



VET Seminar Series

You are warmly invited to the upcoming seminars in Vocational Education and Training (VET), jointly hosted by CRADALL and GLACIER. These seminars bring together scholars engaged in vocational education, skills formation, and comparative education research. All colleagues and students are warmly welcome to join.

📍 Venue: Room N307, St Andrews Building, University of Glasgow

🕒 Time: 11:00–12:00

Session 1:

26 November 2025

🗣️ Speaker: Dr Xinmiao Song (Lingnan University)

Session 2:

11 December 2025

🗣️ Speaker: Dr Johannes K. Schmees (University of Derby)

Session 1:

Title: Caught in the Middle: Navigating Ambition and Reality in Chinese Vocational Education

Abstract:

In a landmark policy shift, China has officially elevated vocational education to a distinct 'type' (类型), positioning it as equal in status to general academic education. This move represents an ambitious blueprint to revitalize a system whose social standing has seen dramatic fluctuations: from a prestigious "golden ticket" providing lifelong employment in the socialist era, to a key channel for rural students' social mobility, and its subsequent decline in appeal following marketization and higher education expansion.



Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork across China, this presentation explores the complex reality behind this new policy framework. I argue that despite its upgraded status, VET remains a primary educational pathway for youth from rural and migrant backgrounds, making it a crucial site for understanding social stratification. On the ground, my research reveals significant tensions within the pedagogical process. This includes a curriculum that struggles to keep pace with industry needs and a focus on elite skill competitions that, while fostering excellence, may not address the skill formation challenges for the majority of students.

This educational complexity extends into the pivotal school-to-work transition, where various internship regimes take shape. While intended as learning experiences, these internships can blur the line between pedagogy and production, often manifesting as a form of precarious labour shaped by imbalanced school-enterprise partnerships. The presentation concludes by reflecting on the core challenges confronting this new policy era: the difficult adaptation of foreign models like Germany's dual system in a different industrial context, and the immense pressure from a competitive youth labour market. Ultimately, this talk poses a central question for discussion: As China redefines vocational education by type, how can it ensure this proclaimed equality in status translates into genuine educational substance and equitable futures for its students?

Dr. Xinmiao Song is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Lingnan University Creative and Cultural Innovation Research Institute, Hong Kong, and an awardee of the RGC Postdoctoral Fellowship Scheme (PDFS) for 2025. She received her PhD in Sociology from The University of Hong Kong. Her research focuses on vocational education and the reproduction of China's new working class, with publications in academic journals such as *The China Quarterly* and *Critical Sociology*. Complementing her academic work, she has also contributed to policy reports on youth poverty in Hong Kong and conducted research on the local recruitment market. Her current research interests, which bridge her academic and policy-oriented work, lie in the employment and skill formation of youth from underprivileged backgrounds.



Session 2:

Title: Vocational biographies as source for international comparative vocational education!?

Abstract:

International comparative research in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) has traditionally concentrated on institutional structures, governance models, and statistical indicators of performance and participation. While such approaches have generated valuable comparative insights, they often overlook the subjective and experiential dimensions of vocational learning and work. As a result, the lived realities of individuals within diverse TVET systems remain un(der)explored – at least in research that focuses beyond national boundaries.

Biographical research offers a means to address this gap. Established within the social sciences (Lutz, Schiebel & Tuiden, 2018) and educational research (Krüger & Marotzki, 2006; Nittel, von Felden & Mendel, 2023), it has also informed TVET studies (Harney & Ebbert, 2006; Pätzold, 2023), illuminating how people interpret their occupational experiences, navigate crises (Bergmann, 2020), engage in workplace learning (Bergmann, Frosch & Dick, 2023), and construct vocational identities (Vonken, 2011).

Our project, BioDataBase, aims to expand the methodological foundations of international comparative TVET research by developing an international database of transcribed vocational biographies. Drawing on the insight that ‘biographies point to the structure and the actors that are equally inherent in biographical processes’ (Harney & Ebbert, 2006, p. 414), the project connects subjective narratives to structural features of TVET systems – in particular its enabling and restricting dimensions. It thereby offers a complementary perspective to comparative approaches focusing on the macro level.

Using case material from England and Germany, I demonstrate how this biographical methodology enables international comparison beyond system typologies. By collecting and analysing vocational life stories across different occupational fields and countries, the project contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how institutional structures are experienced, interpreted and shaped by individuals.

Ultimately, the BioDataBase project seeks to enrich international TVET research by linking the structural with the subjective – offering new empirical and theoretical foundations for comparative inquiry into vocational education and learning.



Dr Johannes K. Schmees: I am Associate Professor at the Institute of Education and Skills, University of Derby. In the academic year of 2025/26, I am also guest professor at Berlin University of Technology. As part of the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Research Cluster, my focus is on international and comparative research in technical and vocational education and training (TVET). My research interests include (1) the comparison and description of VET systems, (2) the impact of international organisations and discourses on the development of national VET policies and VET systems around the world and (3) the development of TVET theories. Prior to my current position, I was Postdoctoral Fellow in the Section for Vocational Studies, School Development and Educational Leadership, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway, and a Lecturer (Akademischer Rat a. Z.) at the Department of Vocational Education and Training, University of Osnabrück, Germany.