

FRESA & the case for a South West Employment and Skills Research Forum

This paper was prompted by South West RDA in light of the introduction of Frameworks for Regional Employment and Skills Action (FRESA). The response to this proposal will be presented to the South West Regional Employment Forum (SW REF) on 23 September 2002.

It is proposed that successful implementation of the SW FRESA requires the creation of a South West Employment and Skills Research Forum (Research Forum).

It argues that the creation of a Research Forum, as a sub-group of the SW REF, provides the framework for regional research collaboration, envisaged Partnership Agreement on skills and economic intelligence and needed by the region.

1. FRESA - the need for greater collaboration

- 1.1. The FRESA is *'the way in which key regional partners led by the RDA will develop and deliver an agreed plan to address the skills and employment needs of employers and individuals within the region'*.¹
- 1.2. While early work will focus on the production of an Action Plan, ministers have stressed that it is the on-going activity - the *'joint analysis, consultation, communication and action planning'*² - that lies at the heart of process.
- 1.3. The FRESA Regional Template states, that to achieve the FRESA objectives, such as 'agreement about what constitutes a healthy labour market', *'the FRESA requires a complete review and agreement on data collection, management, classification and analysis among partners and all those involved in the collection and analysis of data'*.³
- 1.4. Responsibility for the development of this agreement lies with the South West Regional Employment Forum.
- 1.5. The Template further states that the agreement should cover arrangements for:
 - gathering in one place all available data needed to agree priorities for action
 - deciding whether the necessary information is available or sufficient
 - deciding whether to commission new data
 - establishing arrangements for keeping the data / analysis up to date

¹ The Framework for Regional Employment and Skills Action - A Regional Template, February 2002. p.2.

² Ibid, p.3.

³ Ibid, p4.

- 1.6. The Template also requires agreement to be reached on the actions that will be taken within the region to implement the 'Partnership Agreement on Skills and Economic Intelligence'. Details of this nationally agreed framework for the gathering and sharing of data and intelligence are provided at Annex 1.

2. Role

- 2.1. The South West currently lacks the administrative architecture required to orchestrate the research collaboration required by the FRESA and Partnership Agreement on skills and economic intelligence.
- 2.2. While the SW REF is responsible for taking all major decisions relating to the FRESA: methodological, administrative, financial and technical issues will be beyond the capacity of a high level grouping.
- 2.3. A South West Employment and Skills Research Forum ('Research Forum'), working to the SW REF, is therefore needed to carry out the following functions:
- a) **Needs assessment**
 - Identifying and advising on data gaps and research priorities
 - Identifying appropriate areas for collaboration
 - Identifying potential limits to collaborative research⁴
 - b) **Implementation**
 - Identifying resource requirements for specific projects
 - Raising resources for projects
 - Development of research methodologies
 - Tender development
 - Selection and management of contractors
 - c) **Analysis**
 - Analysis of research results
 - Agreement of implications for own organisations / regional partners
 - Formulation of advice / recommendations for the Regional Employment Forum
 - d) **Dissemination**
 - Dissemination within own organisations / sub-regions / sectors
 - Collaboration on regional dissemination events
 - Ensuring coherence of messages

3. Membership

- 3.1. Given its ties to the SW REF, any Research Forum should include representatives of the following organisations: SLIM; RDA; LSCs; Job

⁴ Questionnaires and focus groups will, for example, become too long or lack focus if they try to achieve too much for too many

Centre Plus; Government Office; TUC; CBI (or other employer representative); local government and sector representation.

- 3.2. Given also (a) the need to ensure full sub-regional coverage / links with sub-regional observatories and (b) the significance of local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) in both researching and delivering employment and skills strategies; it is proposed that the region's six local LSCs should be represented on the Research Forum.
- 3.3. Members of the Research Forum should be Research Managers (or equivalents) within designated organisations – ie those who have responsibility for the development and delivery of research strategies; control of associated budgets and responsibility for driving take up of results.

4. Existing Infrastructure

- 4.1. To avoid duplication and overlap the Research Forum should build on the existing infrastructure within the region and develop the role of the South West Labour Market Information Research Network.
- 4.2. The South West Labour Market Information Research Network grew from a TEC Research Managers' network which was responsible for driving collaboration on regional household and employer surveys. It now includes the Research Managers from the majority of the partner organisations that should be represented in the Research Forum (see 3.1 above). In the newly configured network, there have been no examples of collaborative research between the partners and the network therefore is primarily a forum for exchanging information on research plans and results. However, with the appropriate membership, backing and remit, it has considerable potential to drive forwards a collaborative regional research agenda.
- 4.3. To be effective, the Research Forum will require a greater level of secretariat support than is currently available to the South West Labour Market Information Research Network. The Network currently rotates secretariat tasks (preparing agendas, preparing papers, arranging meetings, taking minutes, reporting findings) among members or assigns these to volunteers during meetings. This arrangement is adequate for an informal network, but is unlikely to be sufficient for one with a wider remit, which needs to ensure consistent communication with the SW REF, for example.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1. Improving collaboration around the planning, conduct, interpretation of research, and consequent actions, is central to the successful implementation of the FRESA.

- 5.2. The opportunity exists for the SW REF to harness and build on existing structures to this end.
- 5.3. The development of a Research Forum, with backing of the SW REF, provides a considerable opportunity for the South West Labour Market Information Research Network to expand its role.
- 5.4. It also provides the region with an opportunity to move towards the collaborative research agenda that is central to future development of co-ordinated regional policy.

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Annex 1 - Partnership Agreement on Skills & Economic Intelligence

Ministers have asked all agencies to sign up to a Partnership Agreement establishing a number of principles on the collation of labour market intelligence. These should become 'firmly established in the working practices of partner organisations'⁵.

The agreed principles are:

- I) There should be joint action on research planning, data collection, analysis and dissemination.
- II) Common definitions, standards and methodologies should be adopted by all agencies in respect of a core set of indicators on skills and economic intelligence.
- III) It should be possible for data to be aggregated across certain key sections of the skills and economic intelligence system.
- IV) Key agencies should work together to identify significant gaps in intelligence and which agency (or agencies) should take action to plug them.
- V) Key agencies should work together to minimise the degree of unnecessary duplication of data.
- VI) Research planning cycles should aim to operate with a long-term view of around 3 to 5 years.
- VII) There should be improved analysis and better use of intelligence to ensure that it meets the needs of policy makers, planners and other key users.
- VIII) Where possible there should be open, zero cost, access to intelligence between the parties to the agreement.
- IX) The agreement should be regularly reviewed to enable an assessment of the degree to which the principles are being met, and there should be an evaluation of its impact.

⁵ Letter to partners entitled **PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT ON SKILLS AND ECONOMIC INTELLIGENCE**, dated 25th January 2002, signed by Nick Brown, John Healy and Douglas Alexander.