UNIT 2 – Approaches and methodologies

Graduate surveys – Tracer studies

Main characteristics of the method:
Tracer studies or graduate surveys (otherwise also named alumni surveys) are surveys of graduates from education and training institutions. They are the most valuable single type of survey for collecting systematic and reliable information on the links between study and subsequent employment and work. Graduate surveys provide information about the whereabouts of graduates sometime after the award of the degree, and allow linking this information with socio-biographic and study descriptors (e.g. gender, age, field of study, institution awarding the degree etc.). They can provide valuable data for evaluating the results of the education and training of a specific institution that may be used for further development of the institution in the context of quality assurance.

Apart from national surveys, which normally lie in the responsibility of a central research institute, there is a multitude of decentralised surveys of education/training institutions in many countries which are either designed interdisciplinarily at one education/training institution or are targeted at a single or a few departments or study programmes. Institutional tracer studies are much more developed in the sector of higher education than in the sector of TVET.

Graduate surveys can show a considerable variety of content. For example, they by no means have to postulate that study success is proved by professional success only. Discrepancies between study success and professional success and their reasons - e.g. as a result of specific motives of the graduates or of unfavourable regional employment markets - may themselves be the object of the survey and of the analysis. The studies can include long periods of the educational and professional biography, evaluate assessments and facts, choose a mixture of high standardization and open questions, and they can contribute to explaining instead of measuring the output of universities in a one-sided manner. The last aspect is of particularly high importance as many evaluation surveys only intend to examine the different measures of success, but without offering help in improving the institution’s situation.

Examples of typical topics:
Two main objectives of tracer studies:
- to measure the employability of graduates (labour market information) and
- to get a feedback from graduates to improve the study programme (retrospective evaluation).

Key topics include: employment situation, time to get the first employment, duration of job search, main work tasks/ duties, working time, job satisfaction, use of competencies and required competencies, usefulness of study/training programme, strength and weaknesses of the study/training programme and proposals for improvements.

Examples of possible forms:
The traditional type of national graduate surveys is characterized by its centralised approach: a research institute (e.g. private consultant, public research institute) is conducting the survey according to the needs of a ministry (ministry of education or employment). The individual institutions (VET or higher education) just
provide address register. They do not play an active role in the research process besides technical assistance. In some studies they are doing the send out of the invitation letters. During the last 15 years a new type of graduate surveys has emerged, as more and more individual institutions of education are conducting graduate surveys themselves, sometimes in close cooperation with other institutions of education (network approach).

Most graduate surveys are cross-sectional studies: a population of graduates is asked at one time point only, e.g. two years after graduation. Panel or longitudinal studies in which the same persons are asked at different time points are very seldom. Longitudinal studies are necessary to conduct if we are interested to get information on individual change, because we are able to combine the answers of individuals from the different time points.

The standardised surveys are usually conducted by means of a paper questionnaire or more recently of online questionnaires. Sometimes also telephone interviews are used, where the interviewer enters the answers simultaneously into an online form (CATI).

**Pros and cons**

The advantages of tracer studies are:
- relatively low cost
- easy execution
- ability to provide useful information for improving planning and programming
- ability to combine objective and subjective data
- the flexibility to cover the topics relevant for individual education/training institutes
- ability to secure a systematic information input by standardization and representative determination of the output without having to rely on the construction of a permanent information system

Their major weakness is the demand for detailed information about sample groups or national/regional averages for groups with the same age, gender and educational compositions. In addition, this technique is typically confined to workers’ early market experience and findings may be biased.

**Contextual and methodological concerns**

Preparation of students for future employment is generally conceived as one of the major functions of education and training. There are some systematic reservations regarding information on education and employment as a key theme in information and assessment as well as a key area of concern in education management.

Especially three arguments/questions should be considered:
- To what extent is information on the relationships between education and employment relevant for practical improvements in education?
- Do investigations of the relationships between education and employment lead to the subordination of the education system to the employment system?
- Is it possible to conduct graduate and employers survey in all countries (feasibility) taken into account the risk of a low return rate of questionnaires.

Many graduate surveys have a low quality and therefore the usefulness of such studies is very low. Key problems of the data quality are:
- Reliability and validity of the data are not tested
- Biased sample / representatives not tested
- Low response rate
- Low address quality/ addresses are not valid
Reports from graduate surveys usually contain insufficient information about the key methodological issues. Without a methodological report the quality of the graduate surveys cannot be checked. The following methodological issues should be always reported:

- sampling
- quality of addresses
- response behaviour and representativeness
- data quality, including performed of data manipulation and analysis

Sources:


Isabelle RECOTILLET: Generation surveys: Monitoring transition from school to work. Presentation for Cedefop-ILO-ETF expert seminar, 4 – 5 July 2013, Thessaloniki, Greece
