

LMI learning: an online learning resource

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Labour market information for careers education and IAG

The crucial importance of high quality labour market information (LMI) for effective career decision-making has been stressed in recent policy documents and is emphasised in the Quality Standards for Young People's Information Advice and Guidance (IAG). Additionally, its importance is highlighted in relation to both economic wellbeing and financial capability and the Diploma.

'When someone receives good labour market information that leads to a good decision, it benefits the individual, the employer and the economy.'

(DfES/LSC, 2004, p.2)

LMI: What is it?

LMI comes from a range of sources and includes: information on general employment trends (i.e. unemployment rates; skills gaps; future demand); data on the structure of

the labour market (i.e. what jobs exist, how many, which sectors); information about the way the labour market functions (i.e. how people get into jobs and move between employers); and data focusing on equality and diversity (i.e. which individuals are employed in different sectors and at what levels).

Distinctions can also be made between labour market *information* and labour market *intelligence*, where labour market information refers to quantitative or qualitative data found in original sources such as tables, spreadsheets, graphs and charts, and labour market intelligence relates to an interpretation of labour market information, often referring to subsets of data that have been subjected to further analysis. For IAG, the importance of the differences between LMI that is non-interactive and LMI that is interactive has also been discussed (Sampson *et al.*, 2004). Non-interactive LMI is generally linear in nature, is paper-based, often broader in range and more detailed in topic coverage. Its use is limited, however, for motivating further exploratory behaviour in users. Interactive LMI (using ICT) is generally non-linear, with the user maintaining some control over the selection and sequencing of information. Whilst it is typically less detailed in topic coverage, it increases motivation for career exploration.

What LMI works?

Evidence is limited regarding what LMI works and exactly what can be regarded as successful from the point of view of the client. One study from the Netherlands examined the relationships between higher education and the world of work.

It concluded that information available on the graduate labour market is often insufficient or biased (Teichlet, 2000). Another study from the Netherlands examined the role that LMI plays in the choice of vocational specialization by students (Borhans *et al.*, 1996). It found that labour market forecasts were crucial in assisting appropriate student choice. One other study from Australia investigated the type of LMI used by clients to make job choices and found substantial idiosyncrasies. Individuals lacked insight into their job choices and probably relied on relatively few unspecified cues (Athanasou, 2003).

However, knowledge about the labour market is a key element of careers guidance that is consistently found useful by consumers of services (Bimrose *et al.*, 2004; Bimrose *et al.*, 2008). Those directly involved in delivering careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) will recognise that CIAG without reference to LMI is virtually impossible.

Limitations of LMI

Different types of LMI (e.g. employment trends and projections, unemployment trends, skills gaps, earnings or salary levels) are required for different purposes in careers work (e.g. CV building sessions; preparation for work experience). The complexity of the demands placed on the LMI required for these different purposes is increased by the needs of individuals, who require different types of information at different stages of their career development. For example, a Year 7 student beginning to think about their future, a Year 9 student deciding about subject choices and a Year 12 student applying to higher education are all likely to need different types of LMI to help them progress their career development.

Individuals also vary considerably in their ability to understand and interpret the implications of LMI for their own particular circumstances.

Apart from the different requirements of individuals needing LMI, considerable limitations with currently available LMI have been identified (Bimrose & Orton, 2005):

- LMI that is available on-line across varied websites is reasonably comprehensive but can be difficult to find.
- There is currently no common formatting or presentation style.
- Updating is a constant challenge and resource intensive.
- Whilst the type of occupational information examined from selected sources was found to be similar, the detail and type of information is varied. Additionally, the on-line presentation of the information differs and the availability of occupational information as downloadable and printable pdf documents is limited.
- Many IAG organisations do not directly collect vacancy information, but rely more on available local information and knowledge. This type of local LMI, would represent a valuable source of intelligence. However, there are operational difficulties that need to be addressed before local information could be linked to a national database, which include IT compatibility and resources.
- Local labour market information (LLMI) is consistently identified by career practitioners as centrally important to effective IAG practice. However, whilst existing provision offers rich sources of LLMI for this purpose, it has considerable

shortcomings. In particular, there are gaps regarding information at regional and (more particularly) at sub-regional level. Provision of these data would create a far more comprehensive LMI coverage to support further the work of practitioners. However, it would not be feasible to include all existing local labour market information (LLMI) sources in one on-line LLMI facility because of their dynamism, number and range.

- The digital divide is an important consideration in making LMI directly available to clients. A recent study found that the expansion of LMI services delivered through ICT risks leaving behind the most disadvantaged in society. Practitioner-mediated provision of LMI would reduce the risk of penalising those with least access to information technology (Lindsay, 2005).

Supporting the use of LMI in careers education and IAG

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is often a mystique around LMI, together with a lack of confidence in locating, assessing, understanding, manipulating, interpreting and using it. Interpreting sources and reconciling the data to predict future labour market trends is a complex activity, requiring particular skills and competencies. Without these competencies, it is hard to transform *labour market information* into more useful *labour market intelligence* and so, effectively support career choices and decision making. The freely and publicly accessible online learning resource (<http://www.guidance-research.org/lmi-learning>) has been developed to address this need and support IAG practitioners in

building the skills and the confidence to use LMI as part of effective practice.

The LMI learning resource, funded by Sector Skills Development Agency, operates as part of a wider web-based resource, the National Guidance Research Forum (NGRF) website (<http://www.guidance-research.org>)¹, designed and maintained by the Institute for Employment Research (IER) at the University of Warwick to support the professional development of career guidance practitioners. The website has three main sections: the LMI learning resource; ‘making guidance more effective’, which presents information and knowledge on guidance theory and practice, and policy; and ‘LMI Future Trends’, which presents LMI and data on over 30 broad sectors.

The LMI learning resource is designed to cater for a breadth of practitioners, with differing backgrounds, qualifications, levels of experience and needs. It was developed by the careers and learning team at IER using a range of training materials linked to clearly specified learning outcomes. Practitioner evaluations were central to refining the content. The resource covers the following topics:

- **The nature of LMI** - including the purpose of, and definitions of, LMI enabling users to share their ideas.
- **The changing labour market** - including: differentiating between labour market *information* and *intelligence*; and understanding the complexity and rapidity of change within the labour market by considering myths and realities.

¹ The NGRF was developed by IER with funding support from the Department for Education and Skills, the National Learning and Skills Council and the Sector Skills Councils.

- **Locating sources of LMI** - helping users navigate the major resource of LMI on the NGRF website, together with introducing users to social book-marking as a means of sharing web-based LMI resources.
- **Choosing between sources of LMI** - helping users: consider how to identify potential resources of quality LMI appropriate for their particular context; and explore the skills needed to evaluate LMI sources so practitioners can make sense of the ever-increasing amount of web-based LMI that is becoming available.
- **Frameworks for practice** - presenting commonly identified frameworks to inform the use of LMI.
- **Implementing good practice** - encouraging practitioners to conduct their own visits to opportunity providers by giving guidelines on how to: work effectively with employers; make an initial approach; conduct an effective interview; and record and disseminate the findings of any employer visit.

As a web-based resource, the LMI learning resource can be accessed easily. It allows users to browse and use the resources, participate in the interactive elements dependent on their needs. For instance, the LMI competency checklist encourages the user to think about, and reflect upon, their existing knowledge and competencies in using LMI, as well as suggesting ways in which their competencies and confidence in this area of practice could be developed and improved. The resource provides links to: different sources of LMI; downloadable glossaries; practical resources; and websites around legislation on equal opportunities. Once users have worked through all sections of the resource, they should feel more confident

about: accessing and using LMI effectively and efficiently; critically evaluating different sources of LMI; and explaining the impact of labour market changes on their work with clients/customers. Or, of course, the module can be used flexibly, with sections selected to address user needs.

Feedback is always welcome, so please let us know what you think!

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