

GMT interview

Labour market information: pivotal in careers advice and guidance

Professor Jenny Bimrose

This edition's GMT interview is with Professor Jenny Bimrose¹ who will be known to many of you for her research in the area of Labour Market Information (LMI). What may be less well-known is Jenny's own career trajectory which combines a strong professional practice orientation with a researcher's curiosity, and how this shapes her view that LMI really is pivotal to effective career information, advice and guidance.

What is Labour Market Information (LMI) and why is it important in careers advice and guidance?

LMI for career guidance, or information, advice and guidance (IAG) includes:

- information on general employment trends (e.g. historical trends, future demand)
- data on the structure of the labour market (i.e. what jobs exist, how many, which sectors, which occupations)
- information about the way the labour market functions (i.e. how people get into jobs and move between employers, etc.)
- the interaction between labour demand and supply (i.e. mismatches – as reflected in unemployment rates, skills gaps, skills shortages, etc.)
- data on national, regional and local labour markets variations (i.e. size of workforce, prominent sectors etc.)
- data focusing on equality and diversity (i.e. which individuals are employed in different sectors and at what levels)
- information on progression routes (i.e. career structure, earnings, transferability of skills)².

For career guidance, the distinction between labour market information (LMI) and labour market intelligence is important. Labour market information refers to hard data from original sources (like ONS³), whereas labour market intelligence is the interpretation and contextualisation of these data. It is labour market intelligence with which career guidance practitioners are mostly dealing.

My view about LMI in career guidance practice is the same now as it has been for the last 20 to 30 years – robust and reliable LMI is absolutely crucial for high quality, impartial career guidance. The ability to work effectively with LMI should be a central part of career practitioners' skills and strategies. There is no doubt that this is expected by clients. A key finding from a five year longitudinal case study carried out by Warwick Institute for Employment Research (IER) from 2003 to 2008, funded by the [then] Department for Education & Skills, highlighted the value placed on LMI by clients. Over a five year period, adult clients were asked every year to evaluate the effectiveness of the career guidance they had received and identify precisely what, if anything, they had valued. They consistently identified: 'access to expert information' (largely referring to LMI), as highly valued⁴. Most people who come to a careers guidance practitioner want help in finding employment at some stage and they are probably going to have to go through a whole range of learning experiences until they are successful. So different sorts of LMI will be essential for different stages of that process, for different purposes.

¹ Professor Jenny Bimrose has worked for the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick for the last ten years. You can find out more about Jenny's long career in research in careers advice and guidance at: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/people/jbimrose>

² Bimrose, J. and Barnes, S-A. (2010) Labour market information (LMI), information communications and technologies (ICT) and information, advice and guidance (IAG): the way forward? London: UK Commission for Employment and Skills. Available from: <http://www.ukces.org.uk/publications/lmi-ict-iag>

³ Office for National Statistics: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/index.html>

⁴ Bimrose, J., Barnes, S-A. and Hughes, D. (2008) Adult career progression and advancement: a five year study of the effectiveness of guidance. London: Warwick Institute for Employment Research/DfES. Available from: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/publications/2008/eg_report_4_years_on_final.pdf

Where can careers practitioners find information about the labour market?

Professionals need routinely to update their LMI expertise by developing and sharing knowledge. There are many robust and reliable sources, mostly government funded, that are accessible to practitioners who feel confident about handling large data sets like, ASHE, the Labour Force Survey⁵ or NOMIS⁶. Additionally, many career practitioners have built up their own LMI website resources, which they use with clients. Clearly, practitioners need to do their own LMI research and working collaboratively with others to broaden and deepen their understanding of LMI can enhance this process. Employing organisations need to find ways, including the creative use of ICT, to support this process of knowledge transfer.

How should careers advisers evaluate the validity and reliability of LMI?

An integral part of a careers practitioner's LMI expertise is the ability to make critical judgements about validity and reliability of sources. Here, at Warwick IER, we've developed and managed the National Guidance Research Forum (NGRF) website⁷ for the past 7 years, since its launch. Just last year, it was updated and migrated to the University of Warwick website.

As part of the initial development of the website, way back in 2007, we were able to attract funding from the Sector Skills Councils to develop an online learning module to support careers guidance practitioners in their use of LMI. The LMI online learning module provides learning support for career practitioners in the effective use of LMI in their guidance practice⁸. As part of this module, we've provided a checklist for selecting robust and reliable LMI for use in careers practice, which poses questions to guide learners. The first question asks the learner to think about who produced the LMI – whether the original source is trustworthy and whether the aims and objectives of the organisation producing the LMI are broadly sympathetic to the process of careers guidance. For example, some sources may put a positive spin on particular facts, or even exclude facts altogether, because this is in the interests of their organisation. So, it is important to get similar facts from more than one source to achieve a more balanced and reliable view of a particular source.

The second question invites learners to adopt a critical stance when reviewing LMI sources with regard to data collection. For example, how and why data were collected and whether or not the methodology used was sufficiently robust.

The third question looks at how the LMI data is disaggregated and classified. This is a bit technical, so we take practitioners through what that means, thinking about the relevance and appropriateness of units of measurement and how the data were disaggregated for example, the extent to which geographical boundaries coincide. This also means looking at how sectors are classified as different organisations may use varying definitions, which may also change over time.

The fourth area they need to think about really carefully is whether or not the LMI is up to date, remembering that some sources that may appear to be out of date may actually be the most current available. Practitioners need to try to find out when the research that produced the LMI was carried out, what period the data relates to, when the LMI was published, and if data are useful to the current situation. It is also important to find out when the next data release will be available and whether there's more recent research that actually supports or contradicts the data. Practitioners also need to think about what has happened in the labour market since the research was carried out and make judgements on how relevant or appropriate data are in light of the changes.

The fifth question relates to whether the LMI is fit for purpose, so practitioners need to think about the relevancy to their clients and/or service needs, whether or not there are aspirational attributes of the LMI and if there are any obvious omissions. One gap commonly identified by career practitioners relates to data about equality of opportunities. Additionally, they need to decide whether the language is accessible (by that I mean jargon free) and how the data are presented (preferably with a balance between textual and graphical formats).

What do you think are the most interesting developments in labour market research?

There are lots! But if I was to limit myself to one, it would be the rapid developments in open and

⁵ Annual Survey of Hours and Earning (ASHE) and the Labour Force Survey are carried out by the Office for National Statistics

⁶ NOMIS is a service provided by the Office for National Statistics, ONS, to provide free access to the most detailed and up-to-date UK labour market statistics from official sources

⁷ To access the NGRF website go to: <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/ngrf/>

⁸ The LMI online learning module has been updated and extended and will be available shortly. To find out more email guidance.research@warwick.ac.uk.

linked data. In the UK there has been a move towards opening up what used to be closed data sets. Some are being opened up immediately, with others staged in phases. The volume and diversity of data now being released into the public domain are phenomenal and exciting, but also potentially overwhelming!

At the beginning of this year, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) commissioned Warwick IER to lead on a pilot study called 'LMI 4 U' to examine the feasibility of pulling high quality and reliable data from various sources together for the purposes of careers guidance that would be updated automatically each time the original data set is updated. Given the resource implications of having to keep LMI materials up to date for clients, this has the potential to be a significant development, if taken forward.

Do you think there will ever be a time when LMI will replace careers practitioners?

I have been asked this question many times. A common assumption is that once open access to LMI data is provided, the demand for career practitioners to work with clients face to face will be much reduced. This assumption is highly questionable, since the provision of LMI normally stimulates another set of questions from the recipient as they try to make sense of its application to their own particular context. For example, a client wants to apply for a higher education course and they find information both about the entry requirements and the competitive nature of entry to that course. This is likely to generate a whole series of further questions with which they need help. 'What does this mean for me, at this moment in time, with all the constraints (like finance) with which I'm trying to deal?' That is, a level of skilled mediation is usually still required to help clients make sense of the LMI.

The question implies yet another issue around the use of technology. Making LMI more directly accessible to

clients invariably involves the use of ICT, which also generates anxiety for career practitioners. Is it possible to deliver high quality LMI in career guidance using ICT and if so, what are the implications for the career guidance profession? Recently, UKCES commissioned Warwick IER to produce a report based on research that addressed this question⁹. There clearly are important workforce development issues, which need to be taken seriously.

Finally, what sparked your particular interest in labour market information?

Whilst I was teaching trainee careers advisers at the North East London Polytechnic¹⁰, I became aware of how difficult students found the whole area of LMI. We applied, successfully, for funding for a research project from the European Union and for a three year ADAPT project, which enabled me to investigate ways of enhancing the use of LMI in careers guidance. This project really kick-started my research interest in LMI.

In 2002 a research job was advertised at the University of Warwick for which I applied. Having remained with one employer for over 20 years, I was thrilled to be invited for interview. They offered me the job and I've been here for just over 10 years.

Recently, I was invited to be a member of the Careers Profession Task Force, convened by Government from 2010 to 2012. One of the key recommendations from this Task Force related to the need for training support for career practitioners, both in their initial and continuing training, in three particular knowledge domains. The first is LMI, the second is STEM related issues and the third is ICT. All recommendations made by the Task Force have been endorsed and accepted by the Minister, so are currently being taken forward. LMI seems to have a high profile at the moment. I really do think we lost focus with regard to employer work and LMI over the last decade, so I'm relieved it seems to be firmly back on the agenda.

⁹ Bimrose, J., Hughes, D. & Barnes, S-A (2011) Integrating new technologies into careers practice: Extending the knowledge base. Wath-upon-Deane: UK Commission for Employment and Skills., Available from: <http://www.ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/integrating-new-technologies-into-careers-practice.pdf>

¹⁰ The North East Polytechnic became the University of East London