

Employers' evaluation of late-career vocational and general graduates in two countries (PhD project 2 in CAREER)

Aim

To understand (a) why and how employers differently value late-career workers with specific and general educational qualifications and (b) how these evaluations differ across two countries.

Theoretical background

Several studies have shown that workers with occupation-specific, vocational qualifications suffer late-career employment penalties in comparison to workers with broad, general qualifications (Forster, Bol, and Van de Werfhorst 2016). While studies have documented a late-career penalty to vocational education, it remains unclear *why* this is the case. This PhD project is the first to investigate the mechanisms that drive late-career penalties. To do so, we take the perspective of the employer (Bills, Di Stasio, and Gërkhani 2017): why do they decide to (not) hire older workers?

As a PhD, you will investigate the role of different sociological and economic theories that explain this decision-making. The fact that employers are more reluctant to hire older workers with a specific degree might be explained by human capital theory. Rapid technological innovations change demands in the labor market, and the specific skills that were useful when entering the labor market are seen as irrelevant by employers in the late-career. It might also be the case that factors beyond education are crucial to understand why employers prefer older workers with a general qualification. Vocational graduates might be more likely to have physically straining work, and insofar as employers perceive this, it might affect their late-career employment prospects.

In this PhD-project you will try to disentangle these different explanations to better understand *why* there is a late-career penalty. Moreover, in the project you will look whether the institutional context of a country affects this process. An often-mentioned hypothesis (Hanushek et al. 2017) is for example that the penalty is larger in countries where vocational education is highly specific (i.e., Germany) compared to countries where vocational education is more general (i.e., UK).

Research design

In this PhD project you will focus on two countries: The UK and either the Netherlands or Germany. The choice for countries depends on your language proficiency. The project takes a mixed methods approach (Quadlin 2018): you will collect novel interview data and perform a factorial survey experiment. First, recruiters or employers are approached for a semi-structured interview. Qualitative interviews can unveil important criteria for why some older workers are preferred over others. Second, in a factorial experiment, those responsible for the hiring process are asked to evaluate fictive resumes (“vignettes”) of older workers for their likelihood to invite them for a job talk or to hire them (Oesch 2020). By randomly changing or leaving out characteristics on the fictive resumes, we aim to uncover why workers with vocational qualifications suffer a late-career penalty.

Project

This PhD position is part of an ERC project, for which one other PhD-position is also recruited (see project 3). The other PhD-student will use panel data to investigate how workers are mobile in the labor market over their careers. Besides the project initiator, a fourth member of the project will be a postdoctoral scholar who will investigate how labor markets are changing.

Project initiator

Thijs Bol (UvA), to be hired co-promotor

Location: University of Amsterdam

References

Forster, Andrea G., Thijs Bol, and Herman G. Van de Werfhorst. 2016. "Vocational Education and Employment over the Life Cycle." *Sociological Science* 3:473–94.

Oesch, Daniel. 2020. "Discrimination in the Hiring of Older Jobseekers: Combining a Survey Experiment with a Natural Experiment in Switzerland." *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 65:100441.

Quadlin, Natasha. 2018. "The Mark of a Woman's Record: Gender and Academic Performance in Hiring." *American Sociological Review* 83(2):331–60.