing work around quality of life and/or issues about reconciling paid work and family, commonly articulated in the UK as “work-life balance.” Most organisations tend to focus on these issues as their route to improving quality of work and life experiences. It was also considered useful if to engage a politician with the group as a way of linking the work into the political process. For practical reasons organisations/individuals, with close links with individual members of the team were contacted first.

Organising the event

The Team sought to undertake a relatively wide trawl of organisations given the likelihood that not everybody would be able to attend. Organisations were contacted approximately 2 and half months prior to the planned date by email so as to give as much notice as possible. The email provided a brief outline of the Quality project and the purpose of the event. This was followed up with extensive telephone contact so as to ensure that the Team could be signposted to relevant people within organisations by other colleagues. The venue was considered important in that it would provide a convenient comfortable and pleasant environment for a meeting. The Nuffield Trust (an organisation which researches and campaigns around health issues and known to Annabelle Mark) in central London was chosen – a beautiful Georgian building in an attractive part of central London which was easily accessible by attendees within London and for those from outside coming in by train.

The Team were aware of participants' time pressure so it was planned that the event would run for the morning 7 February 2008 between 10.00 and 13.00. Coffee was provided prior to the start at 9.30 and the buffet lunch was seen as a possibility for networking.

The expert group

Labour Member of the European Parliament

The MEP represents an area of the UK (former coal and steel communities) which has undergone substantial restructuring and changes. She has chaired a Partnership Group in the region which has had responsibilities for employment regeneration.

Chartered Institute for Personnel Development (CIPD)

The CIPD is the professional body for those in the management and development of people (ie Human Resource Managers. It promotes “work –life balance” and in April 2007 published a report providing guidelines for developing W-L balance policies within the work place.

Sociologist and Consultant

A close collaborator with one of the Quality Team Members was invited on the basis of her previous research and experience in relation to the subject area. She has produced numerous academic publications and research papers on the harmonisation of paid work and personal life.

Confederation of British Industry

This organisation is the ‘premier’ lobby organisation for UK businesses and the Policy Officer specialising in advising on flexible working attended the event.

IPSOS Mori

The organisation is a major social research consultancy body. The participant is director of the organisation’s horizon programme which seeks to scan future trends and emerging developments and help other organisations in doing this.

Equalities and Human Rights Commission

This organisation was formerly three separate equality organisations (race, gender, and disabilities) which have merged into one body that performs the function of lobbying, advocacy and advice on equality issues. The former Equal Opportunities Commission undertook extensive research on gender inequalities in work. The EOC produced a major report on the future of work “Enter the Timelords: Transforming work to meet the future” in 2007 and the Steering Group for the work on this research provided a basis for identifying people who would see the Expert Group as relevant to their work.

Trade Union Congress (TUC)

A Senior Officer at the TUC, the umbrella organisation for trade unions, whose role is to develop policy and research related to flexible work and work and personal life issues.

European Health Management Association (EHMA)

The EHMA, is a network of health organisations throughout Europe with its main role to build bridges between different members of the health community, academics, managers policy makers, health professionals. The President was a Group participant.

Policy Studies Institute

A Senior Policy Officer from this major consultancy and research body which specialises in employment, employment relations and labour market research.

Quality Research Team

Professor Suzan Lewis, Professor Annabelle Mark, and Dr David Etherington.

Those invited who were unable to attend:

Work Foundation

This not for profit organisation combines consultancy and advocacy and was invited to send a representative on the basis of its track record in relation to work life balance. The Foundation were unable to send a member of staff, but expressed an interest in the work of the Group.

Institute of Public Policy and Research (IPPR)

The IPPR is a leading “progressive think tank” which produces policy and research on a variety of public policy issues.

British Chambers of Commerce

This organisation represents the interests of small and medium sized businesses and their Officer who specialised in work- life issues was unable to attend but expressed an interest in the work of the Group.

The scenario planning process

Explaining the purpose of the event and posing the central question

After explaining the purpose of the event the focus of the scenario planning was presented to the group:

What are the major challenges the UK faces in the next ten years (up to 2018) when it comes to the quality of work and quality of life?

Disseminating the main findings from Quality research

A presentation of some preliminary findings from research conducted by partner organisations across Europe can be summarised as follows:

- More intensified global competition is giving rise to flexible employment in terms of working time, working place and contractual arrangements;
- Rising income inequalities between households in many countries;
- Inequalities between old and new EU Member States although gap narrowing;
- Women are more vulnerable in terms of atypical and flexible work than men;
- Unemployment is declining except in Germany but remains a threat to particular groups;
- Ageing population, low fertility rates and postponement of parenthood;

- Pluralisation of family life with different family and household formations;
- Continued gender inequalities in education and employment;
- Increasing blurring of boundaries between work and family life;
- Varied nature of child care support within the EU.

There was a short discussion and there seemed to be a consensus and agreement about these findings amongst the participants.

Outlining the technique of scenario planning

Most members of the group were familiar with the scenario planning process. The following definition of scenario thinking was presented:

“A tool for ordering one’s perceptions about alternative future environments in which one’s decision might be played out”

Another definition is:

“A set of organised ways for us to dream effectively about our own future.”

Some emphasis was placed upon the need to think ‘outside the box’ or break out of mind sets and taken for granted thinking and discourses as a way of brain storming what future scenarios can emerge. It was suggested that as a way of structuring thinking that participants could consider the future in terms of aspects that are *pre determined* such as aging, environmental factors (i.e. global warming), digital society, and those which are *uncertain* such as water issues, geo political relations, oil price and energy supply, and population integration issues.

Scenario design was explained in terms of most certain and most effect/least effect (see below) least certain with most/least effect. The participants were split into two groups who were asked to undertake the story creation exercise. Then the Groups reported their findings to a plenary. Emphasis was placed on describing an extreme future world describing several effects of pre determined elements. The Groups were then asked to develop this into a story. The event was planned for groups to prepare 4 scenario stories but there was not enough time so the Groups concentrated upon one. In preparing the stories it was suggested that this could be structured around the PESTLE model to focus the description of outcomes– acronym for Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, and Environmental. The future challenges related to quality of work and life.

Creating the stories

Group 1

This group focused on two key themes. The first is transport, which seemed a particular issue for the UK given the continued problems relating to traffic congestion and the railway system. The second theme, developing on the findings on income inequalities, related to social polarisation and cohesion.

A. Most likely and less effect

- Growing polarisation between rich and poor;
- Congestion –too little space, too many people and too few resources;
- Widespread homelessness, reduced geographical mobility;
- Employee absence rates increase due to mental health problems;
- Budgets for social care increase by 5% each year from 2009;
- Income inequalities and social divide exacerbated by private health and education;
- Cars and non essential travel banned;
- Migration of skills within UK occurs.

B. Most likely and more effect

- Transport congestion becomes unmanageable;
- Managers trained to encourage greater employee autonomy;
- 40% of young people go to University;
- Non essential travel banned and more investment in transport;
- Because of global warming air travel is restricted to 3 flights per person per year from 2009;
- Increase in unemployment as deep recession bites.

C. Least likely and most effect

- Oil price collapses;
- Transport is rationed.

Group 2

This group focused around themes of employment regulation, the changing nature of work and current/future trends in globalisation.

A. Most likely and less effect

- Most of Britain's happiest, most dynamic entrepreneurs are under 30 and work is highly fluid and IT based and there enabled communities;
- Number of self employed, contract based workers outnumber fixed contract workers in the knowledge economy.

Most likely and greater effect

- House prices push public sector workers out of the South East of England (which is the most prosperous and congested region in the UK);
- The impact of an ageing society will overwhelm social and family support structures;
- New technology will emancipate people from traditional corporate working patterns;
- The UK will become an even more unequal society – divisions between those in paid employment and those without protection;
- Policy makers will adopt a life course approach to paid employment;
- Agency Work regulations end exploitation of vulnerable workers;
- The state will no longer accept responsibility for individual/family well being which become the responsibility of the individual;
- World recession and mass unemployment.

C. Least likely and less effect

- Pension age raised to 75 years;
- Recruitment crisis in caring profession as young women abandon workplace to have children in their 20s;
- Sensitivity in policy and working culture towards life stage and age life course phases;
- Work becomes to be seen as an integral and 'valued' part of life rather than something to be balanced;
- Shift towards new values based on "economic optima" and ending competitive arms race.

D. Least likely and greater effect

- Off shoring continues: low skill jobs dry up mass unemployment among lower skill;
- The UK Government will end the opt out of the Working Time Directive;
- Chinese firms will buy British firms and enforce Asian working conditions;
- Green revolution – millions of new jobs created in low carbon sectors – UK leads the world in this respect;
- Energy crisis – overseas suppliers dry up and alternative sources not developed;
- Men and women will share domestic responsibilities equally so that women can play a more significant and better paid role in the labour market;
- Men and women will redefine their roles at home and work.

Developing the stories

Group 1

Their scenario related to the transport situation and its impact – particularly in relation to travel rationing and the collapse of some traditional industrial sectors. In relation to employment increased dichotomy and polarisation. Using the PESTLE method the group outlined their scenario which they considered most uncertain with greatest effect. There was only time for one story for each group.

Political – Cross party political commitment to ration transport as a result of energy crisis.

Economic – Collapse of leisure and manufacturing industry because travel is restricted. Tesco bans import of blackberries from Mexico because of transport crisis. New farming sector formed essentially local and small scale. Farmers markets become more common place and supermarkets disappear. On line shopping becomes the norm.

Social – Local communities becomes more segregated and "tribal" attitudes become dominant. There is less choice in education and health services are localised. There is an increase in home births. Quality of services will vary considerably as more people are involved with service delivery.

Technological – Mobile phones cause ear cancer and green technologies become more widespread.

Legal – World wide ban on travel enforced by a "Green Army" of the WHO.

Environment – Extreme weather increases social divide (as in the case of the tsunami and hurricane Katrina).

Time Line for Group 1 Story 2008 - 2018

2010 – Big Bang! Extreme weather combined with economic recession plus Middle East Crisis and terrorism. Oil producing countries boycott export of oil.

2011 – Government orders travel rationing, overseas travel restricted increasing unemployment and industries close.

2012 – Massive movements of population from cities to countryside. Localised model of healthcare established based on Cuban model. Education choice restricted to catchment areas.

2013 – Smaller percentage of people with high technology.

2016 – Low growth and recasting of the economy. As problems become more widespread, World Health Organisation creates Green Army.

2018 – Single World currency/exchange rate created.

Group 2

This group focused on a story which saw the movement towards a Swedish style social model being created “Giant Sweden” as a response to globalisation which encourages collaboration growth and prosperity. This scenario seemed to derive as a possible reaction to the trends towards labour market inequalities and continued challenges posed by gender inequalities in employment and education. Key elements of the model include:

- Social protectionism in relation to people who become economically inactive (unemployed, sickness and disability);
- Consensual and multilateral relations on an international level;
- Action on climate change;
- Possible lower flexibility at work;
- Downgrade expertise and reduce incentive for innovation;
- New forms of kinships emerging from coercive legislation;
- Social and digital divide emerging as well as huge migration flows;
- High costs of public services;
- Working world comprises legislation which enables people to have control of their work, a strong safety net in case of poverty, workers are central to decision making, high levels of awareness and intelligence gathering.

Time Line for Group 2 Story 2008 -2018

2008 - Blair made President of the EU

2012 - JP Morgan – workers go home at 1830 (as they usually work longer!) champions end of long hours culture. Parental leave extended to 3 months.

2014 - Asian economy grows and China undergoes huge democratic revolution.

2015 - EU strengthens border controls and EU imposes car –free days and low private mobility.

2016 - Blair strengthens EU to act as a global force.

2018 - Protests by the young because of increasing costs of supporting older people.

Future scenarios and policy and practise implications

There was not enough time to focus on the policy implications of the ‘scenarios’ but it would be useful to suggest the following relevant issues and themes that emerged in the Group discussions which merit further consideration:

Employment policies

- More pro active work place strategies to accommodate older workers because of the trend towards an ageing working population;
- Employment polarisation will characterise the labour market with possible continued pressures to strengthen employment rights in the work place;
- A life course and equity approach to employment policies including a safety net for low paid insecure workers will become very important;
- Pressure towards anti discrimination practices towards migrant and other ethnic groups in the work place;
- Move towards strengthening implementation of equal opportunity policies in employment.

Care provision

- In particular the nature of provision may also change in light of transport and environmental issues creating a trend towards localisation of service provision so that services are provided for a specific geographical catchment area;
- Organisational practices will need to be developed in order to accommodate the needs of people with caring responsibilities including both children and family relatives although this may meet with barriers created by the trend towards localised provision;
- Demands to extend more comprehensive and subsidised child care and other care provisions;
- A greater role for stakeholder involvement in decision making on care.

Equality policies

- Both groups identified the continued trend to both increasing income and gender inequalities in the work place which highlights the need to strengthen equality legislation and to focus on actual implementation and practice in the workplace.

Housing provision

- Congestion in the South East of England will continue to raise issues about intervention in the housing market in order to tackle labour shortages caused by the lack of affordable housing;
- Shortfall in provision will lead to significant increases in homelessness;
- Deterioration in housing conditions for disadvantaged groups, especially migrant workers.

Transport crisis

- Pressure to reduce the transport crisis will continue but will have implications for mobility and access to public services in terms of giving priority to 'catchment areas' in relation to allocation of services;
- Transport planning may need to take in account people changing their travel behaviour because of current problems with the infrastructure.

Health care provision

- In health care an impact of a reduction in mobility as a result of restrictions on movement of labour will affect the provision of care and the availability of services to more localised communities;
- The availability of technology is crucial to the growth in both treatment solutions and the sharing of information about health so any changes, positive or negative will affect both what can be done and who knows about it;
- Any reduction in access to high tech health care will result in a return to localised solutions and a search for alternatives within local communities and this is associated with further divisions between rich and poor;
- On the plus side a more localised ownership of health may focus attention on self help and a reduction in problems of iatrogenesis a term referring initially to doctor or drug induced illness but now often extended to illness generated to hospital acquired infections like MRSA.

Local planning

- There will be a need to re-evaluate of what is understood at local and community at local and national levels i.e geography but also what virtual communities are able to operate simultaneously reducing the negative effects of insularity.

Migration policies

- The continued trend towards international migration will lead to policies towards liberalisation in relation to skill and occupation to address labour shortages;
- There may be moves towards quotas and restrictions in other categories of in migration.

Commentary and reflections

The groups' findings

Despite the time constraints (see below) there were some interesting outcomes of the exercise. There were interesting differences between the groups they were with one group centralising the issue of transport and mobility as well as environmental issues in the way it will impact upon work and the other focusing on

employment regulation, the changing nature of work and current/future trends towards globalisation. One group emphasised the nature of the global economy and an enhanced future role of China on the world stage. The trend towards growing polarisation was also seen as prominent. The first group had a more 'extreme' scenario which suggested that the transport crisis would give rise to more localist forms of economic and social structures. The second group, at the other end of the spectrum saw the possible rise of a Swedish style social democracy and the potential impacts on work quality with more socially progressive legislation although with different types of social divisions arising (in terms of income and between young and old).

The event itself

It would be useful to draw a balance sheet on the event. Starting from a critical view point, we were possibly being too ambitious in expecting 4 scenarios from the groups. It seemed that we were constantly pressed for time and that ideally this exercise requires at least a day. We felt that this was not practical given that people would not be able to make the time commitment, but in reflection we could have tried harder to convince participants of the value of a whole day event, or better still a full day from a lunch time until lunch time the following day to allow for reflection and consolidation overnight. The event finished rather abruptly, and although there was time to network at lunch we should have engaged with the group during the meeting to find out how their research and activities link up with the Quality project and to explore how the participants would take these ideas forward – or how the scenarios might influence their future thinking. However a number of participants have expressed considerable interest in following up the research to see what implications it has and how it might inform their own work.

On the positive side the turnout was impressive from a varied range of organisations engaged in the world of work and broadly representative of public and private sectors as well as social agendas that are central to the project. It provided an opportunity to disseminate the findings and connect with some important stakeholders. There may be future possibilities to develop this work further with these organisations.