

RESEARCH ON VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING AS A FIELD FOR KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT – STARTING POINTS FOR THE CEDEFOP RESEARCH ARENA

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Abstract: The paper provides an insight into the process of developing the CEDEFOP Research Arena (CEDRA) as a new kind of research-oriented knowledge resource environment. CEDEFOP is the European Union agency for development of vocational education and training (VET) in the EU Member States and in the associated countries. The main questions are:

- 1) How to interpret the *foundations of VET-related research* as cornerstones for knowledge development?
- 2) How to interpret the significance of *European research and development programmes* for knowledge development in the field of VET?
- 3) How to interpret the role of '*communities of practice*' within VET-related knowledge development?

INTRODUCTION

The following paper provides insights into starting points and into the creation of the CEDEFOP Research Arena (CEDRA). The general background for CEDRA is the repositioning of CEDEFOP (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) vis-à-vis European research on vocational education and training in the recent years. *Firstly*, the main issues of the repositioning are reflected from the perspective of CEDEFOP. *Secondly*, scientific foundations of and conceptual developments within research on vocational education and training (VET research) in Europe will be discussed. *Thirdly*, the role of European cooperation programmes (including transnational projects and research cooperation networks) in the creation of European VET research culture will be reflected. *Fourthly*, the development of research communities as 'communities of practice' and alongside communities of practitioners (as counterparts of researchers) will be reflected.

1. On the repositioning of CEDEFOP vis-à-vis European VET research

After the move from Berlin (Germany) to Thessaloniki (Greece) in 1995 CEDEFOP had to reconsider its position as a European agency for promoting development of vocational training. Part of this repositioning exercise was a process that gradually led to new CEDEFOP initiatives to promote European research cooperation and finally to creation of the strategic framework of CEDRA. In the following some critical issues for the repositioning are summarised. Then, some indications are given on the framework of CEDRA and how the framework tries to respond to the challenges.

The main challenges and for the repositioning of CEDEFOP in European research cooperation can be summarised in the following questions:

- 1) Should CEDEFOP position itself primarily as an *agency for research and development work* **or** as a *programme support agency* **or** as an external *agency for dissemination and capitalisation of outcomes*?
- 2) On what basis should CEDEFOP create cooperation between itself and research communities: as an *external funding body*, as a partner that provides *targeted support* for projects and networks, as a *hosting body* that has permanent support functions?
- 3) How should CEDEFOP emphasise in its research cooperation activities the following aspects: *monitoring* research capacities and progress in research, *promotion of* research communication and *community-building*, analysis and *capitalisation of research results*.

Following the initial repositioning debate CEDEFOP took several initiatives that led it gradually towards a more participative role in research work and profiled the role of CEDEFOP more as a partner than an external funding body or as a host. Finally, some of the initiatives have tried to develop strategic frameworks for monitoring activities, community-building measures and related capitalisation or experiences and results. In this context the plan to create the CEDEFOP Research Arena (CEDRA) paved the way for a new strategic approach. The pillars of the new strategic approach are the following:

- a) the set of user-friendly information services that provide an access to information and knowledge resources (European Research Overview);
- b) the thematic areas for research-oriented knowledge development (including the production of Research Resource Materials, construction of interactive Research Resource Bases, and promotion of Knowledge Sharing Networks);
- c) promotion of knowledge development and research culture with general support activities such as the CEDRA Colloquium and related discussion materials.

The creation of the initial framework for the CEDRA and the related piloting is based on the learning experiences that have been made with the new activities that have been launched in the recent years. The most essential lessons for CEDEFOP and for the research communities are related to the following issues:

- 1) making a deeper analysis on the scientific foundations and conceptual developments within European VET research;
- 2) drawing conclusions from the role of transnational cooperation projects and networks for European VET research culture;
- 3) developing a new understanding for the role of network-based cooperation in the consolidation of research communities as 'communities of practice' *and* in the interaction between researchers and communities of practitioners.

2. On the scientific foundations of and conceptual developments within European VET research

The critical starting point for making a deeper analysis on the scientific foundations of VET research is the general position that VET research can only be seen as a *multi-disciplinary space*. On the one hand the space is seen as a broad field that is shared by several approaches that are derived from different disciplines . On the other hand these approaches are going through processes of specialisation that link them to the field more that to the underlying structures of disciplines. In this respect the field of VET research could be perceived as multidisciplinary field that is

characterised by a basic unity. Any attempts to analyse inner differentiation within VET research could only lead to theme-based listing of VET-specific focal areas or to academic distinctions that have no relevance for the field of VET.

This general position can be challenged by a framework that takes into account the cohesive emphasis but considers it insufficient as a basis for analysing progress in research and in research-based knowledge utilisation. The framework identifies *four kernel domains for knowledge development* within the interdisciplinary field of VET-related research. The basic assumption is the domains of expertise are linked to different problem contexts, conceptual backgrounds, methodologies and prospects for knowledge utilisation.

In the *socio-economic domain* the main focus is on the need or utilisation of qualifications and competences in working life. VET is seen as a background variable and VET systems and VET provisions are seen as users of such knowledge. The research provides support for structural planning of qualification frameworks or feedback on the interrelations between VET provisions and labour market .

In the *socio-political domain* the main focus is on the functioning of the VET system and on the functioning of the VET provisions as parts of the system. Some lines of inquiry give conceptual support for development of VET policies. Some approaches provide feedback information that supports policy assessment

In the *socio-educational domain* the focus is on the educational foundations of the VET systems and VET provisions. Research in this domain covers basic analyses of the underlying educational thinking, accompaniment of curriculum processes and analyses on new modes of vocational learning and competence accumulation.

Research in the *socio-behavioural domain* of VET research focuses primarily on the individual behaviour of particular target groups concerning their use (or non-use) of VET provisions and concerning their behaviour at the labour market. From the methodological point there are several lines of inquiry which focus on general transition surveys, on particular studies on target groups, on accompaniment of targeted training schemes and on development of instruments that support guidance and counselling.

It is obvious that the framework - as it has been presented above – is not the whole picture of VET research. However, the framework provides a possibility to identify the kernel domains of expertise, related methodologies and related prospects for knowledge development and knowledge utilisation.

Given the differences between the kernel domains, it is possible to have a new look on the factors that promote coherence and unity within the overarching field of VET research and promote boundary-crossing dialogue and working interfaces. On the one hand these may be related to certain *core areas for knowledge transformation* that are characteristic for in the field of VET . As such core areas it is possible to mention the following ones:

- uses of research as a support for curriculum development,
- uses of research in the context of training of VET professionals,
- uses of research as a conceptual support for learning in organisational contexts.

In addition to these core areas it is necessary to emphasise the role of more particular *focal areas* for knowledge development that may involve only some of the domains but stimulate new alliances between VET-related research and development expertise and complementary fields of expertise. As such focal areas it is possible to mention the following:

- research on uses of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the field of VET,

- research on patterns for integrating work-related learning in VET provisions and new partnerships between educational establishments and work organisations,
- research on regional VET-related initiatives and on their links to broader regional initiatives.

3. On the role of European programmes for the development of research culture

It is essential to note that the field of VET research is to a major extent overshadowed by the national characteristics of VET systems. Therefore, national concepts and underlying assumptions provide conceptual barriers to cross-cultural communication and for knowledge development at European level. From this perspective it is necessary to have a closer look what kind of role of transnational research cooperation may have in knowledge development in the field of VET.

Roughly, the impact of European cooperation programmes on European research culture can be indicated in the following points:

- 1) development of a new kinds of transnational projects that do not limit themselves to pre-comparative reporting on national developments *but* proceed to problem-oriented comparisons and to treatment of critical issues with patterns of collaborative research;
- 2) development of new kinds of networks that do not limit themselves to mere exchange of information and joint tenders *but* develop themselves as working and learning communities;
- 3) development of new kinds of joint communication facilities for supporting knowledge sharing among research communities and for promoting further analysis and utilisation of research in an organised dialogue between researchers and users of knowledge.

In this context it is necessary to note that transnational projects have raised new needs for ‘accompanying research’ or ‘research-oriented monitoring’ or ‘research-based capitalisation of the outcomes’ at the European level. At the same time transnational cooperation has opened new possibilities for knowledge transfer between different national patterns.

In general terms the notion ‘*accompanying research*’ refers to a programme context in which reform activities, experimental programmes or innovatory initiatives are supported by a related research project. The notion ‘accompanying research’ refers often to single projects and individual case studies. Consequently, the notion ‘*research-based accompaniment*’ is a more generalised expression which characterises the role of accompanying research projects in the programme or accompanying measures that cover a broader range of innovatory activities. In many countries there is no systematic pattern of to link such research-based support to pilot projects. However, most European countries have experience on similar uses of research in VET-related development concepts, but in slightly different roles (such as ‘evaluation research’, ‘implementation research’, ‘process consultancy’ ‘action research’).

The current interest on such research approaches is related to efforts to create a more systematic understanding of research as an infrastructural and interactive element in supporting the development of VET systems and VET provisions. This interest is closely related to the interest to consolidate VET research as a 'practice' *and* as 'research' that has a particular intermediate function between theory and practice.

4. On the role of scientific communities and of ‘communities of practice’

The issues that have been discussed above tend to fall beyond the scope of traditional research disciplines. At the same time there are very few examples of countries that would have provided VET research the basis to develop particular research disciplines. Instead, the typical problem in

most European countries is that of VET research suffers from an institutional marginalisation. To some extent this marginalisation has been overcome by the community-building initiatives of transnational research cooperation networks.

As a part of its efforts to promote European research cooperation CEDEFOP has tried to develop an appropriate approach to support the community-building measures that are based on 'independent' networks. Moreover, CEDEFOP has tried to find out whether there is a possibility to develop synergy between major networks that have complementary tasks.

However, because of their voluntary and temporary character networks have only a limited potential to promote the consolidation of research communities within European VET research. Instead of being infrastructural actors they should be considered as particular platforms that contribute to community-building processes.

Therefore, CEDEFOP has shifted the emphasis from 'networking the networks' to 'networking of knowledge resources' and to support for knowledge development that draws upon the work of European cooperation projects and networks. Moreover, CEDEFOP has to take into consideration the limits of research communities as actors in knowledge development *and* potential conflicts of interest between research communities and communities of practitioners. In this respect CEDEFOP has to emphasise the needs of balanced *research dialogue* between knowledge production and knowledge utilisation. The theoretical insights into the scientific foundations of VET research and into the development of research culture provide a basis for positioning CEDEFOP as a promoter of European research dialogue.

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