

A high level audit of administrative datasets in government departments

Government departments create many administrative datasets and commission survey studies, some of which contain potentially useful information about skills supply and demand, but these are restricted in access and use, hidden deep inside government departments. *Mariette Visser* explains the importance of these resources and suggests an inter-government initiative to encourage better knowledge and usage of administrative database resources.



The LMIP conducted a large-scale ‘audit’ across government, to identify and trace administrative datasets potentially relevant to skills planning. The existence of an administrative dataset however, does not tell us anything about how relevant and useful it is for skills planning purposes or whether the quality of the data is reliable.

Methods

More than 20 government departments participated in the study. The first step was to contextualise the work of each department by analysing their mandates, objectives, institutional structures, operational arrangements, administrative systems and data holdings. The second step was face-to-face interviews with the managers and users of these databases. The purpose was to assess whether the database or particular variables are of sufficient value and use.

Data was assessed as good quality if it was deemed ‘fit for their intended uses in operations, decision making and planning’.

Few databases immediately usable

Few of the datasets were of sufficient quality to be used, and a long-term approach to improving database sources will need to be pursued.

Datasets that are relevant and immediately usable include: the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) database of the Department of Labour, the Strategic Integrated projects (SIP), datasets from the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), and datasets of the South African Revenue Service (SARS).

Some databases contained data relevant to skills planning but were not sufficiently developed to be used immediately. Time should be allowed for these to mature to show consistent levels of quality and accumulate a sufficient number of records to justify inclusion in a skills planning mechanism. Examples of these databases with

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potential included: the Employment Services of South Africa (ESSA) database in the Department of Labour; the Farmer’s Register in the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; and the National Population Register in the Department of Home Affairs.

A long-term data development approach is needed

Of concern is that government databases holdings were for the most part detached and uncoordinated:

- The culture of inter-department mutual access and data sharing is not well developed.
- Awareness of data and databases as a vital asset for planning needs to be strengthened.
- Staff have a limited knowledge of what data their department owns, and which units generate and own datasets.

Pursuing a developmental approach towards government data systems, and engaging with the National Statistics System (NSS) will generate mutual benefits.

How to improve skills planning databases across government

We recommend that the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) engages with other government departments for data to inform skills planning. However, clearly, this can only work as part of a

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national inter-government initiative to encourage better knowledge and usage of administrative database resources.

Database policies to improve DHET’s holdings can be introduced in the short term:

- Continue to map available data in government, compared with a schedule of datasets required, so that new database development 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.
- Strengthen awareness of data and databases as a vital asset for planning.

Most significantly, in the long term, DHET database units will need to collaborate within the National Statistics System (NSS). There is an urgent need to:

- improve the visibility of data among policy makers, researchers and managers;
- support the 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.

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The full report, Paterson A, Visser M, Arends F, Mthethwa T, Twalo T, Nampala T, (2015) High-Level Audit of Administrative Datasets is available on
 www.lmip.org.za