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WORKERS' SECURITY ACROSS THE LIFECYCLE: BARGAINING, SKILLS,  
AND SOCIAL SERVICES



## Collective bargaining's contribution to employment skills and transitions: lessons from the nordic countries

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### ABSTRACT

Major shifts in employment patterns – across sectors, occupations and regions – are a constant feature of modern labour markets. These transitions can occur in more or less humane and efficient ways, depending on whether active policies are leveraged to support workers, employers and industries to adapt to change and take advantage of new opportunities. The imperative to better manage employment transitions is all the more pressing given the necessary shift towards a carbon-neutral, sustainable economy. The very high collective bargaining coverage in Nordic countries contributes to their active labour market policy, proper regulation of employment standards, high-quality investments in skills and innovation, integrated vocational planning, and comprehensive social solidarity. This article will identify how strong collective bargaining in Nordic countries enhances workforce skills, adaptability and innovation, and the lessons from this to improve the more laissez-faire transitions currently occurring in liberal market economies such as Australia.

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## Introduction

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicates that, in the five Nordic nations (Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland), the average extent of collective bargaining agreement coverage remains high at above 85% (OECD 2020a). Those nations, through their industry-wide bargaining, achieve better employment outcomes, including better integration of young workers, women and lower-skilled workers into jobs, than countries now relying on enterprise bargaining and individual contracts (OECD 2018a, 83). This article will analyse some features of collective bargaining in three particular Nordic countries – Finland, Denmark and Sweden – which point to possible ways to overcome shortfalls in Australia's skills training arrangements.

Developed countries can be classified into four broad categories in terms of the involvement of the social partners – i.e. trade unions and employer organisations – in the governance of education and training systems. The social partners: jointly 'define and manage the training system' in Denmark and Iceland; 'contribute to the definition of the training system' in Finland and Norway; and 'have a consulting role' in the governance of

the education and training system in Sweden. In Australia, however, social partners are merely relegated to the role of 'other' (OECD 2019b, 4).

Unions' and employers' organisations are currently involved in the management of training funds, as well as skills assessments and the anticipation of skills needs, in a majority of developed nations (OECD 2019e, 166). However, in Australia, although employer organisations are consulted to discuss the findings of skills assessment and anticipation exercises, there are few opportunities for trade unions to be consulted, and therefore tripartite discussions about those findings are now absent from Australia. This stands in particular contrast to Nordic countries where input by both trade unions and employer organisations to skills planning and policy is 'regular and systematic' (OECD 2018b, 121).

Evidence shows that 'the presence of any type of voice arrangements is positively associated with workers' access to training' (OECD 2019e, 166), that 'employee representation at the workplace can play a significant role in ... increasing training opportunities and prospects for career advancement' and that 'a recognised form of employee representation ... [has] a positive correlation with the number of days spent in training over the last 12 months' (OECD 2018a, 100).

### **How collective bargaining coverage contributes to quality skill and transitions**

The OECD now acknowledges that 'collective bargaining is a particularly useful tool' to respond to 'the challenges arising from mega-trends that are transforming labour markets'. This is because collective bargaining 'can complement public policies in enhancing labour market security and adaptability', particularly through social partners' role co-operating to identify, and prepare for, future skills needs, and by their directly providing, or otherwise ensuring, active support to workers (OECD 2019e, 19, 250). In a context in which low-skilled, older workers, in jobs at high risk of automation or lost through closures or economic restructuring, are vulnerable to being left behind, this active support is vitally needed to help those workers back into good jobs (OECD 2019a, 236, 193).

Countries which have widespread sector-based collective agreements enjoy the advantage of these agreements being able to be changed quickly, with the agreement of the encompassing social partners, to effectively respond to pressing challenges which confront national labour markets (Johansson 2019, 13). Among these challenges is skills formation. At the same time, 'collective bargaining ... at ... sectoral ... level can ... help companies to adapt ... through tailor-made agreements and adjustments in the organisation of work to meet their specific needs' (OECD 2019e, 250).

Accordingly, the OECD is now concerned that 'practical and legal barriers to collective bargaining pose a serious problem' (OECD 2019e, 19). In its most recent flagship publication on jobs, it has highlighted the significant role that collective bargaining, in particular, at the sectoral level, can play in strengthening workers' adaptations to new jobs (OECD 2019a, 193). Social partners do not just play a key role in supporting job transitions and ensuring that workers are equipped with the skills they need (OECD 2019e, 131). Social partners, through their close contact with workers and firms, are also crucial in preparing nations for the future by fostering continuous lifelong learning and by cultivating a learning culture in workplaces and societies (OECD 2019b, 11).

In several developed countries, social partners are represented on sectoral skills councils, which produce industry-specific, long-term projections to ensure that current qualifications meet future skill needs. On the basis of this information, access to lifelong training for workers can be negotiated and secured in collective agreements, and this is an increasingly important issue in collective bargaining (OECD 2019a, 194). Indeed, much of the content of collective agreements is dedicated to non-wage working conditions, such as training (OECD 2018a, 97). Further, in many developed countries ‘collective agreements with respect to adult learning *primarily* determine training leave arrangements, employment protection during or after training, and training rights’ (OECD 2019b, 10, emphasis added).

Similar sector-wide, or more coordinated, collective bargaining could help rebuild what have become very fragmented and dysfunctional skills training arrangements in Australia.

### **Problems with Australia’s skills training arrangements**

Australia, unlike the Nordic countries, has extensively privatised employment services and Vocational Education and Training since the 1990s, which has led to many gaps and distortions. Australia does not even have a ‘public employment service’ – something presupposed by much official international comparative analysis – since its privatisation of the former Commonwealth Employment Service from 1996. Comprehensive employment and skills enhancement programs which were briefly offered in Australia from 1994 to 1996 were disbanded in favour of a system which financially rewards quick, superficial employment of easily placed jobseekers. The current system does not meet the skills needs of people facing barriers to continued workforce participation (Toner 2018).

The abilities of the long-term unemployed, job seekers in some regional areas, and other under-represented groups are not properly measured in Australia. Limited skill assessment and anticipation exercises focus only on what are currently designated as skilled occupations, i.e. those that require at least an Australian Qualifications Framework Certificate 3 or Certificate 4. These exercises are not suitable to inform active labour market policies for the long-term unemployed who stand to benefit the most from training, and who are unlikely to have the necessary prerequisites to enter programs at the Certificate 3 or 4 levels.

Longer-term education and training policies require more forward-looking exercises which are updated on a regular basis. Although several states commission forecasting exercises, and the national government commissions external consultants to do skills forecasting on an ad hoc basis, Australia needs to implement more thorough and regular forecasting exercises like those done in Nordic countries. By doing this, Australia will be able to better preview labour market imbalances over a ten-year time span, so that policy-makers can develop policies to avoid those imbalances (OECD 2018b, 11–12).

In Australia, the proportion of jobs at a high risk of automation, at 10.6%, is significantly larger than in most Nordic countries – under 6% in Norway, just over 7% in Finland, while only 8% in Sweden (OECD 2019c, 1, 2019a, 49). An informed analyst has attributed this to the fact that, ‘faced with high labour costs, many companies in the Nordic countries have already sought to move up the value-added chain and improve labour productivity by

shifting their workforces out of routine jobs to ones involving less routine, more cognitive tasks' (Keese 2019, 35).

Denmark and Sweden are considered internationally 'ahead in the digital transformation of the workplace, with most of their workers intensively using ICTs [information and communication technologies] on the job and predominantly performing non-routine tasks' (OECD 2019f, 22, 23). Skills surveys show that Australian adults' proficiency of problem-solving in technology-rich environments is less than adults in all four Nordic nations for which data is available – Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway. Australia scores 38 for problem-solving in technology-rich environments, which is above the average of 30 for developed nations, but Sweden scores 44 on this indicator (OECD 2019d, 23). The proportion of people in Australia that participate in adult learning is also significantly lower than in those four Nordic countries (OECD 2019b, 11).

In terms of skills mismatches Australia, relative to other developed nations, also has many workers who are overqualified for their jobs: 20.2% of the workers, compared with the OECD average of 16.8%. The figures in the four main Nordic countries are all lower at 7.8% in Finland, 12.3% in Norway, 14% in Denmark and 14.6% in Sweden (OECD 2016a). These sizeable skill imbalances entail correspondingly sizeable costs for individuals, firms and the aggregate economy in terms of lower wages, lower job satisfaction, increased employee turnover, and lower productivity (OECD 2018b, 19).

### **Finland's investment in skills and integrated vocational planning**

Finland invests heavily in skills and vocational planning. This is related to its high valuing of education, and contributes to its renowned position as a highly innovative country (World Economic Forum 2019). Finland is one of a small group of countries, mostly Nordic countries, which lead the developed world in terms of their extent of digitalisation. At the same time, Finnish citizens are comparatively well-equipped with adequate skills and supported by effective lifelong learning systems, to enable them to benefit from that digitalisation. In Finland, a particularly high proportion of people use the Internet in complex and diverse ways, giving them one of the developed world's highest shares of individuals with well-rounded cognitive skills (OECD 2019f, 12, 165).

In Finland, sophisticated methodologies and processes, involving the social partners, are widely used to forecast short-term, medium-term and long-term skill needs both nationally and regionally (Skills Panorama 2017). Employees and their representative organisations are required by law to have opportunities to influence decisions which affect their work and working conditions (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2020).

Finnish employers can use the 'joint purchase training' (Yhteishankintakoulutus) suite of programmes to retrain workers. One of the programmes in that suite which is widely offered is 'Change Training' (Muutoskoulutus). When an employer dismisses workers for financial or production-related reasons, training is organised, in conjunction with the public employment service, aimed at helping the employee to find a new job. This training can last up to 2 years and lead to a vocational degree. Those who participate in 'Change Training' are afterwards typically employed by other companies, or find new work in the company that has organised the training. The public employment services pays 80% of the expenses of this training (European Monitoring Centre on Change 2020).

In Finland since the 1990s there has been a publicly funded expansion of polytechnics, now known as universities of applied science. By contrast, their closest equivalents in Australia – the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes – have, in the same period, had their funding and enrolments reduced, and their programs undermined, by the rise of poor-quality privatised providers.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) communiqué has called for changes to ensure that Vocational Education and Training, and higher education now become equal and integral parts of Australia's post-secondary education system, to better coordinate skills formation. This 'vision' for skills in Australia declares that 'The Commonwealth and states and territories will work together to deliver a system which helps all Australians – for those getting first qualifications or re-training – get the skills they need for employment' (COAG, 2019).

The communiqué came after a mid-2019 report on how the objective of parity between vocational skills training and universities can practically now be achieved, by drawing on proven success in Nordic countries, in particular, Finland (see further Scott et al. 2019). Australia, in rebuilding its public TAFE institutes, can learn much from the Finnish approach of pursuing excellence with equity, and encouraging movement between applied vocational and academic learning. The two main types of post-school institutions in Australia are envisaged as continuing to play distinct roles – i.e. TAFEs to specialise in skills, and universities in research – but with fewer status divisions and greater co-operation, between them.

TAFE institutes are important places for mature-age workers to develop new skills after they leave one type of job to enter a different type of job. Such transitions range from retraining former retail workers to fill skill shortages of midwives, to adding to plumbers' expertise so that they can take up the expanding job opportunities in renewable energy.

However, while there is a crucial need for revitalised TAFEs to achieve higher workforce participation in Australia, many people now outside the paid workforce are not ready to go straight into the formal institutional training which TAFEs offer. Those unemployed people need foundational training first. They need bridging courses which are customised as economic opportunities, with wraparound services which help those out of work commence their journey and which then stay with them throughout that journey. This is particularly the case for the many families in regions in which intergenerational unemployment means that no one in the family has ever experienced regular paid work.

One of the most important things for unemployed people in regions hard-hit by job loss is to expand the horizons of what is seen as possible. Many do not realise the potential of what they can actually do because of the debilitating effect which disadvantage and displacement have had. In this respect, Denmark's long-standing, highly practical, accessible and effective Active Labour Market Programs (ALMPs) provide particularly valuable lessons.

### **Active labour market programs: Denmark's leadership**

Danish leadership in skills training, and the success that continuous provision of ALMPs has had in maintaining high workforce participation through the adaptation of mature-age workers to new jobs in that nation, has been previously recognised (Scott 2014, 161).

The labour force participation rate for people aged 55–64 is now more than 73% in Denmark, whereas it is less than 67% in Australia (OECD 2020b).

In Denmark there is proper financial support for workers, who have lost one job, to undertake skills retraining to obtain another job, i.e. adequate unemployment payments to provide income security for job transition. This is a fundamental Nordic approach: to establish a basis of employment security which assists workers to view changes to particular jobs as opportunities more than threats. Australia has the lowest unemployment payment in the developed world, whereas Denmark has one of the highest. The payment as a proportion of average full-time wages for a single person without children is less than 40% in Australia, whereas it is more than 80% in Denmark (Australian Council of Social Service and Jobs Australia 2020, 35).

Danish funding for ALMPs also automatically increases when the unemployment rate rises (OECD 2018a, 178). According to internationally harmonised data, only 0.01% of GDP is allocated to skills training in Australia, which represents one of the lowest expenditures on training of all developed countries. This low spending reflects both a few unemployed people participating in training programmes and a small amount spent on each participant (OECD 2018b, 87). Denmark, the developed country which invests most in ALMPs, spends more than eight times the public funds that Australia does on those active programmes (OECD 2020b).

Access to life-long training for workers is an increasingly important issue in collective bargaining as shown by an agreement in Denmark which has been accurately hailed as a 'landmark' (OECD 2019e, 166). Covering the period 2018–2021, and providing easier access to adult education and training to enable workers to keep up with rapid employment transformations resulting from digitalisation and other technological changes, this national tripartite agreement was signed by the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions, the Confederation of Danish Employers and the Danish government in October 2017. It includes measures to further strengthen workers' ICT skills and increases funding to improve the quality and suitability of adult vocational training (ArbejdsMarkedsUddannelser or AMU) courses.

A central feature of the agreement is a new 'reconversion fund' in which 400 million Danish kroner has been invested to enable workers to undertake further training on their own initiative. (This is equivalent to almost 88 million Australian dollars, according to the buy rate for the Australian dollar in the retail exchange market on day 1 of the 2020–2021 financial year, reported in the *Australian Financial Review* newspaper on that day.) The agreement also pays a higher allowance to AMU participants to ensure that its level is no less than the highest unemployment benefit rate in Denmark. The allowance increase has been particularly welcomed by trade unions – which continue to defend, and seek to strengthen, Denmark's investment in vocational and continuing training (Jørgensen 2018).

In Australia, there are few parallels to this extensive Danish co-operation between unions and employers for workers' skills development. However, one is the Incolink redundancy trust in Victoria and Tasmania (Incolink 2020), which brings together unions and employers to help provide retraining opportunities for some displaced construction workers after job losses. This provides a basis upon which to build.

Social partners in Denmark also work together in eleven committees which monitor adult vocational training in different parts of the labour market. Information generated by the Vis



Kvalitet system helps monitor programmes and providers. This system collects data from each participant about their satisfaction with the training via questionnaires, as well as data from a sample of companies whose employees participated. Results are used by the committees to identify issues about quality, and to make necessary improvements (OECD 2019b, 18).

Denmark supports a holistic approach to adult education and encourages free opportunities for people to undertake creative learning for life. This enables participants to combine very diverse modules into a formal qualification. The modules can range across vocational skills training, secondary education, higher education, and non-formal liberal education. Denmark's valuing of these many types of knowledge encourages a very high proportion of its adult citizens to attain qualifications (Desjardins, 2017, 45–46, 56–58, 62–66).

The challenges arising from industrial restructuring, and a move away from fossil fuels have disproportionately affected particular regions in Australia. These include, for example, Geelong in Victoria, following the announcement in 2013 that Ford would close car manufacturing in Australia, and Victoria's Latrobe Valley following major reductions of coal-fired power generation there. The success of the Lindø shipyard regeneration project (Lindø, 2020) in the city of Odense in southern Denmark has been previously highlighted as an imaginative example of interest for the possible transition of workers in Australian regions hit hard by job loss (Scott 2014, 156–160). In Lindø 8000 shipyard jobs were lost in 2012, but many employees' skills were preserved in the region and redirected into the development of large-scale renewable energy focused on wind turbines.

The Geelong region has itself had some success in adapting to new renewable job opportunities, with the Danish Vestas company's assembling of some wind turbines in part of the former Ford local car manufacturing plant. A globally recognised cluster of advanced carbon fibre manufacturers in Geelong, linked to Deakin University, is seen as creating one of the new world-class niches which the Australian manufacturing sector needs for a viable future (Smyth 2020). A research partnership underway between Vestas and Deakin University to improve the compressive strength of carbon fibre composite materials for wind turbines could lead to stronger turbines and more renewable jobs opportunities.

An immense planned installation of offshore wind turbines, with a transmission network of cables and substations connected to the Latrobe Valley, also has leading Danish input (Star of the South Project 2020). It is strongly supported by trade unions (Victorian Trades Hall Council 2019), including the Maritime Union of Australia which hopes for new job opportunities for its members on that project. If the Latrobe Valley can shift from its past employment reliance on coal-fired power generation to substantial employment in wind power, then that will be a big step for Australia towards a more carbon-neutral, sustainable economy.

To achieve successful adaptations of workers to the extent that has occurred in Denmark; however, Australia will need to increase its national investment in quality skills retraining towards Danish levels. It will also need to similarly tailor that support to the displaced workers who most need assistance with practical, customised, high-quality and broad-minded transition programs.

### **Sweden's employment security councils**

Sweden's 'Job Security Councils' have been regularly praised as one of the most notable examples of how sectoral collective bargaining can enhance workers' labour market



adaptability, including for their elaborate use of a 'skills barometer' to plan ahead (OECD 2019e, 233). As Dr Samuel Engblom, Policy Director of Sweden's Confederation of Professional Employees (the Tjänstemännens Centralorganisation, or TCO union), points out; however, given that the councils actually support transitions to new jobs for workers who have been laid off from their previous jobs, the term employment security councils is more appropriate. The analysis of Sweden which follows draws on his writings (Engblom 2017, 1–11).

The Swedish employment security councils were set up by the social partners in line with agreements following sector-wide collective bargaining. They have evolved over several decades in an environment in which trade unions have strong leverage. They are bipartite, with no government involvement. As such, they have a robust independence which outlasts shifts in electoral trends and public finances. Their boards have equal numbers of employer and trade union representatives. That model of governance makes them similar to Australia's industry superannuation funds.

Former, long-time Australian Council of Trade Unions economist Grant Belchamber has proposed, on the basis of Denmark's successful employment arrangements, the extension of industry superannuation funds into employment services to help assure greater income stability over the course of working people's lives, and to manage the risks of unemployment (discussed in Scott 2014, 143–149, 2016, 12–17). The achievements of Sweden's bipartite employment security councils in helping workers adapt over their working lives now provide further support for that idea.

The way in which Sweden's employment security councils share the cost and risk of dismissals across sectoral collectives of employers and employees creates a kind of insurance coverage. The councils are formally financed by contributions made by all employers covered by the relevant transition agreement. Those contributions are calculated by the social partners to the agreement, as a proportion of the employers' wage sum. Generally, the contributions are set at 0.3% of an employer's wage bill. However, given that some of the costs of financing the councils come from the economic space which would otherwise be allotted for wage increases, they are in effect financed jointly by employers and workers.

The councils directly provide, or otherwise obtain, tailored services for workers dismissed for economic reasons. These services include an expert personal advisor – in effect a 'case manager' – who can offer the range of transition services and guidance needed by workers who have been made redundant, including to make a savvy assessment of each worker's employment prospects and to help them find a new job, drawing on networks. The councils also top up the level of Sweden's unemployment payments for the affected workers. All these measures help to promote the displaced workers' resilience to adapt in the labour market.

The councils operate constructively, making effective use of their advantage of being able to intervene early, before Sweden's lengthy notice period for dismissal has expired, to gain a head start towards the movement of displaced workers to other jobs. The affected employees are entitled, before the end of the notice period, to take part in transition activities while retaining their salary. If that is not possible, then 30 days pay can be received after the end of the notice period. These are steps which are not possible for the public employment services alone. The interventions by Sweden's employment security councils are among the policies which help to promote an exceptionally high

labour force participation rate for people aged 55–64 there. It now exceeds 80% (OECD 2020b).

Through sectoral collective bargaining, employers and trade unions can adapt conditions to different industries, put more items on the negotiating table and find a wider range of solutions. The councils' work seriously tackles discrimination against mature-age workers by being focused on workers 40 years of age and over, with support then rising for those aged 45 to 59, and rising further for those aged from 60 to 65.

To be eligible for these support services an employee must intend to follow the entire transition program until s/he attains a new job. The transition agreements, and the employment security councils created by them, fill gaps in traditional, government-run active labour market policies. Strong social partners are needed at the sectoral level to provide a sufficiently large pool of employers to share the costs to ensure that the employment security councils can have continuous operations. Sweden's employment security councils are a tangible expression of societal solidarity with displaced workers.

## Conclusion

Sector-wide collective bargaining in Nordic countries is an integral element in those countries' relatively successful enhancement of workers' skills and adaptability. It contributes towards innovation into more advanced, higher-quality jobs. The philosophy of different but equal adult education and training institutions is another integral element, which is particularly evident in Finland. There must be a large and sustained rise in Australia's internationally, embarrassingly, low unemployment payment in order to underpin better reskilling, and workforce retention, of mature-age workers affected by job losses.

Liberal market economies such as Australia can learn from the Nordic countries' superior performance in embracing digital transformations of contemporary workplaces while at the same time better equipping workers with the skills to adapt to those transformations. Australia is currently deprived of the increasingly recognised skill formation benefits which sectoral collective bargaining between social partners brings. This exacerbates other serious deficiencies in Australia's skills training arrangements, evident in high rates of misalignment between jobs and skills. These misalignments militate against national prosperity and productivity. Australia also fails comparatively to assess and develop the potential of people unemployed for long durations, and in high concentrations in particular regions.

By investing heavily in active labour market programmes intensively tailored to respond to displacements caused by structural change in workplaces Australian governments can greatly improve participation in paid employment by mature-age workers. These programs, and other skills retraining initiatives, produce positive environmental, as well as employment, outcomes. Australian policy-makers need to further develop skills retraining services directly involving social partners, i.e. unions and employers, as Nordic nations are doing in the major 2018–2021 Danish tripartite training agreement and through Sweden's bipartite, adaptive employment security councils. The persistent praising of those councils in international policy circles reinforces the merits of proposals for social partners in Australia to now co-operate for skills retraining similarly to how they are already successfully co-operating in – and utilising the existing infrastructure of – industry

superannuation funds.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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