

The role of data

Part of the information about your region will be in the form of data. We use data to describe and compare regions (benchmarking) as well as to monitor progress on policy decisions. All regions collect vast quantities of data in different ways and for different purposes. They can give us an indication of the condition of our region and can provide a baseline for policy development, so that we can have some measure of the effects of the implementation of our policies.

Data has the advantage of being easily presented in visual ways and being readily compared in either time series or on geographical terms. But before using the data we have to be aware that they are accompanied by many caveats (small sample sizes, differences in methodologies, geographical boundary changes to name a few). The problems of finding good reliable data is well documented, particularly in the social sciences where political motives can be seen to be involved in the data gathering processes. To be of use to us in identifying key competencies, the data must have been collected with the real intention of finding out what is going on rather than to show something in particular. To compile useful data the right questions must be asked in the first place, the methodologies must be robust and uncorrupted, and the limitations of the data must be clear. Any evidence base will be an important but imperfect tool, but it does not remove the need for careful interpretation and objective judgement.

As Nietzsche said "There are no facts, only interpretations".

Evidence based or evidence aware policy making has become more and more important to modern governments, as the public are more educated and well informed and have a great deal more access to information, and this is gradually leading to more reliable data.

In our regions we have collected or derived our data in different ways, such as part of national data collection exercises (such as the Census or the National Employers Skills Survey(NESS) in the UK,) or put together from locally collected data such as schools and college data.

The data we collect is based on the past, whereas the decisions we are making are about the future. The analogy that is often used is that it is like trying to drive a car by only looking into the rear view mirror. In the next section of the website we look at Scenario Planning as a way of addressing this and in the following section we look at forecasting as a tool for helping us look forward.

In this section we present some examples of data sets that we (the partner regions) have found useful in the process of identifying key regional competencies. They are in different forms, and have been developed for different purposes, we have sets of indicators (e.g. (HLMI), quantitative surveys(eg NESS), descriptive statistics used as evidence for regional policy making (Evidence Base for the Regional Economic Strategy).