Vocational education research seeks to answer one form or another of a fundamental question: How can we best prepare youth and adults for today’s workplace? Comprehensive national and international research programs typically attempt to ask and answer larger forms of that question. Recurring themes in the United States reflect change—what skills workers need for the changing workplace and what vocational education should provide them. In Europe and Australia, attention is focused more on the impact of research on policy, decision-making, and return on investment. Most other research focuses on the specifics of occupational areas in vocational education, including a focus on attitudes toward agricultural education and teaching strategies in business education. One recurring theme in research across all occupational areas is the call for further research, particularly research in cooperative education. Although quantitative methods still play a major role in research, other research approaches and methods are still being recommended, particularly action research, reflective practice, critical theory and critical research, and a complementary combination of qualitative and quantitative research on the returns to vocational education. Other approaches include Delphi survey, concept mapping, and context-input-process-product, although case studies are the most common. Questions for future vocational education research include exploring the reason for different research emphases and different themes in various countries. (An annotated bibliography contains 27 resources.) (KC)
Vocational Education
Research Trends
Trends and Issues Alert No. 15

Michael E. Wonacott

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

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Vocational education is a large and complex undertaking with activities across many occupations and areas, at many levels, in many settings. Likewise, the body of vocational education research is large and complex, with a diffuse focus on topics ranging from the essential nature of vocational education and its role in society to the individual details of specific occupational programs. In the many strands it follows, however, vocational education research seeks to answer one form or another of a fundamental question: How can we best prepare youth and adults for the workplace of today? This Alert examines the different forms of that question vocational education research asks and the answers it provides.

Comprehensive national and international research programs typically attempt to ask and answer larger forms of that question. Recurring themes in the United States reflect change—what skills workers need for the changing workplace and how vocational education should provide them (National Center for Research in Vocational Education 1999). In Europe and Australia, attention is focused more on the impact of research on policy, decision making, and return on investment, although one European study called research in return on investment “sparse and underdeveloped” (Barrett et al. 1998).

For the most part, other research focuses on the specifics of occupational areas in vocational education. Noticeable examples include a focus on attitudes toward agricultural education and teaching strategies in business education. One recurring theme in research across occupational areas is the call for further research—particularly research in cooperative education, described as “sparse” (Barreus and Stull 1997).

Although quantitative methods still play a major role in research (Rojewski 1997), other research approaches and methods are still being recommended, particularly action research, reflective practice, and critical theory/critical research. Barrett et al. (1998) suggest a complementary combination of qualitative and quantitative research on the returns to vocational education and training: Looke and Dwyer (1998) recommend alternatives to the linear pathways research model for education-to-work transitions. Other approaches used include Delphi survey, concept mapping, context-input-process-product (CIPP), action research, and action reflection learning, but case studies were by far the most common.

Some questions arise in looking at recent vocational educational education research. Why do comprehensive research programs in the U.S., Europe, and Australia have different emphases? Does the somewhat different focus and schedule of occupation-related research merely reflect the different priorities—and place in the pipeline—of front-line practitioners? Why do different themes recur in the U.S., Europe, and Australia? Perhaps answers to such questions will come in future vocational education research.

**Resources**


Analyzes “sparse and underdeveloped” research on the returns of continuing vocational training in businesses reported in 21 publications.


Surveys “sparse” cooperative education research and analyzes dissemination, graduate program, and practitioner issues. Recommends strategies for practitioners and associations, including the development of a definitive research agenda.


Used concept mapping to identify, classify, and prioritize student outcomes as rated by three stakeholder groups (educators, students, and employers).


Reports on challenges in the interface among theoretical framework, data collection, and data analysis in co-op workplace case study.


Recurring themes include attitudes toward and perceptions of agricultural education, status and content of teacher education programs, and learning styles. Proceedings of 1996 (ED 404 496). 1995 (ED 388 773), and earlier meetings also available.


Contains 12 papers on VET and related research developed for Tessaing (1998), including two on costs and benefits of VET.

Hayman, S.; MacKenzie, J.; Adams, H.; and Harris, L., eds. *Vocational Education and Training Research Database.* 1998. Leabrook, Australia: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 1998. (ED 431 130) <www.nevered.au/never.htm> Four issues of a quarterly annotated bibliography from Australia’s national VET database; VET research (no. 35); international information in VET (no. 36); VET and indigenous students (no. 37); and returns on investment in training (no. 38).


Lakes, R. D., and Berth, B. J. “Advancing Critical Vocational Educa-
Suggests postpositivism as a way to understand the cultural context of work; identifies qualitative studies using critical theory; recommends critical research.


Identified perceptions cultural collaboration, competencies, academic working style differences, and contribution of linkage to international collaboration.


Advocates alternative approaches (vocational focus, occupational focus, contextual focus, altered patterns, and mixed patterns) instead of a linear pathways model of research on education-to-work transitions.


Latest in a series of annual publications indexing articles and research studies from selected publications. Indexes also available for 1997 (ED 414 980), 1996 (ED 411 420), 1995 (397 257), and earlier. School-to-work and technology education introduced as new categories in 1996.


Advocates enriching understanding of home economics by action research approaches.


Contains 46 refereed research papers, refereed action research papers, and research training papers. Proceedings also available from 1996 (ED 411 400), 1994 (ED 377 393), and earlier years.


Suggests refereed research papers, refereed action research papers, and research training papers. Proceedings also available from 1996 (ED 411 400), 1994 (ED 377 393), and earlier years.

Ricks, F., and Mark, J. "I'm Not a Researcher But..." Journal of Cooperative Education 32, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 46-54. (E) 542 265

Relates research-practice and reflective practice models to integration of research and practice.


Synthesizes 12 areas of recent VET research in Australia, including returns to enterprises and impact of research on policy.


Reports analysis of 163 JVER articles from 1987-1996: two-thirds were quantitative; most frequent focuses were articulation/generalization and content areas.


Used the CIIP model to review evaluations from five countries on vocational training program quality and identify a more coherent approach to program quality evaluation.


Used literature review, symposium, semistructured telephone interviews, case studies, and background paper on international practice to examine impact.


Examines functional analysis, systems theory, symbolic interaction, and critical theory/conflict analysis.


Describes action research by staff from four polytechnics to develop a research agenda.


Gives a comprehensive overview of VET research in Europe, including steering of VET systems, macro- and microeconomic costs and benefits of VET, proposals for curricular research, and aspects of comparative VET research.


Describes how action research model and techniques can be integrated into technical education curricula.


Analyzes research on cooperative education and career development. Reports a need for additional study to examine the specific constructs of the career development process reported by career-determined and -undetermined students.

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