

Editorial

Welcome to JVRP: introducing the journal and its mission

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Abstract

This first editorial article introduces the Journal of Vocational Research and Practice (JVRP), a new platform dedicated to bridging the gap between academic research and industry practice. Stemming from research conducted at the University of Staffordshire, the journal responds to the need for accessible, practitioner-informed dissemination of work-based learning outcomes, particularly those from Higher and Degree Level Apprenticeships. The paper explores the evolving scope of vocational research, emphasising its potential to inform policy and address productivity challenges within the UK and beyond. JVRP advocates for interdisciplinary collaboration, and values contributions from all vocational levels and sectors, including apprentices, degree students, and professionals undertaking practice-based qualifications. This article sets the scene for the editorial issue, which introduces the diverse editorial board, outlines article submission formats, and includes guidance to support first-time authors. Ultimately, JVRP aims to create a community of inquiry where practitioners can share innovations with academic and industry audiences.

Keywords

Vocational research, practice-based inquiry, educational policy, workforce development, interdisciplinary collaboration.

Introduction, origins, and rationale

On behalf of the editorial board of the Journal of Vocational Research and Practice (JVRP), we would like to take this opportunity to welcome you to our community and this editorial issue, celebrating the release of this new journal. The number of academic journals out there is believed to be somewhere in the region of 30,000 - 35,000 in varied languages (Sadeghi, 2017), so why are we adding yet another to this already populated space?!

Over the past 12 months, Karen Castle and I have led research at the University of Staffordshire, exploring what our Higher and Degree Level Apprentices (H&DAs) do with the findings of their work-based projects. We know our H&DAs achieve some wonderful things with these projects, yielding significant organisational, social, technological, and environmental impact in the process; and it is not just us noticing this - for example, Rozan (2022) acknowledges apprentices in Malaysia are improving small medium enterprise (SME) digital business capability, highlighting the impact of apprentice work is not just in the UK, but is being seen globally. Subsequently, as our apprentices transition from learner to master (Looi and Yong, 2017), they have the ability to influence practice on a larger scale by sharing the results of their projects, a byproduct of their newfound critical thinking and innovative mindset. Essentially, as the classic saying goes, "student has become teacher!" Through our research, Karen and I wished to find out exactly *how* this 'sharing,' otherwise referred to as dissemination, occurs.

What we found out in the process of engaging with and interviewing our apprentices is that journals would be a great place to share findings. Unfortunately, as practitioners, apprentices sometimes find academic research journals intimidating and inaccessible (Perea and Brady, 2017). This is for a number of reasons, including lag in peer review processes and publication timelines (Lundsten et al., 2013), and the challenging nature of academic language and jargon (Kelemen and Bansal, 2002). As an alternative, practitioner focused journals do exist, but we felt there was an opportunity to create something which can bridge the gap - bringing together academia and industry once and for all. We appreciate the magnitude of this task, and we know we will face hurdles along the way, not least convincing the academic community of the need and benefit of filling the space between academia and the professional arena (Love, 2024), and ensuring scientific rigour (Hodgkinson, 2006); nevertheless, we remain committed to this goal.

The evolving field of vocational research, our goal and vision(?)

The term 'vocational research' can be interpreted in a number of ways. For example, Wismansyah et al. (2024) define it as the incorporation of practical skills alongside academic knowledge, while Arlachov and Strelchenko (2024) see it as the integration of scientific knowledge with practice. The most apt definition for us and this journal, however, is by Ferm (2021), who refers to vocational research as the exploration of experiences of students within vocational programmes.

The concept of vocational research has been around for a long time and is described as being in its 'mature phase' (Usup et al., 2024). With this maturity has come an increase in contributions, particularly those which drive policy change and reform (Chen et al., 2023). In other words, work-based research is becoming ever popular, and our hunch is that, despite this clear growth, there are vast numbers of research projects going on as a result of programmes like apprenticeships that are simply not being shared and celebrated. There are professional and expert voices which could shape industry strategy, policy and practices, if only a) they had the tools and environment to share this, and b) the confidence to do so.

We have talked a lot about our own H&DAs so far but let us take a moment to acknowledge the sheer scope of vocational learning. Apprenticeships exist from Level 2 - 7, with H&DAs occupying the latter Level(s) 4 - 7. However, Karen and I

passionately believe creative thinking and innovative practice *is* taking place at Levels 2 and 3 as well, and we want to make it clear that this journal welcomes submissions from *all* levels in *all* industries. Whether you are a Furniture making operative apprentice at Level 2, a Maritime mechanical fitter at Level 3, or a Soil scientist at Level 7, we want to hear from you! This is not just about apprenticeships though. Many full-time students have the opportunity to undertake vocational research, for example, here at University of Staffordshire, our degree students undertake a consultancy project, where they support a local organisation in solving a pertinent issue to yield improvement - we welcome this type of work too. Furthermore, a big 'shout out' to those amongst us studying standalone qualifications either at their own cost or supported by their employer; an example of this being the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) and Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) courses which involve a level of interaction with the organisation and its challenges. Guess what, we welcome contributions from you too.

Solving societal problems

There is a sense that the UK is lagging behind. We are simply not as productive as other advanced economies like the US, Germany, and France (Siddiqui, 2019). We have all sorts of issues in varied industries, including constant restructuring, strong aversion to risk and not enough investment (Kierzenkowski et al., 2018). Recently, Karen and I were invited by our fellow editorial board member, Dr. Trevor Gerhardt, to be guests on his podcast "The Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) Doctor." During our shameless plug of the journal, we talked at length about this productivity crisis and how, from our experience, our programmes have forced H&DAs to sit down and partake in innovation.

By this, we mean that creative thinking and innovative activities are not happening enough in industry. It is no surprise that the lack of innovation is correlated to the low research and development (R&D) investment in the UK compared with other leading economies (Rogers, 2006). In fact, Williams (2022) identifies our UK spending of about 1.7% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on R&D significantly lags behind the likes of France, Germany, and South Korea. The aforementioned Rogers (2006) puts this down to organisational inability to manage R&D effectively. There is not enough focus on this in the UK, and this is where vocational learning comes in and can play a part. Apprenticeships, in particular, come with the commitment to spend at least 6 hours per week in off-the-job learning. It is during this time that, through project-based learning, apprentices are able to produce new and unique ways of solving the problems we face in the workplace.

Ultimately, as we explained in our podcast appearance, UK organisations are, via apprenticeships, (probably without realising) providing the environment for creativity and innovation to occur through the medium of off-the-job learning. Where the workload of a typical full-time employee *not* engaged in an apprenticeship dictates they just do not have time to sit down and be creative, apprentices have this protected time to do this - and they are doing it well. So well, in fact, that we think their employers, suppliers, customers, wider industry, policymakers even; need to hear about it.

What to expect from this editorial issue

Through this editorial issue, we aim to introduce you to the wonderful set of professionals who provide us with strategic direction. When it came to putting together the editorial board, our biggest concern was achieving diversity, and we truly feel we have done that. We knew that if the board was made up solely of Higher Education (HE) professionals, then it would become yet another university academic journal. What we needed was a blend of such HE professionals, alongside representatives of Further Education (FE) and Independent Training Providers (ITPs), employer providers, and a few of the very type of person we want to submit to the journal: successful work-based learners. We are proud to say we have all the above, and we trust this editorial issue is an opportunity for our board members to convey this and create a sense of trust amongst our readership in what we are trying to achieve.

In addition to this, editorial issues also exist to provide guidance to potential authors and set out the varied formats in which people may submit to it (Johnson, 2021). In essence, we felt this editorial issue could be an opportunity to create a 'vocational research toolkit.' We know research is hard, and the process of dissemination is all the more alien. As such, we have compiled an insightful range of editorial articles which consider the purpose and power of vocational research (Dr. Trevor Gerhardt), writing from practice: turning experience into publishable research (Dr. Becky Quew-Jones), methodologies suitable for work-based research (Dr. Joanne Gosling), ethics in practice-based research (Dr. Dilrukshi Dimungu-Hewage), supporting first time authors: a culture of encouragement (Sofija Venckute), call to action for submissions (Dr. Karen Castle and Kieron Chadwick), and two example submissions - the first in the account of practice / reflection format (Yasmin Deter) and the second in the poster presentation format (Alexia Seabrook). It only remains to say that we hope you enjoy reading this editorial issue and we look forward to hearing from you, when the time is right, and it is your turn to share.

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