LABOUR MARKET
INTELLIGENCE PARTNERSHIP

POLICY BRIEF

High-level audit of administrative datasets

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Introduction

A key area for policy in South Africa is how to develop a strong foundation of labour market information and to provide the type of intelligence and signals that can help government, stakeholders, education and training providers, and students to make more informed decisions about how resources are invested in skills development, education and training. In order to address this need the DHET initiated a four year Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) project, with research to be conducted by an HSRC consortium. The project investigates labour market and skill issues, with a view to produce recommendations on how education and training institutions could respond to signals from the labour market, with the goal of developing a credible skills planning mechanism for South Africa.

This research brief is based on a *High-level Audit of Administrative Datasets*. The study surveyed more than 20 national government departments and other entities with the aim to investigate the relevance of databases to skills planning, particularly on the demand side, and to assess options for linking with other databases as part of the skills planning mechanism. The project focuses on identifying datasets and dataset variables in government departments perceived as valuable and relevant to skills planning by considering specific guiding criteria. The objectives of the survey were twofold:

1. To identify which administrative and survey data sources with variables suitable for incorporation in the skills planning mechanism exist in government departments.
2. To assess which identified data sources could be developed into useful resources.

The study employed a mixed-methods approach including a desktop study, case studies, semi-structured interviews, a survey including two questionnaires, analysis of qualitative data and correspondence with key-stakeholders.

Audit Overview

The government departments included in the study were nominated by the DHET. Government departments and other entities surveyed include: Department of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries; Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs; Department of Correctional Services; Department of Health; Department of Home Affairs; Department of Labour; Department of Public Service and Administration; Department of Rural Development and Land Reform; Department of Trade and Industry; Diplomatic Training, Research and Development; Economic Development Department; National Development Agency; National School of Government; National Treasury; Presidency - Performance Monitoring and Evaluation; Provincial Office of the Premier (Education, Economic Development Departments) of Gauteng, Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal; South African Local Government Association; South African Police Service; South African Qualifications Authority; South African Revenue Service; Statistics South Africa; and Strategic Integrated Projects.

A uniform structure was followed for investigating and reporting on each case study. The team acquired information on the mandate, objectives, institutional structure, operational arrangements, administrative systems and data holdings of each department. Having this contextual understanding allowed the research team to probe the nature and function of potentially skills planning relevant datasets. The purpose was to assess whether, using given criteria, these databases or parts thereof (e.g. datasets containing particular variables) are of sufficient value to be used as part of a skills planning mechanism. Key characteristics of the database and quality criteria captured include: data characteristics, data collection instrument(s), data management methods, data format, internal data users, and access conditions.

The research team relied on three sources of evidence regarding quality: the views of the departmental officials; datasets from which publications were produced and distributed that were considered to be of good quality; and data quality as defined by the literature: '…they are fit for their intended uses in operations, decision making and planning' (Juran1999, p. 998)[1]..

Observations and Findings

The audit revealed that few of the datasets surveyed are currently of sufficient quality to be used, and a long term approach to improving database sources needs to be pursued. The study furthermore revealed that government database holdings are for the most part detached and uncoordinated.

These findings stem from a number of observations about the nature of datasets within government departments, including:

- The culture of inter-government-department mutual access and sharing of data is not particularly well developed;
- Awareness of data and databases as a vital asset for planning needs to be strengthened;
- Staff members other than those directly involved seem to have a limited knowledge of what data their department owns (other than HR data with which every employee must interact);

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1   Juran, JM. 1999. Juran's Quality Handbook (5th Edition). The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. www.pqm-online.com/assets/files/lib/books/juran.pdf Accessed 20 October 2015.

- During fieldwork, difficulty experienced in identifying the 'right' people to speak to in departments gives the impression that personnel have limited knowledge of which units generate and own datasets; and
- Pursuing a developmental approach towards government data systems, and engaging with the National Statistics System (NSS), will generate mutual benefits for the skills planning mechanism and the NSS.

Observations and Recommendations

Based on these observations, the study recommends that the DHET engage with other government departments for data to inform skills planning, but should do so as part of a national inter-government initiative to encourage better knowledge and usage of government database resources. Specifically, DHET should focus on database policies to improve its database holdings as follows:

- Continue to map all available data in government and compare this with a schedule of datasets required, so that new database developments can be prioritised and scheduled.
- Explore ways of improving current datasets held by other departments, by applying the concept of the database life cycle, with a view to using these data resources in the future.
- Awareness of data and databases as a vital asset for planning needs to be strengthened.
- Collaborate within the National Statistics System to:
    – Improve the visibility of data among policy makers and managers,
    – Support functioning of research and database units based in departments,
    – Ensure data personnel are familiar with cognate databases; and
    – Initiate and support improved linking and sharing of data between departments.