



Academic research with social impact

Professor of Education
and the Labour Market
Andries de Grip

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Rolf van der Velden

When the Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA) began making job-market forecasts, its work was viewed with scepticism. In those days – the first report was commissioned by the government in 1986 – applied research was not always seen as ‘proper’ academic work. Now these biennial forecasts set the standard for job-market predictions, the institute enjoys a top reputation and its research has received numerous awards. What is the secret to ROA’s success? Andries de Grip and Rolf van der Velden, co-directors of ROA and two of its first ever researchers, take us behind the scenes.

Science and Society

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In the 1980s, labour-market predictions were mainly concerned with human-resource planning. How many engineers do we need, and how many should we train? “In a society based on free choice, we decided this no longer fit the bill”, says De Grip. “We wanted to help people choose their course of study by providing them with valuable information about the labour market. If you’re making that decision now, you want to know what the labour market will look like in five years’ time, when you start looking for a job. We’ve managed to make fairly accurate predictions, which I think has contributed to our success.”

“There’s a lot of flexibility on the labour market”, adds Van der Velden. “The same person can go into different professions, and people from different study programmes can end up in the same profession. That’s another factor that means traditional human-resource planning no longer applies.” Van der Velden was recruited to design a study on how school and higher education graduates were faring on the labour market. The first HBO Monitor, a survey of graduates of Dutch universities of applied sciences, was conducted in 1991. Later a university (WO) version was developed, and one for graduates of intermediate vocational education (MBO). “A good example of multidisciplinary”, says De Grip. “Hans Heijke [the first ROA director] and I were economists, Rolf was a sociologist. I’d never administered a survey, whereas Rolf was an expert.”

Predicting the future

A key factor in ROA’s success is that the researchers look to the future. What themes will be important five years from now? De Grip: “Technological developments such as artificial intelligence have a major impact on job content. Roles have become more complex and require more highly educated people, often at the expense of mid-level positions. Our European Horizon 2020 Technequality project, led by Mark Levels, looks at the disappearance or emergence of certain professions and the implications for education. Another effect of technology is that the labour market has become more flexible. What does the increase in temporary contracts mean for our social-security system and the prevention of inequality?” >

“Health is an important theme too”, Van der Velden says. “We always try to respond quickly to social developments. Twenty years ago, Andries’s research on lifelong learning was already concerned with health. Then the focus turned to vitality and skills that influence a person’s employability. Now it’s becoming clear that health has a major impact on personal development. And in turn, people’s competences shape not only their economic prospects but also their health. We’re trying to find out what people need in order to function well. This no longer refers only to doing well in your studies and on the labour market, or being a good citizen; it means leading a healthy lifestyle too. The disciplinary boundaries between health, economic and sociological research are blurring.”

Multidisciplinary: not because we have to, but because it works

Both men repeatedly stress the importance of ROA’s philosophy and mission. “We want to link contract research with high-quality academic research, collaborate across faculties and build relationships with the study programmes. That way we make use of the full playing field offered by the university”, De Grip says. “Our strength lies in taking a multidisciplinary approach. Not because we have to, but because it helps us answer the questions we’re confronting.”

Examples of this cross-disciplinary cooperation abound. Take De Grip’s research on lifelong learning in collaboration with the departments of Epidemiology and Work & Social Psychology. “One finding is that a lack of certain competences increases a person’s recovery needs, so they may not be able to carry on working until they retire, or they might end up with burnout. Recovery needs is a common term in the medical literature. As an economist, it would never have occurred to me. By the same token, the medical researchers had never come across the concept of ‘skill gap’. Combining our knowledge leads to new insights.”

The fruitful combination of contract and academic research

A good example is the research ROA will do at Siemens in Germany with IBM Watson, the market leader in artificial-intelligence technology. De Grip: “IBM and its customers want to know how Watson applications can improve the performance of employees and organisations. We’ll be studying a ‘chatbot’ that answers employees’ questions about HR matters – which at Siemens Germany involves hundreds of thousands of questions. We know from previous research that jobs disappear, but then other jobs appear. Also, people enjoy their work more: because standardised tasks can be automated, it’s the interesting things that are left over. This study is a good example of contract research that coincides with high-quality academic research. IBM wants to know what works best, and we’ll do a randomised trial to find out.”

“The great thing,” Van der Velden adds, “is that we got this assignment through the grant we received for Technequality. We appointed a postdoc, Marie-Christine Fregin, who in turn had contacts at IBM. Ultimately, this is what makes ROA a success: highly motivated people who can spot these kinds of opportunities. We couldn’t have done it without Marie-Christine. And we have lots of Marie-Christines. As well as a bit of luck every now and then”, he concludes with a smile. <



Rolf van der Velden is professor of Education and Occupational Careers and director of ROA. He also coordinates the National Cohort Study of Education for the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). His current research focuses on the development of performance and choices in education, the transition from school to work, and 21st century skills.



Andries de Grip is professor of Education and the Labour Market and director of ROA. He leads various research projects commissioned by the government and the European Commission. He has published in the areas of training, employability, skill mismatches, human resource management, the effects of increasing the retirement age and more.