

UK Skills Monitoring Surveys: Lessons from a Harmonisation Project

Bucharest, Romania
21 June 2007

Tony Dignan



Overview

- Background
- The harmonisation project
- Objectives
- Approach
- Outcomes
- Lessons learned

Background

- Skills monitoring surveys
 - Regularly undertaken in each of the four UK countries
 - Main objective is to identify issues to do with recruitment difficulties, skill shortages, skill gaps and training, from an employers' perspective
 - Quantitative and qualitative indicators
- Republic of Ireland surveys have been more focused on vacancies

Background (Cont'd)

- Comparative Analysis of Skills Monitoring Surveys Report – January 2004
 - Commissioned by DEL, N. Ireland
 - Objective - To compare findings across the 4 UK countries and Ireland
 - The surveys - broadly common methodological framework and approach, especially UK
 - Also found many differences
 - Definitions and measurement of indicators, survey design, classifications and coding
 - Made comparisons difficult

The Harmonisation Project

- March 2004 – Seminar in Belfast, hosted by DEL
- Participants also from England (SSDA, LSC), Scotland (FSS), Wales (FSW), Ireland (FAS)
- Agreed on desirability of developing a harmonised approach
- Commissioned ERE to prepare a questionnaire for a common approach
 - July 2004 – Draft questionnaire
 - October 2004 – Workshop to discuss
 - Feedback
 - February 2005 – Final report
 - All reports available on DEL website

Benefits of a harmonised approach

- Enable comparisons of key indicators – benchmarking
- Sharing knowledge and experience
- Sharpening the research tools
- More robust interpretation of results
- Improved measurement of key concepts
- Pooling data for research

Project objectives

- Develop a harmonised or common set of questions in relation to:
 - Current vacancies
 - Difficult-to-fill vacancies
 - Skill-shortage vacancies
 - Skill gaps
 - Off-the-job training
- Encompassing structure of questionnaire as well as definitions and measurement

Principles

- Harmonise on current approaches
 - Build on what already exists
 - Minimise discontinuity within the existing surveys
 - Though, the surveys themselves were and are evolving
- Recognise constraints on length, but emphasise accuracy over economy
- Work from a common framework
 - Quantitative and qualitative indicators to be measured

Indicators

- Quantitative
 - Incidence e.g. % of establishments with a difficult-to-fill (D2F) vacancy? Skill-shortage vacancies (SSVs)?
 - Extent e.g. number of D2F vacancies as % of employment
 - Composition e.g. by occupation, industry sector
- Qualitative
 - Reasons for or causes of SSVs and skill gaps.
 - Skills proving difficult to obtain.
 - Impacts of skills-related problems.
 - Measures taken to overcome recruitment and skills-related problems

Quantitative indicators

- Consensus reached on some issues
- But significant points of difference e.g.
 - Whether to define a vacancy
 - How to measure SSVs, skill gaps
- Why?
 - Fear of losing comparability over time with own surveys
 - Wary of narrowing scope of inquiry
 - Resistance to any change that might affect survey length – response rates already an issue
 - Lack of a common definition in the literature

Qualitative indicators

- Lot of issues around:
 - Coding frameworks
 - Whether should be prompted or unprompted
 - Global or occupation-specific
 - Sampling of occupations
- Generally, consensus was more readily achieved
- Why?
 - More cross-sectional focus
 - Less tied to backward comparability
 - Already a body of knowledge

Lessons learned

- Overall, the project achieved **mixed success**
- **Core quantitative indicators**
 - proved more difficult than qualitative
 - preserving backward comparability
- Participants in agreement on **harmonisation benefits and objectives**
 - but each with own organisational objectives and issues
 - outweighed the benefits of a common approach
 - need to ensure organisations see rationale and benefits

Lessons learned (Contd)

- **Building on what already exists** - has its advantages but will tend to **constrain flexibility in achieving consensus**. Won't always be able to start from a blank sheet.
- **Timing** – participating organisations at different stages in survey design and implementation – could perhaps manage via a staged approach
- **Survey objectives** – skills monitoring or vacancy survey? RoI – different labour market context at that time – SSVs, etc in category of 'nice to know, not need to know'

Lessons learned (Contd)

- **Interpretation and use –**
 - Not just about data collection.
 - Even with a common approach, survey results will vary due to differences in labour market trends. Sampling error will also affect comparisons.
 - Need to manage the presentation and use of the data.
- **Co-ordination and drive –**
 - developing a common approach needs a ‘champion’
 - drive the agenda, ensure continuity when change occurs (organisational, personnel, etc).