

Introduction to the 2006 Skills Survey

British social science has developed a unique sequence of surveys that have measured skills trends and their implications for work experience across time. The first study that developed the broad skills measures that informed successive programmes was the Social Change and Economic Life Initiative Survey (SCELI) carried out in 1986 (Gallie 1994). It was a comparative study of six local labour markets chosen to represent contrasting past and current economic conditions. It has then been taken as the reference point for the national skill structure of the mid-1980s. The measures were subsequently included in three major representative national surveys. The Employment in Britain (EIB) survey was carried out in 1992 (Gallie et al. 1998), and two Skills Surveys were carried out in 1997 and 2001 (Ashton et al. 1999; Felstead et al. 2002). In each case, they were large-scale high-quality representative national surveys. The EIB included the same measures together with much more extensive information on job quality, thereby giving us the first rigorous evidence on trends over time. The two ‘skills surveys’ have led to a considerable expansion of the scope of the research programme into skill development. The first Skills Survey, carried out in 1997, was designed to extend the evidence about trends across time in broad skills while providing us with much more detailed knowledge about particular skills. Its primary innovation was that it enabled the measurement of ten generic skills and in addition computing skills. This survey was a nationally representative survey of 2467 individuals in employment, aged between 20 and 60. The 2001 Skills Survey was a partial repeat survey that involved a sample of 4470 respondents. All the key questions on job analyses and skill requirements were repeated identically. The survey thereby enabled an updating of the picture of the distribution and trend of broad skill requirements, and for the first time gave measures of the trends in utilisation of generic skills. The survey extended the work of the 1997 survey by including a richer set of measures of other aspects of job quality that allowed comparisons with the 1992 Employment in Britain Survey.

The 2006 Skills Survey is the third in the sequence of ‘skills surveys’. The overarching aim of this survey is to provide a resource for analysing skill and job requirements in Britain in the middle part of the current decade, thus providing continuity with the previous sequence of surveys and a benchmark for comparison with the past and possible future surveys. It aims to achieve a core sample of 4,750 respondents. Although continuity is the primary aim, it will also extend the field of enquiry to address a major issue not addressed in recent surveys, the relationship between skills and employee motivations and attitudes. Specifically, the new skill survey has six objectives. The first objective is to provide an analysis of the level and distribution of skills—both broad and generic (including computing) skills requirements—being utilised in British workplaces in 2006. ‘Broad’ skills are defined in these surveys by three main indicators: the qualification level and type required for entry to the job, the cumulative training requirement for the type of work, and the amount of learning time before

competence is achieved. Measured generic skills are: computing skills plus literacy, numeracy, technical know-how, high-level communication skills, planning skills, client communication skills, horizontal communication skills, problem-solving and checking skills. The second objective of the 2006 Skills survey is to provide a picture of recent trends in broad and generic skills, updating previous series that extended to 2001. The third objective is to update our knowledge of the valuation of skills, and of the association of skills usage with other worker rewards and indicators of well-being, and of how skills are related to the evolution of inequality. The fourth objective is to provide a description of the work preferences and work motivation of those in employment in Britain, and for the first time a systematic analysis of how preferences and motivation relate to the skill development that people experience in their jobs. The fifth objective is to develop further our knowledge about the relationship between employers' human resource practices, the competitive environment in which they operate, and the level and development of their employees' skills. And the sixth objective is to provide detailed analyses of skills levels and distributions within and between regions of Britain.

In accordance with these objectives, the questionnaire consists of ten block of questions: A. checking eligibility; B. broad questions about the job; C. detailed job analysis questions; D. computing skills and qualifications questions; E. the organization; F. work attitudes; G. pay questions; H. the job five years ago; J. recent skill changes and future perspectives; K. personal details; Q. details of organization and conclusion.

Overall the SCEL, EIB and three Skills Surveys provide us with broad measures of job skill from 1986 to 2006, thus allowing researchers to have a quantitative measure of the change in job skills in Britain over the last twenty years. These datasets provide the social science community with rigorous source of evidence about the changing nature of skills and work in the economy as a whole. Further, there is also the prospect of using the 2006 survey as the launch-pad for a two-period longitudinal study. Such a longitudinal study, in which respondents would be re-visited after two or three years, would enable a huge leap in our understanding of the processes of skills development that are taking place in British workplaces, and contribute much useful empirical evidence as a basis for lifetime learning policies.

Key variables in the 2006 Skills Survey questionnaire

Section B (broad questions about the job)

Number of jobs, type of job, occupational class, contract status, supervision duties, use of computerised or automated equipment, job duration, number of working hours per week, size of workplace, gender segregation, location of work, teamwork, opportunities to learn new skills, presence of quality circles, how work is monitored, job-required qualifications, how necessary are those qualifications, duration of training, whether training led to a qualification, length of on-the-job learning, reason to learn to do job well, reasons for taking the job, factors influencing work effort, work intensity, amount of choice over the job, degree of repetitiveness, degree of variety, closeness of supervision, individual's task discretion, work group's task discretion, satisfaction with task discretion, job stress, likelihood of losing job, easiness of finding a new job, importance of training in decision to take the job

Section C (detailed job analysis questions)

Importance of the following generic skills: paying close attention to detail, dealing with people, making presentations, instructing, persuading, selling, counselling, team-working, listening, physical strength, physical stamina, using hands or fingers, operating tools, knowledge of particular products or services, specialist knowledge or understanding, knowledge of how organization works, using computer, spotting problems, working out the cause of problems, thinking of solutions to problems, analysing complex problems, checking, noticing mistakes, planning own activities, planning others' activities, organizing time, thinking ahead, reading, writing, doing arithmetic, using statistical procedures, using internet, cooperating with colleagues, motivating staff, keeping control over resources, coaching staff, developing others' career, making strategic decisions, managing own feelings, handling others' feelings, looking the part, sounding the part, speaking a foreign language

Section D (computing skills and qualifications questions)

Level of complexity in computer use, ways of using internet, type of school attended, number of siblings, birth order, age when completing full-time education, length of employment since leaving education, qualifications held, undergraduate major, highest qualification in math, class of degree, parental support during school, financial situation during childhood

Section E (the organization)

Whether organizational is an investor in people, use of formal appraisal systems, whether appraisals affect pay or training, information meetings, discussion meetings, direct influence over organizational changes, satisfaction with workplace

communication, proportion of workers using computerised equipment, importance of computerised equipment, union presence, union recognition, union membership, union influence, sector of workplace, ownership of workplace, degree of competition, organizational commitment

Section F (work attitudes)

Importance of family/friend/leisure/work, non-financial work motivation, importance of the following things in looking for a job (promotion, pay, relations with supervisor, job security, using initiative, liking, convenient hours, and etc)

Section G (pay questions)

Gross pay, net pay, gross hourly rate of pay, performance pay, profit-sharing scheme, pension scheme and etc.

Section H (job five years ago)

(5/4/3 years ago) contract status, work intensity, amount of choice over the job, variety in the job, importance of using computer, closeness of supervision

Section J (recent skill changes and future perspectives)

Since 5/4/3 years ago: change in skills, technology, number of staff, training (and duration), promotion, task discretion, work effort, closeness of supervision, amount of choice over the job, previous unemployment experience, consequence of training

In the future: aspiration for training, likelihood of training, type of skills wish to acquire, benefit of these skills, likelihood of promotion, aspiration for promotion

Section K (personal details)

Marital status, number of financially dependent children, ethnic background, mental well-being (worry, anxiety, depression, optimism, and etc), job satisfaction (general and specific)