

Contributing to the Debate: Assessing the Evidence Base on Employment and Skills in the UK

**Briefing Paper Series
March 2010**

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March 2010



Introduction

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills has a remit to develop a labour market analysis function and to develop a range of Labour Market Information (LMI) products both for its own use and for a wider audience. In planning this work, it is essential to review the available data relating to employment and skills in the UK and explore in what ways it may be improved. Just over a year ago, a small number of leading academic experts were asked by the UK Commission to write 'think-pieces' considering sources of LMI in the UK and how they might be improved and strengthened to better meet user needs, looking at data on both employers and individuals (see <http://www.ukces.org.uk/our-work/research-and-policy/lmi-thinkpieces/>).

The themes raised in the papers were discussed at two workshops held with a small number of LMI practitioners and academics from across the UK in late 2008 and early 2009. The workshops focused on the strengths and weaknesses of LMI, and on identifying possible ways in which partners could work together in the future to make improvements.

This paper summarises what, in the UK Commission's view, were the ten key issues to emerge from the think pieces and from the discussion at the workshops. It identifies the common themes identified by experts, and also sets out some key recommendations for further action, both for the UK Commission and for other organisations in the LMI field.

The paper is intended to stimulate and guide at a strategic level the possible future work of the new LMI Forum that is being established by the UK Commission.

The Role of Labour Market Information

Labour Market Information is a term that is used to describe key facts about what is happening in the labour market and employment. It is descriptive, and it can take the form of 'hard', quantitative information, or 'soft' qualitative information. It can include, for example, facts related to the numbers of employers or people working in particular sectors or occupations, about salaries, or about which skills are needed to do certain jobs. LMI is collected by a variety of organisations, including government departments and agencies, employer and professional organisations, trade unions and academics.

First-class LMI has real value to the efficient functioning of the labour market. The more well informed that individuals, employers, training/education providers and policy makers are about the labour market, the more effective their actions and decisions are likely to be. In order for the value of LMI to be maximised, it is crucial that it is turned into high quality labour market **intelligence**. This involves information being interpreted and analysed, so that insights and conclusions can be drawn from it. This often involves bringing together information from several sources.

High quality LMI, therefore, provides a firm basis for the development of labour market intelligence. It may have a variety of uses including enabling the development of more responsive and strategic employment and skills policies. In this regard, it can for example provide information on current and future skills needs and shortages, stimulating debate and action to manage education and training systems in response to those needs.

Trends in labour mobility and globalisation mean that the availability of good quality LMI is not only important at the national level, but at the supranational level too. For example, in the European context, the European Commission has recently stated that: 'The assessment and anticipation of skills and labour market needs is seen as a key instrument for the efficient functioning of labour markets and the mobility of labour within the EU' (2008: 5).

As well as contributing to the efficient operation of labour markets, LMI can also be seen more broadly as a 'public good'. The OECD for example views the availability and dissemination of official statistics in general to citizens as key to 'promoting good governance and the improvement of democratic processes'. It asserts that the provision of such information can strengthen the capacity of citizens to 'influence the goals of the societies they live in through debate and consensus building', and increase the accountability of public policies (see OECD, 2007). LMI makes up a crucial component of official statistics, and of course also reflects a major area of citizens' lives.

The Rising Importance of Labour Market Information in the UK

Looking specifically at the current UK context, the importance of LMI continues to grow. The current UK Government has set out its ambition for the UK to be a world-class economy, emphasising the importance of raising business performance and developing high potential firms to ensure economic and industrial renewal (HM Government, 2009). Recently, it has also asserted that there is a need for a more 'active', strategic approach to industrial policy to support future economic growth – an approach that has become known as 'industrial activism'. This approach puts greater demands on LMI, with more high quality information needed on current and possible future trends in the labour market, skills and employment, to inform policy development. The UK Commission has a high profile role to play here in producing the National Strategic Skills Audit for England.

The time is now particularly ripe, therefore, for assessing whether the evidence base on employment and skills in the UK is sufficiently strong and fit for purpose. There is a clear need for accurate, timely and insightful LMI on a range of issues such as: current and future employer skill needs; the existence, extent and nature of recruitment problems caused by skills shortages that may be holding back competitiveness; the existence, extent and nature of skills gaps amongst employees that may be stifling productivity. There is also a need to better understand the specific skills requirements in different occupations and sectors. All this information can inform policy development, funding decisions and curriculum design. It can also help employers to understand the steps they need to take to remain competitive in the longer term, and help individuals make important decisions concerning issues such as investment in skill formation and career choice.

From the perspective of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, LMI is a crucial tool in providing the 'big picture' in terms of the skills and employment agenda across the UK, and, looking internationally, in benchmarking the UK's economic and skills position against that of its major international competitors. A high quality, UK-wide LMI evidence base is crucial if the UK Commission is to be able to properly fulfil its roles in monitoring the progress of the UK towards its economic, employment and skills goals, and informing policy development.

It is in this context that the UK Commission decided to commission a set of expert think pieces and associated LMI Workshops, a key aim being to start dialogue with LMI practitioners on the current state of LMI in the UK. Before going on to discuss the key issues to emerge from the workshops and the papers, we first provide some further context by briefly describing the current 'LMI landscape' in the UK.

The UK Labour Market Information Landscape

There is a history of doubt in the UK about the quality, availability and suitability of labour market information and intelligence, particularly when it comes to informing employment and skills policy. Over a decade ago now, the National Skills Taskforce (DfEE, 1999) concluded that there was too much data overall, and that this data was also ‘inconsistent and incoherent’. Furthermore, it noted that although there was a wealth of labour market information, there was limited *intelligence*, with the focus tending to be on the collection of statistical data at the expense of analysis, interpretation, dialogue and dissemination.

It is important to note that key improvements have been made to the LMI landscape in the UK in recent years that have addressed some of these problems. One notable development for example has been the introduction of high quality, large-scale, regular surveys of employer skills needs (the National Employer Skills Surveys) in each UK nation. These surveys ensure that the views of large numbers of employers on skills issues are collected and analysed on a regular basis, with analysis also undertaken at occupational, sectoral and regional levels.

Another key source of information is the UK-wide Labour Force Survey - a quarterly household survey of individuals, providing a range of labour market information. Running alongside this, a further important development has been a regular cycle of UK employment forecasts (Working Futures) which provide occupational, sectoral and regional data (see Wilson et al., 2008).

However, in spite of these developments, concerns about the strength of the LMI evidence base in the UK remain. The Leitch Review for example again identified the need to make improvements to the LMI system in the UK, noting that there is ‘little coordination between [survey] sources, meaning that in some instances they deliver contradictory information’ (HM Treasury, 2006). It would seem, therefore, that there is still room for improvement in the UK’s LMI system, but precisely where do the key problems lie? We now turn to present what the UK Commission views as the ten key issues to emerge from its expert workshops assessing the LMI system in the UK and the underpinning think piece papers.

The Ten Key Issues

In setting out the following ten key issues, the paper hopes to stimulate further debate, and support the continued improvement of the UK's LMI landscape. It is hoped that some of these issues can be considered and addressed through the new LMI Forum being established by the UK Commission.

The issues are organised under three 'umbrella' themes:

- LMI management;
- Quality improvement;
- Key measurement gaps.

A) Labour Market Information Management

1. Accessing Labour Market Information

There are a plethora of LMI sources, collected by different agencies, with varying levels of availability to access and stored in different locations. The number and range of sources can be confusing, particularly for those that are not familiar with using them (for example employers or individuals looking for LMI to inform their choices). In addition, it is difficult for smaller organisations to know how/where they can influence research design, which in some cases can lead to duplication of effort.

Several very useful 'gateway' websites exist that provide information about key LMI sources, such as the Learning and Skills Observatory for Wales (<http://www.learningobservatory.com>), Research Online in Scotland (<http://www.researchonline.org.uk/fskills/index.do>), the Office for National Statistics website (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/hub/index.html>), and the UK Commission's own Research and LMI Portal (<http://www.ukces.org.uk/our-work/research-and-policy/research-and-policy-lmi-portal/>) and Employment and Skills Almanac (<https://almanac09.ukces.org.uk/>), but these vary in terms of content and coverage.

There may be value, therefore, in providing a **simple map** of existing key LMI sources which seeks to **co-ordinate**, or at least **signpost** people to the considerable activity already underway.

2. Broadening Out the Audience for Labour Market Information

‘The time may be ripe for a change in the direction of travel, with associated consequences for rethinking the role of LMI and thus re-focusing its gathering and analysis’ (Keep, 2008: 1).

LMI is often seen in the UK as primarily aimed at Government policy makers, for use in the planning and management of education, training and the labour market. However, in some countries (such as the US for example), **individuals** are regarded as key audiences for LMI and labour market intelligence. LMI is provided to individuals to help equip them with information to allow them to make informed choices about their education and working lives. In these countries, the focus is on empowering individuals through informing them about labour market trends.

It can be argued that there is a ‘closed circle’ of LMI in the UK, where **the users of information are often also the producers**. There is, then, clear scope for broadening out the audience. Individuals and employers, as well as policy makers all stand to benefit from access to good quality LMI. However, it is important that LMI is presented in an accessible and appropriately packaged form for these different audiences with their own distinct needs. Good interpretation and analysis can transform labour market information into high quality **intelligence** – which allows it be properly interpreted and understood by non-expert users.

3. No Commonly Accepted Methodological Framework

The difficulties with navigating LMI due to the plethora of existing sources and the lack of a clear pathway to guide users are compounded by other difficulties. It can be difficult to make sense of sources when different methodologies have been used; definitions of vital concepts are inconsistent (such as ‘training or ‘employers’ for example); and standard classification systems are not uniformly applied.

The wide variation in methods used is a real problem in translating information into intelligence because it hampers the collation of data from a number of sources. Current approaches may suit the needs of the individual LMI commissioning organisations, but it does limit the value of the LMI produced:

‘The number of possible sponsoring agencies is numerous, the commissioning process can be ad hoc, and the themes covered are often of parochial and specific interest rather than of general relevance’ (Felstead 2008: 2).

There are no clear lines of demarcation about who commissions the gathering of what types of data, and at what levels.

Strides have been taken to provide the overarching LMI which provides the crucial 'top-down' information needed, either by the Office for National Statistics (e.g. the Annual Population Survey) or by the UK Commission (e.g. Working Futures). These sources can then be supplemented by more focussed, but consistent, geographic or sectoral LMI, which may be quantitative or qualitative depending on the nature of the evidence gap being filled. However, top-down sources are often criticised as not providing sufficient detail for relatively small populations. There is a real challenge to ensure that, where quantitative data is sought for small populations, there is an added value from the analysis which justifies the expense associated with such research.

There is clear value in ensuring that LMI is collected, as far as possible, using a **common framework** that ensures that all parties take much the same approach in the collection, collation and analysis and communication of LMI. The benefits of a common LMI approach are that:

- it allows for better coordination and avoids duplication. 'Official' data sources can be used where possible, with local and sectoral bodies being encouraged to focus efforts on filling gaps in information in their sectors or areas. Thus, cost savings can be achieved in the collection of LMI;
- it encourages the use of consistent definitions, classifications and methodologies, which allows for valid comparisons to be made between sectors and geographic areas. This leads to a shared understanding of the issues and a common basis for policy deliberations;
- it encourages a more in-depth understanding by sectoral and geographic bodies that LMI users seek.

In essence, there are clear advantages to taking a **shared approach** in terms of the use of specific classifications and key official data sources, whilst also encouraging detailed local and sectoral analysis and contextualisation. There are already successful examples of this approach, such as the Common LMI Framework for Sector Skills Councils (<http://www.ukces.org.uk/tags/labour-market-intelligence/lmi-information-to-intelligence>), and the Concordat arrangement that exists in Scotland, whereby Futureskills Scotland has agreed with the various relevant parties (including the Sector Skills Councils) the roles and responsibilities with respect to LMI. Widening of agreements between organisations covering the respective roles in data collection and in the methods, definitions and classifications used would be a valuable step forward.

4. Harmonisation of Data Sources

Taking the notion of the common framework further, a further key issue identified in the think pieces is the **lack of consistency** between key employer data sources in the UK, and international sources. This issue is not one that is raised with regard to sources of data on individuals. This is likely to be associated with the fact that the main LMI data source for individuals - the Labour Force Survey - is a UK-wide survey, and has key indicators which are comparable with EU sources (the European Labour Force Survey).

However, a lack of consistency is a recurrent theme with regard to **employer skills surveys**. This is an issue on which some progress has been made in the UK, where, as we have already noted, each nation conducts its own employer skills survey. However, these surveys are conducted at different times, using slightly different methods, with largely, but not wholly consistent questions. This means it is not possible to attain a UK-wide picture with respect to skill deficiencies or employer training activities.

A paper by the Department for Education and Learning in Northern Ireland on this subject (Dignan, 2004) argues that a more coordinated and common approach to the design and implementation of employer skills surveys can result in three key benefits:

- Improvements to the instruments and methods used within each country;
- Refinement of the definitions and measurement of key concepts;
- “Benchmarking” of key indicators.

Additionally, as with the use of a common framework, **harmonising** employer surveys within the UK would make it possible to ‘reap potential costs savings from economies of scale’ (Wilson, 2008: 37).

Looking *beyond* national boundaries is also becoming increasingly important (at least at European Level). The UK operates in an increasingly global labour market, and free movement of people within Europe in particular calls into question a too narrow a focus on national borders. As well as there being a strong argument therefore for a coordinated approach between countries within the UK, harmonisation across Europe is also desirable, and overlap and duplication between data sources at this level should be reduced.

An important first step here has been the Cedefop project considering the feasibility of a Europe-wide employer survey on skill needs (for more details see http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/upload/etvnews/news/4497-att1-1-2009-04-29_agenda_final.pdf). It is important that this drive towards a pan-European employer survey on skill needs continues, and a more coordinated approach and common framework to collect and disseminate LMI is considered at European level. This will augment other European Commission projects aiming to 'improve the capacity to anticipate and match labour market and skills needs in the EU (e.g. Cedefop medium-term forecasts to 2020 of future skill needs and skills supply across member states).

B) Quality Improvement

5. Drawing on Good Practice from other Countries

The issues discussed above regarding the range of organisations involved in LMI, the lack of common frameworks, and the need to broaden the audience of LMI suggest there is still room for improvement in how the UK manages its LMI collection and analysis.

There are a number of examples of **good practice** in LMI systems from **other countries** from which the UK can draw lessons. The LMI experts commissioned to write think-pieces for the UK Commission pointed particularly to the strengths of the system used in the US (particularly in terms of the quality of classification systems and the information gathered on occupations, good response rates to surveys and overall ethos of providing LMI to citizens as a public good).

There is a strong case for research looking at international differences in LMI systems, to identify models of good practice. This work would build upon the valuable recent Review of LMI published by the Northern Ireland Department of Education and Learning (Department of Education and Learning, 2008) (see: http://www.delni.gov.uk/review_of_labour_market_information_pdf_2_.pdf).

6. Disparate Data

There is a tendency to analyse data sources on an individual level, and not to *link* data sources to provide a richer source of intelligence. Although this happens occasionally, and some examples are detailed below, it is not a routine practice, and the practice of **data linking** could be applied more widely to increase the value of a specific survey source by combining it with other relevant data from elsewhere.

We need to think about new ways of using, linking and interpreting data, for example:

- Linking employer and employee data;
- Linking survey sources with other survey sources;
- Linking survey sources to administrative data (including business registers such as the IDBR).

In his think piece paper, Keep (2008) suggests that linking LMI datasets to information on other drivers of productivity at firm level is a key missing piece of LMI. He suggests if we are in the process of moving from a rather stale policy debate about skills supply and progressing towards a broader one that centres on the productivity agenda (Goodison Group, 2008), wherein it is recognised that skills need to be combined with other factors to produce maximum productive effect, then it follows that there may be a need to find ways to link LMI data at firm and sectoral levels with data on other facets of productivity/performance enhancement (managerial practices, R&D and wider innovation, investment in plant and equipment, etc). Some of the work currently being undertaken by ONS on the merging of data at firm level may show the way here.

Two examples of where data has been linked successfully to other data sources are the Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS), and the National Employer Skills Survey 2007. WERS (last done in 2004, with the next planned for 2010) links employee and employer data, and can be linked in the ONS virtual microdata laboratory to sources such as the ABI, ASHE, EU KLEMS industry level database (which provides measures of economic growth, productivity, employment creation, capital formation and technological change) for example.

Similarly the 2007 National Employer Skills Survey can be linked to a range of employer data via the Virtual Microdata laboratory at ONS, and linking questions have also been included on the 2009 survey. There are plans to also link the 2008 Scottish Employer Skills Survey, and Northern Ireland Skills Monitoring Survey 2008.

Linkage can also help improve data accuracy. For example, Bivand (2009) in his paper on LMI on individuals discussed the issue of industrial coding within surveys. Industrial classifications are important, but some of the individual surveys depend on an individual classifying their employer's business, which is not reliable. There is potential to be improved by linking to the employer classification in the IDBR.

Linked administrative records provide potential for longitudinal analyses. For example, the Work and Pensions Longitudinal Study (WPLS) links spells on different DWP benefits and so is useful for measuring move in and out of employment. For some population sub-groups there may be potential for greater use of such sources in future, but there are important issues of confidentiality and access to be resolved (see Green, 2008).

At present, there is little attempt to draw together data on employment and skills and, given the direction of employment and skills policy, this would seem to potentially present a good opportunity to achieve cost savings by linking existing data sources. It was noted in the workshops that attempts to draw together DWP administrative data with the LSC's Individuals Learning Record has been fraught with difficulties associated with permissions to use the data. Wherever possible, these issues should be addressed on collection, and people responsible for collecting administrative data should be made aware of the potential value in terms of providing the intelligence to help improve the service.

7. Declining Response Rates

Response rates to surveys are falling, and with this comes a number of issues related to the quality of survey data, notably response bias. Proxy responses are becoming increasingly popular as a response to this issue, but they are more prone to misreporting. Some groups seem to be particularly less likely to take part in research, such as young people for example, and this issue is compounded by their high mobility. Together with other highly mobile groups, such as those living in the private rented sector in large cities, and migrant workers, they often fall outwith the scope of sampling frames, and in other instances where they are within the scope of data collection for an information source they may be very difficult to contact.

The issue of **declining response rates** perhaps reflects a wider lack of trust, particularly how personal data will be used. This emerging issue has been accelerated by highly publicised losses of personal data by government agencies. It is an issue which needs serious consideration by commissioners in the design of LMI research to maximise response rates and reduce bias. Better co-ordination through a common framework and harmonised surveys may help, as it will reduce duplication and the problem of 'survey fatigue' (especially in terms of employer surveys), but there remain deeper issues to address here that may call for new, more innovative methodologies.

C) Key Measurement Gaps

8. Information on Skills Use

'If UKCES and the national governments are to manage and monitor the post-Leitch policy agenda, then it seems fairly obvious that data on how skills are being utilised will be required' (Keep, 2008: 11).

Although information on the supply of skills as proxied by qualifications is useful, we have surprisingly little evidence on the *use* to which these qualifications are put to work. The best evidence we have on the utilisation of qualifications are individual rates of return from the possession of different levels and types of qualification.

One of the key gaps in the existing sources of LMI is on the issue of **how employers make use of the skills their employees possess**. This gap in knowledge is proving to be a real issue now that, as Ewart Keep notes in his paper, 'traditional skills policies, centred on simply boosting skills supply are gradually crumbling' (2008: 2). Policy makers from across all four UK nations are now increasingly turning their attention to the issue of skill utilisation in the workplace (with particularly strong emphasis on this in Scotland, see: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/skills-strategy/making-skills-work/utilisation>), and this is a development that is likely to exacerbate as there is a widening realisation that 'there is little value to an organisation having a skilled workforce if the skills are not used well' (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2009: 11). Information about the use of skills could be gathered via surveys of individuals (as has been done in the past through the Skills at Work surveys carried out by Felstead and Green), or through surveys of employers.

In addition, there is a need for more information that allows the linkage between the use of skills and productivity to be made, and that also considers the relationship between skills use/productivity and other factors such as management practices, product market strategies, wider innovation, etc. The UK Commission has considered the issues involved in data collection as a part of its Skills Utilisation project (see http://www.ukces.org.uk/publications-and-resources/browse-by-title/*/Module%5B48%5D%5BrestrictRange%5D/G-I/).

9. Employer Training Activity/Investment

‘...if we are to design and manage our policies via any strong connection with external reality, we need to know what employers are doing on the training front and why they are doing it’ (Keep, 2008: 7).

As well as the variability in the concept of ‘training’ as applied in LMI surveys noted above, there is a key information gap on the **nature and quality of training**.

As Keep notes in his paper, while some data is collected on the training activities of employers, this is weaker and patchier than is ideal, but qualification targets at Levels 3 and 4 can only be achieved if employers increase their spending on training the existing workforce. Felstead (2009) argues that we know little about the quality of training in terms of its outcomes as measured by its impact on skills, whether it triggers a pay rise, the specificity of the skills (if any) it produces, and whether it enhances the experience of work. We know even less about the nature of **informal learning** and what is actually learned. Attempts have been made to capture data on some of these issues. However, they have – so far at least – been restricted to smaller scale surveys.

In addition, Keep (2008) points out that although the National Employer Skills Survey in England has generated some figures for employer investment in skills ‘the accuracy and meaning of these figures is profoundly unclear’ (Keep, 2008), as many respondents have difficulty in answering the question properly due to a lack of information. There is a real need to get behind the headline figures and the current state of training functions within UK organisations.

10. Quality of Jobs

‘...there is no official data on the characteristics of jobs in terms of what they entail, the intensity of work and the nature of relationships at work’ (Felstead, 2009: 15).

The issue of job quality has been given particular prominence recently in European debates. Pay is an important aspect of job quality, and the UK has a comprehensive

source of national information on this. However, **Pay is just one aspect of job quality**. Jobs differ in other ways too of course that has implications for job quality (e.g. working time, work-life balance, the nature of the job itself, the speed of work, the ability to use initiative and relationships with others). This sort of information is particularly important for individuals so they can make informed choices about the sort of working life they want to have, but currently is very limited in current UK LMI data sources.

Next Steps

The UK Commission is establishing a new LMI Forum in early 2010 consisting of key LMI practitioners from a range of partner organisations across the UK. Although a wide range of issues have been highlighted in this paper, many of which are deep-rooted problems that have been with us for some time, it is hoped that this forum will consider them and take forward work in some of these areas. Of course, no single organisation has all of the 'answers' to the problems discussed here: it is only through effective partnership working and the sharing of good practice that they can start to be addressed.

Great strides have been made in recent years in LMI in the UK, and the availability and quality of information has vastly improved. The issues we have discussed here nevertheless represent a significant programme of work. This work is also particularly important in the current context. As we move into an era of tighter restrictions on public expenditure, there will be even greater pressure on LMI to a) inform how that resource might best be allocated to meet the most pressing needs and b) to gather, analyse and report that as efficiently as possible. In addition, we must not lose sight of the fact that LMI has real value, not just to policy makers, but also to a much wider audience. As such it is important to have high ambitions for how it might be even further improved in the future. The UK Commission looks forward to working with our partners to achieve this.

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