

Mapping HRD and VET research across Europe

Issues arising from an institutional analysis

Theses for discussion at the HRD Conference (Tilburg) and ECER/ VETNET (Geneva) in 2006

Sabine Manning

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Introduction

This study is part of a Cedefop supported project, carried out in the context of the European Research Overview (ERO).

The initial mapping of HRD and VET related research, presented in this study, is based on an institutional analysis. The aim is to identify thematic profiles, without any assessment of the quality or capacity (size and manpower) of the institutions. The present analysis starts out from a selection of 250 institutions across 22 European countries, which carry out HRD/VET related research ('HRD/VET' stands for 'HRD and/or VET').

The institutions have been selected from country reports supplied by a Cedefop network of experts, the ReferNet (ERO National Research Reports - ENRRs). While the basic list of institutions for this study is identical with selection provided by the national reports, the relevant information on these institutions has been compiled mainly from the institutional home pages concerned, partly supported by the descriptions given in the ENRRs.

At the present stage of the project, the research profile of the institutions is investigated for Europe as a whole; at a later stage, clustering by country is envisaged. The analysis has been done by applying content-related indicators and descriptors (see annex). This approach allows for linkages with previous thematic analyses of European projects and conference papers.

The following five theses highlight interim outcomes which are focused on those institutions that are characterised by both significant research activities and significant HRD/VET components in their profile (total 176 institutions). The graphical figures, which serve to illustrate the outcomes, are all related to this group of institutions. Each thesis leads to a few questions intended to stimulate the discussion.

Two round tables of European experts, who have been involved in both HRD and VET research, are arranged for this discussion in 2006: the first one at the HRD Conference in Tilburg and the second one at ECER (VETNET) in Geneva. The panel group at each round table is invited to take up major points from the theses, questioning or confirming them in the light of their national and European experience, reflecting on possible reasons and implications, and putting forward their own views on the HRD/VET research landscape. The proceedings of these two round table discussions are included as part of the study outcomes.

Thesis 1 - Research and related activities in HRD/VET

The standard pattern 'R&D' only partly applies to HRD/VET related research: this research is in fact linked with a variety of activities (single or combined): mostly teaching, fairly frequently development or consulting, less often information or administration [Figure 1a]. In most cases, research is combined with one other activity, in less cases with two or more; only a fairly small group of institutions carries out research on its own [Figure 1b]. The combination with other activities often implies an integrated approach: research may incorporate related

activities in its wider profile or, being in a minor role, research may be an integral part of these activities.

Questions:

Which are the most important linkages in qualitative terms (adding value to research): possibly research plus development and research plus consulting? How significant is the (quantitatively dominating) linkage between research and teaching in HRD/VET?

Figure 1a

Combination between research (R) and other types of activity at institutions (total: 176)

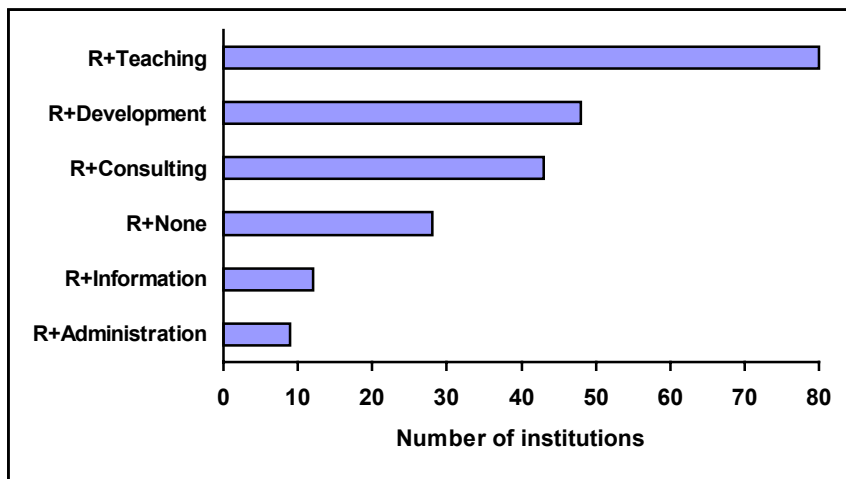
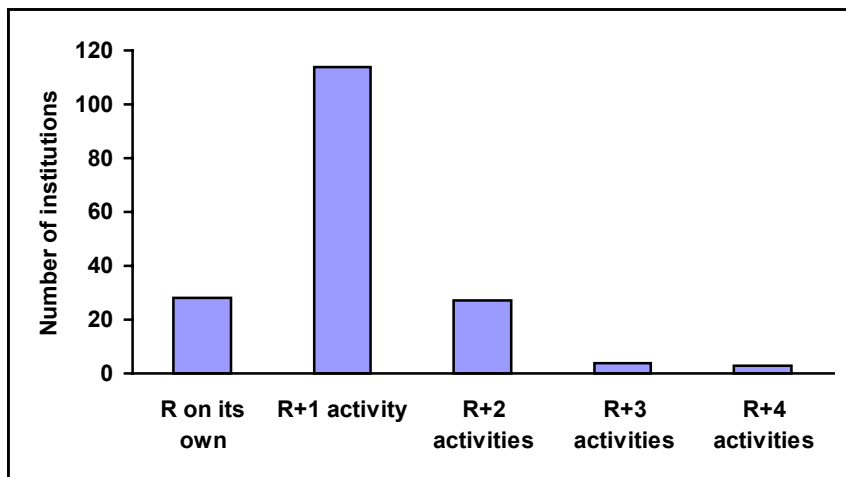


Figure 1b

Combination between research (R) and other types of activity within individual institutions (total: 176)



Thesis 2 - HRD/VET and related research fields

The cross-disciplinary nature of HRD/VET research is reflected in the institutional context of related research fields. Mostly, HRD/VET research is linked with educational studies, followed by economics (incl. business studies), sociology (incl. political studies) and work related studies (incl. technology/ ICT) - [Figure 2a]. A substantial part of the institutions cover several related fields [Figure 2b], above all linking HRD/VET with both economics and sociology. Only a small group of institutions is concerned with HRD/VET (mostly VET) on its own [Figures 2a/b].

Questions:

How to assess the linkage of HRD/VET with contextual fields of research? Does this make HRD/VET research more prosperous or more dependent?

Figure 2a

Type of field related to HRD/VET within institutions (percentage of total =176; partly overlapping)

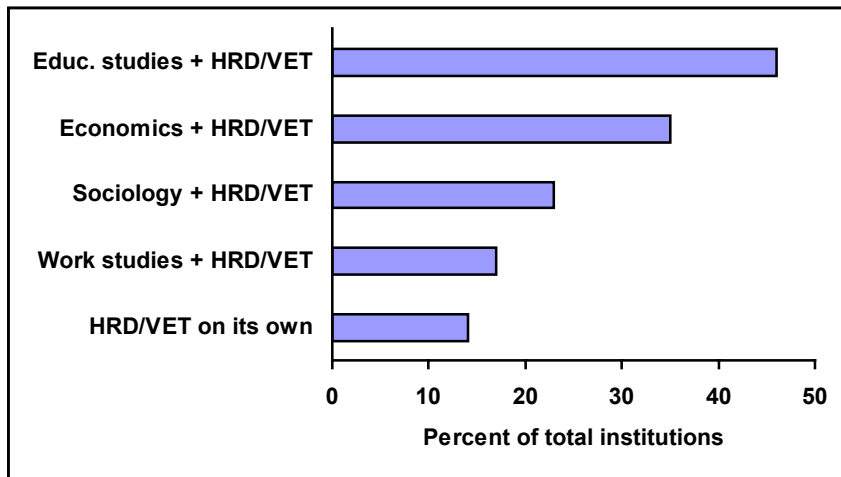
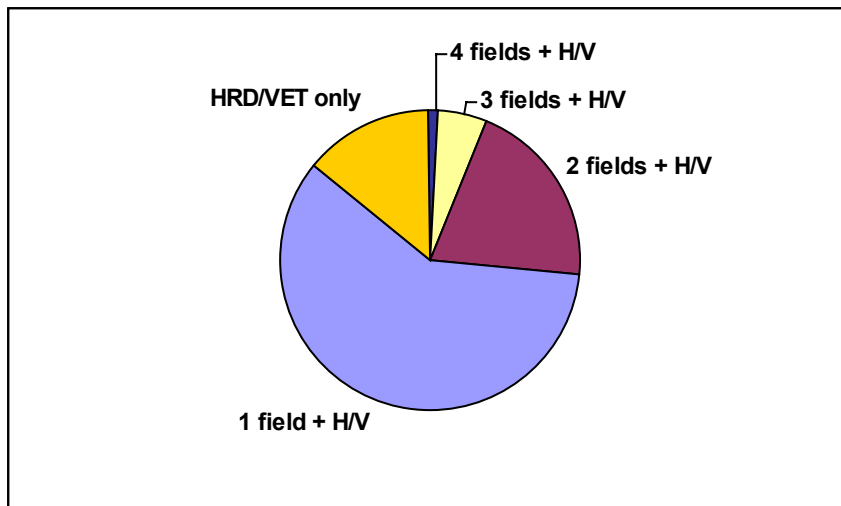


Figure 2b

Number of HRD/VET related fields within individual institutions (proportion of total =176)



Thesis 3 - Distinction between HRD and VET

The constellation of HRD and VET as two fields of research, which for instance seems to match the two European conferences (HRD conference and ECER/VETNET), does hardly apply to the institutional landscape in Europe. There are only a few institutions where both the name and the profile of activities clearly points to HRD or VET, but a large number where neither the name nor the profile relates to HRD or VET [Figure 3a].

If the profile of activities across all institutions (irrespective of their names) is considered, the following picture appears: The largest proportion of institutions include overlapping aspects of VET and HRD (such as learning and work, continuing education or skills development); less frequent are those institutions that conduct VET specific and/or HRD specific activities; and finally there is a small group including both HRD and VET as specific activities [Figure 3b].

Questions:

How can we assess the large area of overlapping research (such as learning and work): Is it subsumed under either HRD or VET, or is it rooted in either HRD or VET? What is the role of the two parallel European conferences (HRD Conference and ECER/ VETNET), both of which have a lot of this research in common? Is perhaps the international conference 'Researching Work and Learning' a step toward developing a field in its own right?

Figure 3a

HRD/VET identity according to name of institutions and to activity at institutions (total: 176)

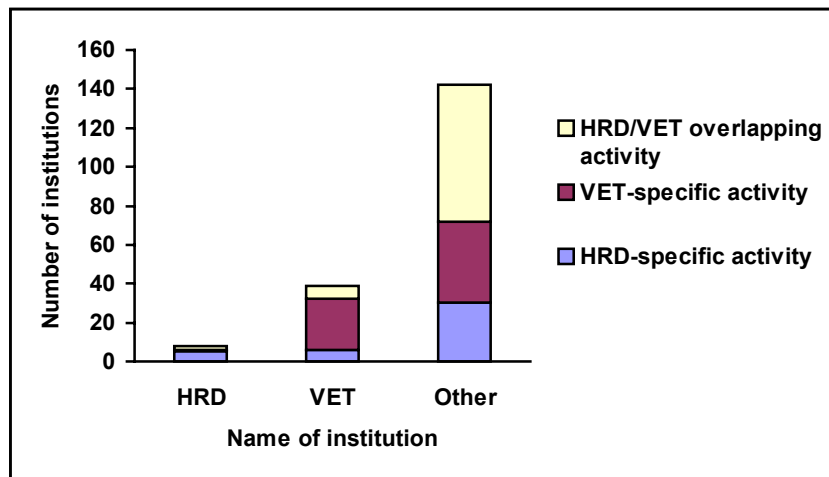
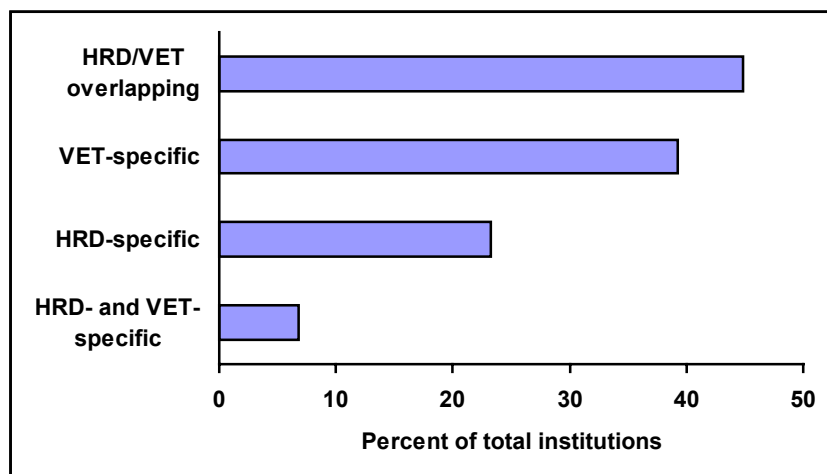


Figure 3b

HRD/VET activity at institutions (percentage of total =176)



Thesis 4 - Profiles of HRD and VET research

HRD research is related to a broader thematic profile than VET research. This is evident from comparing the range of themes, identified by thematic descriptors of VET/HRD related research (see annex), within institutions [Figure 4a]. In cases where both HRD and VET are covered, the overall thematic profile is particularly broad. On the other hand, research in the overlapping area between HRD and VET (e.g. 'work and learning' - see thesis 3) tends to have a more narrow profile. 'Narrow' in this case means that individual aspects of VET/HRD (e.g. 'competence development') are addressed, but these may be embedded in a neighbouring research field (e.g. labour market surveys).

Furthermore, the identification of HRD and VET related research by thematic descriptors, also across languages, reveals conceptual differences: While VET is identified as a fairly common concept (despite the variety of training patterns), HRD has got various orientations. In general, HRD related research across European countries is focused more often on the labour market than on the organisation, only partly it covers both [Figure 4b].

Questions:

What can we associate with 'HRD' in European research? Is there a field of HRD or rather a variety of HRD features linking up with VET in broad thematic profiles? Where do we find European research on HRD in the labour market? There is little evidence of this research at the present European conferences on HRD or VET!

Figure 4a

Thematic profile of research in relation to HRD/VET focus at institutions (percentage of each group)

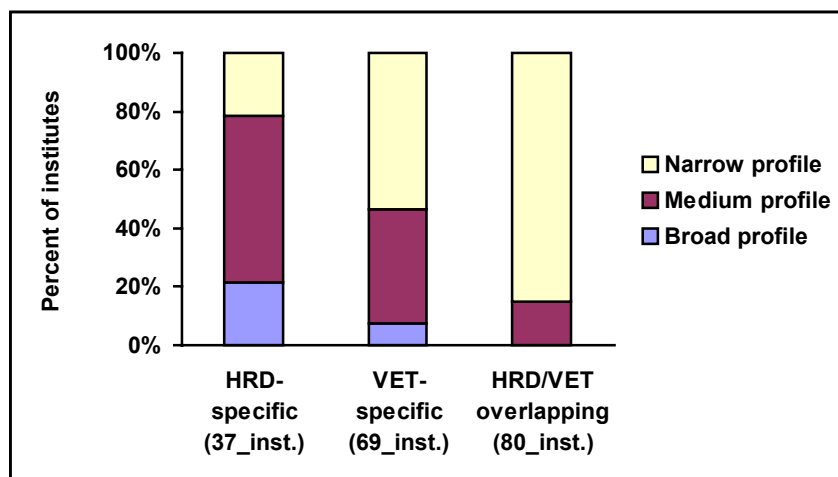
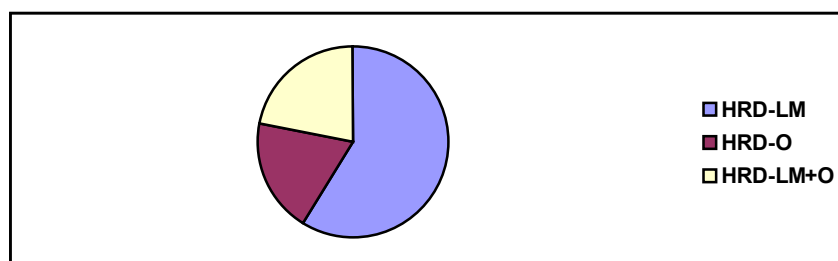


Figure 4b

HRD related research within institutions - focus on labour market or organisation (total 41)



Thesis 5 - National and European HRD/VET research

The thematic pattern of HRD/VET related research, which has been identified for the institutions in individual countries (thesis 4), differs considerably from that found for papers and projects at European level. Both the papers at European conferences (HRD conference and ECER/VETNET) and the EU projects of recent years have a strong focus on process issues (learning, competence development etc), while the institutions have high proportions shared by three areas: system (such as adult education, IVET), process (learning and work etc) and framework (labour market, society etc) - [Figure 5]. The basis for this comparative analysis are the thematic descriptors of VET/HRD related research (see annex).

Questions:

How can we assess the difference in thematic patterns of research between national institutions and European conferences and projects? Are European activities, by addressing process issues rather than system and framework aspects, more forward-looking? Or do they neglect issues that are no less essential for national development?

Figure 5

Thematic pattern of VET/HRD related research:

Institutions, conference papers and EU projects (percentage of each group)

