

A focus and a forum for the analysis of aid and international policy development in education and training



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**SPECIAL SESSION 4:**

**Bridging research and policy development**

# Improving the Impact of Educational Research on Decision Making and Practice in TVET: Issues and Prospects

## Author:

**Rupert Maclean**, Chair Professor of International Education, UNESCO Chair in Technical and Vocational Education and Training and Lifelong Learning, Director of the Centre for Lifelong Learning Research and Development, Hong Kong Institute of Education

## Abstract:

Worldwide, governments and education decision makers are exploring innovative approaches, including the re-engineering of their educational systems, to address various key concerns regarding skills development for employability (TVET). In addressing these key concerns, it is widely held that educational research has the potential to play an important role in policy formulation and decision making aimed at improving TVET. Yet, despite the potential of educational research to making an important contribution to decision making in education, many researchers complain that education decision makers pay scant attention to research findings. Policy makers and implementers, on the other hand, argue that much of the available educational research is unintelligible and lacking in relevance for educational decision making purposes. Examples where educational research could usefully inform decision making regarding TVET included monitoring the health and effectiveness of TVET systems, investigating options for reform and change, and evaluating intended and unintended outcomes of interventions.

This presentation will commence by examining the genesis of TVET research in countries such as Australia, China, Japan, the United States and Germany, and TVET research undertaken by selected intergovernmental organisations and bilateral agencies. It will then move onto suggesting concrete ways to increase the impact of research on TVET; and examine what researchers can do to improve their relationship with policy makers, and increase the likelihood that their research findings will be taken into account by education authorities.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In both developed and developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region governments and administrators involved with educational decision making are exploring innovative solutions, including the re-engineering of their educational systems, to address various key concerns, all of which relate to various aspects of TVET. These include:

- the most cost effective ways to expand access to education;
- ways of improving equity, for women, lower socio-economic groups and those in remote areas;

- increasing the relevance of education;
- upgrading the quality of education while at the same time maintaining the quantitative expansion of education systems to cope with an increasing demand for their services; and,
- ways to enhance both the internal efficiency of education systems to ensure that limited resources are put to best use and external efficiencies to ensure that the products generated by the content and processes of an education system best satisfy economic and social requirements.

In addressing these key concerns, it is widely held that educational research has the potential to play an important role in policy formulation and decision making aimed at improving education and schooling, since it “is the tool which enables policy makers to determine national educational needs,

to assess new approaches to resolving issues, and to evaluate the effectiveness of policies and strategies” (ADB, 1996, p. 1). Yet decision makers do not use research as much as they could and do not actively seek it out, thereby largely neglecting or overlooking the opportunity for better policy or decisions that research findings may provide.

Despite the potential of educational research to making an important, some would say essential, contribution to decision making in education, many researchers complain that education decision makers pay insufficient attention to research findings. Policy makers and implementers, on the other hand, argue that much of the available educational research is unintelligible and lacking in relevance for educational decision making purposes. Examples where educational research could usefully inform decision makers include monitoring the health of education systems, investigating options for reform and change, evaluating intended and unintended outcomes of interventions and assessment strategies.

Much has been written (e.g., Husen and Kogan, 1984; Brown, 1994; Hallinan, 1996; McGaw, 1996; Rauner & Maclean, 2008; Maclean & Wilson, 2009) which analyses the relationship between education decision making, research and educational information. Some of this writing presents the views of researchers and others who express a concern about the marginal attention given to research in policy formulation and educational decision making. Many (e.g., Shavelson, 1988; Harlen, 1996, Ordonez and Maclean, 2002; Biddle & Saha, 2002) provide suggestions as to what needs to be done to increase the impact of research in this area.

Agencies such as the Asian Development Bank (e.g., 1996), OECD (e.g., 1994; 1995; 1996) and UNESCO (e.g., ACER/ACEID, 1995; IBE/NIER, 1996) have also contributed to the debate on this topic, vigorously seeking pathways to improve the flow of information between the producers and consumers of educational research, and providing case studies to illustrate where this communication has been successful.

It is clear from the literature that due to radical and widespread changes occurring in the use of information technologies, much more information is now more readily available for policy makers to use as an input to the decision making process. In some ways this makes the decision making process more difficult than it was when information inputs were more restricted.

## **2. GENESIS OF TVET RESEARCH**

Research on technical and vocational education and training is by now an internationally established and widely recognised focus of educational research. The internationalisation of TVET research is expressed by such things as the annual national, regional and international conferences on TVET,

networks such as UNEVOC, the establishment of UNESCO Chairs in TVET, and the inclusion of TVET into the international programmes of the World Bank, OECD, ILO, Asian Development Bank and UNESCO, to promote the development of TVET systems, especially in developing countries. The fact is that vocational education cannot escape the dynamics of internationalised technological and economic development and the establishment of international labour markets depends also on the cross-border mobility of employees, these things leading to a growing interest in TVET research. TVET research builds on the contributions of a number of different research traditions and disciplines, and the design and evaluation of vocational training processes. These range from qualifications research in industrial sociology to the didactics of the various vocational disciplines. Basic research with a view to the further development of TVET systems, occupations and occupational domains, and to the design and evaluation of vocational training processes, is at the core of TVET research. The challenges for TVET research have increased with the acceleration of technological and economic change and the readjustment of the relationship of internationalisation and localisation in the qualifications of employees (Rauner & Maclean, 2008).

Even though vocational education and training is important for the global economy because it serves the qualifications of skilled workers for the intermediary sector of the employment system, TVET research is still largely shaped by national traditions of vocational education. In looking at the genesis of TVET research it is important to recognise that the definition of the research field of TVET research has always been determined by national definitions and structures, which in turn are shaped by cultural traditions. By way of illustration, there are some interesting studies which describe the genesis and development of research in TVET over the past 40 or so years from the 1970's in a number of countries such as Germany, France the United States, Australia, China and Japan (Rauner & Maclean, 2008). These studies document a period of significant and dynamic change in the vocational landscape of the countries concerned. There is also an analysis by Holmes and Maclean (Rauner & Maclean, 2008) on the genesis of research on TVET and skills development by intergovernmental organisation and bilateral agencies such as the World Bank, the ILO OECD, AusAID and others.

### **3. DIFFERENT TYPES OF RESEARCH: DIFFERENT LEVELS OF DECISION MAKING**

When considering the relationship between research and decision making in education, it is important to recognize that there is not one, but many different types, of educational research. These range from reviews of the research literature which present an overview of the research done by others on a particular matter (such as on the influence of socio-economic status or gender on educational outcomes in TVET) to sophisticated and detailed research studies which examine a particular question in great depth (such as the impact of particular teaching methods harnessing ICT's on the learning outcomes of TVET students).

Sometimes a particular body of research (such as the impact of gender on access to TVET and learning outcomes) has had a considerable influence on public opinion and decision makers alike, so that the findings become part of the taken for granted reality as to how education and schooling systems function. In such cases it is not generally possible to say that a particular research study influences a particular policy, but the influence of research on policy and practice in a more general sense is there for all to see.

Educational research in TVET may serve many different functions, besides informing those who make educational decisions. Some TVET related academic research in universities, for example, may be

undertaken for no other reason than that it reflects the particular interests and inquisitiveness of the researcher or researchers involved.

In addition, educational researchers work in very different types of work settings, such as universities, TVET research units in government departments and in independent or semi-independent research units including those in the corporate sector. With the growing popularity of action research, and the notion of the teacher/trainer as researcher, educational practitioners in TVET training institutions are also undertaking research, as an input to help improve their educational practice. When this occurs the producers and consumers of research may in fact be one and the same entity.

The motivations of these different groups of researchers can vary considerably. For instance, independent researchers in universities tend to be much more critical in their approach to their research than are those working as part of government research units.

Just as there are many different types of TVET research and researchers, so there are many different types, and levels of decision makers. Decision makers include both Ministers of Education and other politicians who make policy decisions that may influence a whole TVET system, as well as high ranking civil servants who themselves assert a great deal of decision making influence when implementing the policy decisions of their political masters. In addition, moves towards a greater decentralization of education, and the development of genuine partnerships with private sector employers in TVET, has had important implications for the decision making process, with an increasing proportion of decisions now being made at the level of the community, firm, TVET training institution and classroom where, for example, the decisions of TVET trainers on matters such as teaching methods can have a profound influence on the educational outcomes of a particular group of TVET learners in a particular setting.

#### **4. OPINIONS OF DECISION MAKERS ON EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH**

Reference will now be made to a small scale study conducted by the author when working in UNESCO Bangkok some years ago (Ordonez & Maclean, 2002). This presents the perspective of education decision makers, who are the consumers of research, regarding the impact of educational research on the decision making process. That UNESCO study showcased the views of a small group of senior educational decision makers (including some working in the area of TVET) from countries in the Asia-Pacific region on the possible link between educational research and improved educational practice, and on what they believe can realistically be done to improve the usefulness and influence of educational research on decision making in education. The extent to which the views expressed are generalisable more widely to other education decision makers in the Asia-Pacific region, in particular to those working in the area of TVET, remains to be tested.

The data refers to the opinions of high ranking education decision makers and administrators from 19 countries in the Asia Pacific region whose views were surveyed through open ended questions, when these officials attended meetings in Bangkok organized by UNESCO Bangkok.

The decision makers were surveyed as a group, and also interviewed individually, respondents being invited to present their views on a range of matters. These were organised under five main themes: (a) the influence of educational research on establishing priorities for the education sector in their country; (b) expectations regarding research and decision making in education; (c) evidence regarding the overall impact of educational research on the decision making process in their country; (d) views on who should determine the research questions to be answered and who should do the

research; and, (e) specific suggestions on how the relationship between researchers and decision makers can be improved.

Despite the diverse nature of the countries surveyed with regard to such matters as their level of economic development, the features of their education systems, socio-cultural characteristics and the like, there was a surprisingly high level of agreement among them regarding the views expressed. Respondents were assured that their responses would be treated anonymously, with no individual respondent or their country being identified in the write up of the material collected without their prior approval.

It is beyond the limits of this short presentation to examine each of the five areas examined in the study. Instead the focus here is on where the decision makers surveyed were in agreement as to what can best be done by researchers to improve their relationship with policy makers, and to increase the likelihood that their research findings will be taken into account by educational authorities. In their view it is essential that researchers do more to ensure that:

- their research is conducted on topics that are of interest to decision makers;
- researchers clearly specify the policy implications of their findings;
- research is of high quality, with rigorous methods of inquiry;
- claims made in the research are realistic, in terms of data collected and methods adopted;
- research findings are expressed precisely, concisely and in concrete form; and
- decision makers take the trouble to articulate more explicitly their research needs to researchers.

They also believed that decision makers should be more open-minded with regard to the contribution of research to improving educational practice, rather than being quick to dismiss it as largely irrelevant, which currently and frequently happens. Although it is not easy to resolve the current long standing differences that exist between researchers and decision makers in the areas referred to in this paper, there was a common agreement among those surveyed that all parties needed to work together more constructively to ensure that available research and decision making resources were harnessed most effectively to help improve the quality and relevance of education in the Asia-Pacific region.

## **5. THE WAY AHEAD**

There is no doubt that educational research has the potential to make an important contribution to policy formulation and analysis IN tvet. However, there appears to be at the current time a strong feeling amongst many educational decision makers and administrators in the Asia-Pacific region that educational research has a long way to go before it reaches its potential in the region. In order to improve the current situation, there is a need for all parties concerned to examine critically the current relationship between research and policy-making with a view to identifying constructive and realistic ways in which policy makers and education researchers can work together most effectively in this regard.

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# From reconstruction to deconstruction – A review of South African skills development research

## Author:

**Peliwe Lolwana**, Director, Educational Policy Unit, Wits University, South Africa

## Abstract:

The presentation discusses the last two decades of research on skills development in South Africa with the emphasis being on research on the South African Further Education and Training (FET) colleges. It is adapted from a longer paper (1) in which the authors address research relevant to both the supply and demand. The presentation provides a periodization of knowledge production in South African skills development across three overlapping, but markedly distinct phases. These phases are defined by the transformation of skills development in South Africa post democracy, by the structural relationship between the state and the research community and by the epistemological approaches and paradigmatic stances adopted. The central argument is that research has made an important contribution to the transformation of skills development in South Africa but that continuing to do so would require a broadening of the epistemological and paradigmatic frameworks applied. It would also require the establishment of securely funded research institutes for long term theoretical work and the training of a new generation of researchers.

(1) By Lesley Powell and Peliwe Lolwana

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This essay discusses the last two decades of research on skills development in South Africa with the emphasis being on research on the South African Further Education and Training (FET) colleges. It is adapted from a longer paper in which the authors address research relevant to both the supply and demand aspects<sup>1</sup>.

The essay provides three key periods of knowledge production in South African skills development, each defined by the transformation of skills development post democracy, by the structural relationship between the state and the research community and by the epistemological and paradigmatic stances adopted.

The first period, called the *Period of Reconstruction* (1994 to 2002), saw the design of the post-apartheid skills development legislation and the structures and institutions supporting such,

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<sup>1</sup> Powell, L., Lolwana, P., 2012. From reconstruction to deconstruction – the role of research in South African Skills Development. Paper prepared by ADEA for its Triennale Meeting (Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 2012).

including the transformation of the 152 technical colleges into FET colleges. Here research focussed on understanding the structures and systems that existed in apartheid's manpower and technical college systems and on developing policy recommendations for a single, co-ordinated skills development system.

Research was funded either directly by government, or by donors and businesses working in partnership with government. With few exceptions, research in this period privileged quantitative methodologies and when qualitative methods were utilised these eschewed interpretivist approaches in favour of descriptive 'hard data' on which policy could be built (see Fisher et al, 1998; Jaffe 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d). The focus was on developing indicators that would function as a baseline against which the transformation of the sector could be measured (see Powell and Hall 2000, 2002 and 2004). This resulted in research privileging applied approaches above theoretical studies (Mcgrath, 2008) and quantitative above qualitative approaches.

Very little academic research was produced on skills development during this period amounting to less than ten Masters and Doctoral thesis. This is partly explained by the focus of universities on schooling and higher education, rather than skills development.

The second period, called the *Period of Early Critique* (2002-2009), saw the consolidation of the FET college sector. The FET Colleges Act was passed, college principals appointed, common management systems developed, college councils trained, a R1.9 billion Recapitalisation Fund implemented and a new FET curriculum implemented.

With much of the policy frameworks formulated and in the early phases of implementation, research shifted to an increasingly critical engagement with policy with concern expressed with the failure of policy to achieve its stated outcome (HSRC, 2007; McGrath et al, 2004; and Papier, 2006). A smaller body of work, frequently overlapping with the above, focused on the relationship between colleges and the labour market (Cosser, 2003; Gewer, 2009; Kraak, 2007) and on aspects of institutional development such as governance systems; management systems (Geel, 2005) and teaching staff (Jaffe et al, 2004; Papier, 2008).

A key concern of this period was the structural incoherence within the skills development system caused by the establishment of education and training in two distinct Departments of Education and Labour. Until very recently, skills provision through the Sector Education Training Authorities was located in the Department of Labour and education provision in the Department of Education. Kraak (2006) argued the importance of 'joined-up' policy to correct for this by allowing "cross-sectoral policy co-ordination and complementarity" (2006: p.21).

Despite the criticisms of implementation and system disjuncture – these works are largely located in 'productivist' accounts of VET which are built on two key assumptions. First, is that "training leads to productivity, [which] leads to economic growth" and second, that "skills lead to employability [which] lead to jobs (skills for work)" (McGrath, 2011). Both assumptions are contested by a large body of literature which argue that the relationship between education and economic development is complex and related just as much to the social, economic, trade and political policies of a country as it is to skills development.

A growth in academic research occurred during this period. The vast majority were Masters Thesis produced as part of a MEd or MPhil. Similar to studies in the *Period of Construction* these studies represent disjointed topics, supervised by different supervisors and across different universities. While many of these focus on the successes or failures of policy implementation, a few such as Barnes (2004), Allais (2003, 2007) and Gamble (2006) began to interrogate and challenge the assumptions underlying South Africa's skill development approach.

Despite the enormous contribution made since 1994 by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the National Business Initiative, by 2009 both research centres were only minimally engaged in FET research. This resulted in much of the recent research being undertaken by consultants. Concern with the consultant model is well documented and includes the implications for research quality, the development of long term research trajectories and the training of future researchers. These concerns highlight the importance of developing sustainable institutional homes at which long term projects and researcher development can take place and emphasises that the absence of such will limit the research agenda to projects that are descriptive, empirical, lacking in theorisation and are mostly short term in nature.

The third period, which we termed ***Deconstruction – A New Moment***, marks the period post 2009 which we argue exists as a unique moment for considering anew the epistemological and theoretical approaches applied to skills development research and the structural organisation thereof.

This should not be read as a criticism of the works previously undertaken, but rather as recognition of the limitations of these approaches for the next phase of skills development. An important impetus for this is what McGrath (2012) describes as a ‘triple moment of challenge and opportunity’ (2012: forthcoming). The first is the policy moment – having committed to expanding participation to 1 million students we are now confronted with how little we understand the workings of these institutions and the impact that they have on the lives of students. The second, the ‘theoretical moment’, exists as a unique opportunity to advance our understanding of the role that VET plays in development (McGrath, 2012: forthcoming). The third, relates to epistemology and methodology. There is an increasing awareness that current approaches, and specifically macro quantitative approaches – while useful – suffer a number of limitations (see McGrath and Lugg, 2012 and Powell, 2012). There is a need to broaden the base of who we talk to, of how we talk to these people and probably also of why we talk to them.

These concerns come at a critical moment for skills development research in South Africa. The establishment of a new Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in 2009 with higher education, further education and work-based skills contained in its mandate has to some extent addressed concerns with the systemic incoherence. The DHET has adopted an open stance of dialogue and engagement with researchers and has recently allocated a research project of R75 million, one of the largest in the history of skills development research in Africa, to the HSRC. One of the challenges of this project is the capacity available to undertake the work, another – and probably the greater challenge – is the ability to unpack and engage anew with the assumptions underpinning policy research undertaken over the past two decades.

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## Evidence based VET policies – a European experience

### Author:

**Christian F. Lettmayr**, Acting Director, Cedefop – European Centre for the Development of Vocational Education and Training, Thessaloniki,

### Abstract:

Already in 1963, the European Council decided on ten general principles of a common vocational education and training policy for the EU. Especially under principles 3 and 4 the Council asked for research, forecasts and information exchange as a basis to attain a common policy. In 1975, Cedefop, the European agency for the development of vocational education and training in the EU, has been founded as an independent organisation of the European Communities to develop and coordinate research, inform on research, disseminate related information and provide a platform for experience exchange and discussion.

Applied research, answering to the needs of policy makers by providing high quality analysis has become the central activity of Cedefop today, as information dissemination has lost in importance due to the developments in communication technology, the development of the web, etc.

The trend towards evidence based policy making is of course a development which goes far beyond TVET. It is closely related to a pragmatic and rational approach towards policy making, to extended possibilities because of better statistics and data, to progress in the social sciences, and last but not least the development of an evaluation culture. It is, thus, also part of a more transparent and accountable policy making process. This does not replace political decisions or ideological objectives, but informs such decisions and by allowing a learning process arguably makes decisions more effective.

As reflected in Cedefop's work programme and medium term priorities, this translates into several broad types of research and analyses. First, reporting on developments and monitoring on progress against set (political) objectives. This includes, whenever possible, impact analyses and assessment of results. Second, not least because of the diversity of the EU-Member States, identification of policy initiatives and good practices, ideally with an assessment of results, stimulating policy makers decisions to adapt similar decisions. Third, forecasts and more basic research of specific issues help to better understand phenomena related to VET and the labour market. These, in particular, help to define options for a common policy and the design of common tools and initiatives in pursuance of the political priorities. [In my presentation concrete examples for each of these areas of research will be highlighted.]

Cedefop's authority and the acceptance of Cedefop's work relies not only on the quality of its work and its independence in terms of unbiased assessment of results but also its focus

on the political priorities, thus relevance, and the dissemination of its results in a form which is understandable and applicable, thus practicality.

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I want to share some of Cedefop's experiences with you in areas of policy making which have gained particular relevance. Of course, such successes have many fathers and it should be well understood that Cedefop has been one of many contributors only and that also Cedefop's work is building on the substantial contributions of many researchers, and other institutions inside and outside of the European Union. Finally, it is work which lives of the support also of policy makers, in our case mainly the European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament, the Governments of the Member States and the Social Partners and their willingness to base their decisions on the evidence provided.

One of the major paradigm changes today is the learning outcome orientation. While the principle is to a large extent still conceptual its implementation has made good progress in the past years. It has been fundamental for the so called Copenhagen process and the design and finally implementation of the European tools. One of these tools is the European Qualification Framework. Of course, it is in part a theoretical and conceptual construct, which has been derived nevertheless on the evidence of very diverse education and training systems in the Member States. It is a referencing tool to which

national qualifications, acquired in different systems can be related. By relating to a common reference point, national qualifications can be compared to each other and are acceptable in all participating countries. In 2012, national qualification frameworks are in place in all Member States and most countries will have undergone a referencing process, which is a kind of peer review of the national frameworks to secure that the references to the European Qualification Framework are consistent. Cedefop, not only has contributed to the design of the tools and provided substantial input to the policy documents, mainly Council recommendations, but it continues to play a major role in the referencing process. Because Cedefop's input builds on an intimate knowledge of the state's systems its technical input is widely accepted. This is key for the implementation and practical application of the tools. Cedefop's work on the European tools is following the policy objectives as defined by the responsible ministers in the so called Copenhagen process. Cedefop also monitors the progress of the countries in this process, which is voluntary as the Union does not have legislative powers in this policy area. Effectiveness of this monitoring and reporting obligation rests on two basic conditions. One is the quality of the evidence which indicates progress, another is the validation of the results and thus acceptance by the national authorities. As implementation progresses, reporting on the tool will attain more and more the character of impact evaluations with a view on how the tools can be made more efficient and effective and finally if they in reality are able to deliver on the basic objectives.

Especially in the field of actually implemented policy initiatives a particular area where evidence is important to inform policy learning are the identification and the sharing of good practices. I would like to refer here to two areas, one the validation of non-formal training and learning, the other transmission mechanisms whereby skill anticipation is translated into a more relevant provision of education and training. Both fields will be very important areas whereby countries can learn from each other. To make such learning possible initiatives need to be presented in an objective and comprehensive way. Success and problems need to be highlighted and conditions need to be described which are responsible for the success in the particular situation. To take another example, which has gained high visibility in these days, the German type system of apprenticeships has contributed to lower youth-unemployment rates in these countries. It is important to understand to which extent it can and should be copied and what would be the necessary conditions for its functioning. Again, the analyses and evidence would be a typical work Cedefop could perform to provide policy makers with good evidence.

Coming to the third type of evidence for policy makers I will not report on our skill forecasting, which actually is new only in the sense that it has been designed as a regular input into a continuous policy process of constant adaptation of education in general and TVET provision or what I have called just before a transmission mechanism. Nor will I refer to our work on mega trends as I have reported already yesterday on these subjects. I would like to refer instead on our work on skills obsolescence which is closer to basic research into basic phenomena, which is less motivated by responding to a particular policy objective at present but which we believe could be an important issue for TVET and especially adult learning. This kind of research attempts to provide a better understanding of a phenomenon in a qualitative sense as for instance the question about different types of obsolescences, the typical situations in which skill obsolescence occurs, etc. From a policy point of view its quantitative impact is also important and thus we are trying to assess what are the negative effects of obsolescence and how frequently does it occur. This information provides policy ideally with a sound ground to further explore the issue and decide if it should become a focus of policy initiatives.

VET research, as much research in the social sciences, has been dominated in the past by qualitative approaches with little methodological rigor. Cedefop has and is making a big effort to introduce and enrich its research by quantitative, econometric and statistical, methods to increase the reliability and quality of our research. Among Cedefop experts we have today excellent labour market

economists as well as statisticians. This is of course also true for many of our contractors who support our research. Nonetheless, as dependent we are on the cooperation with external experts we have built up an internal research capacity which we believe is crucial for the quality of our work. Of course methodology also has benefitted greatly from the possibilities of new IT programs and hardware.

Cedefop's authority and the acceptance of Cedefop's work relies, however, not only on the quality of its work and its independence in terms of unbiased assessment of results but also its focus on the needs of policy makers and political priorities, thus relevance, and the dissemination of its results in a form which is understandable and applicable, thus practicality. We believe this is of paramount importance in the field of applied and policy related research and especially for VET.

One of the performance indicators we use for the evaluation of our own work has been the number of policy documents by the European institutions and international organisations which are informed by Cedefop's work and the mandate the Centre receives from the EU institutions. This indicator, which needs to be assessed in a qualitative and a quantitative way has been constantly increasing in the past years which we believe is a good indication of the impact and value added of our work.