LMI THINKPIECE

BREAKING FREE OF THE THRALL OF PLANNING?

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INTRODUCTION

In the world of Labour Market Information (LMI) there are two types of people, those who create it, and those who use it. The author of this Thinkpiece is a user, and what follows adopts a user's perspective on where LMI might be going across the UK over the next decade or so. As a result, readers will find little in the way of a deep technical discussion of the issues, but rather an attempt to reflect on why we gather LMI from employers, what we do with it, and where some of the biggest gaps in current research and data might reside.

The other point to make at the outset is that, as with so many other areas of E&T activity, the ways in which we might conceive of the gathering, analysis, dissemination and usage of LMI have perhaps become somewhat 'imprinted' by what has gone before. The tendency is to think in terms of more or less of pretty much the same, for broadly similar purposes. As will be explored in greater detail below, increasingly of late the main purpose of LMI from government's point of view has been to support the planning of the E&T system – a type of activity that has gradually grown in significance and which has driven the gathering of a greater volume of LMI than was the case say twenty years ago.

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. Traditional skills policies, centred on simply boosting skills supply are gradually crumbling. There are many reasons for this change, but two that are important for the purposes of this paper are:

1. The arrival of UKCES as a major player in the policy arena, and its insistence on a policy agenda that embraces the supply of, demand for, and usage of skills.

2. The dawning of a stark realisation that meeting any of the Leitch targets will be extremely demanding and that in order to do so it is absolutely essential that both employers and individuals make a genuine step change in their willingness to invest in skill.

As the Secretary of State for Universities, Innovation and Skills John Denham noted in his speech to the CBI on 24 October 2008:

> The question though, that I want to ask today is whether all this will be enough. If we pursue these policies with sufficient determination, will they produce what our economy really needs: the right people, in the right place, and when they are needed?
>
> My answer has to be: 'Not necessarily'. There are a number of key factors driving our skills system which are not yet properly addressed in our skills policies:
>
> 1. Whether we understand properly what drives employer spending on skills and whether our current framework will maximise it.
>
> 2. Whether a system that responds to the demands of individual employers will produce the critical mass of learners with the right skills.
>
> 3. Whether government and business should not work more effectively together in areas of strategic skill needs.

> 4. Whether national and local government themselves could not do more to boost the demand for, and supply of, skilled labour.
> (Denham, 2008: 2, numbering added)

Plainly, these points raise significant issues about the kinds of LMI that needs to be gathered in order to both inform policy formation and monitor its roll out, and the use to which this data is put. What follows will try and address some of these issues.

FIT FOR PURPOSE, BUT WHAT IS THE PURPOSE?

If we adopt the fairly standard design and engineering concept of an activity or artefact being tested against its 'fitness for purpose' then, in trying to judge the performance of current LMI gathering activities and the data they generate, we obviously need to be very clear what the purpose or purposes of this work is/are meant to be. Unfortunately, as with so many other areas of E&T activity, clarity is in short supply and competing claims exist in abundance. Put briefly, the following represent some of the main reasons why LMI is gathered from employers by public bodies and agencies:

Planning ('or I come to bury Caesar not to praise him…..')

As the author has noted in the past (Keep, 2002 & 2006), much of the centrally-directed activity in the English E&T system has in recent times revolved around attempts at planning for different levels and types of E&T provision, often with the implicit or openly avowed aim of getting skills supply to 'match' demand. Leaving aside arguments that 'matching' is a complex and potentially deeply problematic, possibly delusional concept (see Keep, 2002), the planning process has tended to expand in importance and to cover ever more complex sub-divisions (spatial and sectoral) of the labour market. In order for this planning activity to take place, the requirement for LMI has increased very considerably, with a much greater need for data on sectors and occupations and on small geographical units than had been the case in say the 1980s.

When DIUS (2007) responded to the Final Report of the Leitch Review (2006), and in the subsequent announcement by DCSF and DIUS (2007) about the abolition of the LSC and its replacement by the Young Peoples Learning Agency (YPLA) and the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), the general line being taken was that Leitch's damning judgement concerning the more or less total

failure of the planning process to produce results commensurate with the priority afforded it in the E&T system had been fully accepted and that planning was henceforth dead. The SFA, in particular, would absolutely not engage in any kind of planning and everything would be about supporting a demand-led and atomised marketplace where the customers would be individuals and employers. However, thereafter the backtracking began and it is now manifestly apparent that something suspiciously akin to planning is now expected to take place at:

- National
- Regional
- Sub-regional/Multi-Area/city region
- Local
- Sectoral
- Sub-sectoral
- Occupational

levels.

This suggests two things. First, it attesting to the persistent hold of technocratic concepts within the ranks of the senior policy makers, and also among other stakeholders – witness the CBI's (2007) desire for the numbers of young people opting (or being allowed to opt) for particular 14-19 Diploma 'lines' to be made to 'match' employer demand for those occupational categories within the local labour market. Second, if this planning activity is going to continue (and it shows little sign of abating in the short term) then it requires fairly finely grained LMI that can be disaggregated to local and sub-sectoral level. This means big surveys with a many thousands of respondents – so the National Employers Skill Survey (NESS), or son of NESS, looks safe for some time to come.

These points notwithstanding, there might be considerable merit in returning to Leitch's original judgement about the disutility of planning, and having a meaningful public debate about what planning is for, and what can realistically be expected of the process. The need for such debate is reinforced by the recent House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Skills and Science Committee inquiry into the implementation of the Leitch Review's recommendations (see IUSS Committee, 2008)*. The written and oral evidence taken by the Committee included a considerable volume of contributions from bodies such as DIUS, RDAs, HEFCE,

the Sector Skills Alliance and individual SSCs, other employer bodies, the LSC, FE and HE institutions, and Employment and Skills Boards. Much of this touched upon the role of different levels and types of planning for skills, and revealed a number of key points:

- Confusion and vagueness as to what the overall purpose(s) of planning might be.

- Fairly widespread disagreement about the best level(s) at which planning should take place, but a general consensus that, at present, there were too many players at too many different levels, with much duplication, overlap and wasted effort as a result.

- Doubts about who exactly were being influenced by or actually acting upon some of the plans that were being formulated.

This evidence suggests that a period of reflection might prove valuable.

One key issue that might be considered is whether LMI is there to support multi-level, cross cutting planning, or whether it is there primarily to help inform and support the decision making of independent actors (employers, individuals and E&T providers of all kinds) within a labour marketplace concerning issues such as career choice and investment in skill. The choice between, or at least weighting between, these two functions impacts very materially on who is the customer of LMI, and what kinds of LMI might be needed (see below).

Forecasting Future Skill Needs

Besides providing information on current patterns of demand, much LMI is focussed on indicating future skill requirements. This data might be used for formalised planning, but could also be made available to individuals, E&T providers and employers in order to aid decision making about future career choices and the levels and patterns of course provision. Moreover, in a system that has been dominated by national targets for participation and qualification achievement for almost twenty years, and which now faces a need to meet the over-riding goal of achieving the Leitch targets by 2020, indicators of the trend and scale of both future

skills supply and demand will continue to be needed by those policy makers who are charged with superintending the system.

Identifying Current Skill Shortages and Gaps

This purpose, which is plainly fairly closely aligned with general forms of planning, has been of importance for some time (see the work of the National Skills Task Force, for example), and is one of the key areas that the NESS focuses upon. More recently, attention to shortages has been reinforced by the need to determine in which occupations non-EU immigration can be permitted to take place. In addition, both the 2008 Pre-Budget Report and the recent white paper on skills and social justice – *New Opportunities, Fair Chances for the Future* (H M Government, 2009) charge the UKCES with the task of carrying out a "periodic strategic skills audit to identify where there are skills gaps and how provision could better supply the skills that employers need" (H M Government, 2009: 31).

Despite the importance attached to this topic, it is worth noting that genuine and persistent skill shortages are fairly small in scale, and are concentrated in particular occupations and sectors. Skill gaps tend to be transitory and largely the result of the arrival of new staff in the workplace. In other words, LMI reveals that the 'skills crisis', at least as traditionally defined (major shortfall in supply relative to demand), is a pretty small one.

Monitoring Policy Impacts

LMI is also used to monitor the impact of government policy, which extends from exhortation (train more) to specific interventions and streams of subsidy (e.g. Train to Gain). General LMI is all the more important here because, at present, the specific evaluation activities for many of these interventions are generating only weak and partially information (again, T2G is a prime example).

Providing 'Killer Facts' for Government

Ministers and many civil servants find themselves 'just passing through' skills policy on the way to better things. Their understanding of the issues and complex interactions that determine how E&T policy work are often fairly primitive, and frequently revolves around some simple readings of human capital theory, the use of a qualifications stockpiling metaphor and belief in a knowledge-driven economy. In constructing their policy analysis and a seat-of-the-pants evaluation of how their policies

are playing out, there is a tendency to grasp hold of decontextualised 'killer facts' that can be written into speeches and used to justify the latest initiative or pronouncement of impending reform (policy-based evidence). LMI is a key source of such 'killer facts', for example the notion (unfortunately entirely erroneous) that the Leitch Review had found that by 2020 there would only be 600,000 jobs that required unskilled workers, which ministers and many others have deployed on numerous occasions to justify all manner of policies, not least the transfer of funding from non-vocational adult learning to Train to Gain.

Gauging Employer E&T Activity and Investment Levels

One of the least apprehended points in both past and current E&T policy is that, on the whole, when policy makers talk about the national E&T system, what they are referring to is those elements of E&T that government funds or provides the infrastructure for. The activities of employers, in the main, tend to be semi-invisible, since government does not control them. However, if we are to design and manage our policies via any strong connection with external reality, we need to know what employers and doing on the training front and why they are doing it. While some data is collected, it is weaker and patchier than is ideal (see below), yet in terms of delivering the Leitch agenda it has become more important than ever to track employer investment patterns since the Levels 3 and 4 targets can only be achieved if employers step up to the plate and increase spending on training. Part of the problem is that much employer activity is informal and fails to lead to qualifications (see below).

Overview

Plainly in a world where the resources to collect LMI from employers are finite, and employers' willingness to respond to surveys and other forms of research is also not unlimited, there is a strong possibility that not all the demands listed above can be met in full, and that some will either be ignored, or the data collected will be sub-optimal from the point of view of satisfying this particular potential requirement. The key is to work out what is really needed and to prioritise. As has been suggested above, perhaps the most critical issue is the degree to which LMI is driven by the needs of government and its agencies that revolve around planning, rather than by the interests of other actors.

WHOSE PROPERTY, WHOSE SPECIFICATION?

This brings us on to the topic of who owns LMI. Besides needing to know the purpose, we also need to be clear about who sponsors LMI gathering and analysis – which often means the ability and willingness to fund LMI work. As noted above, a key issue is whether LMI is there to help government and its myriad E&T agencies plan provision, or whether it is there to help oil the wheels of a labour market and the decision making therein by E&T providers, individuals and employers. In other words, rather than being there for (state) planning, it exists to help re-inforce the efficient functioning of a market. Depending on how one sees this issue, the sponsorship of LMI will vary.

At present, the vast bulk of LMI gathering and analysis is paid for by the state and its agencies, and the data gathering design is set by them rather than by employers or other stakeholders. As the section above suggested, even within England there are a considerable number of players who are commissioning and using LMI – DIUS, DCSF, local authorities, UKCES, SSCs, RDAs, HEFCE, the LSC (at national and regional levels) and so on. It is unclear to what degree their LMI needs are coordinated, and whether there are clear lines of demarcation about who commissions the gathering of what types of data at what levels. Perhaps the kind of concordat arrangement that exists in Scotland, whereby Futureskills Scotland has agreed with the various parties, including the SSCs, who is meant be to be doing what in respect to LMI, represents a useful model.

It will certainly be interesting to see how the control of LMI develops, since with the arrival of UKCES there is a new player in town, and one that may have different interests in the LMI field from those of some of the four national governments to which UKCES reports. One area where change may take place as a result of the formation of UKCES is the drawing together of LMI collected to address employment issues, and that collected with respect to skills. Because two government departments are responsible for these respective foci for LMI (DfES (now DIUS) and DWP), and co-ordination between them appears to have been limited, with little co-design or concertation of data gathering and analysis. For example, DWP, via Jobcentre Plus, gathers considerable amounts of data on employers skill needs and recruitment criteria via the Jobcentre Plus Employers (Market View) Survey (see Bunt, McAndrew and Kuechel, 2005). This data

has very rarely been cited by DfES/DIUS or the LSC – perhaps because it has some very depressing messages about employers' demand for qualifications in many lower level occupations.

Another new player, and one that again represents the joining together of employment and skills policy agendas, is the Adult Advancement and Careers Service (AACS). If we are to have the step change in information, advice and guidance (IAG) that has been long demanded, then one of the factors that may be needed to support that change is new and/or different kinds of LMI. It certainly seems reasonable to assume that the AACS will want to have some say in the types of LMI that is collected in future.

One area that may well be important for the AACS is the provision of information on career pathways and progression opportunities within particular occupations. Much current LMI seems to be based on the need (as perceived by government and employers) to make ready and insert individuals into current job slots, but individuals may be more interested in the longer-term opportunities that are or are not on offer through entering that occupation. Moreover, if the adult workforce is to be upskilled in the way demanded by the Leitch targets, then the role of career development and job progression opportunities as a motivator for such investment become quite important.

WHAT ARE THE FOCI AND BOUNDARIES?

Besides needing to be clear about the reasons for undertaking LMI research, we also need to spare some thought for consideration of what level(s) of analysis we want to deploy. Traditional LMI gathering has tended to view the nation state as the prime unit of analysis, not least because that is the level at which control of our very centralised E&T system resides but also because it is the prime unit of analysis within which the various targets that dominate all aspects of publicly-funded E&T are framed. However, in a world of:

- multi-national enterprises
- off-shoring
- outsourcing
- EU-wide labour markets
- mass migration
- considerable levels of immigration

these traditional views of the world may be starting to fray at the edges (see Brown et al, 2008). If this is the case, at least for some occupational groups and industries, a wider focus may be needed to make sense of what is happening and why.

At the other end of the scale, there is mounting evidence that inter and intra-regional differences in skill formation, absorption and productivity within the UK are tending to grow (Local Futures, 2006; Green and Owen, 2006). This tugs in the opposite direction to the point made above, suggesting the need for much more finely-grained data and analyses. A secondary factor that reinforces the need for more local data is the impending transfer of responsibility for funding 16-19 provision from the LSC to local authorities, and the expectation that local authorities efforts at regeneration and economic development will become much more important than hitherto (see H M Government, 2009).

MISSING PIECES

In one sense, the section that follows is by far the most important in the paper. The aim here is to provide a non-LMI expert's view of areas and topics that, at present, are either wholly absent or only treated in a fairly shallow way, and yet which hold the potential, in the author's view, of providing new information that would be of considerable value in helping to better frame both policy and practice.

How Employers Interpret and Use (or not) the LMI Current Available to Them.

As far as the author knows, this is a topic about which remarkably little is known. We now have an established cottage industry churning out LMI for RDAs, SSCs, UKCES, local authorities, the LSC, and four national governments, all of whom make the implicit assumption that this information will be made available to employers (and individuals), who it is presumed will then act upon it in framing their training investment patterns and plans and in thinking through their recruitment and selection policies. But do they? The simple answer is that we really do not know, and this suggests that perhaps some research about how different actors access, analyse and act upon LMI might be worthwhile.

Skills = qualifications

A great deal of LMI revolves around the notion that the qualifications that people hold, particularly their levels, are a good

or at least sufficient proxy for the skills they hold and that employers want. A large volume of research suggests that this is almost certainly not the case (Payne, 1999; Warhurst and Nickson, 2001; Bowles and Gintis, 2002; Bates et al, 2008; Newton et al, 2005; Bunt et al, 2005). For example, the CBI claim that many employers now operate a 20/80 rule within the recruitment and selection process, which means that they afford an 80 per cent weighting to soft and generic skills, and a 20 per cent weighting to hard skills (CBI, 2007). This suggests that we need to think harder about how we acquire reliable and meaningful data on employer demand for:

- Generic skills
- Management and leadership skills (and how we define management jobs in the first place)

in ways that allow for some meaningful quantification and gradation of the skills being sought.

Skill Usage

From the perspective of UKCES, skills policy now has three components:

1. Skills supply
2. Demand for skills
3. Skill usage

The vast bulk of current LMI-gathering instruments do not directly address 3. 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. It might be thought that questions on such should be directed at individual workers (as is the case with the Skills Survey, see Felstead et al, 2007). However, it is also perfectly possible to ask employers about the topic, and one example is the Australian Survey of Employer Use and Views of the VET System (SUEV), which is run by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) (for details of SUEV, see Watson, 2008). For example, employers were asked to rate the skill levels of their employees relative to their organisational need, with respondents being asked to rate the skills of their employees as being above, adequate for, or below what was required (Watson, 2008:9). The somewhat startling finding in 2005 was that only 5 per cent of employers thought the skills of their workforce were generally below what was required, 58 per cent thought that they were adequate, and no less than 37 per cent believed that their

employees had skills at levels above what their employer required (Watson, 2008:9).

Linking LMI Datasets to Information on the Other Drivers of Productivity at Firm Level

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.

Employers' Skills Investment Patterns

Although NESS generates headline figures for employer investment in skills (currently running at £38 billion p.a.), the accuracy and meaning of these figures is profoundly unclear. A high proportion of employers do not have training budgets, and even where they do we do not know what is counted in them and what is not. Many of the NESS respondents are probably relying in 'guestimates' when they provide figures. Nor do we know a great deal about what exactly is subsumed within the broad categories of training that surveys identify – for example, 'induction', which might cover anything from watching a health and safety video/DVD to a week-long course. Given the prominence that is afforded the NESS estimate of £38 billion by both the government and other stakeholders when discussing employers' contribution to UK upskilling, it would be sensible to explore what this figure means, probably in the first instance through some detailed case studies that tried to relate reality back to the organisation's response to NESS (see below).

Informal Learning in the Workplace

Despite the ongoing obsession by policy makers on formalised learning, preferably of the sort that leads to whole qualifications, research tells us that for most of the adult working population, the vast bulk of learning is informal, uncertified and takes place on-the-job (Felstead et al, 2004, Eraut and Hirsh, 2007). One of the reasons that informal learning has tended to remain fairly invisible

to policy makers is the difficulty of quantifying it (the other tends to be its failure to produce qualifications, which have come to be seen by national policy makers as almost the sole legitimate 'outcome' of any form of E&T activity – see Keep, 2002, 2006 & 2008). However, there are now survey methodologies available (See Felstead et al, 2004) that can help close this information gap, and although they focus on the individual worker as respondent, their results could be triangulated with data from employer surveys (see above).

The Internal Training Capacity of UK Organisations

Because public policy has tended to obsess about the external provision of skills, with employers cast as either welfare (subsidy) recipients or as customers/purchasers of services from outside training providers both public and private, we know remarkably little about the current state of training function within UK organisations – how it is staffed, by whom, and what its capabilities are. If we are going to bring about a step change in employer's training efforts, or bring about greater certification of workplace learning, then a robust, well-staffed, expert and highly competent in-house training/human resource development (HRD) function seems to be a prerequisite. A 'state of the function' assessment, which would need to include the ability and willingness of line management to deliver aspects of training and development, is urgently needed.

Methodological Advances

As has already been noted above, the potential to combine data from different sources to gain a richer, multi-actor picture of what is going on, and to aid the exploration of inter-linkages and causality seems to hold out considerable promise. In addition, there might also be considerable merit in three further approaches:

1. Visits to a limited sub-sample of respondents to explore with them why they gave the responses they did, and how they interpreted the questions and their import (see Ashton et al, 1999 for details of attempts to do this as part of the development of the Skills Survey methodology).

2. The combination of survey and case study methods. As noted above, if we are to make any sense of NESS responses on employers' investment in skill, we need to supplement survey data with that generated by more detailed case studies. This

approach plainly has cost implications, but without it we are liable to be left with data whose reliability and meaning we can only speculate about.

3. The linking of responses from employers and their employees via parallel surveys. This has been a feature of the Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) for many years, and has helped provide a means of checking the validity of responses, particularly those relating to employer respondents' views about things they were doing for or to the workforce and how they perceived the workforce's reactions thereunto. This approach was adopted by the ESRC Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance when, in its Employer Perspectives Survey, it visited the employers of individual respondents to the Skills Survey in an attempt to probe the training individuals reported receiving with their employer's product market and employee relations strategies (see Green, Molloy and Mayhew), 2003).

A final point relates to trying, in the longer term, to encourage employers to generate new types of data for themselves. At present very little of the LMI data, particular forecasts of future skill needs, is derived from the internal workings of organisations' own HR planning functions (Keep, 2002). It more often generated by complex models of economic development and occupational trajectories, and insofar as employer-generated data is incorporated into these it is usually in the form of rule-of-thumb guestimates rather than drawing on detailed, in-firm planning of future labour force and skill requirements. The one partial exception to this has been the construction of some, though by no means all, of the Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs) which have engaged with individual employers and which have drawn out of them at least some kinds of data on anticipated future skill needs.

This picture exists, at least in part, because UK organisations, in the main, simply do not attempt to forecast their future HR requirements in any formalised way. Ours is an 'easy come, easy go' labour market that does not facilitate (or necessitate) much in the way of internal forecasting. This is a pity, because if firms were doing more of their own LMI the overall quality of forecasts might rise, and employers' ownership and understanding of LMI might also increase.

Conceptualising What the Data Tells Us

Besides gathering such data, there is also an urgent need to try and help policy makers to deploy the terminologies that surround it with greater exactitude. At present, there is an alarming tendency to slide from 'skills' to 'qualifications', and from 'unqualified' to 'unskilled' (see for example, Leitch Review 2005 & 2006, Cabinet Office, 2008). Many people who have few or no formal qualifications can still be highly skilled, and as noted above, many important facets of skill are not certified through current forms of qualification.

At a deeper level, as noted above in relation to LMI as a source of 'killer facts', the mental maps which policy makers form using LMI are also sometimes dangerously simplistic and, as a result, ultimately misleading. For example:

- LMI has often been linked to selective readings of occupational change that have been deployed to paint a rosy picture of an all-encompassing knowledge-driven economy and high skill labour market. These visions are not realistic and do not reflect what LMI really tells us.

- There is a tendency to read across from qualification level to pay and status, when we know that people can be relatively well skilled, and even well-qualified, and still not necessarily earn large rewards – for example, nursery staff (Cooke and Lawton, 2008).

- Conceiving of the labour market as a single, simple entity that can be viewed through the lens of averages derived from rate of return calculations on the average wage premia attached to particular types and levels of qualification, without understanding the often large range of dispersion around that average (Keep, forthcoming).

Greater sophistication in conceiving of, and modelling, both the current and future shapes and operation of the labour market is essential if we are to use LMI intelligently.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The issues highlighted above form quite a demanding agenda. In particular, the degree to which LMI gathering and analysis is tied to planning processes the utility and purposes of which are not

always clear, raises large questions for those who are comfortable with the status quo. The danger is that instead of engaging with a set of quite difficult issues, that raise challenges on both methodological, and more importantly policy fronts, those responsible will settle for a bit more or less of the same. This will serve current policy agendas reasonably well, but will arguably prove wholly inadequate in addressing the post-Leitch agendas that are starting to emerge across the UK.

NOTE
* The author acted as one of the two specialist advisors to the IUSS Committee's post-Leitch inquiry.

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