

Nature and future of VET-related research in the European Research Area

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1. (Some of) the issues facing VET-related research:

- How can research contribute within the time constraint of the policy process?
- How could research and evidence-based practice begin to set and shape future policy agendas?
- To achieve an impact on policy making at a European level, VET research needs to establish credibility and resonance with policy makers and ensure that the research outcomes are accessible, understood, useable and robust.
- Need to look beyond current policies to identify and thus shape future policy priorities.
- Need to build greater links and productive relationships between research and practitioners so that practice is informed by evidence and research priorities respond to practitioners' needs.
- Need to develop and enhance research capacity – in all its forms – within the VET community.
- Exploit the linkage between VET and other groups interested in learning.
- Work longitudinally on learner histories.
- Investigate development of motivation for learning (or not) over the lifecourse
- How to create cultures that cultivate positive learning dispositions?
- The issue of how to incentivise employers regarding training and development of staff with lower levels of skills.
- It may be that we need a much more differentiated approach to learning and development in different sectors.
- How best to support employers and employees to realise the potential of this form of non-formal learning.
- We need more examples from organisations of all sizes about strategic approaches to learning, development and performance, including how informal learning is linked to other forms of learning and development.
- Employers' plans relate to their business aims and to some extent they may be content to operate with relatively low skilled labour and minimal plans for learning, development and upskilling. In such circumstances it may be important to collect examples of companies that have been successful with more ambitious plans and models.
- There is also an issue around innovation. Learning, development and performance may all be enhanced (compared to the existing structures) if there is a shift to different markets,

industries and so on. In some circumstances it may be easier to support these shifts than to get significant changes in existing forms of organisation of work.

- There are many instances where the greatest (learning) challenge is how to change the organisational culture, the organisation of work and the division of labour (for example, in health and welfare services).
- Often the perspective needs to be upon work rather than learning *per se*. It may also be important to look at relations between workplaces, through networks, supply chains etc., rather than focusing upon single organisations. Similarly it may be better to look at clusters of issues (learning, retention, progression, work intensification etc.) rather than just focusing upon trying to improve learning in an otherwise unchanged context.
- Sweden, for example, has started to look at the idea of ‘sustainable workplaces’, considering issues of workplace diversity, work intensification (the consequences of coping with fewer staff) and capability of individuals (where they happen to be in terms of their own development) alongside issues linked to learning, development and performance as a whole.
- A qualitative approach to long-term trend analysis may yield insights into broader outcomes of learning in relation to social exclusion and the development of social capital.
- Do certain qualifications (frameworks) and forms of assessment generate greater commitment to lifelong learning than others?
- The role of knowledge in the interplay of learning and working is an important area for further investigation.
- Value of a perspective focused upon the individual and the ‘story you tell about yourself through employment’.
- Reconciling learning for organisations and learning ‘for yourself’ within CPD.
- We need better frameworks for thinking about what we learn and the way we develop our capabilities.
- There is a need to broaden the range of learning outcomes recognised, and the evidence for them, including tacit knowledge and skills that are not explicitly taught.
- More work is necessary to develop the link between communities of interest and individual development.
- A conscious capability to learn needs to develop in school and be carried through into work.

The above represents my thoughts on an agenda for VET-related research. Others could amend and add to this list. The point is that the field is huge and, as in other areas of life (and literature), how we relate is critical:

Only connect.

2. (Some of) the issues around communication:

- disjunction between different bodies of VET research and the tendency for work not to carry across disciplinary boundaries;
- although VETNET quite good at linking educationalists and those concerned with HRD;
- model of research (re UK) of moles burrowing away in parallel tunnels, each unaware of the efforts of their colleagues.;

- until research becomes better integrated and able to adopt an holistic approach, although our knowledge of the detail may improve, a deeper understanding may be beyond us;
- tradition of organising research within mono-disciplinary boundaries, whereas there is a need for inter-disciplinary research groupings and/or networking arrangements and infrastructure,
- problems of assembling and supporting a ‘critical mass’ of researchers who can work together on integrated research projects that can bridge current divides.

3. Representation of the field:

Considerable complexity

Multit-level foci

Multiple disciplinary perspectives

Different VET subject contexts

Different national and locational contexts

Value in loose ties rather than strong ones

Bring in insights from different disciplines;

Bring in insights from discussions with colleagues from other countries.

Facilitate the interactions but not necessarily expect too much outside the frame of individual projects and programmes

Results in the main are not manifest in joint outcomes

Rather mutual interaction with influence within separate settings

4. Where we may make progress together:

- **theoretical discussion to support the development of conceptual models**
- **opportunity for discussion of different methodological approaches: need critical reflection on our approaches**
- **overcoming some of the problems of insufficient accumulation of knowledge (not seeking comprehensiveness)**
- **thinking through our ‘models of educational change’**
- **accepting influence is upon policy context and rarely directly upon policy**
- **accepting that being a network with loose ties can be a strength**