

Research For Economic Recovery

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The economic downturn may be on everyone's mind, but getting ready for the upturn is also important.

Research can play a vital role in ensuring the public sector is well-placed for recovery, by helping organisations see the benefit of investing in training now, to gain a competitive edge when the economy improves.

The idea of re-skilling for the economy is gathering momentum in the learning and skills sector and beyond. In December a House of Commons committee enquiry on "re-skilling for recovery" asked experts how individuals and companies might be supported by the sector, in order to be ready for economic recovery when it comes.

Sector Skills Councils are helping businesses see the benefits of investing in training now to gain competitive advantage in the future. TV advertisements featuring Sir Alan Sugar are promoting Apprenticeships to employers and their employees, not despite the economic dip but because of it. A

At a time when purse strings are tight, research can be vulnerable to budget cuts. It is therefore interesting to see that many organisations are still investing heavily in research, which is arguably more crucial in times of recession than when the economy is booming. We're talking about research for economic recovery.

At its best, research can provide accurate, real-time reports of the state of affairs on the ground " essential in a fast-changing economy. It can produce ideas for future development that will meet service or programme users' needs, and so is integral to the sector becoming more demand-led.

Organisations can monitor who is accessing what form of support and why some people don't take it up, and find out which new policies and programmes are working well and which are not. In summary, research can help survey, deepen understanding, monitor, measure performance, explain, evaluate, develop " and more.

In the economic downturn when budgets are tight, research has to be of high quality and useful.

But what does this mean in practice?

First, high quality research design is essential. It can be tempting to jump from a general research methodology to specific techniques, but too often problems arise and opportunities are missed. ORC International's researchers help clients to clarify what they want to get out of an evaluation, a skills needs analysis or a learner consultation, before going ahead with online surveys, focus groups or other data collection methods.

Second, to achieve its full potential, research needs to be action-orientated. Towards the end of a research phase we often run action planning and development workshops where findings are shared by researchers and open discussions lead to fresh ways of thinking and practical ideas for improvement. Researchers become part of the client team for half a day, to bridge the gap between research and development.

When this recession ends, as inevitably it will, the learning and skills sector will be reflecting and supporting a changed world. Hopefully, research will have underpinned these changes, providing the real evidence needed to inform national and local priorities for public sector bodies.

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