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# Social Institutions in VET

## Identifying and measuring the driving forces behind robust VET programs

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# Social Institutions in VET: Identifying and Measuring the Driving Forces behind Robust VET Programs

**Social institutions help overcome fundamental problems and perform a function in society. For comparison across contexts, analysis needs to focus on social institutions with equivalent functions. Robust institutions achieve their functions more effectively, but robustness is difficult to assess. This project develops a framework for assessing social institutional robustness. This framework combines institutions' key properties—function, structure, culture, and sanctions—with their scope of influence and level of institutionalization.**

## Introduction

Social institutions are relatively stable patterns of behavior or joint action that help overcome fundamental problems and serve a function in society (Turner 1997; Miller 2019). Although there is a wealth of literature on social institutions, they remain difficult to measure and compare across contexts. This paper develops a theoretical framework for assessing social institutions' robustness and a methodological approach for their identification and comparison.

In comparative research, institutions are the accepted starting point for cross-country analyzes and comparisons. The economic literature highlights how institutions affect efficiency and resolve market failures (e.g., O'Higgins 1997; Wolter and Ryan 2011; Eichhorst et al. 2015). Political economists are interested in the distinctive political and institutional foundations of national systems (e.g., Thelen 2004; Culpepper and Thelen 2008). In sociology, numerous scholars have investigated the role of institutional arrangements and how they affect outcomes. One example are studies on the impact of educational institutions on labor market outcomes (e.g., Maurice and Sellier 1979; Maurice, Sellier, and Silvestre 1986; Allmendinger 1989; Kerckhoff 1995; Mueller and Shavit 1998).

## The Framework

We combine key theoretical concepts on social institutions' properties into one theoretical framework that attempts to describe robust social institutions. Thus this framework converts existing concepts into a framework usable by empirical researchers.

Miller (2019) uses four general properties to consider social institutions: function, structure, culture, and sanctions. A social institution's function is its defining feature, the problem it exists to solve, and its overall purpose or end. Social institutions' structures comprise the roles, rules, and tasks within institutions, and the relationships or hierarchies among those. Institutional culture is implicit and "comprises the informal attitudes, values, norms, and the ethos or 'spirit' which pervades an institution" (Miller 2019, p.8). Finally, institutions have sanctions—consequences for breaking rules and norms—that range from formal legal punishment to informal moral disapproval (Miller 2019).

Tolbert and Zucker (1999) differentiate three levels of institutionalization: pre-institutionalization (habitualization), semi-institutionalization (objectification), and full institutionalization

(sedimentation). This sequential process of institutionalization describes the development of institutional structures, which stabilize and become more persistent over time. For example, the social institutions responsible for the training and continuing education of qualified VET personnel are deeply embedded in society and have historical continuity, thus they are in full institutionalization (Nielsen 2010).

Leslie and Clunan (2011) introduce a spatial dimension that identifies whether a given social institution has a narrow or broad scope of influence. Institutional boundaries, which define that scope, can be geographic or any other characteristic used to divide groups. Pilot trials in VET are an example for social institutions with narrow scope, because they operate at a small scale like just one school district.

Figure 1 combines the properties and dimensions of social institutions into a single theoretical framework. This framework captures the various potential configurations of social institutions to shed light on drivers and barriers of institutional development. Each row depicts one of the four properties and the columns represent the institutionalization level and scope of influence.

Figure 1. Theoretical framework of social institutions

| Institutionalization Phase (Tolbert & Zucker) | | Pre-institutionalization | | Semi-institutionalization | | Full institutionalization | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Scope (Leslie & Clunan) | | Narrow | Broad | Narrow | Broad | Narrow | Broad |
| Properties (Miller) | Function | | | | Very Robust | | |
| | Structure | | | | Robust | | |
| | Culture | | | | Weak | | |
| | Sanction | | | | Very Weak | | |

Legend for properties' coloring
Very Robust
Robust
Weak
Very Weak

To measure the robustness of a given social institution, scholars would first assess its institutionalization level, then determine if it were narrow or broad. Finally, scholars would color or fill in the boxes in the selected column to show whether each property is strong or weak. For example, a robust institution would be all the way to the right of the table (full institutionalization, broad scope) with every property filled in to indicate a strong function, structure, culture, and sanction. A less robust institution would be to the left with weaker properties.

Using the framework, we can derive the following hypotheses on social-institutional robustness in any social field: 1) A social institution is robust when all of its properties—function, structure, culture, and sanction—are robust; 2) A social institution is more robust as it advances through the institutionalization process; 3) A social institution is more robust when it is broader in scope; and 4) A robust social institution is robust in every dimension of the framework. For a meta-institution comprising multiple social institutions, a fifth hypothesis arises: 5) A meta-institution is robust if all of its constituent social institutions are robust.

# Assessing Social Institutions in VET

Applying the framework to measure social institutions in a specific social field, such as the field of education and training, is a six-step process. First, define the relevant social field(s) for your research question. Second, determine the appropriate level of analysis—for example one part of a meta-institution or a whole context—based on field-specific theory and substantive field-knowledge. Third, using the same theory and knowledge, identify the fundamental problem(s) in that field relevant to the research question and the function(s) associated with them. Fourth, choose an empirical case where the research question can be tested. Fifth, analyze the empirical case to find the social institution(s) relevant to the function(s) in the predefined level of analysis. Finally, use the framework to assess the robustness of the identified social institution(s) and compare them across empirical cases.

For the research question of why some VET programs succeed and others do not, we would begin in the social fields of education and employment, as VET programs have to prepare young people for both an educational career and a professional one in the labor market. The level of analysis appropriate for this question is individual VET programs, which determine young people's labor-market prospects. To derive fundamental problems and functions, we build on Rageth and Renold's (2019) theoretical framework that describes the relevant sub-processes along the VET curriculum process, comprising the phases of curriculum design, curriculum application and curriculum feedback. These sub-processes can then be translated to seven key functions that are equivalent across context (see figure 2). Importantly, we argue that multiple solutions based on those functional equivalents can exist, thus dissimilar social institutions may be functionally equivalent in VET programs in different contexts.

Figure 2: Overview of VET functions along the curriculum value chain
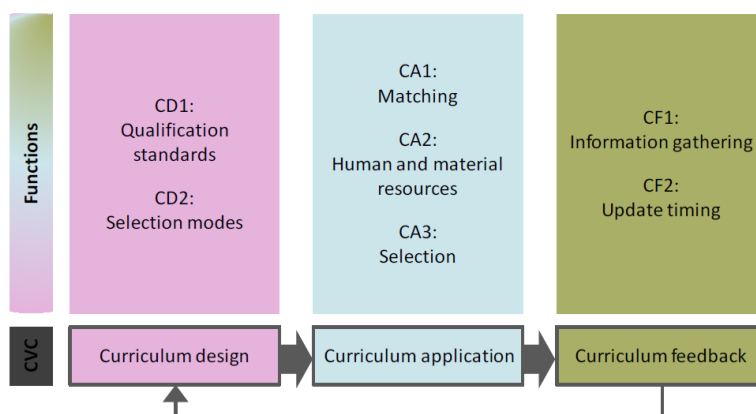


Source: Own depiction based on Rageth and Renold (2019); CD = Curriculum Design; CA= Curriculum Application; CF = Curriculum Feedback.

We could choose any VET program as our empirical cases and identify the institution(s) carrying out the seven functions in that case. Finally, we would plug the identified institutions into the framework to assess their robustness. To compare social institutions across contexts, steps four to five can be applied to each empirical case relevant to the comparison. In that process, focusing on the functions to identify the social institutions enables scholars to compare social institutions as functional equivalents.

The generic methodological approach can assess the robustness of social institutions in any social field. This approach addresses one gap in the existing research, which provides a

number of interesting frameworks but does not always demonstrate how to use them in practice. Measurement helps us meaningfully compare across contexts so policymakers can strengthen the social institutions in any field, and specifically in VET programs to improve the youth labor market. The next step in this research agenda is to operationalize the framework into a concrete tool and apply that to a number of countries' VET programs.

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### Importance of Social Institutions in Society

Social institutions are **patterns of shared behavior or joint action that solve problems** and carry out key functions in society. They can be organizations or implicit, and common examples include the family, languages, and governments. Comparing any complex process across countries and contexts is difficult, but we can make more meaningful comparisons by assessing the social institutions carrying out each function in the complex process.

This project combines the existing theories on social institutions into a framework of their properties—their structure, function, culture, and sanction—, institutionalization level, and scope. We can use this framework to compare VET programs or any other social field by

1) using field-specific theory to find the common functions across contexts

2) identifying the social institutions carrying out all of those functions, and then

3) assessing the social institutions' robustness using the framework.

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