New Perspectives on the Labour Market: Extending Analysis using ABS CURFs

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Guest Editors of the AJLE June, 2006

The ABS introduced the Remote Access Data Laboratory™ (RADL™) in 2003 to allow approved clients access to selected Confidentialised Unit Record Files (CURFs) at their desktop via a secure internet link. Using RADL, clients can run on-line data analyses using software such as SAS, SPSS and, more recently, STATA. Because the CURFs are kept within the ABS environment, and client activity is monitored, the ABS is able to release more detailed CURF data via RADL than can be made available on CD-ROM.

In the middle of 2005, the ABS issued a call for articles to be submitted, peer-reviewed and published in a special issue of the Australian Journal of Labour Economics, titled ‘New Perspectives on the Labour Market: Extending Analysis using ABS CURFs’. The special issue devoted to articles utilising CURFs from ABS surveys, accessed through the RADL.

There are now more than 20 expanded CURFs available on RADL, which provide a richer source of ABS microdata for analysis by labour economists than ever before. The initial call for papers indicated that the Special Issue will be devoted to papers based on the following CURFs:

- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2002
- Survey of Employment Arrangements and Superannuation 2000
- Survey of Employment and Unemployment Patterns 1994-97*
- Child Care Survey 2002
- National Health Survey 2001*
- Census 2001—Household Sample File*
- General Social Survey 2002*
- Income and Housing Costs Survey 2002-03*

These CURFs denoted with an asterisk are available both as basic versions on CD-ROM and expanded versions on RADL. The other CURFs are only available on RADL.

The ABS provided support to assist potential authors in accessing and using RADL through the RADL Administrator. The RADL Administrator is also the initial contact for support in relation to the particular survey files. For more information about RADL, see the ABS website (www.abs.gov.au) - Services We Provide – CURFS – About the Remote Access Data Laboratory (RADLTM).
Of course, all papers submitted were peer reviewed and a selection of articles were published (i.e., after suitable revision to ensure academic standards).

As alluded to above, the RADL ability to use STATA program is relatively recent. From Monday 31 October 2005, approved researchers were able to run queries in STATA against all Expanded CURFs. It is worth noting that this was a STATA trial in which the ABS manually cleared all output (unlike the RADL automatic clearance for SAS and SPSS queries; note that since April 2006, automatic clearance also applies to STATA queries). As manual confidentiality protections were applied during the trial, the output clearance turnaround times was usually within one working day, although it could take longer depending on the demand and operational constraints. The STATA trial finished in the first half of 2006, but many of the papers submitted for this Special Issue were based on analysis conducted in trial period. The feedback from participants in the STATA trial, including several authors in this Special Issue, has already lead to substantial enhancements to the relevant processes of the RADL. In any innovation, it is necessary that the processes be tested by end-users and hence the papers in this issue should contribute, in some way, to refinements that may make it easier for future researchers to use the RADL.

Apart from the focus on the RADL, there was no cohesive theme for the articles in this paper. Elisa Birch applies a relatively recent econometric method, the quantile regression approach, to explore the public-private sector earning gap in Australia. The wage premium for public sector employment varies substantially along the earnings distribution, with low-paid workers having the largest wage advantage from employment in the public sector.

Justine McNamara, Rebecca Cassells, Ann Harding and Rachel Lloyd use recent Child Care Surveys to demonstrate that recently there has been a significant increase in the use of long day care and family day care services, accompanied by a fall in the use of informal care services. Parents’ out-of-pocket costs for care fell slightly in real terms with more substantial falls in costs for sole parent and low income families. Their analysis appears to suggest that these changes may not have been accompanied by substantial increases in labour supply.

Bruce Bradbury examines disadvantage among teenage mothers and concludes that this disadvantage lie in the factors that determine fertility at young ages rather than being an effect of young motherhood per se.

Nonetheless, young motherhood is a strong signal of disadvantage, which should be used in the targeting of services to disadvantaged mothers and their children. While fertility among teenagers is obviously another important policy issue, it is not clear that there is sufficient data to examine such issues at this stage with the latest General Social Survey only focussing on Australians aged 18 and over.

The three papers that address Indigenous issues are the closest thing to a theme being developed in the papers in this issue. Nicolas Biddle provides a detailed exploration of the variation in returns to education for Indigenous Australians and highlights some issues that might drive the ongoing shortfall in Indigenous educational outcomes relative to the rest of the Australian population. In the second paper on Indigenous issues, Pauline Halchuk uses her RADL access to an expanded CURF to measuring employment outcomes for Indigenous Australians, with a particular focus
on disaggregating factors associated with particular geographies (e.g. remote versus regional and metropolitan areas). In the third Indigenous article, Boyd Hunter replicates and extends previous analysis in order to illustrate how the high rates of Indigenous involvement with the criminal justice system could depress employment outcomes.

We commend the articles in this Special Issue for any users of RADL, potential or current. Hopefully the lessons contained in the following analyses will inform future uses of this relatively new method of making ABS data available.