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# STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH AND PERCEPTIONS OF CAREER GUIDANCE IN DUTCH SECONDARY EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

This in-depth study focuses on the content of and students' perceptions of and experiences with career guidance in secondary education in the Netherlands. We address (1) students' experiences with five career guidance activities, using semi-structured interviews with 112 students, and (2) students' perceptions of career guidance, using 817 student questionnaires. Results show that student conversations with school counselors and tutors about career guidance mainly involved grades or teacher recommendations. Almost all participants stated they acted on these suggestions by selecting subjects for upper secondary education in line with their grades. At least half of the students found career guiding activities such as sample classes, subject-information sessions, and in-classroom information from school counselors useful. Fewer students considered subject recommendations to be useful. On average, students were neutral to slightly positive regarding the helpfulness of such guidance. We advise schools to develop a shared vision and policy on career guidance, as large differences in students' experiences and perceptions were found.

*Keywords:* secondary school; students' perceptions; career guidance; subject choices; interviews; questionnaires

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This study focuses on the content of, and students' perceptions of and experiences with career guidance in secondary education. Students in secondary education can select school subjects that fit their talents and interests, in preparation of their continuing education at the tertiary level. Students' subject choices can be important for developing their talents and interests, and may

either facilitate or constrain their tertiary education options. Subsequently, subject choices in secondary education may also have effects on society, for example, regarding shortage occupations in fields such as health care, technology and education (Dijks et al., 2023). For example, when few students opt for advanced courses in science and technology, this is reflected in tertiary

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education options, and in turn, on career choices of graduates.

However, making career choices is a delicate and difficult task for students in secondary education (Hanımoğlu, 2018). Given that it is often difficult for students to select subjects in upper secondary education they consider relevant to their desired future careers, there is a need to provide students with advice that corresponds to their desired careers (Hanımoğlu, 2018). Only limited research is available on the ways in which secondary school teachers guide students in their career decisions, particularly from the students' perspective (Howard et al., 2015; Mittendorff et al., 2011). For example, in prior research, Mittendorff and colleagues (2011) addressed the perceptions of vocational students concerning career conversations with their teachers, and Howard and colleagues (2015) focused on the ways in which children and youth understand the various factors influencing their career choices. Very few prior studies take a qualitative approach that listens to students' experiences and perspectives. It is, however, important to deepen our understanding of students' perceptions of career guidance, given the important roles that their perceptions of their teachers and learning environment play in determining what they will learn about educational careers and career decision-making (Shuell, 1996, in Mittendorff et al., 2011).

In the Netherlands as well as in many other countries, students in secondary education are either prepared for more practical-oriented tertiary education (e.g., vocational education and training) or more theoretically-oriented tertiary education (e.g. universities of applied sciences and research universities) in different tracks. In educational research, a large proportion of research focuses only on tracks preparing for higher education, with limited research on preparatory vocational tracks. In this study, we made a particular effort to include students from all tracks in secondary education, to better capture the broad variety of students' perceptions of and experiences with career guidance.

Moreover, with the in-depth character and qualitative nature of our study, we set out to provide further insight into how students perceive specific career guidance activities, as many different activities are organized by the schools, yet few are purposefully provided to guide students in their career development processes. An in-depth understanding of exactly what the activities entail and what makes activities useful and important for students' career decisions such as subject choices, or not useful or important at all in their perspective, may guide further refinement of career guidance in secondary education. More specifically, insight into students' perceptions could help education professionals improve career guidance in terms of its content, intensity, timing, and other aspects.

In the present study, we map the experiences of Dutch students with the career guidance received in secondary education, specifically study profile guidance, provided largely by tutors (similar to homeroom teachers in the United States) and school counselors. Study profile guidance entails the career guidance that Dutch secondary schools provide to support students' decision to pursue certain combinations of school subjects in upper secondary education (the so-called mandatory 'study profiles' in Dutch upper secondary education). In most cases, counsellors are in charge of career guidance and organize most activities, while tutors usually have conversations with students on a more regular basis. There are no specific career guidance qualifications for tutors. Tutors are always teachers, and in many cases so are counselors, and they have sometimes done a short course on, for example, conversation skills. Although research suggests that other people outside school, such as parents, matter for students' choices (Dijks et al., 2023), there is no formal career guidance outside of school. This study focuses particularly on career conversations with school counselors and with tutors, subject information and sample classes, subject recommendations by subject teachers, and in-classroom information provided by school counselors, as

these are frequently used activities by most secondary schools in the Netherlands.

In the following section, we first present relevant findings from previous studies on students' experiences with career guidance. Given the relative dearth of research on students' experiences with career guidance in secondary education, we also discuss corresponding research on tertiary education, although the context and guidance are different and students are older. In both secondary and tertiary education, career prospects play an important part in career guidance. We then present the research questions for this study, along with relevant characteristics of the Dutch educational system and some older research findings on the experiences of Dutch students with career guidance.

### **STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH CAREER GUIDANCE**

Career guidance can include a variety of activities, including career conversations, subject information and sample-subject classes. The literature on students' experiences with career guidance in secondary and tertiary education presents varying results regarding which activities they found useful or informative. On the one hand, students in secondary school tended not to rate stand-alone career-education courses as effective (Welde et al., 2015). In an Irish study, 53% of junior doctors did not recall that their universities had organized any career-advice sessions, and only 8% perceived that adequate career advice had been available at medical school (Croghan & Baker, 2021). Furthermore, lower-secondary students in Switzerland ranked parents as more useful for career choices than career counselors, who they rated as more useful than job fairs, information events, and teachers (Kamm et al., 2020).

On the other hand, in other studies, students have reported experiencing several activities or components of career guidance as useful. For example, Canadian students in senior secondary school rated the following

projects as helpful: students' description of their present selves, subject-specific lessons, simulated days in specific careers, self-portraits of personal meaning, activities/tools and desired outcomes, creation of a budget based on expected earning and expenses, classmate job suggestions, and career portfolios (Welde et al., 2015). These projects helped students to learn a lot about themselves or careers, in addition to making them excited about what they could do with their lives, and/or made them want to learn more about different careers. In a South African study, students rated campus visits and open days among the most useful information sources in choosing higher education institutions (Wiese et al., 2009). Australian tertiary students reported that the course in Career Planning and Development had been beneficial and that it had helped them to determine a career strategy (Miller & Liciari, 2003).

In another study (Payne & Sumter, 2005), university students of sociology and criminal justice in the United States favorably characterized a career fair, in which they mainly learned about the job requirements, benefits, and salaries of various jobs. The event had also led some students to become disappointed with the majors and careers to which they aspired. Students noted that they would prefer the career fair to have a broader focus. For example, in an interdisciplinary department composed of sociology and criminal justice majors, a student recommended that an effort be made to find 'more for sociology people.' Other students offered more practical recommendations, including having more space so that it would be less crowded and having more agencies participate in the career fair. Finally, an American study about computer-assisted career guidance (CACG) suggests that undergraduate students generally prefer CACG systems to be highly directive (Osborn et al., 2021). Following the intervention, these students perceived that the CACG system had been useful in helping them make career decisions. They reported significant gains in self-knowledge, options knowledge, career-related decision-making

skills, and executive processing skills. All in all, students' experiences with career guidance activities seem to vary largely, stressing the need to listen to students' voices in order to find new leads to further improve career guidance in secondary education.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As indicated by the studies discussed above, students have varied experiences concerning the importance of different career guidance activities, yet in-depth insights into their perceptions of and experiences with career guidance is lacking. Hence, the first research question for the current study is as follows:

*How do students experience career guidance in secondary education?* Experience is viewed as the students' personal processes of going through different career guidance activities. Career guidance in the current study means study profile guidance activities involving education professionals. Study profile choices and study profile guidance in the Netherlands will be explained in detail in the next paragraphs. We particularly address students' experiences with five commonly provided guidance activities involving education professionals: career conversations with (a) school counselors and with (b) tutors, (c) subject information and sample subject classes, (d) subject recommendations by subject teachers, and (e) in-classroom information provided by school counselors.

The second research question is: *To what extent has the study profile guidance provided helped the students in the process of choosing their study profiles?* By perceptions we mean the way in which secondary school students think and feel about the extent to which the career guidance provided had helped them in the process of choosing their study profiles. In answering these research questions, we will compare the perceptions and experiences of students pursuing different educational tracks, that is, more practical-oriented and more theoretically-oriented tracks. The specificities of the Dutch education system will be explained below, as this contextual information is

important for understanding the career choice opportunities as well as boundaries of students' choices within this system.

## STUDY PROFILE CHOICES WITHIN DUTCH UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION

When Dutch students start secondary education, they are placed in a track, based on teacher recommendations and performance tests. Secondary education includes a pre-university track (six years), a senior general track (five years), and several pre-vocational tracks (four years). The pre-vocational tracks include theoretical, combined, middle-management, and basic pre-vocational tracks, which prepare students for different levels of vocational education. The senior general and pre-university tracks prepare for higher education. All students choose a "study profile" at the end of the third year (for the pre-university or senior general tracks) or at the end of the second year (for the pre-vocational tracks). Study profiles prepare students for specific domains of vocational and higher education. The profiles include mandatory subjects for all students (i.e., Dutch and English), a study profile component (a combination of subjects), and optional courses. Students take their final exams in all these subjects. Thus, both the tracks and -within pre-university or senior general tracks- the study profiles determine which vocational or higher education domains students are admissible to.

For the basic, middle-management, and combined prevocational tracks, schools offer at least one of ten study profiles: Engineering, Fitting Out, and Energy; Transport and Mobility; Building, Housing, and Interiors; Maritime and Technology; Animals, Plants, and Land; Care and Welfare; Business and Commerce; Media, Design, and IT; Catering, Baking, and Leisure; and Services and Products. Some of these profiles (e.g., Maritime and Technology) are offered only at some schools. In 2019, the most common profiles in the basic and middle-management pre-vocational tracks were Care and Welfare and Services and Products. In the combined

prevocational track, the Services and Products profile was the most popular (Onderwijs in Cijfers, 2021).

The theoretical track of pre-vocational education comprises Business (which is chosen by more than half of the student population); Engineering and Technology; Agriculture; and Care and Welfare (Onderwijs in Cijfers, 2021). The pre-university and senior general tracks also have four study profiles, which are offered at each school: Science and Technology; Science and Health; Economics and Society; and Culture and Society (Rijksoverheid, 2022a, 2022b). The Economics and Society profile is particularly popular, and Science and Health is chosen relatively often as well. Boys tend to be more likely to choose Science and Technology or a combination of the two science profiles, while girls are more likely to choose Culture and Society (Onderwijs in Cijfers, 2021).

### **DUTCH STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH CAREER GUIDANCE**

Career guidance activities are usually offered in the year of the study profile choice: students in pre-vocational secondary education choose in the 8th grade, and students in senior general secondary education and pre-university education in the 9th grade. Career guidance is part of the examination program in pre-vocational education, but this is not the case for senior general and pre-university education (Korpershoek et al., 2022). There is no fixed curriculum for study profile guidance, so schools are free to give substance to career guidance. Prior research showed that school counselors and tutors often perceived the interests and future studies or employment of students the most important in making study profile choices, although these views varied (Wichgers et al., 2022). Hence, there is considerable variation in the guidance students receive, which stresses the importance of first identifying what activities students have received.

This study builds on three prior studies conducted in the Dutch context. In 2009,

Van Langen and Vierke investigated the experiences of Dutch students in senior general and pre-university education with various study profile guidance activities. The students perceived the activities as having been neutral to somewhat important to their study profile choices (Van Langen & Vierke, 2009). The highest ratings were assigned to guidance conversations with the tutor or school counselor, as well as to information on which profiles would meet the entry requirements for which degree programs. Other relevant activities, in decreasing order of perceived influence, were information sessions with parents, information sessions on tertiary education programs at universities (and universities of applied sciences), sample classes, and written or in-classroom information about the profiles. These activities were followed by job fairs or sessions, tests about possibilities or interests, excursions or internships at companies, profile information provided by upper-track students, school projects about profile subjects, excursions to universities (or universities of applied sciences), and work weeks or camps about study profile choices. In general, girls perceived activities as more important than boys did (Van Langen & Vierke, 2009).

The second study conducted in the Dutch context was conducted by Mittendorff and colleagues (2011), investigating career conversations between Dutch vocational education teachers and students. The authors distinguish four clusters of career guidance between teachers, based on the perceptions of students. One category comprises “personal teachers,” who balance non-directive and directive behavior. These teachers were rated significantly higher by the students than other teachers were on “talking about planning and instruments,” “being personal,” and “influence.” Another cluster consists of “non-personal and directive teachers,” who were rated significantly lower on “talking about personal issues,” “questioning,” “being personal,” and “stimulating self-directedness.” Falling between these extremes, the other two clusters could be regarded as “mainstream clusters.” The third Dutch study

is based on interviews with a small sample of pre-vocational students concerning transition portfolios: instruments developed to improve career-related decision-making and career-planning processes using assignments to help students obtain a better image of themselves and their beliefs about various professions or work (Mittendorff et al., 2008). The results differ across three cases (schools). In one school, students perceived the portfolio as useful for collecting evidence about personal development, and as something that could be helpful for job applications or further studies, although personal conversation and investment in a relationship were essential to high-quality career-counseling conversations. In another school, the students did not perceive the portfolio as useful, and in the third school, half of the students thought it was useful. They reported that it had helped them to collect achievements and activities, and that it could be helpful for demonstrating what they had already done when entering vocational education. Very few students in this school perceived the portfolio as an instrument that had helped them with career or future choices.

Many international studies about students' perceptions of career guidance focus on single activities (Miller & Liciari, 2003; Osborn et al., 2021; Payne & Sumter, 2005; Wiese et al., 2009) or do not examine these perceptions in great depth (Croghan & Baker, 2021; Kamm et al., 2020; Welde et al., 2015). From prior research on career guidance conducted in the Netherlands, we know which profile guidance activities are generally available in senior general and pre-university education and that students perceived the activities as having been neutral to somewhat important to their study profile choices (Van Langen & Vierke, 2009). These activities include contact with school counselors and tutors, which received the highest ratings in terms of importance to study profile choices in the study by Van Langen and Vierke (2009). For students in prevocational secondary education, no prior studies are available about this topic. There have been some explorative

studies on transition portfolios of prevocational students (Mittendorff et al., 2008) and career conversations in vocational education (Mittendorff et al., 2011). Thus, although prior studies focused on career guidance in general, to the best of our knowledge, there are no other recent scientific studies on study profile guidance that focus on the perspectives of students. The current study adds to the aforementioned Dutch studies by focusing on all tracks of secondary education, including prevocational students' experiences with profile guidance. Moreover, the in-depth character of our study provides further insight into how students perceive specific career guidance activities.

Although this study is problem-driven, we study career guidance in light of several theories and models which show different beliefs about what career guidance could be. Three well-known ones are Hollands' RIASEC model (in Hartung & Niles, 2000), social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994) and career construction theory (Savickas, 2013). Holland developed the RIASEC model which categorizes both people and career environments as one of six personality types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, or conventional. It is the task of school counselors and tutors to help develop congruence between students' personality type and environment.

In the SCCT, implementing self-concept within academic and career pursuits is central. Amongst other things, the career development assessment and counselling model focuses on students' interests, abilities, and values, and on subjective self-assessments to identify life themes and patterns (Gysbers et al., 2014).

In the career construction theory, adaptability is central. Individuals acquire adaptability by developing four resources: concern about the future; control through self-discipline, effort, and persistence; curiosity about possibilities; and confidence to pursue goals and aspirations (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). In career guidance, students are guided in examining positive and realistic expectations

and helped to develop specific goals to meet these expectations. As such, different theories emphasize different factors as part of career guidance, and a fundamental question is therefore how best to guide young people in career choices.

In this study, we aimed to capture students' voices in an open conversation with them, not limiting ourselves to discussing factors that followed from the three career theories introduced above. Open conversations give room for initial responses by letting the students share freely their experiences, without steering the conversation too much by structured interview questions. Therefore, the three theories were mainly used to interpret and reflect on the findings in the discussion section rather than as theoretical lens for collecting the data.

## METHODS

### STUDY DESIGN

The current study was part of the research project Flow-VO, conducted by the University of Groningen, the Netherlands, investigating educational pathways and study profile choices. It was based on a mixed-methods design. The first topic (students' experiences with five commonly provided guidance activities) was investigated according to interviews. The second topic (students' perceptions of whether the career guidance provided had helped them in the process of choosing their study profiles) was explored through questionnaires. We used a mixed-method approach because we expected this to provide a more comprehensive understanding than by using interviews or questionnaires alone. Questionnaires are suitable for reaching many students, while the meaning of the results of the questionnaires can be better explored through interviews.

### PARTICIPANTS

A total of 14 Dutch secondary schools participated, which were found partly in

the researchers' network, and partly by approaching other school's counselors. Usually the tutor asked students who wanted to participate in an interview. A total of 37 semi-structured group interviews were held with 112 students from all tracks.

Three students were enrolled in the basic prevocational track, and five were following a combination of the basic and middle-management tracks. Eighteen students were enrolled in the theoretical prevocational track, 32 were in the senior general track, and 54 were in the pre-university track. Table 1 shows which tracks the various schools offer. In all, the sample consisted of 69 girls (62%) and 43 boys (38%).

In addition, questionnaires were administered to 938 students from 11 of the 14 schools. Three schools did participate in the interviews, but not in the questionnaires, mainly because of time-related reasons. In general, students participated per class, except when students and/or parents did not give consent. The final sample consisted of 817 students, of whom 114 prevocational students: 27 in the basic track (66.7% boys), 21 in the middle-management track (47.6% boys), and 66 in the theoretical track (31.8% boys). In all, 323 senior general students (32.3% boys) and 380 pre-university students (38.8% boys) completed the questionnaire. There was a non-response of 121 students.

### MATERIALS

Interview participants were asked about all study profile guidance activities offered by their schools, such as conversations with tutors, recommendations of subject teachers, and profile choice tests. The activities were obtained from study profile choice documents that schools had sent to the research team in advance of the interviews. For each activity, we first discussed (1) whether the students had or had not received it. If they had, we also asked (2) what the activity had entailed. We also studied (3) what students had thought of it or what effect it might have had on their choices, choice processes, and

**TABLE 1**  
*Participating Schools*

School	Tracks					
	Basic track: prevocational secondary education	Middle- management track: prevoca- tional secondary education	Combined and theoretical track: prevoca- tional secondary education	General secondary education	Pre- university education	Pre-university education/ grammar school
School 1	X	X	X	X	X	
School 2				X	X	X
School 3	X	X	X			
School 4				X	X	X
School 5				X	X	
School 6	X	X	X	X	X	
School 7				X	X	
School 8	X	X	X	X		
School 9				X	X	X
School 10			X	X	X	
School 11			X	X	X	X
School 12			X	X	X	
School 13			X	X	X	X
School 14			X	X	X	X

perceptions of subjects and study profiles. Finally, we asked (4) students for their suggestions regarding specific activities. In studying the content of the activities, what the students thought of them, and what their suggestions were (2-4), we also considered the argumentations of the activities and the students, using the various theories discussed above. Holland's theory (in Hartung & Niles, 2000) focuses on congruence between personality and environment, with interests playing a major role. The SCCT (Lent et al., 1994) focuses on subjective self-assessments and on values and life themes. In career construction theory (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), adaptability is central, with a focus on expectations of the future and confidence to pursue goals and aspirations, among other things. In addition to these four areas, the interview guide consisted of some questions about the students' own choices and their perceptions of the different profiles.

In most schools, three students from each track participated. As a rule, the students

formed the group in which they were interviewed. The first author conducted the interviews at the students' schools. The interviews took approximately 45 minutes. Audio recordings were made of almost all interviews, except for three, where the students and/or parents did not give their consent to do so. In these cases we took written notes.

One questionnaire item was used for the current study: "The study profile guidance at my school helped me in choosing my study profile and subjects." Students were asked to respond to this statement along a five-point Likert-scale, ranging from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (5). In total, the questionnaire contained 63 questions, all of which were about students' perspectives on the various profiles, but not about career guidance.

## PROCEDURE

The project was approved by the ethics committee of the Department of Pedagogical

and Educational Sciences at the University of Groningen. Prior to the interviews, participants and their parent(s) or guardian(s) were given an information letter explaining the aims of the research and stating that the results would be presented anonymously. In all cases, both the student and a parent or guardian signed a consent form. Separate consent forms were used for the interviews and the questionnaires. The interview data were collected between January 2019 and September 2020.

The digital questionnaire and accompanying instructions were sent to the point of contact—usually the school counselor—at each participating school through Qualtrics (Qualtrics, 2005). These contacts distributed the instructions, along with the link to the digital questionnaire, to the homeroom teachers in the beginning of 2021. The students completed the questionnaire during class. The data was administered anonymously and the researchers had exclusive access to the data.

## ANALYSES

In ATLAS.ti, qualitative data analysis software, we coded all quotations according to five components of study profile guidance: career conversations with school counselors and with tutors; subject information and sample subject classes; subject recommendations by subject teachers; and in-classroom information provided by school counselors. Within the group interviews, we analyzed the responses of individual students. Inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006), we conducted a thematic analysis of the data, albeit iterative and reflective (Nowell et al., 2017). We used a combination of inductive and deductive analysis. In Phase 1, we familiarized ourselves with the data, including reading and re-reading all interview transcripts, after which we created themes in Phases 2 and 3. In this phase, we worked deductively, by first using codes for the five components of study profile guidance. For every component, we then used four pre-formulated general themes: (1) whether

students had received the specific component of study profile guidance; (2) what it had entailed, according to the participants; (3) what the students had thought of it or what consequences it might have had; and (4) students' suggestions for improvement. We also used (5) other themes, to allow for themes we had not yet thought of in advance (inductive coding). These other themes were only used regarding career conversations with tutors and subject recommendations by subject teachers. An example is 'tutor always available'.

After defining the general themes, we read each quotation to determine whether it was related to any of these themes and to search for subthemes (reviewing, defining, and naming themes; Phases 4 and 5). In doing so, the most relevant parts of the quotes were marked. Subthemes were created inductively, depending on the content of the main themes. Examples of subthemes include the observation that conversations with the school counselor were about students' grades or that students' profile choices changed after receiving the subject information. The third author checked the first author's analyses of Part 1 of the first topic (individual guidance with the school counselor). Given that the two authors were in full agreement on the codes, the first author continued with the further coding of the data.

We have established trustworthiness by several means in the different phases of the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). For example, we engaged with the data by conducting the interviews ourselves, which helped in searching for meanings and patterns. We have also used a coding framework which provided a clear trail of evidence for credibility, and we used researcher triangulation by discussing themes and subthemes with several authors.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the five-point Likert scale item ("The study profile guidance at my school helped me in choosing my study profile and subjects"), using IBM SPSS Statistics 20 for Windows (IBM, 2017). Means and standard deviations

were calculated for the different educational tracks. The percentages of the different responses were calculated for each educational track. To compare the differences between the educational tracks, we computed an ANOVA-test. Although the data was nested—students within schools—the sample was too small to conduct a multi-level approach to the analyses. Therefore, we were not able to compare the results on school-level. We also did not have demographic information such as ethnic-cultural background and socioeconomic status.

## RESULTS

### RESULTS REGARDING SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES

In the following sections, the themes and subthemes regarding the five study profile components will be described. We first present which activities students had received related to education professionals and then describe their experiences concerning the content and consequences of five guidance activities. The results are presented as mentioned by the students, for example, when we write that students had “short” conversations with school counselors, the students had indicated that the conversations were short (or they used similar phrasings). Any suggestions made by the participating students with regard to improving these components are discussed as well. In so doing, we will abbreviate the basic educational track to “b”, the combination of the basic and middle-management tracks to “bm”, the theoretical prevocational track to “t”, the senior general track to “s”, and the pre-university track to “pu”.

**INDIVIDUAL GUIDANCE CONVERSATIONS WITH SCHOOL COUNSELORS.** Students from all participating schools could request a conversation with a school counselor, and 25 reported that they had already done so (t: n = 4; s: n = 8; pu: n = 13). Twenty students mentioned that it was possible to request a conversation, but that they had not (or had not yet) done so (s: n = 5; pu: n = 15).

**Content.** For five students, the conversation had been short, and it had included only which profile choice they had made (t: n = 3; pu: n = 2). In 11 cases, students and their counselors discussed grades or the recommendations of their subject teachers concerning whether the students should choose their subjects (s: n = 7; pu: n = 4). Five students mentioned that their interests in possible future subjects had been addressed in the conversations (pu: n = 5), and three discussed the role of future tertiary studies or employment with their counselors (s: n = 1; pu: n = 2). Finally, five students talked to their counselors about the possibility of choosing additional subjects or a combination of subjects that could not be chosen together according to the timetable (t: n = 1; s: n = 2; pu: n = 2).

**Consequences for Students.** Seven students reported on the perceived impact of the interview with the counselor on their actual or intended choices. One student (pu) agreed to choose Science and Health only if they received a score of at least a report card grade of 7 (out of a possible 10) for chemistry, and would otherwise choose Economy and Society. A senior general student reported that the conversation had been helpful in choosing a subject. Two senior general students changed their profile choices in response to a meeting with their counselors, who recommended choosing a profile with subjects for which they had better grades.

One pre-university participant changed their intention to study French or German to Business Economics because the counselor advised that this would be better suited to the student's desired degree program (Business Administration). A senior general student had changed one subject because the counselor did not allow two electives. Only one student (t) did not act on the school counselor's recommendation by choosing an additional elective.

**Students' Suggestions.** Seven pre-university students explained that they would like to

have had more or more in-depth discussions with the counselor or tutor. For example:

Yeah, look, I don't need it at all, for a teacher to ask me that, because it's easy for me to just make a choice, but some people really are in doubt, so they should pay attention to that, I guess.

### **INDIVIDUAL GUIDANCE CONVERSATIONS WITH TUTORS.**

In seven interviews (bm, n = 1; t: n = 1, s: n = 2; pu: n = 3), one or more of the students reported that individual conversations with the tutor had been obligatory. One interview group of pre-university students reported that it had been obligatory, but that their tutor did not hold these conversations. In addition, 11 students reported having had a conversation with the tutor (s: n = 4; pu: n = 7). Many students had not talked to their tutor about subject choices.

**Content.** Four students reported that the meeting with the tutor had been very short (s: n = 1, pu: n = 3). Another student did not remember what the tutor had explained (t: n = 1). According to 10 students, the conversations had emphasized their grades or, in some cases, their capacities (t: n = 2; s: n = 2; pu: n = 6). Two students reported that they had talked with the tutor about subjects or profiles in which they were interested (t: n = 2). The tutors and students discussed future-oriented arguments in seven cases (bm: n = 3; t: n = 1; s: n = 3).

We started looking at my subjects. Which ones I had a good position in. She said whether it was good or not. Yeah. Interviewer: And when did she say whether it was good? Simply if it fit with your grades? Or did she actually go... Student 3: Yeah, whether it fit with my grades. And just what I wanted to do later.

**Consequences for Students.** Seven students elaborated on the consequences of these conversations. For three students, the conversation had affirmed the choices that they had already intended to make (bm: n = 1; pu: n = 2), and three other students reported

having acted on the recommendations of their tutors. One pre-university student chose all electives of interest, and another discovered that the Care & Welfare profile was better suited than the profile in Catering, Baking, and Leisure was to the aspiration to become a doctor (bm: n = 1). Another student did not choose a subject for which this student had poor grades (t: n = 1). In contrast, a pre-university student decided to take advanced mathematics despite having been advised to take applied mathematics instead:

And he said something like, "Yeah, then you just have to take it a bit easier, then you do a little less with it." But, yeah, for physics, it was also recommended that advanced mathematics would be more convenient. Yeah, then it seems a bit odd that the tutor actually advises against it, in effect. Interviewer: Yes. Student: But then I also just talked about it with my mother, and she said something like, "Well, you know, you're just going to try it, and otherwise you can still go to applied mathematics." But if you have a positive recommendation for it, then it's better to just do it, I think.

**Students' Suggestions.** Many students explained that they would have liked to have had more conversations with their tutors (t: n=1; s: n=1; pu: n=1) or counselors (see above). Others clarified that they would like to change the meetings. For example, they would make them focus more on the interests of students (pu: n = 4) or what would take place in the next year, once they had chosen their study profiles (s: n = 1). According to two students, the conversations should also make students think more about the study profile choice (s: n = 2). Two other students expressed a preference for more one-on-one conversations (t: n = 1; pu: n = 1). Two senior general students noted that they would have liked for their tutor to take more initiative to talk with them about study profile choices, as this had never happened:

Student 1: Yeah, I don't actually mind, because I knew what I wanted to be. But kids who don't know, that really is bad.

Student 3: Exactly.

Student 1: That you don't, that you don't have any support with that. That you have to take action yourself. Some people just don't do that.

### **SUBJECT-INFORMATION SESSIONS, SAMPLE SUBJECT, AND "SUBJECT CAROUSELS" OR**

**"SUBJECT MARKETS."** In all schools, students reported having had some kind of information session about the content of the subjects in upper secondary education. In seven interviews, one or more students reported having participated in sample classes (t: n = 1; s: n = 2; pu: n = 4). In addition, students in 17 interviews mentioned having participated in subject-information sessions with the whole class or year level (t: n = 2; s: n = 3; pu: n = 13). Participation in "subject carousels" or "subject markets" was reported in six interviews (combination of t and pu: n = 1; s: n = 2; pu: n = 3).

**Content.** According to students in four interview groups, sample classes are intended to give students an idea of what classes in certain subjects look like in upper secondary school (s: n = 2; pu: n = 2), possibly in the form of a practical session (pu: n = 1). In one interview (pu), students reported that subject teachers had also told students that the pace is faster in upper-track subjects than it is in lower secondary education. According to students from 10 interview groups, in information sessions, subject teachers explained what upper-track subjects would look like (s: n = 1; pu: n = 9), in addition to noting the study profiles in which they teach (s: n = 1). As described by several interview groups, during "subject markets," students who are facing a study profile choice can ask upper-track students about their experiences with subjects (t: n = 1; s: n = 1; pu: n = 2 interview groups), or they can ask teachers about specific subjects (t: n = 1; s: n = 2; pu: n = 2).

**Consequences for Students.** Fifteen students explained the consequences of sample classes for their perceptions of specific study profiles and subjects, as well

as their career choices. Six students reported that their perspectives about subjects had changed either positively or negatively, thereby leading them to choose differently (s: n = 1; pu: n = 5). Two students observed that the sample classes had provided them with greater insights, but that their choices had not changed (pu: n = 2). Four explicitly asserted that these classes had not been useful (t: n = 1; s: n = 2; pu: n = 1).

Information sessions helped 22 students with their choices (t: n = 2; s: n = 2; pu: n = 18). For six students, these sessions had provided them with greater insight, but they explicitly stated that they had not changed their subjects or profile choices in response (s: n = 1; pu: n = 4). Seven other students reported that information sessions had not been useful for them (s: n = 2; pu: n = 5). Ten students reported that subject markets or subject carousels had helped them with their choices (s: n = 6; pu: n = 4).

That did help with my choice. For example, chemistry was really bad. It just sort of gave us...uhm...the giggles. So, then I thought, well, I really shouldn't choose that, but I already knew that to some extent, but I went back one more time, just to be sure.

Other students noted that they had not learned very much (pu: n = 2) or that they had even forgotten the event (t: n = 1). As explained by four pre-university students, the mathematics teacher had described his subject as very difficult, although two of them said that this had not influenced their choices. In contrast, three other pre-university students described the carousel largely as advertising.

**Students' Suggestions.** Two pre-university students suggested making subject information sessions less boring:

Maybe more explanation, but not in such a boring way that it takes a long time to give the information, but just to let you experience a bit which or what you can expect from the subjects in the upper track. So, you don't necessarily have to shadow the

classes, but you just need a clear picture of what you'll get in them. Or what you can get. Student 3: Yes. Or, for example, just have people who have chosen that package in the 4<sup>th</sup> year tell about how the subjects are then, because that would let you see it from a student's perspective.

Three other pre-university students were of a similar opinion: instead of subject information, they would have preferred to visit classes or watch videos about the following year's subjects. In contrast, another pre-university student expressed a preference for receiving additional information to participating in the practical sessions during sample classes: Because you might do three practical sessions in one year, and then you won't have any idea of what you would be doing the rest of the year in that subject.

**SUBJECT RECOMMENDATIONS.** In 23 interviews, multiple participants noted that they had received recommendations from their subject teachers (t: n = 4; s: n = 9; pu: n = 10). Moreover, students in six interview groups reported that they would receive such recommendations later that year (t: n = 1; s: n = 2; pu: n = 3). Different schools used different systems for this purpose. A school can give students a negative, conditional, or positive recommendation regarding one subject, all profile subjects, or all subjects. In most cases, this was done along a three-point or five-point scale, either with or without a specific focus. For example, a recommendation could focus on both capacities and work attitude.

**Content.** In one school, prevocational students received recommendations for choosing specific profiles. In other schools, students received recommendations about choosing specific subjects. The content of the recommendations differed as well. According to students in some interview groups, different teachers based their recommendations on different aspects. Although grades always played a role, some recommendations also included expectations about the student's work attitude and

aptitude for the subject (pu: n = 1), general motivation (pu: n = 1), the motivation shown in class, and whether the teacher expected the student to be able to handle the subject (t: n = 1), along with commitment and capabilities (pu: n = 1).

Nine students reported having received exclusively (or almost exclusively) positive recommendations (s: n = 5; pu: n = 4). The recommendations received by other students differed. For example, some had received conditional recommendations (s: n = 1) or a few negative recommendations (s: n = 2; pu: n = 2). Two participants had received many negative recommendations (pu: n = 2). Three pre-university students and one senior general student had received conditional or negative recommendations for mathematics or physics. One student was told to pay more attention in class in order to make the recommendation positive (pu). In one school, students had the option of completing remedial assignments to change negative recommendations to conditional or positive recommendations.

**Consequences for Students.** Many of the recommendations that students had received were in line with their preferred choices. Ten participants reported that the recommendations had confirmed the subjects that they had been going to choose anyway, or that they would probably choose (t: n = 1; s: n = 4; pu: n = 5). Similarly, four students mentioned they had not intended to choose the subjects for which they had received negative recommendations (s: n = 2; pu: n = 2). In addition, six students explained that their profile or subject choices had changed in response to the recommendations (s: n = 3; pu: n = 3). One pre-university participant mentioned the possibility of choosing different subjects in case of conditional recommendations, although a classmate thought that such recommendations usually indicate that the student does not enjoy the subject anyway.

The only thing was really those recommendations. And that I thought that was really, really good because it simply gives confirmation of my thoughts, "Okay, for math, I want to choose advanced mathematics. I could pass that. Okay, then I could do this as well, you know," like that.

Although one senior general student noted that the recommendations had been helpful, six participants went against it (t: n = 1; s: n = 2; pu: n = 3).

Student 1: I still have the idea that teachers want to get back at you a little bit, so to speak. Interviewer: Really?

Student 1: Yes, they, they base their judgments too much on emotion, and that's not really allowed. They actually aren't allowed to base their insight into students on emotion, but purely on whether, "Do I think he can or can't do it?" [...]

Interviewer: No, okay. So you think that the advice isn't always good, and you can sometimes disregard it?

Student 1: Yes.

Student 2: Yes.

Although three of these participants had received negative recommendations for subjects (foreign languages or history), they nevertheless had to choose these subjects, as they were not able to pursue either of the science profiles (s: n = 2; pu: n = 1).

I got, uhm, I had a minus for German, because I really only had failing grades. But I had to choose it, because I have a Culture and Society profile, so I had to have a foreign language.

Nine students described that the recommendations had been of little or no influence on their choices or views of subjects and study profiles (t: n = 2; s: n = 2; pu: n = 5). Two prevocational students also reported this at first, but later mentioned that the recommendations had been very helpful. Furthermore, eight students stated that they had not understood the recommendations they had

received (t: n = 1; s: n = 1; pu: n = 6).

For example, one senior general student had received a positive recommendation for French, despite having relatively weak grades.

Another group of participants had not yet received their subject recommendations, but were going to receive them and had already reflected on the possible consequences. Thirteen of these students mentioned that the recommendations would be important (t: n = 1; s: n = 5; pu: n = 7).

If someone tells you, "I don't think it would be wise to take an exam in that," well, then I shouldn't just be stubborn and go on and choose it anyway.

Ten other students reported that the recommendations would not influence their choices (t: n = 5; s: n = 3; pu: n = 5).

And if I get a minus, well, then I'm just fine for the whole year. And if I happen to do worse on one test, I get a failing grade, then I follow my own intuition. If I want it, I just do it.

**Students' Suggestions.** Some students had suggestions for improvement. For example, two senior general students noted that they would have liked to receive recommendations for all subjects, instead of only for mathematics, as is currently done at their school. Other students would prefer to have more options than only negative or positive, along with more explanations of the recommendations (s: n = 2). Two prevocational students who had received the recommendations after making their profile choices noted that they would have preferred to reverse this order.

**IN-CLASSROOM INFORMATION PROVIDED BY SCHOOL COUNSELORS.** In 20 groups interviews, students reported having received information in the classroom from a school counselor (t: n = 3; s: n = 7; pu: n = 10). More specifically, a school counselor had provided

information once or several times to one or several classes at the same time.

**Content.** The information provided by the counselors usually took the form of a lecture. Two types of information were frequently discussed: practical information on profiles and profile choices, and information on appropriate ways of making these choices, according to the school counselors. Practical information was mentioned most often, namely in 17 interviews (s: n = 7; pu: n = 10). For example, counselors explained which subjects were mandatory and which could be electives for the different profiles, or they explained which career-choice activities were going to take place.

Good ways of making a choice were also discussed during the lectures. Future-oriented choices were mentioned in three interviews (s: n = 2; pu: n = 1), thus taking tertiary education and professions into account, sometimes in combination with the students' capacities or grades (pu: n = 2) or their interests (s: n = 1). Other remarks included the perception that the choice is very important for a student's future (t: n = 1), as well as the opinion that the choice is not decisive for the rest of a student's life (pu: n = 1) and that there are no wrong choices (s: n = 1). Two recommendations that were mentioned in one interview group were that students should put themselves first (pu: n = 1) and act on the recommendations of the choice platform, and that vocational education is preferable to senior general education as a follow-up to prevocational education (t: n = 1).

**Consequences for Students.** The participating students explained the consequences of the in-classroom information for their study profiles and subject choices, as well as for their perceptions. A few noted that they had found the information boring and that they had not learned anything new (s: n = 1; pu: n = 1) or they had not needed it in order to make their choices (s: n = 2). Similarly, some did not remember much of

the information (pu: n = 2) or had no opinion about it (pu: n = 2). Others thought that the school counselor had explained study profile choices perfectly (s: n = 2). They had enjoyed the session (s: n = 2), gained a clearer picture (pu: n = 1), or said it was helpful (s: n = 3, pu: n = 3). One even identified it as the most useful profile-choice activity (pu: n = 1).

And now, I've gotten a helpful schedule as well, and a clear picture in my head: "I can choose this. I can't choose that."

One student reported having received new information on classical languages (pu: n = 1), while another had become confused by having to think about the study profile choice for the first time (pu: n = 1). After the in-classroom information session, three students no longer perceived Culture and Society as a "fun package," which carries a negative connotation in the Netherlands (s: n = 3).

**Students' Suggestions.** Three senior general students reported that they would have liked for their school counselor to address the professions that fit the profiles in greater depth.

## RESULTS REGARDING STUDY PROFILE GUIDANCE IN GENERAL

Students in all educational tracks answered the five-point Likert scale to the statement regarding the helpfulness of the study profile guidance at school with an average of 3.18 (SD = 1.16). Students in the basic prevocational track (n = 27) answered with an average of 3.30 (SE = 1.30), in the middle-management prevocational track (n = 21) the average was 3.43 (SE = 1.25), in the theoretical prevocational track (n = 66) the average was 3.08 (SE = 1.19), in the senior general track (n = 321) the average was 3.20 (SE = 1.17), and in the pre-university track (n = 378) the average was 3.15 (1.12). Analysis of variance revealed no significant differences between the educational tracks (see Table 2).

**TABLE 2**

*Results Analysis of Variance for the item "The study profile guidance at my school helped me in choosing my study profile and subjects."*

	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	2.784	4	.696	.521	.721
Within groups	1079.033	807	1.337		
Total	1081.817	811			

## DISCUSSION

This study builds on previous research on students' experiences with career guidance, and especially on three Dutch studies of secondary schools and students in vocational education (Mittendorff et al., 2008; Mittendorff et al., 2011; Van Langen & Vierke, 2009). The present study is the first to map Dutch career guidance activities within all tracks of secondary education. The in-depth character of our study has also generated greater insight into how students perceive specific career guidance activities, including contact with school counselors and tutors, which was rated as most important to study profile choices by students in the study by Van Langen and Vierke (2009).

The first research question for the current study was: *How do students experience career guidance in secondary education?* We first analyzed five commonly provided guidance activities, which students experienced in different ways. The activities appear to play a role to varying degrees in the perceptions and profile choices of many students. For example, students often described conversations with a school counselor or tutor as short. Almost every student had acted on the professionals' suggestions.

Similar to the results reported by Van Langen and Vierke (2009), many students in this study perceived conversations with counselors and tutors as important to their study profile choices. This did not apply to all students in the present study, however, mainly because some perceived the conversations with counselors as having been very

short and superficial, and not all students had had such a conversation. Furthermore, the students' perception that these conversations focused largely on grades is in contrast to Wichgers and colleagues (2022), who report that most counselors and tutors considered students' interests and keeping options open more important than grades. Moreover, although the present study was not designed to distinguish clusters of career guidance like Mittendorff and colleagues (2011) did, the results suggest that the brief conversations with counselors and tutors tend to emphasize "talking about planning and instruments," while paying less attention to "questioning," "being personal," "talking about personal issues," and "influence." The reverse probably applies more to sessions in which the professionals discussed the role of grades or the recommendations of subject teachers, or the interests of students and their future subjects, studies, or employment.

Sample classes were reported in seven interview groups, with subject-information sessions mentioned in 17 and "subject carousels" or "subject markets" in six. Half of the students who reported perceptions of these activities or their consequences for career choices ( $n = 15$ ) perceived sample classes as useful, while one fourth perceived them as not useful. Subject-information sessions were useful for 28 students and not useful for seven students. More than half of the students who reported about the consequences of subject markets ( $n = 20$ ) said that they had influenced them in some way. The present finding concerning the importance of these activities, and

especially subject-information sessions, is in line with the findings of various studies on student experiences with similar activities. For example, students generally perceive sample classes (Van Langen & Vierke, 2009), simulated career days (Welde et al., 2015), career fairs (Payne & Sumter, 2005), and campus visits/open days (Wiese et al., 2009) as useful. Authentic information about the content of subjects (Van Langen & Vierke, 2009), tertiary education (Wiese et al., 2009), or specific careers (Payne & Sumter, 2005) thus seems to have been perceived as useful by many students in previous studies, as well as in the present sample. In contrast, other studies have suggested that job fairs and information events are perceived as less useful for career choices than support provided by parents and career counselors (Kamm et al., 2020).

In subject recommendations, grades always played a role. About half of the students reported the recommendations to influence their choices. In-classroom information usually involved practical information on profiles and making profile choices (e.g., time schedules) and appropriate ways of making these choices. More than half of the students said that they had enjoyed these sessions or perceived them as useful. This outcome corresponds to the finding of Van Langen and Vierke (2009) that many students assign high value to information (and information sessions) on study profiles and entry requirements in tertiary education.

The varying perceptions of students with regard to specific career guidance activities are generally in line with their views on the relative helpfulness of the study profile guidance provided at their schools, which was the second research question. On average, students tended to have a neutral standpoint regarding the helpfulness of the study profile guidance at their schools. These results are similar to the findings reported in previous Dutch studies involving students in senior general and pre-university education, who rated study profile guidance as being neutral to somewhat important (Van Langen &

Vierke, 2009). This also corresponds to the varied results of international research on students' experiences with career guidance (Croghan & Baker, 2021; Kamm et al., 2020; Welde et al., 2015).

In general, the results of the present study do not seem to be related to specific educational tracks. One exception is that subject-information sessions were apparently more likely to be provided to pre-university students, and that subject markets were apparently influential for a relatively large share of senior general students. Moreover, most suggestions for improving study profile guidance were offered by pre-university students. In addition, students in the theoretical prevocational track and the senior general tracks were relatively more likely to report that their choices would not be influenced by subject recommendations from teachers.

Although many students reported that study profile guidance had helped them with their choices, more than 20% disagreed at least somewhat with the statement that study profile guidance at their schools had been helpful. The experiences of students with specific career activities also point toward several recommendations for educational practice. For example, one frequently mentioned suggestion is to make subject information livelier. Many participants also suggested providing more or more in-depth meetings with tutors or school counselors. These suggestions echo the perceptions of some of the students in the study by Mitten-dorff and colleagues (2008), who identified personal conversation and investment in a relationship as essential to high-quality career-counseling conversations. The students in the current study also noted that their conversations with tutors, and especially with school counselors, devoted a great deal of attention to grades. Given that tutors and school counselors have reported the importance of the interests and future studies or employment of students (Wichgers et al., 2022), however, we suggest that these factors should be included more often in conversations with students.

Some of the students in the current study had received nearly exclusively negative subject recommendations from teachers, which could be demotivating. In addition, according to students in some interview groups, different teachers base their recommendations on different aspects. Moreover, prevocational and senior general students appear to be particularly unlikely to perceive such recommendations as useful. Especially for these students, it would probably be useful for education professionals to make the purpose of the recommendations clearer to them. To this end, teachers, tutors and school counselors should discuss how they formulate the recommendations, and they should clarify the function and meaning of the recommendations to their students.

More generally, we suggest that schools should develop a shared vision and policy for study profile guidance. If students are more involved in these efforts, the guidance will be better suited to meeting their need for support, thereby helping them make well-considered career choices. Also, since there is no fixed national curriculum for study profile guidance, schools differ with regard to the guidance they offer. For example, many students did not have any conversations with their school counselor or tutor, as such conversations were voluntary. This is despite the fact that students consider these conversations helpful. We therefore recommend the adoption of national frameworks that state that all schools should pay adequate attention to study profile guidance and career guidance in general. The introduction of a career guidance qualification for secondary education professionals could also be explored.

A key conclusion is that students needed conversations with professionals that are about more than just grades. Many said they needed more or more in-depth meetings. This argument reflects different aspects of the three theories discussed in the Introduction as well as under Materials. Indeed, interests are reflected in all of them, but especially in Holland's theory (in Hartung & Niles,

2000). This also fits values and life themes (SCCT, Lent et al., 1994), and expectations of the future (Savickas, 2013). In addition, subject recommendations sometimes appeared only negative and sometimes unclear, which could be demotivating. Motivation in career choices aligns with subjective self-assessments (Lent et al., 1994) and confidence to pursue goals and aspirations (Savickas, 2013). Thus, although the current study is not sufficient to answer the question of how to guide young people in their career choices, we can argue that students need certain guidance (such as individual conversations), and yet in practice this does not happen sufficiently.

The findings of the current study provide in-depth insight into how students experience career guidance, especially with regard to those in the theoretical prevocational, senior general, and pre-university tracks. The study, however, also had limitations. For example, it could be that interviewing in groups caused students to influence each other's answers. In our experience, the fact that students were in a familiar group contributed greatly to their openness in the interviews. Also, we did not specifically focus on students with different background characteristics. We also do not yet know what actually happens in the five different components of profile choice counseling, and there are also other physical and digital choice activities that have not yet been studied. We therefore recommend investigating possible differences between the career guidance experiences of students with different background characteristics (e.g., gender and socioeconomic background).

Furthermore, observational research could be used to explore what happens during the various activities, as social desirability might be less likely to occur. This seems also better suited to explore the role that student SES, gender, and ethnicity play in career guidance. It should also be studied how online career-guidance programs are used (and the extent to which students consider this useful). To determine the extent to which

these findings apply to other contexts, future studies should focus on conversations with career counselors and teachers in other countries. The ways in which teachers arrive at their subject recommendations should also be clarified, especially given the students' reports that different teachers consider different factors in this process.

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