

The contribution European comparative VET research can make to policy and practice

Alan Brown

**Paper given at Conference on VET Research 2012:
Valorisation of Results and Valorisation Processes**

Biel, Switzerland

24 – 25th October 2012

Professor Alan Brown
Institute for Employment Research
University of Warwick
Coventry, CV4 7AL, England
alan.brown@warwick.ac.uk



Lutterworth: workplace of Frank Whittle and John Wycliffe: local goes global

- Jet engine: work with technology; employment; globalisation (1930s)
- Morning star of the reformation: translation of bible into English (1380): work with ideas: Huss; Luther; Calvin (1536)
- People shape the world in different ways and we need to adapt to changing worlds



Contribution of comparative VET research to policy:

- Adaptability more appropriate driver of policy than employability
- Problematising 'simple' pan-European policy 'solutions'
- Providing a basis for evidence-informed policy
- Highlighting the importance of learning processes (cf fixation with policy structures)

Contribution of comparative VET research to practice - emphasises importance of:

- Value of mastery of an initial occupational or disciplinary knowledge base
- Changes in context to developing expertise
- Progress in different learning domains (practical; cognitive; affective / relational)
- Teaching and learning relationships
- Identity development

Focus on adaptability; teaching & learning

Context

- Changing context for careers and learning at work
- Transitions & life-course perspective
- Identity development

Research

- Career pathways EU 10; career biographies GB, NO; career narratives: DK, FR, DE, IT, ES; vocational careers GB, DE, CH
- Aerovet: aerospace apprentices: GB, DE, FR, ES; EQF – NQF EU5
- Mature: knowledge maturing processes: UK, DE, AT, CH

Findings

- Implications of importance of learning at work and individual career development
- Implications for VET / lifelong learning
- Adaptability – changing contexts

Nature of transitions (new contexts):

- Extended transitions into career-related employment
- Changes within job: role, context, technology, work organisation
- Job changes: employer, sector, location, recognised career paths (upskilling or downward drift)
- Major job shifts: role, sector, employment (reskilling)
- Adjustments required at many different levels
- Extended transitions to career-related employment
- Transformational shifts in perspectives as careers unfold

Need for lifelong learning

- Dynamic engagement across the lifespan:
 - up-skilling
 - re-skilling,
 - entry, re-entry, exit
 - re-direction
- Formal VET and informal learning important
- Adaptability rather than employability as driver
- Vulnerability to being 'locked into' particular ways of working & thinking
- Public policy - recognition of the need to: raise individual aspiration; encourage greater autonomy; promote lifelong learning

Role of learning in developing adaptability at work:

- learning through challenging work (or mastering the practical, cognitive and communicative demands linked with particular work roles and work processes);
- updating a substantive knowledge base (or mastering a new additional substantive knowledge base);
- learning through (and beyond) interactions at work;
- being self-directed and self-reflexive.
- Also learn at work through changing jobs – at low and high skill levels.

Learning to adapt through updating a substantive knowledge base:

- Specialist professional qualifications / apprenticeship / vocational training
- Initial training relevant to current jobs, even when working in a different occupational area
- Learned particular ways of thinking and practising
- Actual knowledge base often required considerable updating: through work activities; career development activities away from work: courses etc.

Case for adaptability as a system driver 1

- ‘capability to make a series of successful transitions where the labour market, organisation of work, occupational and organisational knowledge bases subject to considerable change’
- role in raising aspirations (higher & lower skill levels)
- potential to empower positive decisions & actions
- facilitates participation in skill development
- value in different labour market conditions

Case for adaptability as a system driver 2

- value in increasing equitable access to training & learning
- progress even if not able to secure stable employment
- produces level of engagement beyond simple updating
- driven by a desire for sense-making and developing identity
- professional and personal identities seen as complementary
- process of knowledge updating and re-contextualisation.

Implications adaptability as a driver

- Initial vocational education and training important: mastery of an occupational / disciplinary knowledge base
- Experience of work important: demands linked with particular work roles and processes;
- Upskilling: spend less on formal programmes and more on facilitating job change – career guidance infrastructure
- Reskilling – major changes of direction – keeping people in the labour market – career guidance
- Adults programmes of own choosing – not explicitly linked to employability – more likely to develop a continuing commitment to learning in other ways.

Implications for VET / lifelong learning where funds are limited – give support to:

- Initial (V)ET: substantive programmes leading to mastery of a knowledge base are more transferable than generic programmes
- Helping people move between different types of low skilled work – career guidance – more effective way of improving adaptability than remedial courses
- Career guidance for mid-career workers (re-orientation; reinforcement; re-engagement) – stay in labour market longer
- value of experience of work, training, education and other contexts: guidance ‘binds’ learning to transfer between contexts etc.
- Adult programmes of learning which are not **necessarily** vocational
- Reorienting a small proportion of the initial education and training budget (but pay attention to learning between work contexts) to support for adult programmes and particularly adult career guidance
- Programmes emphasising adaptability rather than employability.

Problematizing simple pan-European solutions 1:

- ECVET: complete modules (ECVET points) accredited during placement in another country
- AEROVET partners and experts (teachers, trainers, organisers of mobility) agree that it only makes sense to think about recognising learning outcomes within the complex sector of aeronautics if the mobility period lasts 3-4 weeks or longer
- low interest in a formal certification – not only because no added value due to the legal assessment regulations in Germany and France
- legal conditions; formal recognition of learning outcomes from mobility phases impossible in countries with a holistic tradition of assessment, also question of whether such recognition is desirable at all from a pedagogical point of view

Problematizing simple pan-European solutions 2:

- common professional work tasks (PWT) as the common ground, in terms of content, for the learning outcomes to be acquired at the other learning venues (hosting institutions).
- one result of the project is a workable, comprehensive description of the potential for learning in the sector in the shape of the learning units (LU) and sub-units derived from the professional work tasks according to the ECVET technical specifications.
- product is available as a mobility certificate, which has been legitimated by the competent institutions involved, validated by educational experts from colleges and the industry, and tested during a piloting phase at Europe's largest aircraft manufacturer AIRBUS.
- progress in relation to learning outcomes for a number of professional tasks.

Providing a basis for evidence-informed policy:

- need to prepare for changes of occupation; value of low skilled employment changing jobs; value of guidance for those not engaging in substantive learning in mid-career: stay longer in labour market
- (NQFs – EQF relationship) UK: spent 15 years promoting comprehensive competence-based qualifications systems; shift to learning outcomes; universal levels; national qualifications framework: did not work – have moved beyond a NQF; rediscovered importance of learning processes; reintroduced notional learning hours. Abolished QCDA; introduced a QCF; move from competence-based qualifications with little labour market value towards more substantive qualifications.
- EQF more effective if used as a simple communications tool rather than a tool for reform; do not equate level of qualifications for similarity; do not overburden the frameworks;
- Accentuate added value of the EQF meta-framework for transparency & recognition of foreign qualifications.

Highlighting the importance of teaching and learning processes (cf fixation with policy structures):

Tutors:

- Develop skills and nurture abilities (building on prior experience)
- Relations with students as key
- Teaching and learning processes at heart of VET / vocational HE not qualifications, policy or structures
- Support: cognitive, practical, social, emotional and moral.

Learners:

- Learning for life in a broad sense
- Engage with valued forms of knowledge: practice, knowing
- Need consistent policy frameworks with teaching and learning as primary focus
- Identity work - becoming: learning to be, live together, do, know

Contribution of comparative VET research to practice 1

Preceding arguments also relevant here:

- Value of mastery of an initial occupational or disciplinary knowledge base
- Changes in context vital for developing expertise
- Progress in different learning domains (practical; cognitive; affective / relational)
- Teaching and learning relationships important
- Identity development (reframing) not just skills development
- Learning while working is important
- Lack of learning & development – downward career drift
- Conducive employment contexts -> learning/positive disposition to career
- Learning for career development and personal development as drivers.

Contribution of comparative VET research to practice 2

- Intensive episodes of learning across the life-course (with stability too)
- Many people actively shape their personal work biographies, but often value help
- Coherent career narratives important
- Individual access to learning and development constrained by: individual factors; organisational factors (organisation of work); labour market opportunity structures.
- Employability – interaction of individual and labour market
- Adaptability – interaction of individual and changing contexts: learning for all aspects of life; learning for changing job (and life) roles; more relevant and humane than employability - fostering ability to make successful transitions throughout life.