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European research communities in VET and HRD

Comparative analysis of two annual conferences -

based on indicators related to participation and thematic profile

European Educational Research Conference (ECER): Programme of the Vocational Education and Training Network (VETNET)

International Conference on HRD Research and Practice Across Europe

Period under investigation: 2000 to 2004, including five annual events of each conference

A working paper

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Introduction

In the field of European vocational education and training (VET) and human resource development (HRD) there are two major annual research conferences which address similar themes but function independently:

- the European Educational Research Conference (ECER): the programme of the Vocational Education and Training Network (VETNET) and
- the International Conference on HRD Research and Practice Across Europe.

These two conferences have different histories and contexts. The related research fields also have their own origins and conceptual frameworks. These complex issues, however, will not be tackled in this study, they will only be referred to as a background for selected questions which the present analysis is intended to address.

The main aim of this analysis is to explore the relationship between the conference as a framework of activity and the development of the community concerned. This is done for both conferences/ communities in parallel and in comparison. The relationship between conference and community implies two directions: A conference may convey an image of the corresponding community; at the same time the conference may have an impact on the activities and structure of this community.

The approach adopted in this initial analysis is to identify various indicators which might throw light on this relationship. The indicators refer to the following objects of analysis:

- participants of the conferences; members of related projects, organisations and networks;
- countries in which participants work or on which papers are based;
- themes of papers presented at the conferences and of EU projects.

While the indicators referring to participants and countries are based on the statistical data concerned, the indicators referring to themes of papers and projects are based on descriptors (see annex to descriptor 9).

There is no hypotheses or selection of assumptions to guide the analysis. Instead, the indicators are investigated in a systematic way, with the evidence related to each of them being presented, examined and discussed. The outcome of this analysis is intended to serve as a detailed resource, to be taken up in various ways - for offering an initial overview (see final section 'major outcome and comments'), for reporting on selected issues or for presenting evidence in specific studies.

The analysis is based on a comprehensive set of data, referring to all participants and presentations of the two conferences in the period 2000 to 2004 (complete data sequence).

Abbreviations and terms used in the following analysis:

'**ECER**' = European Educational Research Conference: VETNET programme;

'**HRD conference**'/ '**HRD**' = International Conference on HRD Research and Practice Across Europe;

'**Conference**' (related to either 'ECER' or 'HRD conference'): covering all the annual '**events**';

'**Country**': referring to the place of work and/or the email country code.

1

Annual participants

Indicator

'Annual participants' are the number of participants at each year's event. This indicator is suitable for measuring the attendance of an individual event, particularly in comparison to other events, and for establishing mean values or trends of participation over a number of events. Also, the breakdown of this indicator by country is instructive.

There are, however, limits to the use of this indicator, mainly because it does not take account of repeated attendance by individual persons at two or more events. This means, for instance, that the sum total of 'annual participants' over several years cannot be applied for assessing the size of the community related to the conference concerned. This aspect will be taken up in connection with the indicator 'individual participants' (see indicator 2).

It should be added, though, that there may be other contexts in which the sum total of 'annual participants' might be useful to know, e.g. for assessing the organisational effort required for running a conference over a period of time. But this aspect is not part of the present analysis.

The statistical analysis below contrasts the trend of annual participation in the two conferences during the total period (figures 1a and 1b), followed by a special overview of annual participants from new EU countries (figure 1c).

Figure 1a

Annual participants at ECER 2000 to 2004

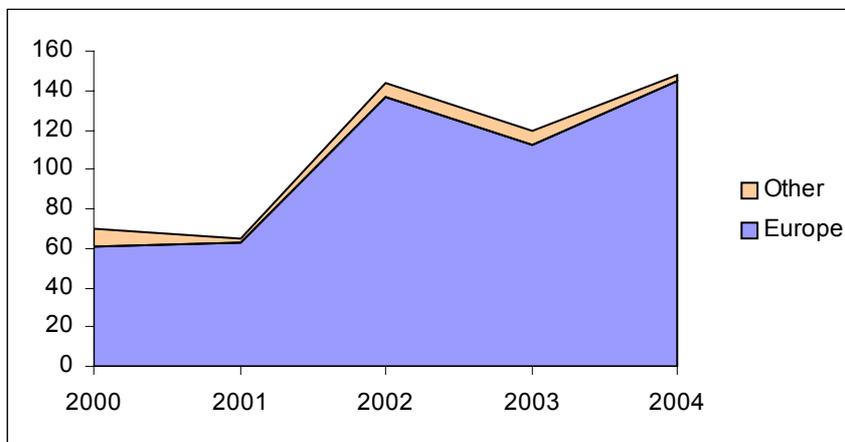
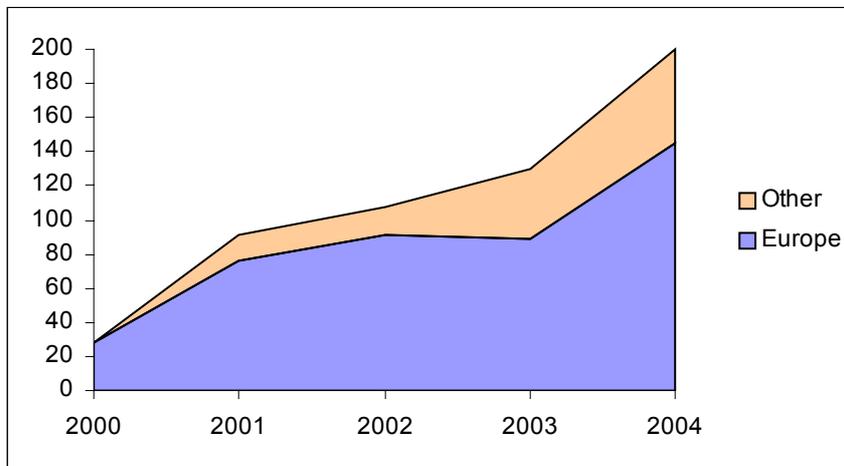


Figure 1b

Annual participants at the HRD conference 2000 to 2004



Outcome 1a/b

Both conferences show an overall increase in annual participation over the investigated period, but the two trends differ from each other. The average rise in the number of annual participants was stronger at the HRD conference (by 80%) than at ECER (by 30%). Furthermore, the rising trend during the period was fairly even at the HRD conference, while the trend at ECER was marked by considerable annual changes including a temporary decrease in participation.

The breakdown of the number of annual participants by region differs significantly between the two conferences. While the proportion of annual European participants at the HRD conference drops steadily (from 100% in 2000 to 73% in 2004), the corresponding proportion at ECER stays nearly unchanged at a fairly high level (average 95%).

Comment 1a/b

The different trends in annual participation observed at the two conferences may have various reasons. One explanation, especially for the different degree of increase, could be that the trends concerned are related to different stages of development: While the HRD conference actually started in 2000, therefore showing a marked initial rise, ECER had already started several years earlier, so that the initial rise in participation is no longer visible.

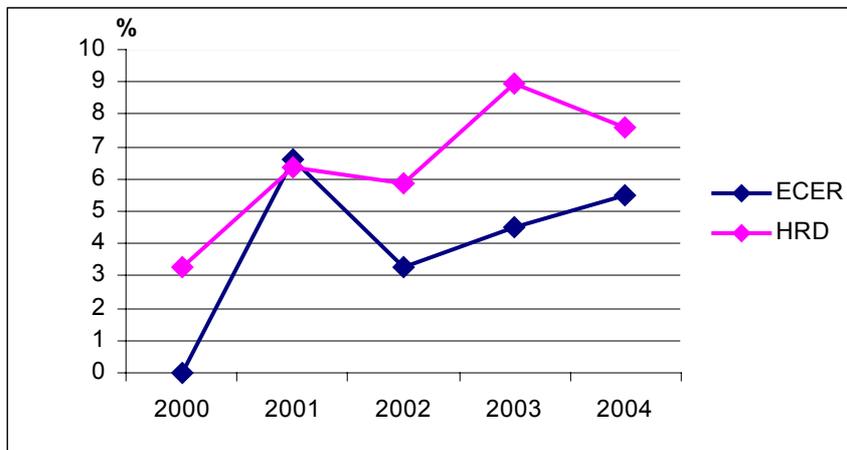
This contrast, however, does not explain why the annual participation at ECER shows such an uneven trend. It may be assumed that this reflects different levels of attraction attributed to individual events. A likely factor for this is the location (country/ city) in which the event takes place. This aspect will be further investigated in connection with another indicator: the proportion of participants who attended just one event within the period (indicator 3).

The difference between the two conferences with regard to the regional breakdown of participation can be mainly attributed to organisational factors. ECER is clearly a European conference, where outside participants are welcome but not particularly encouraged to join in. Therefore non-European participants tend to turn up in small numbers. The HRD conference also started out as a European event, but was soon extended to include non-European participants, with active involvement of the Academy of HRD (US based global organisation). This change was also expressed by adding the word 'international', from 2004 onwards, to the original name 'conference of HRD research and practice across Europe'.

Figure 1c

Annual participants from new EU countries at ECER and the HRD conference:

Proportion of annual European participants 2000 to 2004



Outcome 1c

The proportion of participants coming from the new EU member states, as a percentage of all annual European participants, is small at both conferences (average 4% ECER, 6% HRD); the corresponding annual proportions within the period however are rising. The figure above includes participants from both the newly accepted members and the candidates for later entry.

Comment 1c

The participation of researchers from new EU member countries merits special attention. These researchers have to cope, at the same time, with the challenges of the new European environment and the problems of transition in their own countries. The proportion of participants in the two conferences looks small, particularly in view of the size of the population of the new EU countries - in total and for single countries like Poland. Of particular interest in the present analysis is the question of how participation from these countries could be stimulated. This question is taken up under indicator 2.

2

Addressed participants

Indicator

'Addressed participants' are those who have been addressed by mailing lists prior to the conference, in the form of calls for proposals or similar announcements. These participants can be identified as a proportion of either the total annual participants or the total members included in the mailing lists. These proportions may be an indicator of how efficiently a conference is organised. They also serve to identify the relationship between a conference community and networks of researchers.

The following analysis of addressed European participants in each conference focuses on the annual events of 2003 and 2004. The corresponding mailing lists are described below:

ECER

- the mailing list used by the EERA secretariat for issuing the calls for proposals, which includes all participants of the previous year;
- the Cedefop mailing list ERO-Call, which reaches about 400 VET and HRD researchers across Europe.

HRD conference

- the mailing list of the EHRD Network, which brings together HRD related researchers from nearly all European countries, including most of the individual participants from the preceding years of the HRD conference.

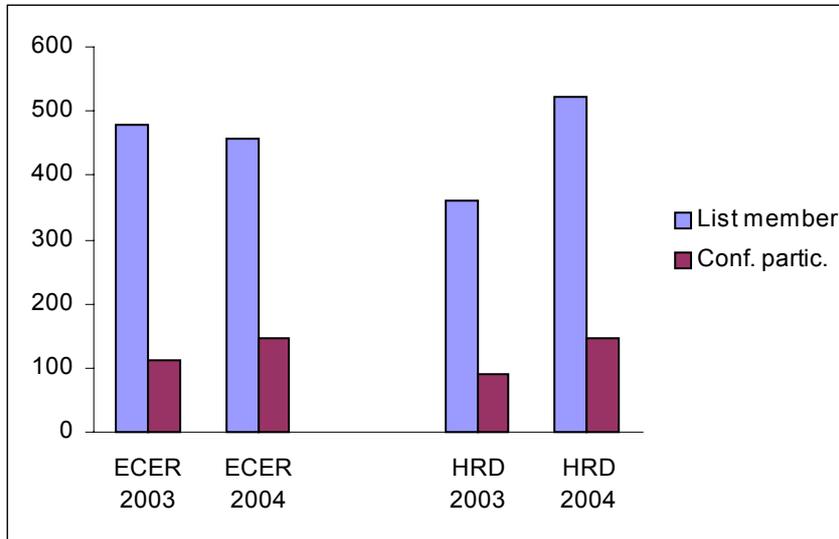
It should be added that calls for participation in the HRD conference are also circulated in the mailing list of the University Forum for HRD (partly overlapping with the EHRD Network) and in special lists compiled by the programme chairs of the annual events.

The annual events of both conferences, including the calls for proposals, are also publicised on specific home pages. The effect of these announcements is likely to differ from that of the mailing lists: While these lists mainly address a known audience (above all preceding participants), the web pages may attract more newcomers.

In the figures below, the list members and conference participants are contrasted, in order to identify the proportion of addressed participants (2a/b).

Figure 2a

List members and participants at ECER and the HRD conference
Number of persons from Europe 2003 and 2004



Outcome 2a

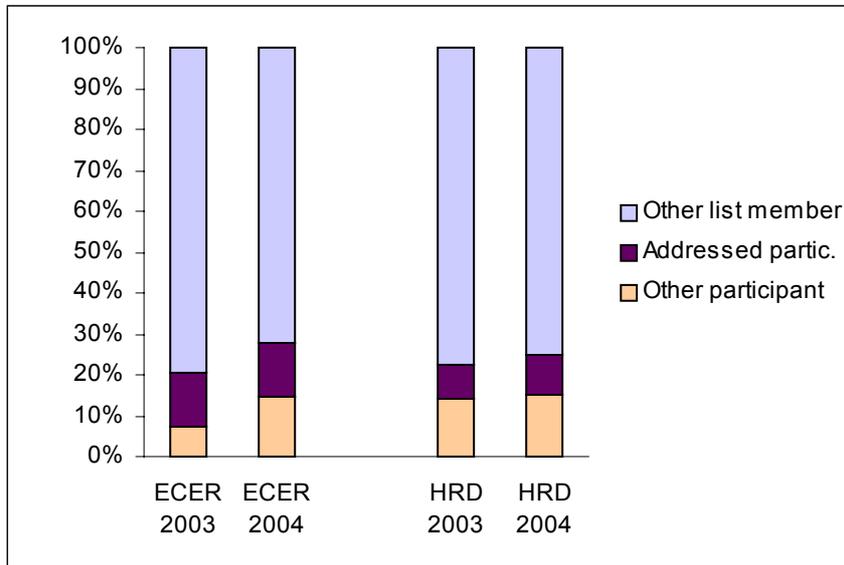
The list members related to ECER are taken from the two respective lists together (EERA and ERO-Call), with individuals appearing in both lists being counted as one person. The list members related to the HRD conference are those of the European EHRD Network.

As the figure above shows, the total number of list members related to each conference is similar. List members outnumber conference participants by three to four times. If the changes in list membership and conference participation between 2003 and 2004 are compared, there seems to be an opposing trend regarding ECER, but a corresponding trend regarding the HRD conference.

Figure 2b

List members, addressed participants and other participants at ECER and the HRD conference:

Proportion of the total number of European persons involved 2003 and 2004



Outcome 2b

The group of addressed participants is shown in relation to both the total list members and the total participants. The corresponding proportions are fairly similar for both conferences: Addressed participants account for a small proportion of list members (15% for ECER, 10% for the HRD conference), but for about half of the total participants (average 56% at ECER, 38% at the HRD conference).

Comment 2a/b

Firstly, a large proportion of list members receive calls without attending the conference concerned. In view of the broader function of these lists (except for the EERA list), this outcome is not surprising. It may even point to a potential pool of additional future participants.

Secondly, if the conference participation is considered, the attending list members meet non-list members in roughly equal proportions - with minor differences between the two types of conferences and the two years in each case. This may be interpreted as a significant effect of the mailing lists, matched by a corresponding effect of other means of publicising.

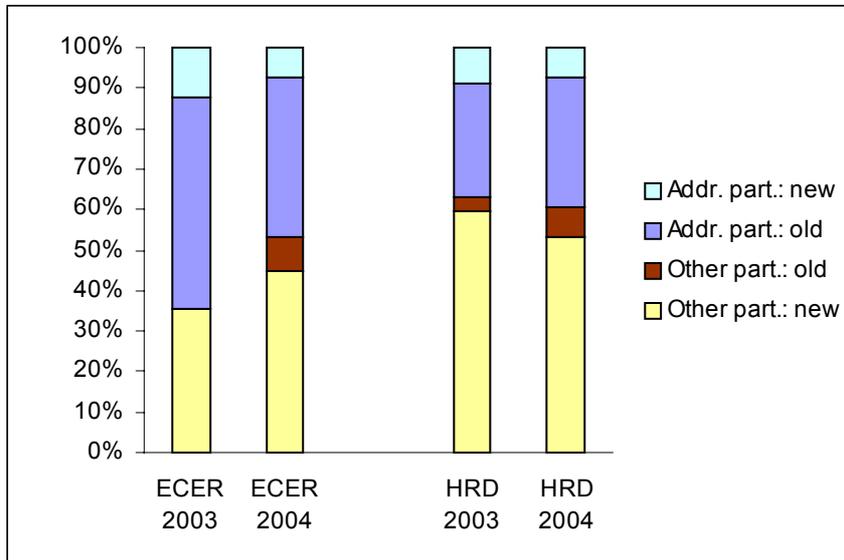
The evidence above suggests that addressed participants are largely identical with 'old' participants (who have been at this conference before). This aspect is analysed in more detail below.

Figure 2c

Participants at ECER and the HRD conference:

Breakdown of addressed and other participants by 'new' and 'old' participants:

Proportion of each among total annual participants 2003 and 2004



Outcome 2c

The proportion between addressed participants and other participants is the same as in the previous figure (2b), only reproduced at a larger scale.

The breakdown into 'new' and 'old' participants refers to those persons who are newcomers at the event concerned and those who have participated in any event before. The proportions between these two groups, in all four events, show a majority of new as against old participants. This relationship will be analysed further in connection with the 'once-only participants' and the 'returning participants' (indicators 4 and 5).

The point of interest in the figure above is the degree to which new and old participants have been addressed via mailing lists. Again, the outcome is similar for both conferences: Among the new participants, the proportion of those addressed is small (average 17% of the new participants), while among the old participants the proportion of those addressed is large (average 88% of the old participants).

If the group of addressed participants is considered as a whole, the new participants among them are a minority (average 20% of the addressed participants).

Comment 2c

The detailed analysis proves the assumption that calls via the mailing lists reach old rather than new participants. The conclusions which could be drawn from this outcome may depend on the aims pursued by these conferences. This is not only a question of the balance between old and new participants in general. It may be worth considering what kind of new participants are desirable: those turning up by chance from anywhere or others who are of specific interest. The latter could be researchers from new EU member states or from newly formed project partnerships or networks. In order to attract these groups in a more targeted way, the mailing lists would have to be expanded accordingly or be supplemented by more specific forms of communication.

The limits of the EERA list in this respect are particularly evident. This list consists of the participants of the immediately preceding ECER event and, therefore, only reaches 'old' participants. There is of course an expectation, implied in the EERA list, that the newcomers of the preceding event could be encouraged to return to the following event. However, as the analysis of returning participants (indicator 5) reveals the proportion of this group is small compared to the large proportion of once-only participants.

Altogether, the mailing lists operating for the two conferences have mainly the effect of maintaining the community of previous participants while contributing little to attracting newcomers.

3

Individual participants

Indicator

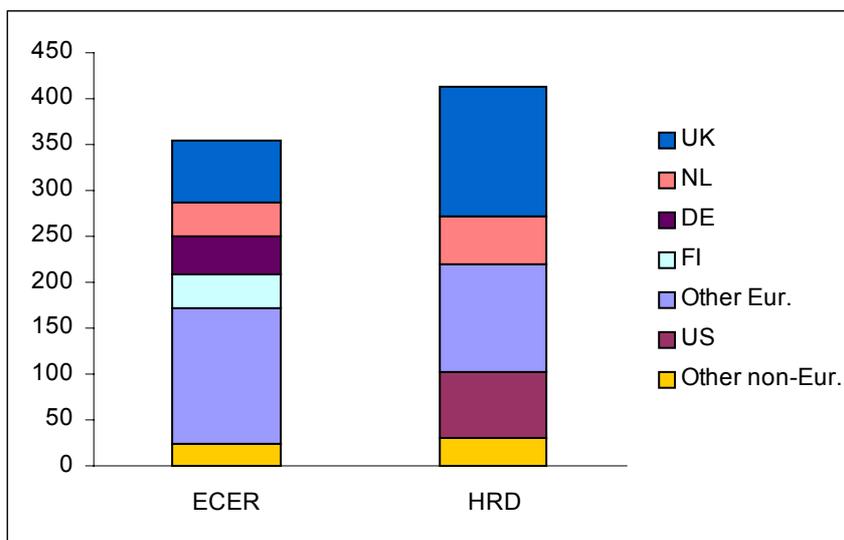
'Individual participant' refers to a person who attended the conference concerned at any time in the given period (between one and five times in the period 2000 to 2004). This indicator counts an individual person only once, irrespectively of how often he or she took part. It is therefore suitable for measuring the size of the community related to the conference concerned. It should be noted, though, that the two sets of conference participants are treated separately, without indicating any overlap between the two 'communities' (persons who attended both ECER and the HRD conference - this special group is presented under indicator 7).

The statistical analysis of individual participants includes a breakdown by country. Results are presented for the period in total (figure 3a), followed by a more detailed breakdown for each conference (figures 3b and 3c) and a special overview of participants from new EU countries (figure 3d).

Figure 3a

Individual participants at ECER and the HRD conference:

Total number and breakdown by country 2000 to 2004



Outcome 3a

The total number of participants at each conference is fairly similar (ECER 355, HRD 412); the European group is even closer in size (ECER 330, HRD 309). The breakdown of participants by country highlights the biggest groups only (at least 30 participants). Among the European participants, at both conferences, the UK is the biggest representative (particularly large at the HRD conference), followed by the Netherlands. Germany and Finland, too, stand out at ECER, but not at the HRD conference. The group of participants from outside Europe, especially the US, is much larger at the HRD conference than at ECER.

Comment 3a

The prominent role of the UK at the HRD conference is mainly due to the British origin of this event (the initial promoter being the University Forum for HRD in the UK), while ECER has been a European event from the start (even though with strong UK backing as well). This different organisational background may also play a part in the uneven distribution of UK participants between the HRD conference and ECER. Still, it may be concluded that in the UK the HRD group is stronger than the VET group in terms of both size and organisational backing.

The representation of the Netherlands is significant in two respects: it is quite strong altogether, in relation to the proportion of Dutch citizens in Europe; it is noticeable at both conferences, similar to the UK. These two countries in particular may be regarded as the European pillars of both conferences.

Among the rest of the European countries, two stand out at ECER: Germany and Finland (despite its small population!). But neither is highly represented at the HRD conference. At the same time France, as the third major country in Europe (next to Germany and the UK), has a low representation at both conferences. This outcome suggests that the distribution of European participants within and between the two conferences doesn't follow a simple logic. It is probably influenced by various factors (outside the reach of this analysis!), including the role of VET (as promoted at ECER) and HRD (as conceived by the HRD conference) in individual countries (see also comment on the following figures 3b/c), the language issue (both conferences using English as lingua franca), financial resources and academic stimuli.

The different proportion of non-European participants at the two conferences can be largely attributed to the organisational factors which were already mentioned in connection with the regional breakdown of annual participants (see comment 1a/b).

Table 3a

Individual participants at ECER and the HRD conference:

Number from countries with large participation 2000 to 2004

(see figure 3a and comment 3a)

	ECER	HRD
DE	41	11
FI	38	7
FR	10	25
NL	37	51
UK	68	141
US	4	72

Figure 3b
 Individual participants at ECER:
 Breakdown by country 2000 to 2004

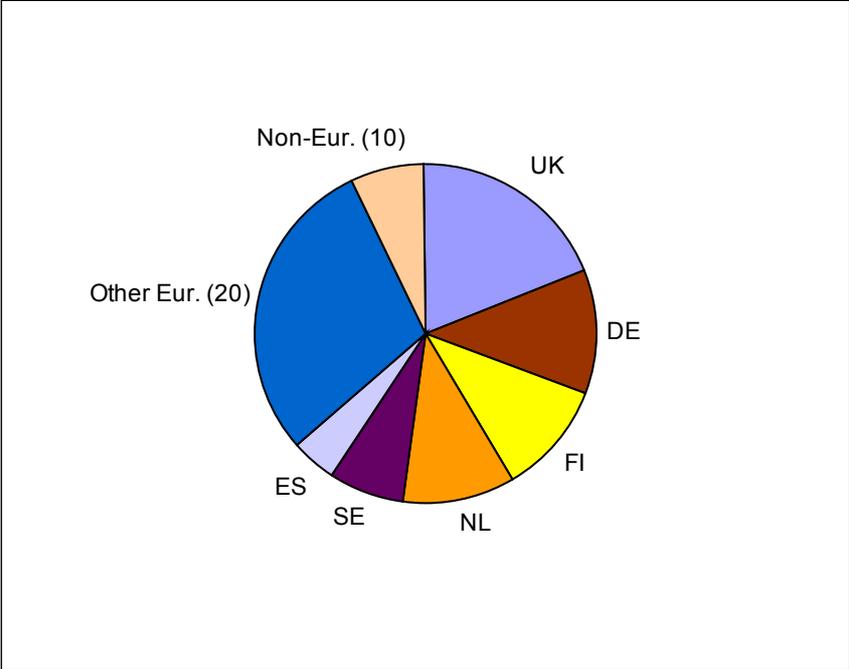
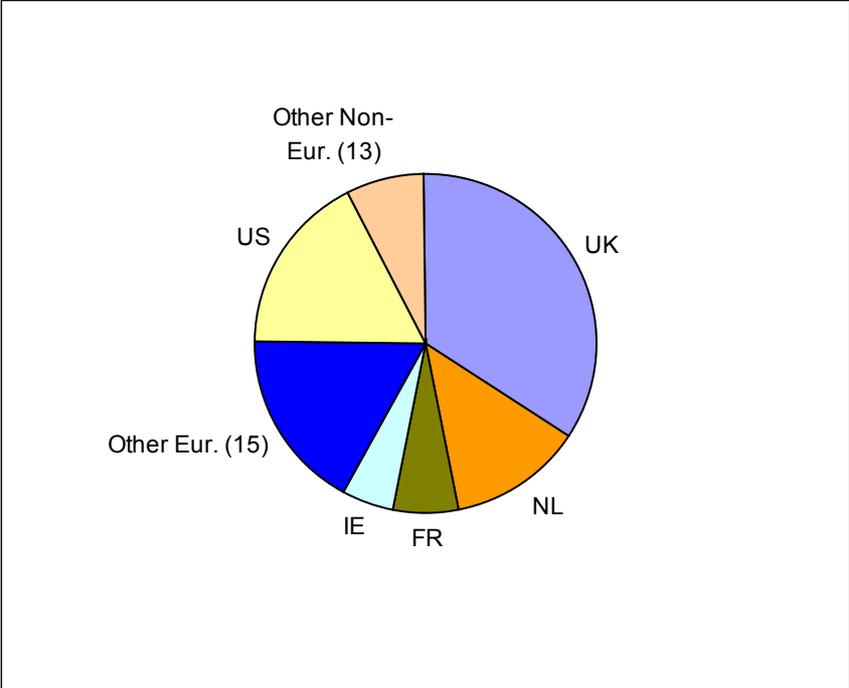


Figure 3c
 Individual participants at the HRD conference:
 Breakdown by country 2000 to 2004



Outcome 3b/c

The two figures above show a more detailed national breakdown of individual participants for each conference. Those countries which account for least 5% of all participants in the conference concerned are made visible. Again, the UK and the Netherlands can be found in both cases, while the other major countries are specific to each conference: at ECER these are Finland, Germany, Spain and Sweden; at the HRD conference France, Ireland and the US. In both conferences, the remaining groups of European and non-European participants comprise a fairly large number of countries (indicated in brackets).

Comment 3b/c

Care should be taken in interpreting these breakdowns (see comment on figure 3a). It could be assumed, for instance, that the representation of an individual country at the two conferences might be dependent on the national balance between HRD and VET related research communities. This interpretation seems to make sense in several cases, in the light of common knowledge on certain national systems: roughly equal balance of HRD and VET in the UK and the Netherlands; VET dominance in Finland, Germany and Sweden. But the assessment for France, Ireland and Spain would be rather speculative - their more prominent representation at one or the other conference might be just as dependent on other aspects such as the effective organisation of conference events in the country concerned (e.g. HRD conferences in Limerick and Toulouse).

It should also be stressed that the size of a national group at either of these conferences cannot be taken as an indicator of the strength or weakness of the research community in a given country. The degree of participation in such a European event is influenced by lots of factors, which cannot be examined in this analysis.

4

Once-only participants

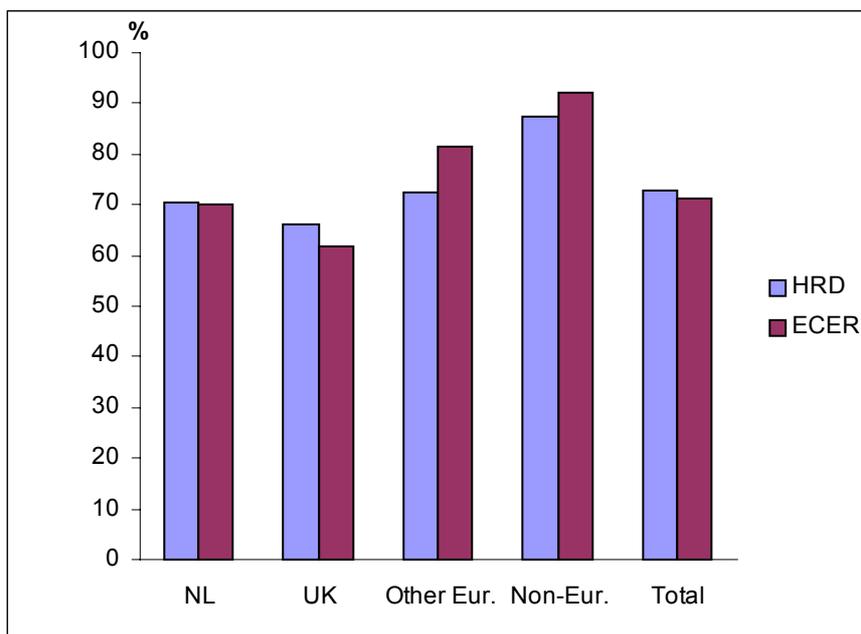
Indicator

'Once-only participants' are those who attended the conference concerned only one time in the given period (in one out of five years). This indicator measures the lowest level of frequency in attendance (see also indicator 6 on 'frequent participants'). For comparative analysis, the once-only participants are presented as a proportion of the individual participants in the total period (see indicator 3) or of the annual participants at single events (see indicator 1). In both these contexts, the indicator allows to make certain assumptions about the characteristics of a conference community and also about the effect of the conferences (see comments below).

The once-only participants are first shown as a proportion of individual participants by country (figure 4a), then as a proportion of annual participants throughout the five years (figure 4b); as a further aspect of analysis, the location of events and the involvement of host participants is considered (figure 4c/d).

Figure 4a

Once-only participants at ECER and the HRD conference:
Proportion of all individual participants by country 2000 to 2004



Outcome 4a

The proportion of participants who attended only one of the annual events is nearly equal for ECER and the HRD conference - see right column in the figure (ECER 71% and HRD 73% of the individual participants). The proportions are also fairly similar across the major country groups (with the non-European groups somewhat higher than European groups for both conferences). This result may be summed up in a simple statement: Three out of four participating persons turned up only once in five years.

Comment 4a

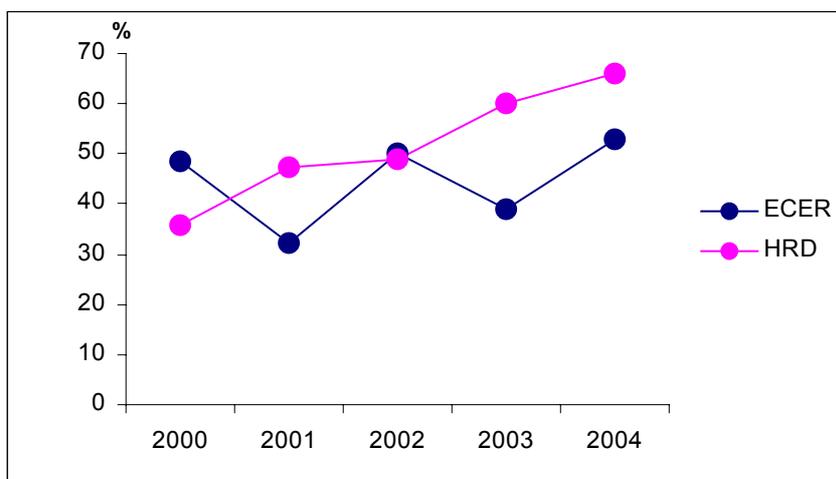
The close matching between ECER and the HRD conference with regard to this indicator is striking, not least because the organisational patterns of these two conferences are quite different. Whether this outcome is a coincidence or of any wider significance, for instance pointing to a general feature of annual research conferences, remains open.

The proportion of once-only participants can be used to identify the degree of fluctuation in the conference community. This fluctuation may be interpreted in the following way: The high percentage of once-only participants (more than 70%) shows the predominant function of these conferences for facilitating dissemination and extending contacts, while the potential of these conferences for building/ strengthening communities of their own seems to be less great. It would therefore not be realistic, for instance, to consider the participants in the VETNET programme of ECER as the informal membership of VETNET or to try and build this network on the basis of ECER participation. It should be added, though, that conferences are a major framework for underpinning contact between various members of transnational networks and project partnerships, thereby helping to consolidate the infrastructure of the European research community at large.

Figure 4b

Once-only participants at ECER and the HRD conference:

Proportion of annual participants 2000 to 2004



Outcome 4b

This figure shows the once-only participants for each year as a proportion of the annual total participants in each conference. The average percentage is lower than in figure 4a (ECER 45%, HRD 52%) because the annual totals include repeated counting of persons who attended two or more events. On this basis it can be said that around half of the participants in any event attended just this single event. With regard to the sequence of events, the proportion of once-only participants at the HRD conference rose steadily while the corresponding proportion at ECER went up and down in annual succession, with only a slightly rising overall trend.

Comment 4b

The two trends showing the proportion of once-only participants among annual participants seem to follow the corresponding trends already observed for the number of annual participants (see figures 1a/b). This resemblance is significant, because it suggests that once-only participants follow a general trend of participation rather than being specific in their attendance.

It should be added that, in view of this resemblance, even a slightly problematical aspect of this indicator appears to be insignificant: The number of once-only participants towards the final year of a period may be exaggerated, because this is likely to include a proportion of first-time participants who may return in the following year(s). so this factor alone could account for a rising trend at the end of the period - but actually the corresponding rise of total annual participants is just a prominent.

Against the background of the general resemblance stated above, it is worth noting a difference in emphasis: The uneven pattern of annual attendance at ECER is more pronounced among once-only participants than among total participants. Therefore, the open question of how to explain these 'ups and downs' will be investigated among the once-only participants. This has to be done in the light of additional factors influencing annual participation, especially the role of the host country concerned.

The following two figures (4c/d), referring to ECER and the HRD conference, identify the location of annual events (country/ town). At the same time, they show the proportion of once-only participants from the host country concerned.

Figure 4c

Once-only participants from host country and other countries at ECER:
Proportion of annual participants 2000 to 2004

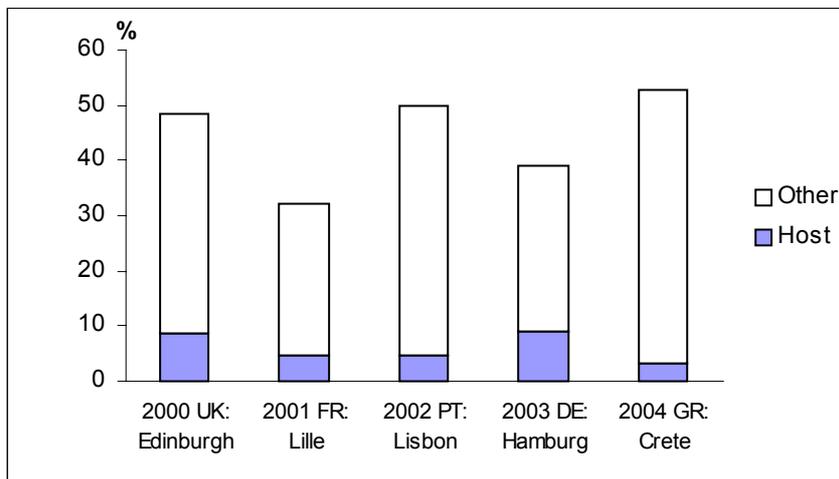
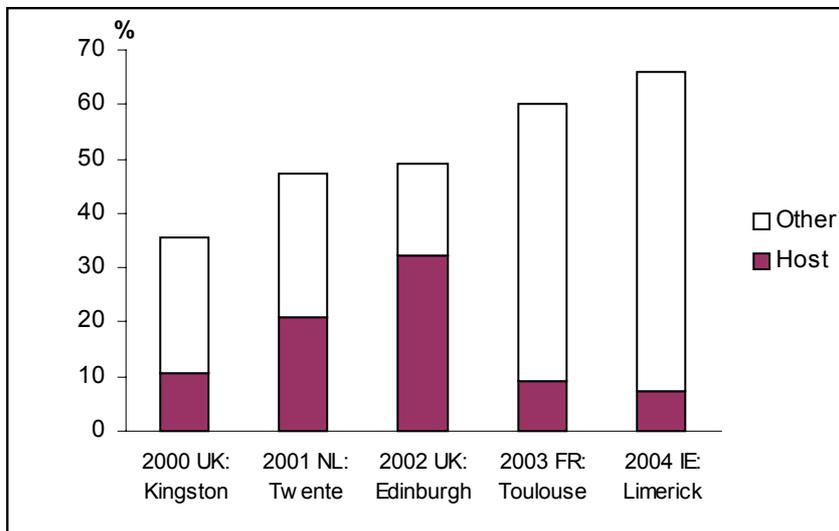


Figure 4d

once-only participants from host country and other countries at the HRD conference:
Proportion of annual participants 2000 to 2004



Outcome 4c/d

The once-only participants are presented as a percentage of annual participants for each conference - in this respect the outcome of the two figures is identical with the comparative figure 4b. The uneven distribution across the ECER events can now be associated with the location concerned: while Edinburgh (UK), Lisbon (PT) and Crete (GR) had a higher participation rate, Lille (FR) and Hamburg (DE) had a lower rate.

The columns of once-only participants are divided into host and other participants, both being calculated as a proportion of annual participants, but also visible in relation to each other. If the proportion of the host participants is considered, a common pattern across the events of both conferences emerges: the proportion is larger for events in the UK, the Netherlands and Germany, while it is smaller for France, Ireland and Portugal and particularly small for Greece.

Comment 4c/d

Various factors could play a part in the once-only participation rate for each event, including the organisational effort and resources of the local programme team, the attraction of the place itself and the status of VET research in the country concerned.

The proportion of once-only participants from the host country provides further insight. The difference between the events partly reflects the absolute size of the corresponding national VET research communities (e.g. large in Germany and the UK; small in Ireland and Portugal), but also the acceptance of an English language event in the cultural environment concerned (no doubt positive in the Netherlands, but negative in France).

Even more revealing is the proportion of once-only participants from other than the host countries. This proportion is especially high for Crete and Lisbon (ECER) and for Limerick and Toulouse (HRD conference). In more concrete terms: Large numbers of participants from across Europe and also from outside Europe turned up just once within five years to attend events which took place in particularly attractive environments. It certainly is not speculative to detect a significant factor of tourism in this participation rate - which after all is an agreed part of conference management.

5

Returning participants

Indicator

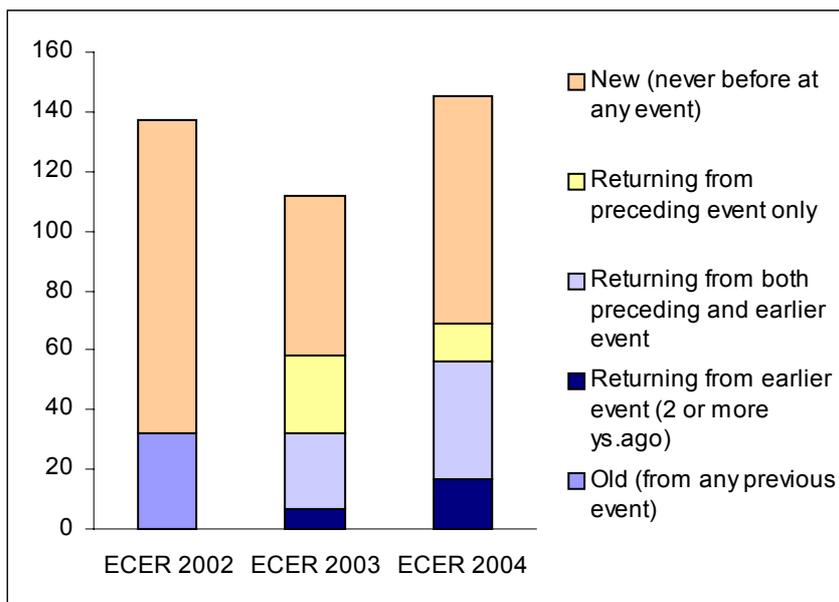
'Returning participants' are those who attended two or more events of the conference concerned. They may return one year after their first event or later; they may return once or several times. This indicator is the counterpart of the once-only participants (indicator 4). The process of returning can be regarded as a feature of community development. The question whether this return is led by internal factors of the conference itself or by related/ external factors will be of particular interest.

For comparative analysis, the returning participants are presented as a proportion of the annual participants in selected years.

Figure 5a

Returning participants at ECER:

Breakdown of numbers at three successive events 2002 to 2004



Outcome 5a

The figure describes the flow of participants within the successive events by using colour and arrows. The top part of the columns shows the group of newcomers at each event, the rest below are returning participants. While the number of newcomers varied between the events (this phenomenon was mentioned in connection with the once-only participants - see indicator 4), the total number of returning participants increased from event to event.

However, among the returning participants there were also two different developments:

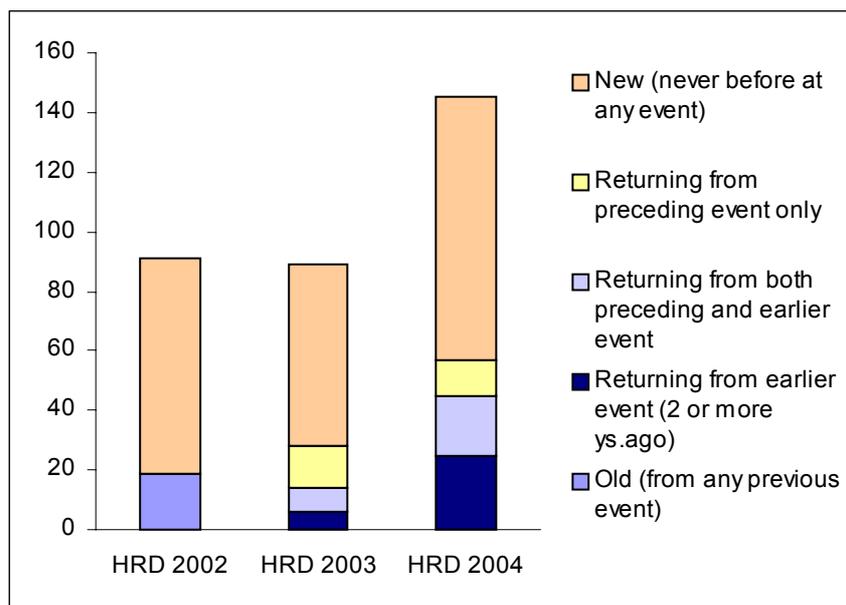
- The returning newcomers (yellow segment) varied in size (2003 bigger, 2004 smaller), obviously depending on the total number of newcomers at the previous event. The proportion of those newcomers who returned in the following year was about 25% in both 2003 and 2004.

- Those participants who returned after two successive years (light blue segment) grew in size (2004 bigger than 2003). Their proportion of the returning participants in the previous year was about 77% in both 2003 and 2004.

Altogether, a growing group of frequently returning participants emerged (see more about 'frequent participants' under indicator 6).

Figure 5b

Returning participants at the HRD conference:
Breakdown of numbers at three successive events 2002 to 2004



Outcome 5b

This figure on the HRD conference is designed in the same way as the previous one on ECER. The outcome, too, shows similarities. While the number of newcomers (top segment of the columns) varied between the events, the total number of returning participants (all other segments together) increased from event to event.

Again, among the returning participants there were two different developments:

- The returning newcomers (yellow segment) varied in size (2003 bigger, 2004 smaller), obviously depending on the total number of newcomers at the previous event. The proportion of those newcomers who returned in the following year was about 20% in both 2003 and 2004.
- Those participants who returned after two successive years (light blue segment) grew in size (2004 bigger than 2003). Their proportion of the returning participants in the previous year was about 40% in 2003 and 90% in 2004.

Altogether, a growing group of frequently returning participants emerged.

Comment 5a/b

At both conferences, newcomers returned in small proportions while those having participated before returned in large proportions. This outcome suggests that the conference

events in themselves have relatively little binding effect on participants. There must be more important factors, from external contexts, which influence the returning of participants. These factors are further examined in connection with 'frequent participants' - indicator 6).

The analysis of returning participants also links up with the issue of calls for participation (see indicator 2). At both conferences, less than half of the participants of one year returned in the following year (average for 2002/2003 and 2003/2004: ECER 40%, HRD 30%). This outcome shows up the limits of those conference calls (such as applied by EERA for ECER) which are sent to the participants of the preceding year only.

6

Frequent participants

Indicator

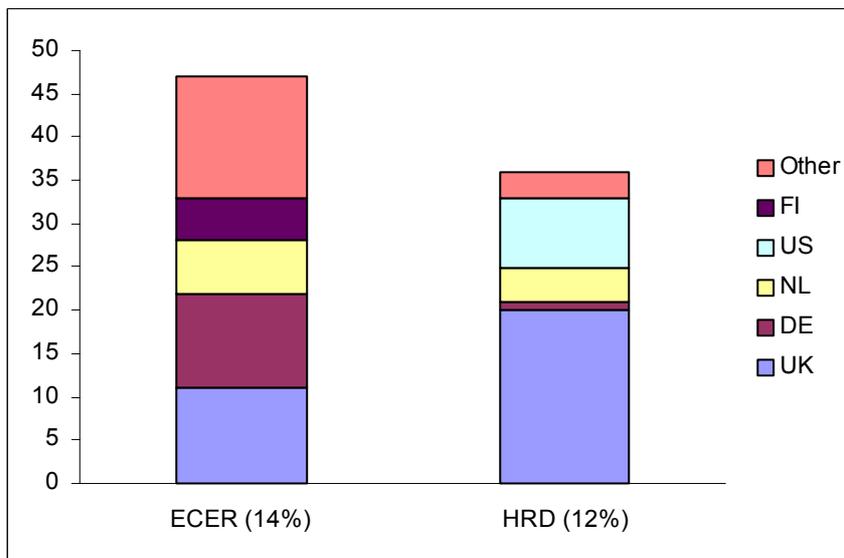
'Frequent participants' are those who attended the conference concerned three or more times in the given period (five annual events). This indicator, which measures a high level of frequency in attendance, contrasts with the indicator for the lowest level (see indicator 4 on 'once-only participants'). For comparative analysis, the frequent participants are presented as a proportion of the individual participants in the total period (see indicator 3). This proportion serves to identify certain characteristics of a conference community.

The frequent participants are first shown as a proportion of individual participants, with a breakdown by country (figure 6a), then in relation to the members of the supporting networks: the VETNET Board and the Forum network (figure 6b) and the University Forum for HRD and the Academy of HRD (figure 6c).

Figure 6a

Frequent participants at ECER and the HRD conference:

Breakdown of number by country; total proportion of all individual participants 2000 to 2004



Outcome 6a

The proportion of frequent participants among the individual participants is nearly equal at both conferences (ECER 14%, HRD 12%). This contrasts with the high proportion of once-only participants established in figure 3a (ECER 71% and HRD 73%). The remaining individual participants attended two events (15% at each conference).

The breakdown of frequent participants by country appears to be similar to the corresponding one of all individual participants (figure 3a). The same individual countries are among the major participants (UK and NL in both conferences; DE and FI at ECER; US at HRD). This similarity also applies the national proportions within each conference, with only one difference worth noting - the relatively strong group of frequent ECER participants from Germany (same number as UK).

Comment 6a

The frequent participants can be regarded as the core group of the conference community. The size of this group is fairly small - about one out of eight persons at both ECER and the HRD conference. Whether the similarity of this proportion for the two conferences is a coincidence or a more general phenomenon cannot be investigated in this analysis (see corresponding note on similar proportion of once-only participants - comment 4a).

The effect of this core group on the conference concerned is of course stronger than the small number of persons may suggest. In quantitative terms, the enhanced effect is obvious when the repeated participation of these persons is considered. More important is the qualitative aspect: Frequent participants are more likely to form or strengthen ties between themselves, to be among the main actors of the conference and to function as a continuum between annual events. The open question in this respect is whether the core group is a product of the conference itself, and thereby an indicator of the community building potential of a conference, or whether the development of the core group is (also) related to any other context of research community activities.

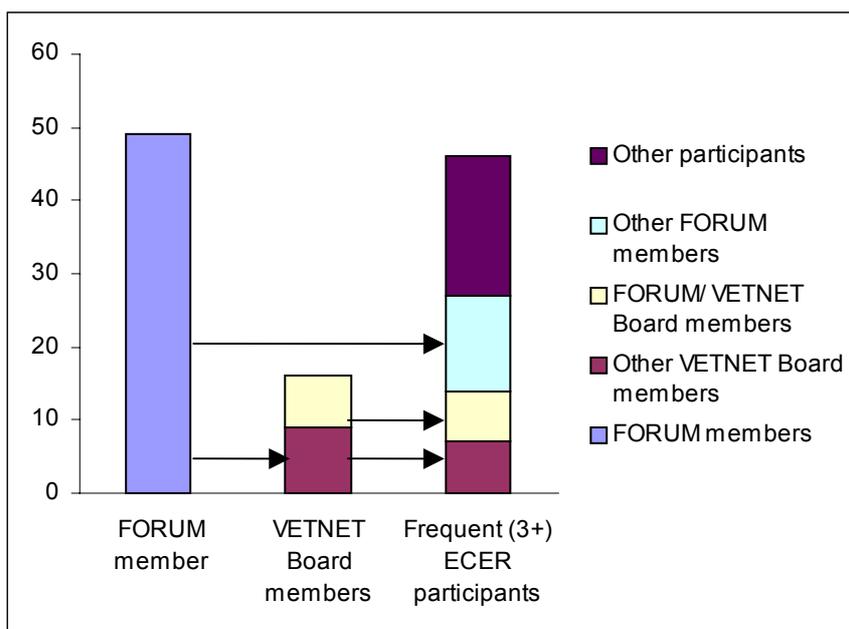
The national breakdown of frequent participants is also worth considering: The core group basically represents the national grouping of the overall conference community. This could be interpreted both as a reflection of community developments within the conference and as an effect of community activities outside the conference.

The question of how the core group of a conference is related other communities will be taken up below (figures 6b/c).

Figure 6b

Frequent ECER participants in relation to the members of the VETNET Board and the Forum network

Numbers of persons 2000 to 2004 (period related to ECER)



Outcome 6b

The group of frequent ECER participants (in the column on the right) is broken down according to the membership in two related networks: VETNET represented by its board members and Forum, which was an active European VET research network up to about 2002.

The breakdown reveals the following relationships:

- VETNET Board members, most of whom participate frequently in ECER, account for a third of the frequent participants;
- Forum members constitute half of the VETNET Board and, as a larger group, half of the frequent conference participants;
- more than half of the frequent participants are either Forum or VETNET Board members.

Comment 6b

The statistical relationships identified above demonstrate the close linkage between frequent ECER participation and membership in the two most prominent networks of European VET research. This is of course not surprising, particularly in view of the major function which the VETNET Board has got in organising this conference. At the same time, informal collaboration between this board and the Forum has been a major factor in bringing about a core group of conference participants.

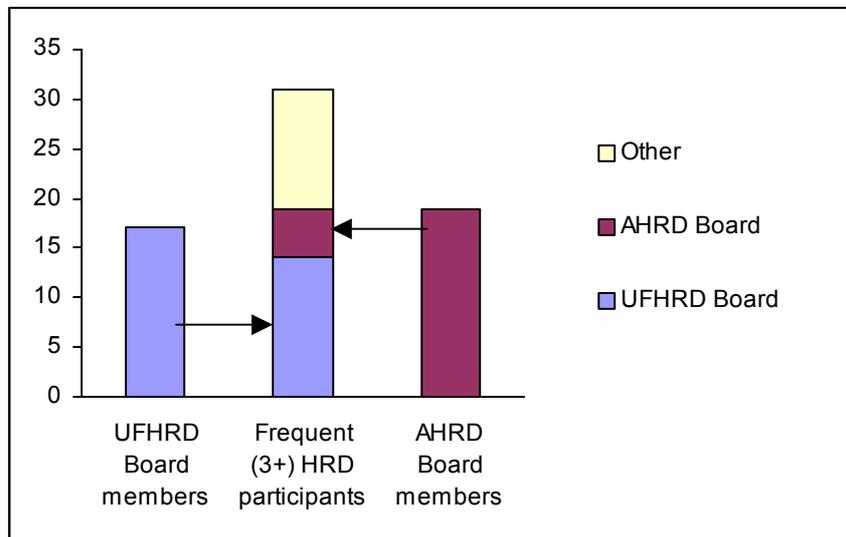
However, the wider context of networking should also be taken into account: both the 'members' (Forum/ VETNET Board) and 'non-members' among the core group are linked with numerous European project partnerships and thematic networks. Many of these use the ECER events for presenting joint research results. The majority of frequent conference participants are likely to be 'multiple' members of these networks.

In conclusion it may be assumed that the core group of ECER participants is an outcome of both the VETNET Board membership and the wider European networking activities. Altogether, the core group seems to have emerged from this broader community development, rather than being a product of the conference itself.

Figure 6c

Frequent HRD conference participants in relation to the board members of the AHRD and UFHRD

Numbers of persons 2000 to 2004 (period related to HRD conference)



Outcome

The frequent HRD conference participants (in the middle column) include members of the two major supporting organisations:

- the Board of the University Forum for HRD, of which the majority are frequent participants;
- the Board of the Academy of HRD, of which a small part are frequent participants.

Together, these members form nearly two thirds of the core group of HRD conference participants.

Comment 6c

The proportion of organisational members among the core group of HRD conference participants is larger than is the corresponding one at ECER (two thirds at HRD, one third at ECER). This difference suggests that the influence of the supportive organisations on the conference community is stronger at the HRD conference than at ECER.

The remaining frequent participants at the HRD conference are mostly UFHRD members, while only a few are associated with European project partnerships and networks. This outcome, too, distinguishes this core group from the ECER core group, which is strongly linked up with European networking activities. A particular feature of involvement in research collaboration will be investigated in the following section on team participants (indicator 5).

7

Identical participants

Indicator

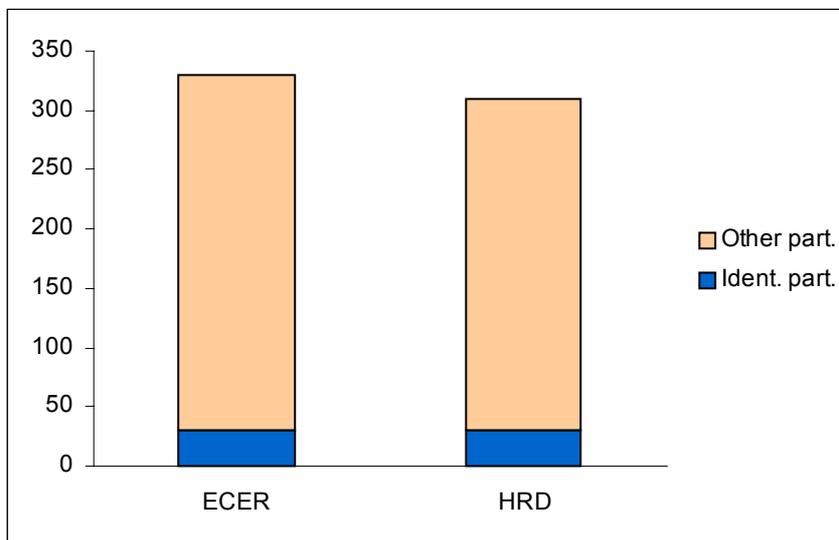
'Identical participants' are those persons who attended both ECER and the HRD conference, with a minimum of one event each in the given period. These participants constitute an identical group within the two conference communities. Identical participants are analysed in relation to the total individual participants (see indicator 2) of the two conferences. The analysis is confined to persons from European countries.

This indicator is suitable for measuring the degree of overlap in participation, as a basis for identifying the linkage between the two communities in the European context. Furthermore, the identification of identical participants makes it possible to analyse the distribution of all individual participants between the two conferences, in order to assess the overall size and structure of the 'combined' ECER/ HRD conference communities.

Identical participants among individual participants from Europe are presented in figure 7a, followed by a national breakdown of identical participants in figure 7b. The distribution of individual participants across the two conferences, also including a breakdown by country, is shown in figure 7c.

Figure 7a

Identical participants among total individual participants from European countries:
Numbers at ECER and the HRD conference 2000 to 2004



Outcome 7a

The number of European participants who attended both conferences at least once in the whole period (identical participants) is 30. This group accounts for a tenth of the total number of individual European participants at each conference and for 5% of the number of individual participants of the two conferences taken together.

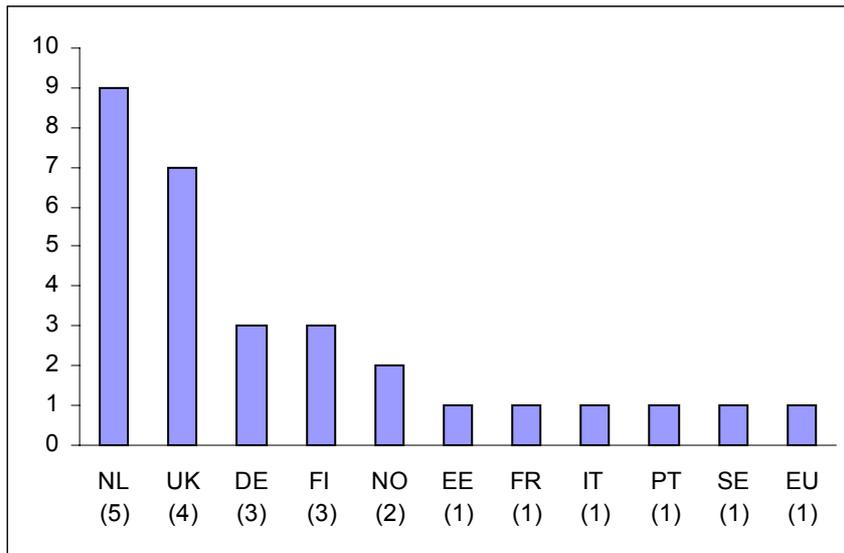
Comment 7a

The group of identical participants appears to be small, if the close links existing between the two research fields are considered. This thematic linkage will be analysed later in this study (see indicator 9).

Figure 7b

Identical participants from Europe at ECER and the HRD conference:

Breakdown of number by country (with number of institutions in brackets) 2000 to 2004



Outcome 7b

The group of identical participants includes 11 different nationalities. The most represented countries are the Netherlands (9 persons from 5 institutions) and the UK (7 persons from 4 institutions). In addition to the figure it should be pointed out that the proportion of identical participants among all individual participants is as follows: 11,5% for the Netherlands, 3,5% for the UK and 4% for the remaining countries belonging to the identical group.

Comment 7b

The broad national spectrum of this small group is noteworthy, even if several countries are only represented by one person. Mostly, these identical participants are researchers involved in European projects and networks, thereby sharing transnational experience and, potentially, the function of multipliers. These characteristics add to the significance of the group.

The representation of the first two countries deserves special attention. The Netherlands have the highest number of individual participants and institutions in this group, and their proportion of identical participants among all individual participants is well above average. This outstanding position may be an expression of the flexibility of these researchers or of close linkages between VET and HRD related research in this country.

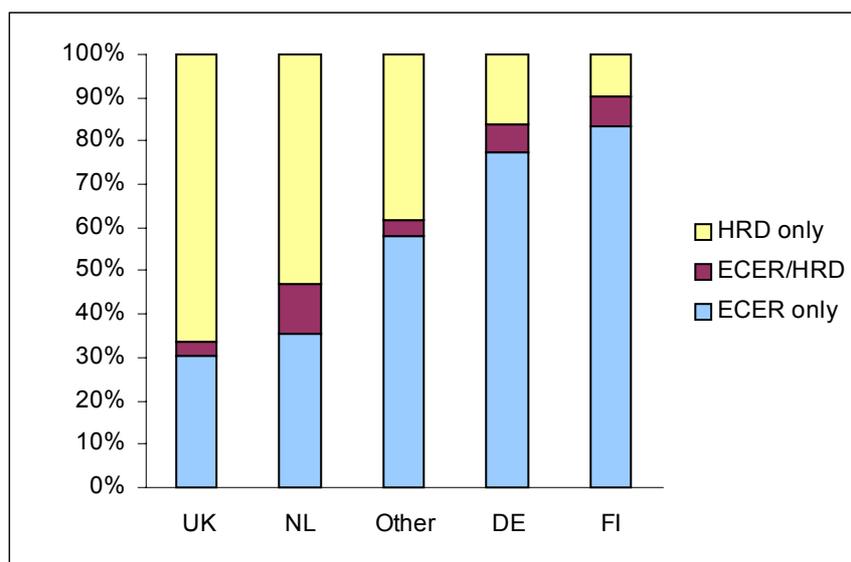
The UK is on place two in the absolute number of identical participants, but below average in their proportion of all individual participants. This observation suggests that in the UK the division between the VET and HRD related research communities is strongly pronounced.

And since the UK is dominant by sheer number in both conferences, they also play a considerable part in the extent to which the two conference communities are divided in general.

Figure 7c

Distribution of individual participants between ECER and the HRD conference:

Proportion of identical and other participants - breakdown by country



Outcome 7c

This figure shows a breakdown of individual participants in major countries (with a total number of participants above 40) according to three groups: the identical participants (ECER/HRD) in the middle of a column, and the participants attending either ECER or the HRD conference (ECER only/ HRD only) at the bottom and the top of a column.

These three groups in comparison can indicate the balance between ECER and HRD related participants. While the proportion attending the HRD conference dominates among participants from the UK and (less so) the Netherlands, the opposite is the case for the other countries, particularly for Germany and Finland.

It should be stressed, for any interpretation, that the figure shows proportions, to allow direct comparison, and not absolute numbers, which would result in different sizes of columns.

Comment 7c

These outcomes, showing noticeable national differences in the balance of participants between ECER and the HRD conference, seem to confirm certain assumptions about the role of VET and HRD related research in the countries concerned. However, care should be taken in drawing any direct conclusions from the evidence presented above: as stated before, participants in these European or international events are not necessarily representative of the total national research community concerned, and the organisational context in which these two conference operate, are also quite distinct from each other.

Transnational presenters

Indicator

A **'transnational presenter'** is a person who either presents a **transnational paper** (i.e. a paper written by a team of authors from at least two different countries) or contributes to a **transnational session** (e.g. a symposium arranged by a European project partnership or a workshop held by a transnational group). These two organisational forms (paper/session) are distinguished in comparative breakdowns.

Some specifications of this indicator need to be explained in more detail. In case two or more persons present one joint transnational paper, these are counted as individual presenters. In transnational sessions, each person is counted only once as a transnational presenter for each session concerned (even if he or she made several contributions to this session). For the whole period, transnational presenters are treated as individual participants (see indicator 2). This means that a person who was at least once involved in a transnational presentation belongs to the group of transnational presenters, to be contrasted with other participants who never made a transnational presentation.

A related indicator, referring to the product of one or more transnational presenters, is the category of a **'transnational presentation'**. This is defined as a paper presenting outcomes of transnational research or a peer reviewed contribution made to a transnational session. These two forms of presentation imply different levels of conference activity: While transnational papers presuppose team work, but are presented in ordinary paper sessions (often by one author only), transnational sessions are a particular category of team presentation integrated in the programme (symposium or workshop). In terms of conference activity, therefore, the latter form may be interpreted as an advanced level of transnational presentation.

The basis for identifying both transnational presenters and transnational presentations is the conference programme. The two indicators serve to determine the degree of transnationality attributable to a European or international conferences and the community concerned.

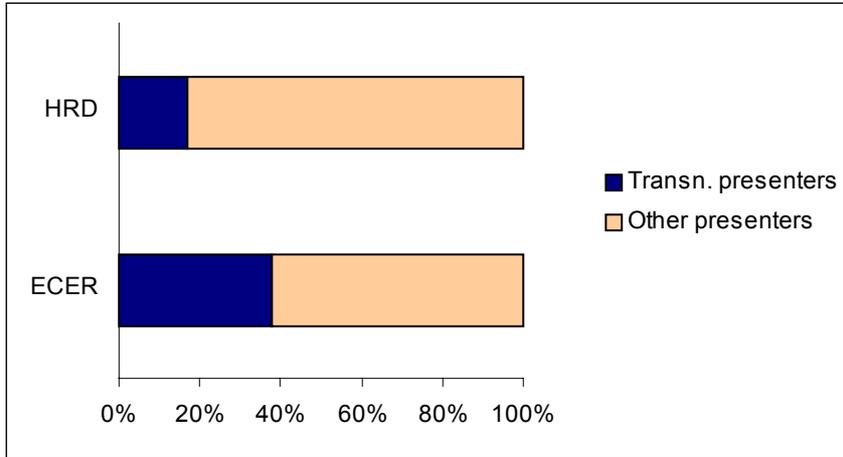
An additional group included in the analysis of transnational presenters at ECER are **'EU project partners'**, i.e. persons involved in a project partnership supported by the EU. The statistical basis for identifying these persons has been provided by a parallel analysis of European project networks in VET and HRD¹.

The first two figures provide comparative overviews of transnationality at the two conferences, focusing on transnational presenters as against other individual participants (figure 8a) and on transnational presentations as against other presentations (figure 8b). The following figures focus on aspects of transnationality among ECER presenters, including the balance between transnational papers and contributions to transnational sessions (figure 8c) and the composition of transnational presentation teams (figures 8d/e). Finally, the relationship between the involvement in transnational presentations and in European project partnerships is demonstrated (figures 8f/g).

¹ Manning, Sabine; Manning, Stephan. European research networks in vocational education and training: An analysis of participation and network relations. Berlin: Research Forum WIFO 2004 [http://www.b.shuttle.de/wifo/vet-pr/networks.htm]

Figure 8a

Transnational presenters at ECER and the HRD conferences:
Proportion of individual participants 2000 to 2004



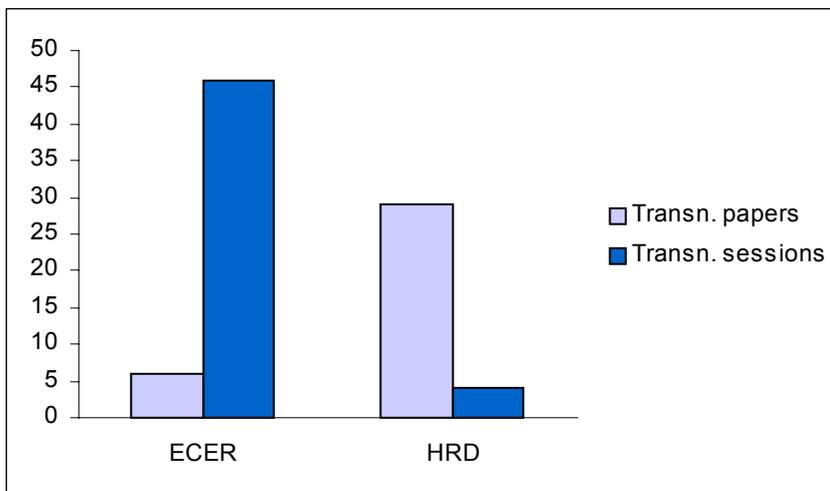
Outcome 8a

The proportion of transnational presenters among individual participants in the period 2000 to 2004 was higher at ECER (38%) than at the HRD conference (17%). If the absolute numbers of individual transnational presenters from Europe are compared, there are 129 persons at ECER as against 52 at the HRD conference.

As a more detailed analysis shows, the national composition of these two groups is also different: At ECER 96% of the transnational presenters came from European countries, while the corresponding proportion at the HRD conference was 75%.

Figure 8b

Transnational presentations at ECER and the HRD conference:
Number of transnational papers and transnational sessions 2000 to 2004



Outcome 8b

Transnational presentations took different forms at the two conferences: While transnational sessions were characteristic of ECER (46; HRD 4), transnational papers dominated at the HRD conference (29; ECER 6).

Comment 8a/b

The two conferences differ considerably in the degree of transnationality which they reached in the given period: At ECER, transnational presenters and transnational sessions determine the conference community and programme to a greater extent than at the HRD conference.

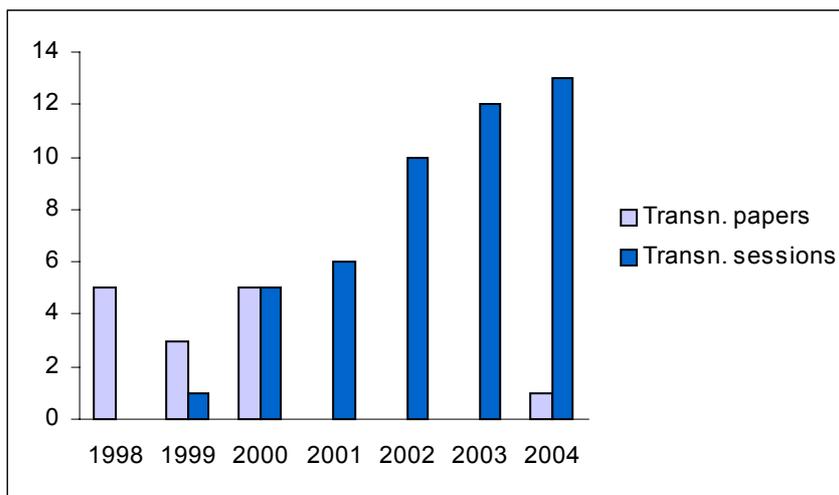
A major reason for this difference can be found in the specific context of European project partnerships and networks in which many ECER participants are involved. The relation between this project context and the transnational presentations at the two conferences is analysed in more detail in the final figures (8f/g).

The following analysis (figures 8c/d/e) takes a closer look at the development of transnational presenting at ECER over a longer period.

Figure 8c

Transnational presentations at ECER:

Number of transnational papers and transnational sessions 1998 to 2004



Outcome 8c

The figure above includes two preceding years (1998, 1999), which mark the initial phase of the VETNET programme introduced at ECER. At the beginning (1998 to 2000), there were several transnational papers, but in the following years (starting 1999) these were replaced by a growing number of transnational sessions.

Comment 8c

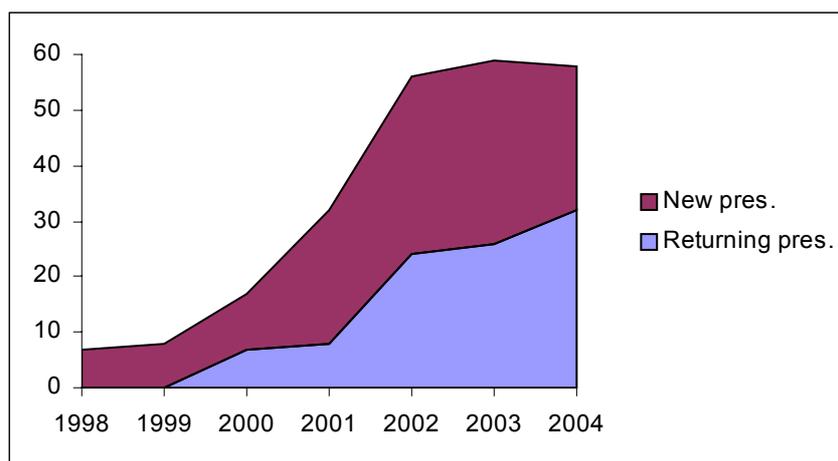
The change, in transnational presentations at ECER, from papers to symposium or workshop contributions, reflects the progress in EU project research during that period. In the late 1990s, the initial results of the first few EU projects became available, typically presented as papers by the coordinators of the partnerships concerned. From 2000 onwards, following the

growth in EU project research activities, symposia and workshops established themselves as the favourite form of transnational presentations. While most of these sessions focused on single projects (one each), a few were concerned with broader themes of research.

Figure 8d

Transnational presenters at ECER:

Breakdown according to new and returning presenters 1998 to 2004



Outcome 8d

This figure shows the composition of transnational presenters for each annual event. New presenters (red strand) are those who were involved in a transnational presentation for the first time at the year concerned. Returning presenters (blue strand) are those who had already made a transnational presentation in a previous year and now became involved in this activity again.

The total number of transnational presenters increased annually during the whole period. The initial high rate of growth changed to a lower rate from 2002 onwards. The number of the new and the returning presenters grew at a corresponding rate. The average annual ratio between these two groups, from 2000 to 2004, was about 60% new presenters to 40% returning presenters.

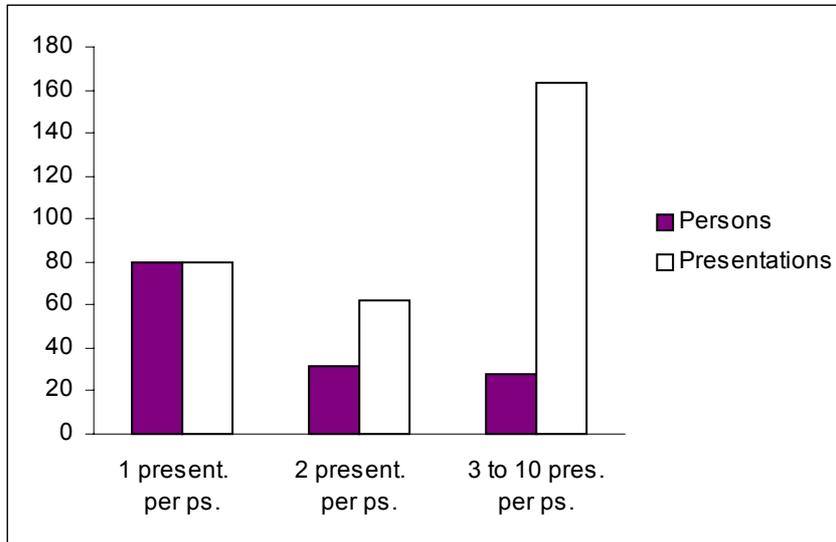
Comment 8d

Altogether, there was a continuously rising trend in the number of transnational presenters at ECER in the total period. The change in the rate of increase before and after 2002 appears to be connected with the general development in ECER participation, showing a relative peak of the total number of participants in that year (see figure 1b).

The ratio between new and returning presenters was fairly steady too. This suggests that the transnational presentations could draw on a balanced potential of 'new' and 'old' team members, as a resource for both renewal and reinforcement. These two complementing aspects of community development among the transnational presenters can also be traced from another angle (see figure 8e).

Figure 8e

Transnational presentations made by individual presenters at ECER
Breakdown by number of presentation per person 1998 to 2004



Outcome 8e

This figure starts out from the total number of individual transnational presenters at ECER in the whole period. In contrast to the annual presenters shown before (figure 8d), the figure for the whole period relates to individual persons who made transnational presentations. The focus of this breakdown is the number of presentations (transnational papers or contributions to transnational sessions) per person: one, two or more (three to ten) presentations.

The breakdown shows that a large group of presenters (80) made one presentation each, while the remaining presenters (32+28) made two or more presentations. The first group accounts for the majority (57%) of the total number of presenters. However, the number of presentations by the other two groups (64+163) reach a much higher total than that of the first group (80).

Comment 8e

The outcome of this breakdown is interesting in comparison to the previous analysis of new and returning presenters (figure 8d). The first group of presenters, those with one presentation per person, correspond to the category of 'new presenters', while the remaining groups, with two or more presentations per person, correspond to the 'returning presenters'.

In both figures, the ratios between the groups of presenters concerned are similar (new presenters 60% - persons with one presentation 57%). But the difference lies in the number of presentations: the great majority of these were made by the returning presenters, i.e. by persons who presented at different annual events (partly these persons also presented at different sessions of the same annual event).

The evidence above suggests that, in the course of annual conference events, a growing proportion of presentations was made by a relatively small group of presenters. This pattern of development may be interpreted as a feature of community building which is directly related to conference activities (i.e. transnational presenters who are VETNET Board members and return also for that reason). At the same time it may be assumed that this

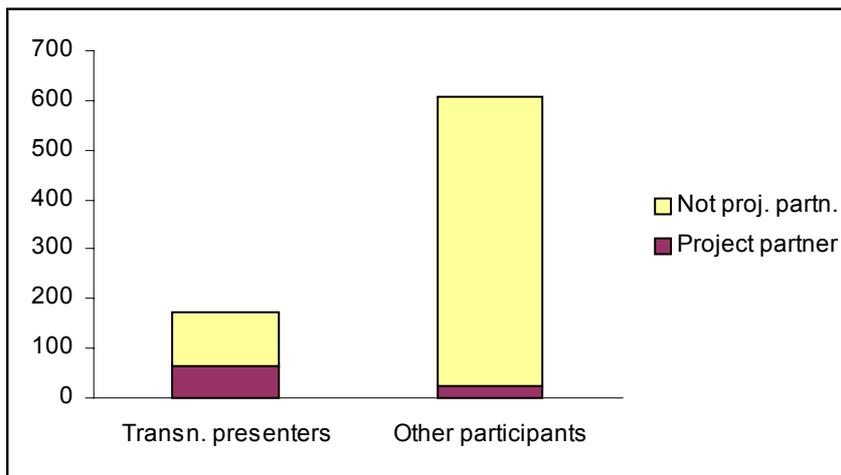
pattern is influenced by the underlying project activities (i.e. transnational presenters who are project coordinators or producers of project studies).

The following figures (8f/g) illustrate the general relationship between transnational presenting and involvement in EU projects, for both ECER and the HRD conference.

Figure 8f

Transnational presenters and other participants from Europe at ECER and the HRD conference:

Breakdown of number according to involvement in EU project partnerships 2000 to 2004



Outcome 8f

As the figure shows, the majority of EU project partners participating in any conference are also transnational presenters. Project partners constitute a third of the transnational presenters, while their proportion among the rest of the European participants is minimal (5%).

Comment 8f

The linkage, among the European conference participants, between involvement in transnational presentations and participation in EU project partnerships is evident. Nevertheless, the majority of transnational presenters was not involved in EU projects (at least not in the selection of major VET/HRD projects on which this analysis is based).

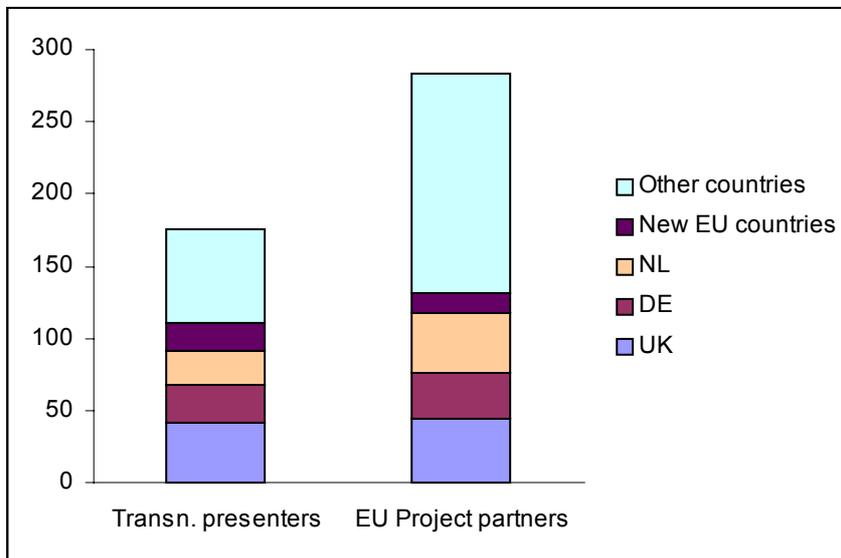
There are obviously other contexts that play a part in the formation of the transnational teams concerned, for instance related research networks (e.g. Forum) or transnational publications (e.g. Cedefop supported studies). In connection with these external factors, however, conference activities like workshops undoubtedly have a stimulating effect on arranging transnational presentations.

It may therefore be concluded that transnational presentations, particularly at symposia and workshops, potentially combine external and internal factors for the development of collaborative research.

Figure 8g

Transnational presenters from Europe at ECER and the HRD conference and EU project partners:

Breakdown of number according to country 2000 to 2004



Outcome 8g

The figure includes two separate groups: transnational presenters from Europe participating in any of the two conferences, and EU project partners. The linkage between the two, shown in the previous figure (8f), is the background for this comparison.

The most highly represented countries in both groups are the UK, Germany and the Netherlands, accounting for 52% of the presenters and 42% of the project partners. The remaining countries are of similar number: 19 among the presenters and 21 among the project partners.

In comparison, the total individual participants of the two conferences also include UK, Germany and the Netherlands as the top group (54%), with the remaining participants representing 23 countries.

Comment 8g

The breakdown by European country reveals that the transnational presenters match both the EU project partners and the total individual conference participants to a high degree. This is significant for assessing transnational presentations: It suggests that the special feature of transnationality is underpinned by a broad national spectrum, comparable to both the conference and project activities in the European research context.

Themes of presentations

Indicator

The comparative analysis of themes is based on a set of **descriptors** which have been developed to identify thematic components in the broad field of VET and HRD. They function like key words, used for content analysis, but are constituting parts of a model. These 25 descriptors are grouped according to five **categories**, which serve to describe thematic areas of research. An overview of the descriptors and categories is presented as part of the Research Monitor on the WIFO website (see annex at the end of section 9).

In this analysis, descriptors for individual conferences are presented as a proportion of all descriptors applied for each event in the period concerned. This makes the thematic analysis independent of the different number of presentations.

In addition to the comparative analysis of presentations at the two conferences, the thematic pattern of ECER presentations is compared with that of EU projects, since these form the basis of transnational activities in European VET research. This has already been established in the analysis of frequent participants and transnational presenters (descriptor 6/ comment 6b; descriptor 8/ figure 8f). The additional analysis is based on a set of 30 EU projects in the broad field of VET and HRD, which were carried out in the period of 1995 to 2003 (see details about these projects in a previous study¹).

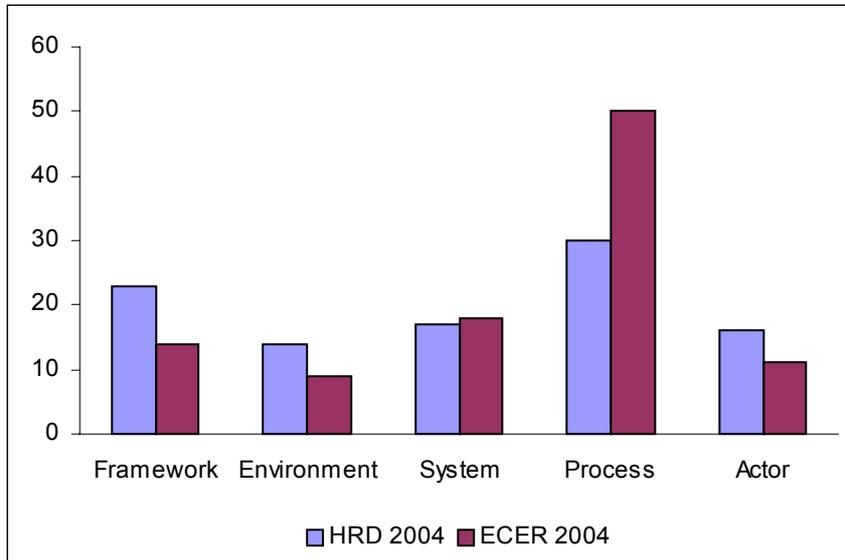
The following figures present thematic patterns of presentations at the two conferences in comparison (figures 9a/b) and the development of these patterns over the period for both ECER (figure 9c) and the HRD conference (figure 9d). Furthermore, the thematic pattern of ECER presentations is compared with that of EU projects (figure 9e/f).

¹ Manning, Sabine; Manning, Stephan. European research networks in vocational education and training: An analysis of participation and network relations. Berlin: Research Forum WIFO 2004 [http://www.b.shuttle.de/wifo/vet-pr/networks.htm]

Figure 9a

Themes of presentations at ECER and the HRD conference:

Breakdown (proportion) of descriptors according to thematic categories 2004



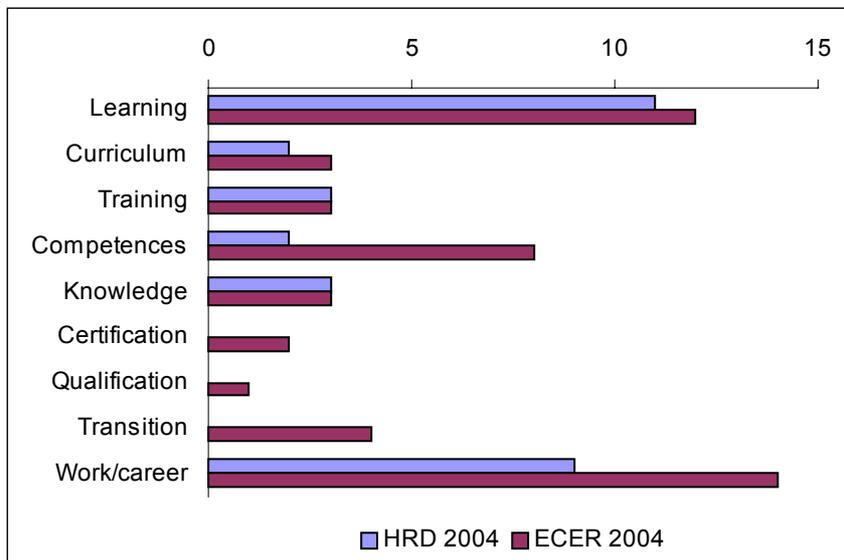
Outcome 9a

The presentations at the two conferences are similarly spread across the five thematic categories. The category 'process' occurs most frequently at both conferences, but there are differences in the balance: while ECER presentations particularly focus on this category, the HRD conference presentations show a more even spread between the five categories.

Figure 9b

Themes of presentations at ECER and the HRD conference:

Breakdown (proportion) of descriptors related to the thematic category 'process' 2004



Outcome 9b

This figure focuses on the category 'process', starting out from the overall proportion of descriptors shown in the previous figure (9a). The breakdown reveals the following specific patterns for the two conferences:

- Presentations at ECER cover all descriptors of this category, while those at the HRD conference have a smaller range.
- The most highly represented descriptors in both conferences are learning and work/career. The first of these descriptors is the top one among HRD conference presentations, while the latter is the most prominent for ECER presentations (these favourite positions apply across the total set of 25 descriptors). The descriptor of competences is also high-ranking among presentations at ECER, but not at the HRD conference.

Comment 9a/b

There is a remarkable similarity between presentations at the two conferences, according to the distribution of descriptors across the five major categories. It should of course be noted that the subject matter covered by these categories may vary a great deal between presentations. In general, presentations at ECER are more concerned with VET, while those at the HRD Conference are focused on HRD (related to organisations). This implies, for instance, that the category 'system' is mainly represented by VET descriptors at ECER, while it predominantly refers to HRD descriptors at the other conference. However, the system aspect in both cases is what matters in this comparison.

Most presentations are devoted to descriptors grouped under 'process'. This category is the favourite one at both conferences, though more highly developed at ECER (in terms of both the higher proportion and the broader spread of descriptors). Particularly noteworthy is the similarity between the two conferences with regard to the two most prominent descriptors

addressed in presentations: learning and work/career. This suggests that there is essential common ground shared by the presented research. The two descriptors, like most other descriptors within the category 'process', are not only comparable in general terms (as is the case with the category 'system') but also in the subject matter. It should however be added that these descriptors (as single content items) are not identical with themes of presentations.

Figure 9c

Themes of presentations at ECER:

Breakdown (proportion) of descriptors according to thematic categories 1998 to 2004

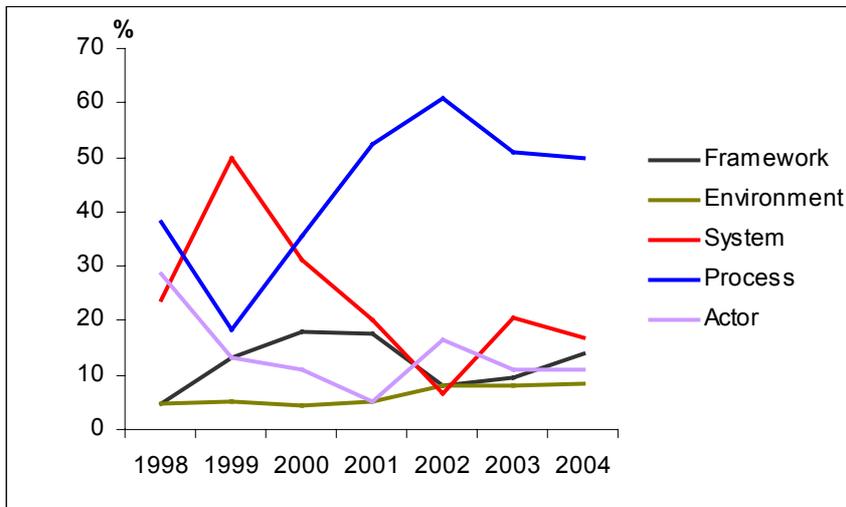
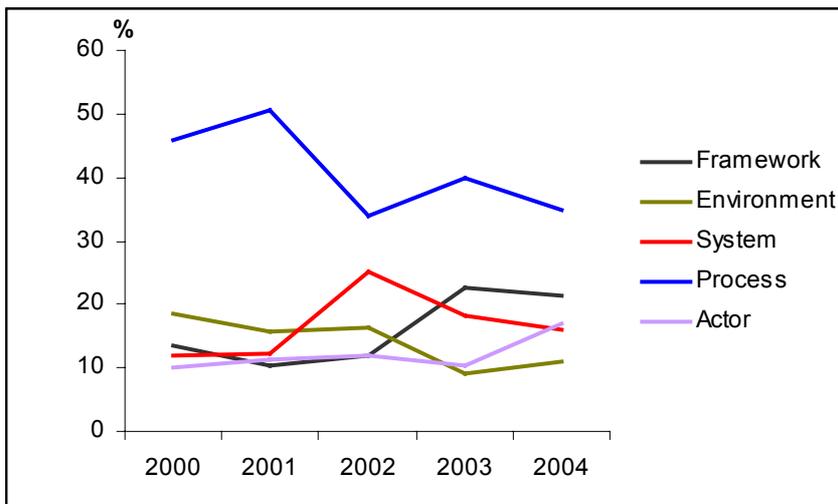


Figure 9d

Themes of presentations at the HRD conference:

Breakdown (proportion) of descriptors according to thematic categories 2000 to 2004



Outcome 9c/d

The two figures show the breakdown of descriptors according to thematic categories from the first to the latest event of the conference concerned. While most of the represented categories keep at a fairly even level across the period at both conferences, the following categories show different developments:

- in presentations at ECER, the category 'system' moves from a high position to a low one, while the category 'process' has a strong rising trend;
- in presentations at the HRD conference, the category 'process' as the only high-level category shows a moderate downward trend; this is partly matched by the slight upward movement of the categories 'framework' and 'system' from a relatively low level.

Comment 9c/d

The development of the thematic categories of presentations across the period confirms the broad similarity between the two conferences, but also reinforces the difference already observed in the overall profile (figures 9a/b): the category 'process' has not only a higher significance in presentations at ECER than at the HRD conference, but also an increasing one.

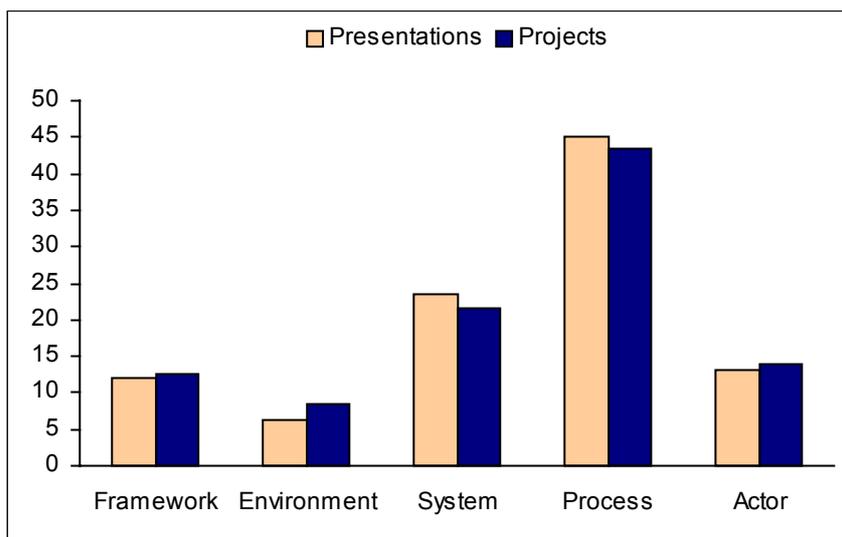
This difference cannot be interpreted without further investigation. One factor to be examined in the figures below is the context of EU projects which has already been proved to be significant for ECER attendance.

Figure 9e

Themes of ECER papers and EU projects:

Breakdown (proportion) of descriptors according to thematic categories:

Period 1998 to 2003 (ECER presentations) and 1995-2003 (EU projects)



Outcome 9e

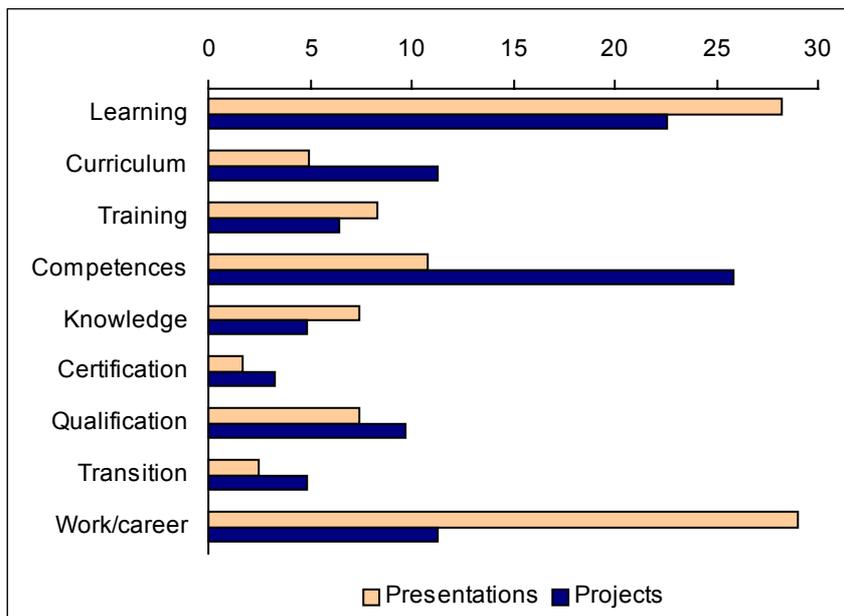
The proportion of descriptors according to thematic categories is nearly equal between ECER presentations and EU projects. In both cases, the category 'process' is by far the most prominent, with the category 'system' following at a medium level.

Figure 9f

Themes of ECER papers and EU projects:

Breakdown (proportion) of descriptors related to the thematic category 'process':

Period 1998 to 2003 (ECER presentations) and 1995-2003 (EU projects)



Outcome 9f

The breakdown of descriptors within the thematic category 'process' produces a more differentiated picture, if the ECER presentations and EU projects are compared. While most descriptors, including 'learning' as a prominent one, have fairly similar proportions, two descriptors have different proportions: the descriptor 'competences' is only prominent for projects, while the descriptor 'work/career' is only prominent for presentations.

Comment 9e/f

Altogether, there is a significant similarity in thematic profile between ECER presentations and EU projects. This outcome can be explained in the following general terms: A lot of ECER presentations, particularly those made in transnational sessions (symposia etc), are based on current research in EU projects; consequently, the thematic profile of project research has a major influence on that of ECER presentations.

Descriptors

for mapping the contents of research resources in VET and HRD

The Research Monitor offers a simple set of terms for describing the contents of research resources which are related to vocational education and training (VET) and human resource development (HRD). These descriptors, arranged according to categories, are applied for mapping and analysing these resources. The 25 Monitor descriptors have been developed from an original set of 12 descriptors used for the European Research Overview as part of the CEDEFOP Research Arena [[ERO descriptors](#)].

Category	Descriptor
Framework	(01) Technology/ information and communication technology (02) Politics/ society/ culture/ population/ community/ person/ gender (03) Economy/ business/ labour market/ social partners/ human capital (04) Administration/ finance/ management/ entrepreneurship
Environment	(05) Region/ city (06) Educational institution (07) Enterprise/ organisation
System	(08) Lifelong learning / adult education (09) General education/ academic education (10) Vocational education and training*) (11) Initial education and training/ apprenticeship (12) Continuing education and training/ higher vocational education (13) Human resource development*) *) Descriptors to be applied only if the system as such is the objective of analysis.
Process	(14) Learning (15) Curriculum/ pedagogy (16) Teaching/ training/ mentoring/ coaching (17) Competence/ skill/ experience (18) Knowledge (19) Certification/ accreditation/ assessment (20) Qualification/ degree (21) Transition/ access/ recruitment/ guidance (22) Work/ occupation/ job/ career/ assignment
Actor	(23) Learner/ student/ trainee (24) Worker/ unemployed person/ personnel/ manager/ work team (25) Teacher/ trainer/ professional
Category	Descriptor

European research communities in VET and HRD

Comparative analysis of two annual conferences -
based on indicators related to participation and thematic profile

Major outcome and comments

The comparative analysis has produced initial insight in the current development of European research communities in HRD and VET related to two major annual conferences:

- the European Educational Research Conference: the programme of the Vocational Education and Training Network (ECER) and
- the International Conference on HRD Research and Practice Across Europe (HRD conference).

The period under investigation is 2000 to 2004, including five annual events of each conference. The major outcome and comments of this analysis, drawn from the individual sections, is compiled below.

Overall trend in participation across annual events (Indicators 1 and 4)

Both conferences show an overall increase in annual participation over the investigated period, but the two trends differ from each other. The average rise in the number of annual participants was stronger at the HRD conference (by 80%) than at ECER (by 30%). Furthermore, the rising trend during the period was fairly even at the HRD conference, while the trend at ECER was marked by considerable annual changes including a temporary decrease in participation.

One explanation, especially for the different degree of increase, could be that the trends concerned are related to different stages of development: While the HRD conference actually started in 2000, therefore showing a marked initial rise, ECER had already started several years earlier, so that the initial rise in participation is no longer visible.

This contrast, however, does not explain why the annual participation at ECER shows such an uneven trend. It may be assumed that this reflects different levels of attraction attributed to individual events. In order to gain more insight, a particular group of participants was investigated: those who turned up at single events only (once in the whole period).

The trends in participation observed for the particular group were similar to those of the total participants: The proportion of once-only participants at the HRD conference rose steadily, while their distribution across the ECER events was uneven: Edinburgh (UK), Lisbon (PT) and Crete (GR) had a higher participation rate, Lille (FR) and Hamburg (DE) had a lower rate.

Among the once-only participants, those from the host country showed a common pattern of attendance across the events of both conferences: the proportion was larger for events in the UK, the Netherlands and Germany, while it was smaller for France, Ireland and Portugal and particularly small for Greece.

Various factors could play a part in the once-only participation rate for each event, including the organisational effort and resources of the local programme team, the attraction of the place itself and the status of VET research in the country concerned.

The proportion of once-only participants from the host country provides further insight. The difference between the events partly reflects the absolute size of the corresponding national VET research communities (e.g. large in Germany and the UK; small in Ireland and Portugal), but also the acceptance of an English language event in the cultural environment concerned (no doubt positive in the Netherlands, but negative in France).

Even more revealing is the proportion of once-only participants from other than the host countries. This proportion is especially high for Crete and Lisbon (ECER) and for Limerick and Toulouse (HRD conference). In more concrete terms: Large numbers of participants from across Europe and also from outside Europe turned up just once within five years to attend events which took place in particularly attractive environments. It certainly is not speculative to detect a significant factor of tourism in this participation rate - which after all is an agreed part of conference management.

European and global participation (Indicator 1)

The breakdown of the number of annual participants by region differs significantly between the two conferences. While the proportion of annual European participants at the HRD conference dropped steadily (from 100% in 2000 to 73% in 2004), the corresponding proportion at ECER stayed nearly unchanged at a fairly high level (average 95%).

The difference between the two conferences with regard to the regional breakdown of participation can be mainly attributed to organisational factors. ECER is clearly a European conference, where outside participants are welcome but not particularly encouraged to join in. Therefore non-European participants tend to turn up in small numbers. The HRD conference also started out as a European event, but was soon extended to include non-European participants, with an active involvement of the Academy of HRD (US based global organisation). This change was also expressed by adding the word 'international', from 2004 onwards, to the original name 'conference of HRD research and practice across Europe'.

Representation of major European countries (Indicator 3)

The total number of individual participants at each conference (counted once during the whole period) is fairly similar (ECER 355, HRD 412); the European group is even closer in size (ECER 330, HRD 309). Among the European participants, at both conferences, the UK is the biggest representative (particularly large at the HRD conference), followed by the Netherlands.

The prominent role of the UK at the HRD conference is mainly due to the British origin of this event (the initial promoter being the University Forum for HRD in the UK), while ECER has been a European event from the start (even though with strong UK backing as well). This different organisational background may also play a part in the uneven distribution of UK participants between the HRD conference and ECER. Still, it may be concluded that in the UK the HRD group is stronger than the VET group in terms of both size and organisational backing.

The representation of the Netherlands is significant in two respects: it is quite strong altogether, in relation to the proportion of Dutch citizens in Europe; it is noticeable at both conferences, similar to the UK. These two countries in particular may be regarded as the European pillars of the two conferences.

Among the rest of the European countries, two stand out at ECER: Germany and Finland (despite its small population!). But neither is highly represented at the HRD conference. At the same time France, as the third major country in Europe (next to Germany and the UK),

has a low representation at both conferences. This outcome suggests that the distribution of European participants within and between the two conferences doesn't follow a simple logic. It is probably influenced by various factors (outside the reach of this analysis!), including the role of VET (as promoted at ECER) and HRD (as conceived by the HRD conference) in individual countries, the language issue (both conferences using English as lingua franca), financial resources and academic stimuli.

It should also be stressed that the size of a national group at either of these conferences cannot be taken as an indicator of the strength or weakness of the research community in a given country. The degree of participation in such a European event is influenced by lots of factors, which cannot be examined in this analysis.

Participants from new EU countries (Indicator 1)

The proportion of participants coming from the new EU member states, as a percentage of all annual European participants, is small at both conferences (average 4% ECER, 6% HRD); the corresponding annual proportions within the period however are rising.

The participation of researchers from new EU member countries merits special attention. These researchers have to cope, at the same time, with the challenges of the new European environment and the problems of transition in their own countries. The proportion of participants in the two conferences looks small, particularly in view of the size of the population of the new EU countries - in total and for single countries like Poland. Of particular interest in the present analysis is the question of how participation from these countries could be stimulated. This question is taken up below.

Mailing lists in support of conference participation (Indicator 2)

The list members related to ECER are compiled from two lists: the annual ECER call for proposals, addressing all participants from the previous year, and ERO-Call, the Cedefop supported mailing list. The list members related to the HRD conference are those of the EHRD Network.

The plain facts are as follows: The total number of list members related to each conference is similar. List members outnumber conference participants by three to four times. Addressed participants (those who have received calls prior to the conference) account for a small proportion of list members (15% for ECER, 10% for the HRD conference), but for about half of the total participants (average 56% at ECER, 38% at the HRD conference).

Two conclusions may be drawn: Firstly, a large proportion of list members receive calls without attending the conference concerned. In view of the broader function of these lists (except for the EERA list), this outcome is not surprising. It may even point to a potential pool of additional future participants.

Secondly, if the conference participation is considered, the attending list members meet non-list members in roughly equal proportions - with minor differences between the two types of conferences and the two years in each case. This may be interpreted as a significant effect of the mailing lists, matched by a corresponding effect of other means of publicising.

A more detailed analysis shows that addressed participants (who have received calls) are largely identical with 'old' participants (who have been at this conference before). Again, the facts are similar for both conferences: Among the new participants, the proportion of those addressed is small (average 17% of the new participants), while among the old participants the proportion of those addressed is large (average 88% of the old participants).

The conclusions which could be drawn from this outcome may depend on the aims pursued by these conferences. This is not only a question of the balance between old and new participants in general. It may be worth considering what kind of new participants are desirable: those turning up by chance from anywhere or others who are of specific interest. The latter could be researchers from new EU member states or from newly formed project partnerships or networks. In order to attract these groups in a more targeted way, the mailing lists would have to be expanded accordingly or be supplemented by more specific forms of communication.

The limits of the ECER list in this respect are particularly evident. This list consists of the participants of the immediately preceding ECER event and, therefore, only reaches 'old' participants. There is of course an expectation, implied in the ECER list, that the newcomers of the preceding event could be encouraged to return to the following event. However, as the analysis of returning participants reveals the proportion of this group is small compared to the large proportion of once-only participants (see following section).

Altogether, the mailing lists operating for the two conferences have mainly the effect of maintaining the community of previous participants while contributing little to attracting newcomers.

Conference attendance and community development (Indicators 4, 5 and 6)

The proportion of participants who attended only one of the annual events is nearly equal for ECER and the HRD conference (ECER 71% and HRD 73%). The proportions are also fairly similar across the major country groups. This result may be summed up in a simple statement: Three out of four participating persons turned up only once in five years.

The close matching between ECER and the HRD conference in this respect is striking, not least because the organisational patterns of these two conferences are quite different. Whether this outcome is a coincidence or of any wider significance, for instance pointing to a general feature of annual research conferences, remains open.

The proportion of once-only participants can be used to identify the degree of fluctuation in the conference community. This fluctuation may be interpreted in the following way: The high percentage of once-only participants (more than 70%) shows the predominant function of these conferences for facilitating dissemination and extending contacts, while the potential of these conferences for building/ strengthening communities of their own seems to be less great. It would therefore not be realistic, for instance, to consider the participants in the VETNET programme of ECER as the informal membership of VETNET or to try and build this network on the basis of ECER participation. It should be added, though, that conferences are a major framework for underpinning contact between various members of transnational networks and project partnerships, thereby helping to consolidate the infrastructure of the European research community at large.

'Returning participants' are those who attended two or more events of the conference concerned. They may return one year after their first event or later; they may return once or several times. This indicator is the counterpart of the once-only participants. The process of returning can be regarded as a feature of community development. The question whether this return is led by internal factors of the conference itself or by related/ external factors will be of particular interest.

At both conferences, newcomers returned in small proportions while those having participated before returned in large proportions. This outcome suggests that the conference events in themselves have relatively little binding effect on participants. There must be more important factors, from external contexts, which influence the returning of participants. These factors are further examined in connection with 'frequent participants'.

The frequent participants, who attended three or more of the annual events, can be regarded as the core group of the conference community. The size of this group is fairly small - about one out of eight persons at both ECER and the HRD conference.

The effect of this core group on the conference concerned is of course stronger than the small number of persons may suggest. In quantitative terms, the enhanced effect is obvious when the repeated participation of these persons is considered. More important is the qualitative aspect: Frequent participants are more likely to form or strengthen ties between themselves, to be among the main actors of the conference and to function as a continuum between annual events. The open question in this respect is whether the core group is a product of the conference itself, and thereby an indicator of the community building potential of a conference, or whether the development of the core group is (also) related to any other context of research community activities.

There is a close linkage between frequent ECER participation and membership in the two networks related to European VET research: VETNET represented by its board members, and Forum, which was active up to about 2002. Together, they form about one third of the core group. This linkage is not surprising, particularly in view of the major function which the VETNET Board has got in organising this conference. At the same time, informal collaboration between this board and the Forum has been a major factor in bringing about a core group of conference participants.

However, the wider context of networking should also be taken into account: both the 'members' (Forum/ VETNET Board) and 'non-members' among the core group are linked with numerous European project partnerships and thematic. Many of these use the ECER events for presenting joint research results. The majority of frequent conference participants are likely to be 'multiple' members of these European networks.

The frequent HRD conference participants include members of the two major supporting organisations: the Board of the University Forum for HRD and the Board of the Academy of HRD (US). Together, these members form nearly two thirds of the core group of HRD conference participants.

The influence of the supportive organisations on the conference community is stronger at the HRD conference than at ECER. The remaining frequent participants at the HRD conference are mostly UFHRD members, while only a few are associated with European project partnerships and networks. This outcome, too, distinguishes this core group from the ECER core group.

Linkage between ECER and HRD conference communities (Indicator 7)

A few persons attended both ECER and the HRD conference, with a minimum of one event each in the given period. This group of identical participants account for a tenth of the total number of individual European participants at each conference. This proportion appears to be small, if the close links existing between the two research fields are considered.

The group of identical participants includes 11 different nationalities. This broad national spectrum is noteworthy, even if several countries are only represented by one person. Mostly, these identical participants are researchers involved in European projects and networks, thereby sharing transnational experience and, potentially, the function of multipliers. These characteristics add to the significance of the group.

The representation of the first two countries deserves special attention. The Netherlands have the highest number of individual participants and institutions in this group, and their proportion of identical participants among all individual participants is well above average. This outstanding position may be an expression of the flexibility of these researchers or of close linkages between VET and HRD related research in this country.

The UK is on place two in the absolute number of identical participants, but below average in their proportion of all individual participants. This observation suggests that in the UK the division between the VET and HRD related research communities is strongly pronounced. And since the UK participants are dominant by sheer number in both conferences, they also play a considerable part in the extent to which the two conference communities are divided in general.

Transnational presentations and collaborative research (Indicator 8)

The programmes at both ECER and the HRD conference include transnational presentations, either papers jointly prepared by authors from different countries, or special sessions organised by transnational groups.

The two conferences differ considerably in the degree of transnationality which they reached in the given period: The proportion of transnational presenters among individual participants was higher at ECER (38%) than at the HRD conference (17%). While transnational sessions were characteristic of ECER, transnational papers dominated at the HRD conference.

Altogether, transnational presenters and transnational sessions determine the conference community and programme to a greater extent at ECER than at the HRD conference. A major reason for this difference can be found in the specific context of European project partnerships and networks in which many ECER participants are involved.

Transnationality at ECER can be traced from an earlier stage of development. At the beginning (1998 to 2000), there were several transnational papers, but in the following years (starting 1999) these were replaced by a growing number of transnational sessions.

This change reflects the progress in EU project research during that period. In the late 1990s, the initial results of the first few EU projects became available, typically presented as papers by the coordinators of the partnerships concerned. From 2000 onwards, following the growth in EU project research activities, symposia and workshops established themselves as the favourite form of transnational presentations. While most of these sessions focused on single projects (one each), a few were concerned with broader themes of research.

The total number of transnational presenters increased annually during the whole period. The initial high rate of growth changed to a lower rate from 2002 onwards. The number of the new and the returning presenters grew at a corresponding rate. This suggests that the transnational presentations could draw on a balanced potential of 'new' and 'old' team members, as a resource for both renewal and reinforcement.

The degree to which individual participants are involved in transnational presentations at ECER is also revealing. During the six-year period, a large group of presenters made one presentation each, while a small group made two or more presentations. The large group mainly included new presenters (involved in a transnational presentation for the first time), while the small group mainly included returning presenters.

The evidence above suggests that, in the course of annual conference events, a growing proportion of presentations was made by a relatively small group of presenters. This pattern of development may be interpreted as a feature of community building which is directly related to conference activities (i.e. transnational presenters who are VETNET Board members and return also for that reason).

At the same time this pattern is obviously influenced by the underlying project activities (i.e. transnational presenters who are project coordinators or producers of project studies). If the European participants at both conferences are taken together, project partners constitute a third of the transnational presenters, while their proportion among the rest of the European participants is minimal.

This outcome suggests a clear linkage between involvement in transnational presentations and participation in EU project partnerships. Nevertheless, the majority of transnational presenters was not involved in EU projects (at least not in the selection of major VET/HRD projects on which this analysis is based).

There are obviously other contexts that play a part in the formation of the transnational teams concerned, for instance related research networks (e.g. Forum) or transnational publications (e.g. Cedefop supported studies). In connection with these external factors, however, conference activities like workshops undoubtedly have a stimulating effect on arranging transnational presentations.

It may therefore be concluded that transnational presentations, particularly at symposia and workshops, potentially combine external and internal factors for the development of collaborative research.

Thematic pattern of presentations (Indicator 9)

The following comparative analysis is based on a set of 25 descriptors grouped according to five thematic categories (see annex below).

The presentations at the two conferences are similarly spread across the five thematic categories. The category 'process' occurs most frequently at both conferences, but there are differences in the balance: while ECER presentations particularly focus on this category, the HRD conference presentations show a more even spread between the five categories. Within the category 'process', the most highly represented descriptors in both conferences are learning and work/career. The descriptor of competences is also high-ranking among presentations at ECER, but not at the HRD conference.

Altogether, there is a remarkable similarity between presentations at the two conferences, according to the distribution of descriptors across the five major categories. It should of course be noted that the subject matter covered by these categories may vary a great deal between presentations. In general, presentations at ECER are more concerned with VET, while those at the HRD Conference are focused on HRD (related to organisations). This implies, for instance, that the category 'system' is mainly represented by VET descriptors at ECER, while it predominantly refers to HRD descriptors at the other conference. However, the system aspect in both cases is what matters in this comparison.

Most presentations are devoted to descriptors grouped under 'process'. This category is the favourite one at both conferences, though more highly developed at ECER (in terms of both the higher proportion and the broader spread of descriptors). Particularly noteworthy is the similarity between the two conferences with regard to the two most prominent descriptors addressed in presentations: learning and work/career. This suggests that there is essential common ground shared by the presented research. The two descriptors, like most other descriptors within the category 'process', are not only comparable in general terms (as is the case with the category 'system') but also in the subject matter. It should however be added that these descriptors (as single content items) are not identical with themes of presentations.

The development of the thematic categories of presentations across the period (five annual events in succession) confirms the broad similarity between the two conferences, but also reinforces a difference already observed in the overall profile: the category 'process' has not only a higher significance in presentations at ECER than at the HRD conference, but also an increasing one.

A major factor influencing the thematic profile of presentations is the context of EU projects which has already proved to be significant for ECER attendance. The analysis reveals that the proportion of descriptors according to thematic categories is nearly equal between ECER

presentations and EU projects. In both cases, the category 'process' is by far the most prominent, with the category 'system' following at a medium level.

The breakdown of descriptors within the thematic category 'process' produces a more differentiated picture, in comparison between ECER presentations and EU projects. While most descriptors, including 'learning' as a prominent one, have fairly similar proportions, two descriptors have different proportions: the descriptor 'competences' is only prominent for projects, while the descriptor 'work/career' is only prominent for presentations.

Altogether, there is a significant similarity in thematic profile between ECER presentations and EU projects. This outcome can be explained in the following general terms: A lot of ECER presentations, particularly those made in transnational sessions (symposia etc), are based on current research in EU projects; consequently, the thematic profile of project research has a major influence on that of ECER presentations.