

In search of the 'European dimension' in collaborative knowledge development in VET research

Alan Brown

Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick

e-mail: alan.brown@warwick.ac.uk

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One way that collaborative knowledge development in VET research can progress is through collaboration of national programmes on 'knowledge and learning' that have a strong VET component. A complementary paper outlines how six national programmes are committed to supporting European collaboration as a means of:

- facilitating **strategic research co-operation**
- **research deepening** in a way compatible with creation of a European Research Area,
- adding considerable value to significant national programmes
- creating a common web-site and platform for dissemination for the six programmes.

Building upon the co-operation already achieved the programmes intend to commit fully to networking national research activities in the area of 'knowledge and learning' in order to implement systematic exchange of information and good practice; strategic activities; implementation of joint activities and transnational research activities.

Valuable as that collaboration will be, there are three obvious weaknesses from the perspective of a European dimension for VET research more generally. First, VET is only one aspect of these programmes looking at 'knowledge and learning' more generally. Second, although the programmes draw on the expertise of substantial numbers of researchers, only a minority of VET researchers from each country are directly involved. Third, and most crucially, only six countries (Finland, France, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK) are involved in the collaboration.

Another way collaborative knowledge development in VET research could take place is through participation in European projects or networks (Framework 6; Leonardo; COST; Information Society etc.). However, there are limitations here too from a VET perspective. Framework 6 has a broad remit, and is looking for integration across disciplines and subjects. Individual projects can focus upon issues specifically related to VET, but their influence may be limited, because of problems of co-ordination and difficulties of single projects having a substantive impact upon policy or practice.

European institutions, particularly CEDEFOP, may feel they have a role in collaborative knowledge development in VET research. However, in practice, they

seem more focused upon building up a common knowledge base of VET research. There is post-research co-operation in exchanging information and the results of research, either through documentalist networks (like ReferNet) or research reviews and syntheses. These have a role, but they are not genuinely **collaborative** (each researcher or national network does their piece and these are then collected together) nor are they primarily concerned with **knowledge development**.

So there is no immediate prospect of a sustainable vehicle for European collaborative knowledge development in VET research. Reflecting on this, however, I wondered whether we should problematise the goal of a 'European dimension' to 'collaborative knowledge development in VET research'. It is at least possible that this is the wrong goal for VET researchers to pursue. So let us think about best to facilitate knowledge development in VET research.

First, what is the relationship between European VET researchers? We are not a community of practice in the sense of sharing a common practice - our contexts are simply too different for that. Rather as a community we are loosely coupled on the basis of overlapping interests, but without a strong common core interest. We have weak ties. In such a situation the temptation is to think we could achieve much more if we were able to forge stronger ties across the board. I think we should be much more selective.

Sometimes ties should be strong, as when we are carrying out mutual projects; responding to common threats (at an earlier time policy makers over-concern with narrowly-defined outcomes and neglect of learning processes). Strong ties may also be required when dealing with issues which are part of VET but broader in scope: addressing issues of social inclusion; equal opportunities; promoting assessment for learning etc. However, at other times (indeed most of the time) weak ties between VET researchers may be more helpful, principally because this enables us to bring in different kinds and ways of thinking from other disciplines, other communities etc.

Pragmatically, it takes too much energy to keep ties strong and to try to establish a high degree of coherence. Whereas loose ties give more scope for people to enter 'our field' from other disciplines, countries, perspectives etc., and this can lead to the formation of new relations and links with other networks and interest groups.

Vocational education and training research has multi-level foci and our field in many respects is rather context bound (differences in national systems, cultural understandings, industrial and organisational settings). I do not feel there is a pressing need for action at a European level, whereas for a variety of reasons there is a need for greater co-ordination of research efforts at a national level.

VETNET and other associations act as communities of interest. Personally I feel more would be achieved at a European level by supporting these types of more open and fluid networks, with 'loose ties' rather than 'networks of excellence' outcomes predicated upon strong ties. Incidentally one problem with 'networks of excellence' may be that the numbers of researchers involved, funding per institution, competing interests etc. are all likely to lead in practice to processes with rather weak ties. In comparison, integrated projects do offer possibility of a stronger alignment between

focus, funding, interests and direction - processes and outcomes both based on fairly strong ties.

VETNET has fairly weak ties, and on occasion we may be able to strengthen these ties (additional meetings etc.). However, we should accept that our processes are built on and are likely to rest on fairly weak ties, because the benefits and outcomes occur elsewhere in relation to our own work. The exception to this, of course, is in relation to the brokerage function of VETNET where individuals find others with similar interests and deepen their collaboration (for example, by working on joint projects, exchanging information etc.)

Expertise is distributed throughout VETNET and is a resource that allows individuals to access experience and expertise of others, but we do not need a strong central core of beliefs as we are an appropriately 'loosely coupled' organisation. Our strength lies in the heterogeneous nature of the membership, with only partially overlapping interests. This means it is possible to draw on the experience of others with embedded knowledge of particular systems, approaches and perspectives. There is also a degree of meta-knowledge here: for example, I do not need to know the details of say Dutch senior secondary vocational education (and every time someone tries to tell me I fall asleep), but I do need to know who to approach to get this information.

I think social network analysis of VETNET would show the existence of many strong, and in some cases intense, dyadic relationships. These links, however, are often medium-term: significant for a period of time and then reconfigured. On the other hand, the number of links we all share would be very small indeed and we share a restricted number of 'scripts' (being confused by the French?) compared to those with whom we work more intensively over a longer period of time.

Within VETNET, we have a low level of cohesion, limited coherence or agreement on a sense of direction and a weak degree of centralisation. The strength of our network is that members have multiple memberships of other networks; in that way most people are simultaneously both inside and outside the network. We are unusual in that we do not have most people in the centre of the field with odd 'information brokers' crossing boundaries and bringing back ideas from elsewhere. Most of us are near the edge of the network operating in a number of other contexts too.

I am not sure we will find much of a structural 'European dimension' to collaborative knowledge development in VET research in the near future. In our field we certainly do not fit too well with 'European' ideas of the European Research Area of the future emanating from Brussels. Exchanging ideas and ways of thinking in existing networks and engaging in more bounded forms of collaboration may nevertheless help European researchers support knowledge development in VET research.