

COMMENTARY

Research for and on occupations

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Occupations continue to constitute a major element of the way in which labour markets are structured despite all the prophecies of doom purporting to signalise an end to a world of work organised along such lines. Nevertheless, the occupational landscape is undergoing more movement than ever before. New occupations are being developed whilst others are disappearing or changing in terms of their characteristic activities, requirements and structures, a fact not least reflected by the large number of new and updated training occupations. These new and updated occupations have helped provide accompanying qualifications for the ongoing structural change and have supported the process. The result is that the dual system is now much more firmly anchored in the growing services sector and within knowledge intensive occupations than was previously the case.

The aims of occupational research are to anticipate this change, reveal its causes and interdependencies and develop structural proposals. To this extent, occupational research initially comprises skills research. Its role is to investigate the basic principles underlying occupational development, analysing the structuring of work tasks and activities for this purpose. The position of occupations in the employment system, the significance of occupations within the process of structural change, the interlinking of the educational and employment system and the changing of occupation over the course of a working lifetime are all valid objects of research. Notwithstanding this, occupational research also needs to turn its attention to individual perspectives. These especially include the development of occupational identities and attitudes and the structuring of occupational biographies within the context of lifelong learning.

Relation to application and utilisation

Although the relevance of occupational research to vocational education and training is obvious, it remains somewhat underdeveloped as a research area. There is a raft of reasons for

this. One reason is that occupational research exhibits and indeed needs to exhibit correlations with various fields of academic research rather than being capable of clear localisation in disciplinary terms. A further reason is the fact that occupational research is directly or indirectly aligned towards implementation. There is an expectation of specific results and realisable recommendations on the part of vocational training policymakers and those involved in company and extra-company practice. This is particularly true of research which is conducted within the scope of updating procedures and which needs to be based on benchmarks negotiated with the social partners and on instructions issued by the relevant government ministry. Research of this nature takes place within a political and administrative context. FELIX RAUNER'S proposal for a fundamental restructuring of vocational (education) research, for example, fails to take this central function of occupational research into account. He urges the foundation of one or more Max Planck Institutes in order to achieve connectivity with internationally established research standards. Although such an approach may ostensibly serve to enhance a reputation for academic research, the intrinsic and academically aligned pure research carried out by institutes of this kind is unlikely to harmonise with the necessity of conducting occupationally specific analyses. This would also mean that regulatory work would lose the impetus, co-involvement and corrective which are indispensable to it.

Notwithstanding this, the tendency has been for too little weight to be given to theoretical research thus far, and this is an area where some catching up needs to take place. The multifarious nature of the occupations and the context factors mean that this hardly comes as a surprise, although occupational research can point to considerable research experiences, traditions and results. There is likely to be scarcely another field of research which presents as many qualifications analyses in such a differentiated form. Some updating procedures are based on full surveys of whole branches. The foundations of research requirements lie in sophisticated research designs, the use of socio-scientific methods, specialist and methodological reflection on the approach adopted and results obtained and, not least, the autonomy and independence of the research work conducted. One of the reasons this hardly registers with some parts of the research community is the fact that the updating processes and the research contribution made exhibit very little transparency for those not involved. It is also true that research results are often not prepared in such a way so as to make them available for academic research debate, meaning that external validation cannot be ensured.

Systematisation of occupations

Occupational research depends on robust data on the structures and development of employment and employment activity. The 2009 Report on Vocational Education and Training represents the first time that BIBB has produced an independent data report providing a

comprehensive and indicators-based summary of initial and continuing vocational education and training. The report contains findings from surveys conducted by BIBB itself as well as bundling relevant data from official statistics. Work remains to be done on closing gaps which still exist.

The compilers of official statistics are now struggling to cope with the multitude and dynamism of occupations. The aim of occupational classifications is to capture and systemise this diversity. Existing classifications of occupations will no longer be able to do sufficient justice to the requirements placed in a clear and coherent systemisation of occupations. For this reason, new classifications are being worked on and are expected to be available next year. The Federal Institute is actively involved in this restructuring process and has brought its own proposals to the table. These new classifications would provide occupational research with an instrument which will enable better recording of the dynamics of change, particularly in the service sector.

Against this background of classification of occupations, one central research issue is how occupations are formed and how a delineation between occupations may be drawn. The tasks facing occupational research include the clarification of basic principles in this area and the development of empirically based proposals for the definition of occupations and for specific updating procedures. There is plenty of evidence to show that the existing (training) occupations display very many areas of communality. Within educational policy, this finds expression in the demands for joint basic training, for joint core skills and for the formation of occupational groups. There is also wide-ranging consensus that the areas of communality are sufficient to achieve a reduction in the number of training occupations from its present level of 349.

Notwithstanding this, research results alone cannot justify the formation of occupations. The fact is that occupations represent various tasks and areas of responsibility rather than merely constituting bundles of different competences. This means that they also affect branch structures and spheres of interest. A problem regularly arises in this respect in the form of the conflict with existing occupational and branch structures which occurs when customer requirements call for a cross-occupational spectrum of action which cuts across fields of activity. Differences and even conflicts between the results of occupational research and the updating of occupations are, therefore, nothing unusual. Such differences and conflicts are in the nature of things. This makes it even more important to clarify the respective roles, in other words, occupational research and updating need to work hand in hand without, however, losing sight of their various tasks and their own sense of intrinsic purpose.

Networking of occupational research

The main thrust of occupational research takes place at the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) and at BIBB, although it is also conducted by institutes of higher education and a number of research institutes. Occupational research has been treated as a cross-sectional topic at the IAB over the course of recent years. The plan is to make a main focus of research in future. In its evaluation of the IAB, the German Council of Science and Humanities was right to call for better networking to serve as the basis for an intensification of occupational research. The IAB and BIBB have taken this proposal on board and have agreed a closer degree of cooperation. This cooperation agreement applies to sharing information on the planning of research and the implementation of joint projects and events and also extends to include the exchange of human resources.

Both institutes were founded almost 40 years ago to operate within a narrowly defined context in terms of scheduling and content in systemising and professionalising research, development and advisory services. Whereas the occupational research conducted by the IAB mainly focuses on the perspective of the labour market, BIBB's main emphasis is on the perspectives of vocational education and training and on the way these network with other educational areas and the employment system. In overall terms, these different approaches complement each other extremely well, this being reflected in a large number of cooperation agreements and in the extensive exchange of views which takes place. The joint preparation of projections for the development of the qualifications structure and the mutual use of research data are examples of this. The key is to continue and intensify this work, both bilaterally and within research networks such as the Vocational Education and Training Research Network (AG BFN).