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## Differences and similarities in the use of the portfolio and personal development plan for career guidance in various vocational schools in The Netherlands

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In The Netherlands, a growing number of vocational education and training institutes are implementing competence-based approaches to learning, including new career guidance practices. These practices often involve instruments such as portfolios or personal development plans, and are aimed at supporting students in their search for a sense of direction, occupational choice and developing their identities. In this study perceptions of teachers, career counsellors and students on portfolios and personal development plans for career development were investigated at two vocational schools and one prevocational school. The results suggest that these instruments are perceived to be useful when used in a dialogical context. If used in a context without reflexive dialogues between teachers and students, students perceived the instruments as not useful and showed coping behaviour, such as not committing themselves to the actual goals or completing the instruments for external purposes/credits only.

**Keywords:** career guidance; portfolio; personal development plan; student and teacher perceptions

### Background and rationale

In The Netherlands, most vocational and prevocational schools are implementing new, so-called competence-based curricula. These curricula start from a constructivist approach and are based on the idea that young people should learn to direct their own learning and career path (Biemans et al. 2004, Wesselink et al. 2007). In competence-based education (as implemented in The Netherlands) the actual competences needed for working in practice, rather than academic disciplines, are the starting-point for curriculum development. Competence-based education schools have welcomed a more self-directed, student-centred approach in which the learner is made responsible for his or her own learning and career path, and in which teachers are seen as coaches who guide those students along their way. The school is regarded not only as an institute that focuses on getting learners qualified, but also as ‘a career centre’ in which students acquire competences, such as being able to reflect on personal ambitions and motives, and taking action and initiative to direct their own career development (Geurts 2003, Kuijpers, Meijers, and Bakker 2006). To realise this, many schools are implementing *career guidance* as an integral part of competence-based education and are using or implementing instruments such as portfolios and personal developments plans to help students develop these so-called career competences (Kuijpers, Meijers, and Bakker 2006). The implementation of competence-based education in The Netherlands is also enforced by the government: in 2010, all vocational

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schools in The Netherlands are expected to use competence standards for the assessment of the students' learning (van Nieuwkerk 2007). In The Netherlands, prevocational education is for 12- to 16-year-old students and consists of four levels, ranging from a basic vocational program (Level 1) to a more theoretical program (Level 4). Vocational education in The Netherlands is aimed at 16- to 20-year-old students and consists of four levels, ranging from Level 1 (assistant worker – one year's training) to Level 4 (middle-management – three to four years' training).

One of the aims of these recent innovations in vocational schools has been to increase motivation and empower learners within and beyond the school. Another argument is that young people need to be prepared for an ever-changing society. Many authors argue that the increasing focus on service and knowledge management in our society requires cognitive and self-management competences so that workers may fulfil complex occupational roles and manage the demands of contemporary life (see, for example, Defillippi and Arthur 1994, Giddens 1991). This requires individuals to learn throughout their lives and to be flexible in fulfilling different occupational roles. Arthur (1994) states that for an increasing number of employees, the 'boundaryless career' – a career that extends beyond the borders of the current employment and beyond individual boundaries (into extraorganisational networks) – is a reality. Workers organise their careers independent of traditional organisational boundaries. According to Handy (1995), in the future jobs will only be temporary and people will move from one contract to the next based on the strength of their portfolios of achievements. According to Handy, we will enter the age of 'portfolio careers', in which continuing employment depends on the evidence that we provide for a wide range of skills, understandings, and qualities. Sociologists also argue that young people are required to make more individual decisions than in earlier times (Walther 2006, Diepstraten 2006). Another argument for the implementation of competence-based education and a stronger focus on career guidance is that many youngsters in vocational schools face problems around (personal) identity development and making choices for the future. This is not unique to The Netherlands (Neuvel and van Esch 2005; Den Boer, Mittendorff, and Sjenitzer 2004), but also affects other Western European countries like the United Kingdom (Banks et al. 1992, Law 2000) and Germany (Walther, Bois-Reymond, and Biggart 2006).

In order to meet these societal demands, some scholars argue that learners need to acquire professional competences, competences that not only comprise 'know-what' and 'know-how', but also 'know-why' (Doorewaard 2000, Defillippi and Arthur 1994). In other words, the changed society requires individuals to have a sense of direction and identity (Wijers and Meijers 1996). Developing a sense of direction and identity is not easy (Kuijpers, Meijers, and Bakker 2006; Wijers and Meijers 1996). It involves reflecting on personal motives and identity and allowing insecurity to be part of the learning process (Coffield et al. 2004). Developing a sense of direction should be a reflective process; that is, not (only) based on a set of learned and internalised rules of action, but on critical assessment of the situation and options available, because the individualisation and flexibility of labour relations continuously require that the individual responds to unpredictable situations (Kuijpers, Meijers, and Bakker 2006). If the development of a sense of direction and identity is regarded as an important aim of education, a powerful learning environment is required in which students are stimulated to reflect on their motives, values and ambitions for the future (Coffield et al. 2004).

Obviously, there have also been critiques of competence-based education, in particular on the idea that people should be self-directed and autonomous in order to cope with a boundaryless career, and of the assumption that reflection is 'the key to everything'. Sennett (1998), for example, presents a less optimistic view. He observes that employees often become entangled in a flexible labour market: stability in employment and jobs are perceived as a sign of inflexibility or weakness. Some employees transfer between jobs without knowing whether this will be to their

advantage or not. Sennett also argues that frequent (re)shuffling of members of the workforce can break bonds between workers and can destroy solidarity. Other scholars are concerned that there is an overemphasis on reflection. Kuijpers and Meijers (forthcoming) addressed the potential pitfall of what Foucault (1975) – following philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) – called a ‘panopticum’. When students are forced to reflect, and are at the same time not taken seriously by the school and teachers, in that the teachers do not have the time to reflect with students and/or to discuss products appropriately, students will feel that reflection is an useless – albeit enforced – process. As a result, students will react in the same manner as they react to the curriculum they do not see as relevant: they will try to achieve maximum results with a minimal effort. Back in the 1980s, Hargreaves (1986) had already highlighted the possible danger of using instruments such as a portfolio as a device for surveillance and control rather than as instruments that really empower the individual or his/her professional development. Criticism has also been aimed at the relevance and suitability of competence-based education to ‘at-risk’ learners, who (in The Netherlands) are likely to be enrolled in vocational education. A relatively high number of students in Dutch vocational schools (compared to other types of education) originate from lower socioeconomic and/or minority backgrounds; these backgrounds are characterised by values, beliefs, rules and interaction patterns that can differ greatly from what students encounter in school (Geurts and Meijers forthcoming). Also, a relatively high number of students with learning disabilities are present in vocational schools (Eindhoven and Vlug 2006). Young people at risk often find it difficult to learn in a self-directed manner and experience less support in constructing their lives and careers (Walther 2006).

In this study, career guidance and the use of career guidance instruments will be investigated within the context of competence-based vocational education. In the following section we will discuss career guidance and research on the use of career guidance instruments. After this discussion, the research questions will be presented, as well as the methodology that was used to answer them. Finally, the research findings will be presented in addition to a reflection on the findings, strengths and limitations of our study, as well as implications for future research and practice.

### **Career guidance and the use of portfolios and personal development plans**

Schools that implement competence-based education often use a form of career guidance that can be seen as ‘integral career guidance’ (see Figure 1). Integral career guidance is not only aimed at preparing students for vocational education, but also offers continued support during their education, and is aimed at developing career competences such as reflecting on one’s ambitions and capabilities, or networking. In integral career guidance, several instruments for guidance have been assimilated (Meijers 2006).

Integral career guidance consists of a series of connected instruments in combination with activities such as assessments, intake procedures, personal development plans and reports that demonstrate student reflection. Of central importance is the portfolio, in which all the information derived from the other instruments and activities comes together. Integral career guidance is provided by teachers who have an extra task in career guidance for which time is assigned. In this form of career guidance, teachers are directly responsible for the supervision of students.

Two of the most commonly used instruments in this type of career guidance within vocational and prevocational schools are the personal development plan and the portfolio. The purpose of the *personal development plan* is that a student learns to reflect on his or her own strengths and weaknesses, and direct his or her own learning process by setting up personal learning goals (Reynaert et al. 2006). Usually important questions to be answered in this plan are: ‘Who am I as a person?’, ‘What do I want in my future (career)?’, ‘What are my current strengths and weaknesses?’, and ‘What do I need to do to develop to reach my goals?’.

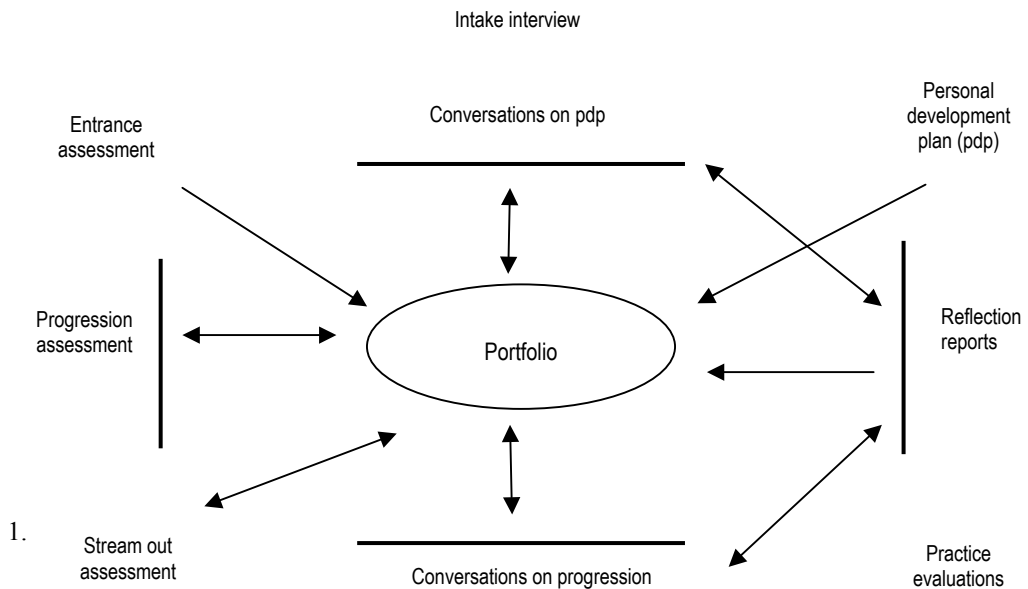


Figure 1. Integral career guidance (adapted from Meijers 2006).

A *portfolio* is often a collection of documents and other evidence illustrating progress towards a goal (Larkin, Pines, and Bechtel 2002). Portfolios are regarded as valuable in that they provide evidence of performance and because they promote self-development and learning, in part because students are expected to reflect on what they have done and what progress they have made towards a goal (Wright, Night, and Pomerleau 1999). Because of the continuous nature of portfolios, it is assumed that portfolios and personal development plans encourage students to develop self-reflection and to take charge of their lifelong learning. They allow students to take ownership and thereby promote a sense of responsibility (McMullan 2006).

The use of portfolios and personal development plans is not exclusive to the Dutch context, nor to prevocational or vocational education. Personal development plans and portfolios have been on the agenda of educators and policy-makers in other countries as well. Examples of similar initiatives in other countries are the 'Bilan de Compétence' in France (Evans, Kersh, and Kontiainen 2004), the CH-Q (Schweizerisches Qualifikationsprogramm zur Berufslaufbahn) in Switzerland (van den Dungen, Mulders, and Pijls 2004) and the Record of Achievement and Progress Files in the UK (Broadfoot 1998). There are also a growing number of studies, mostly in higher (medical or teacher) education, that investigate the use and effects of portfolios (Wright, Knight, and Pomerleau 1999; Broadfoot 1998; Driessen et al. 2003).

McMullan (2006) reported that portfolios can be very effective as assessment and learning tools, provided that both students and mentors receive clear guidelines and comprehensive support on how to use them. They should be designed in such a way that they are relevant, clear and user-friendly for both students and mentors. Broadfoot (1998) addressed the effectiveness of the Records of Achievements used in the UK, and emphasised the importance of usability and credibility as well. She argued that these aspects, together with the expertise of the teachers, are important in creating ownership, which influences the perceived and actual value they have for students. Driessen et al. (2003) also reported on factors contributing to portfolio effectiveness, including a supportive academic mentor system to coach the student, a clear portfolio structure allowing students to determine content and form, organisation of the

portfolio around student self-reflection, and an early and unambiguous introduction of the portfolio in the curriculum. The support or coaching of students as a crucial factor has also been mentioned by other researchers, such as Elshout-Mohr and van Daalen-Kapteijns (2003). They stated that the effectiveness of a portfolio not only relies on its design and implementation, but even more on the quality of the coaching. At the same time, Elshout-Mohr and van Daalen-Kapteijns (2003) argued that many teachers are not sufficiently competent in fulfilling this new role.

Research on the effectiveness of personal development planning is less common and often focuses on specific cases, for example on projects for special target groups or specific places (see, for example, Bullock and Jamieson 1998). According to Clegg and Bradley (2006), understandings and practices of personal development planning vary quite widely in and between schools and this diversity is characterised by ill-defined concepts, a variety of functions, ill-researched implementations and/or dependence on a specific context, for instance the higher education sector. Although there are no general reviews that investigate the effectiveness of personal development plans, there are issues discussed by authors that contribute to the success of this instrument. Ward and Richardson (2007) addressed a few critical success factors for personalised learning plans, one being 'learner engagement'. Another factor stressed by Ward and Richardson is the need for reflection on function of the plans, such as the stimulation of learning processes and the recording of outcomes of those learning processes, thereby enabling both learners and tutors to revisit (and renegotiate) them. Bullock and Jamieson (1998) furthermore argue that the value of one-to-one discussions between tutors and students is crucial, and the quality of the personal development planning process was thought to rest, to a great extent, on the skills and enthusiasm of individual tutors (see also Whiteside 1994 in Bullock and Jamieson 1998).

The use of instruments such as portfolios and personal development plans for career guidance is relatively new in the vocational and prevocational education context in The Netherlands. There is a lack of empirical evidence on the impact of these instruments in this context to date. An exception is research by Kuijpers, Meijers, and Bakker 2006, which focused on the influence of the learning environment on the development of career competences of students in vocational education. This research indicated that a powerful learning environment for the development of competences, such as reflecting on personal ambitions and taking initiative to direct one's own career development, is one in which a student can experience authentic, occupational practice, in which a student is able to exert influence on the content and progress of the curriculum, and in which the career learning process is being evaluated and discussed in a dialogue between students and teachers. However, this research also showed that many schools find such a learning environment difficult to realise. A more practice-oriented curriculum was often present, but schools failed to give students more freedom within the curriculum, as well as not managing to achieve a reflective dialogue. Finally, their research did not provide any clues as to why these schools failed to establish such a learning environment.

Even though (more) evidence is available from a higher education context, the (secondary) vocational and prevocational education context differs in many respects, for instance in terms of the type of learners enrolled. As was argued, a higher percentage of at-risk students can be found in vocational schools. Students are also younger and pursue education at a lower level.

Finally, there is little empirical evidence concerning students' perceptions of the use and effectiveness of career development instruments for career guidance and whether these perceptions differ from those of teachers and counsellors. This study, therefore, is a first attempt to examine these issues and to investigate the perspectives of teachers, career counsellors and students with respect to career guidance and the role of career guidance instruments in vocational and prevocational education.



## Research aim and questions

This study provides a first description of how teachers, students and career counsellors in vocational schools perceive the role of portfolios and personal development plans as a part of career guidance. These perceptions are analysed for the beliefs, practices and uses of the instruments by respondents in Dutch vocational and prevocational education. The research questions that will be investigated are:

- How are instruments like personal development plans and portfolios used in career guidance as perceived by teachers and career counsellors in a small number of vocational and prevocational education cases/schools?
- How do students in this context perceive and use these instruments?
- What differences and similarities can be found between the cases/schools investigated?

Because of the exploratory nature of this study and the lack of prior research in this particular context, a qualitative approach was taken in the form of case studies. Case studies are particularly useful in situations where a problem or phenomenon needs to be investigated and described in its real-life, situated context, when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident, or when the implementation of a certain innovation needs to be investigated (Yin 2003). Case studies can also be used to develop new theories (Glaser and Straus 1967).

## Method

### *Sample*

Three cases (or schools) were investigated in this study. Case 1 consisted of four teachers at a large vocational school in the southern part of The Netherlands: the portfolio coordinating teacher, a teacher assistant responsible for portfolio coaching, and two (mentoring) teachers took part. Also, eight students enrolled in the first year of Juridical Service studies participated in the study. Juridical Service is a Level 4 degree programme, and has four subdomains in which a student can specialise: Public Sector, Business Services, Social Security and Employment Strategies, and Personnel Work. The first year consists of four semesters, each corresponding to one of these four domains. During the second year, students are being trained 'on the job' in one of these four domains. After the second year, students specialise in one domain. Juridical Service studies has changed from a 'traditional education' approach to a competence-based education approach. There is a strong focus on practice-oriented learning, (self-)reflection and student self-responsibility. Students are expected to formulate individual learning goals in a personal development plan, and this process is being coached by teachers. Students have to create a text-based portfolio in which assignments and written reflections provide evidence of their learning and are thereby collected. Students are supposed to have planned 'career conversations' with their career guide (teacher) every eight weeks; during these conversations, personal development plan and portfolio are to be discussed.

Case 2 consisted of two teachers, one career counsellor and six students enrolled in the first year of Business and Marketing studies at a large vocational school in the southern part of The Netherlands. This is Level 3 and 4 of their programme, and it has two domains of specialisation: Retail Trade and Wholesale Trade. After the first (general) year, students specialise in one of these domains. Since 2005, Business and Marketing has taken on a competence-based approach. Students have no books, only a laptop with access to several digital sources. Students are involved in projects, together with a small group of their fellow students. These projects emphasise practical skills and learning at the workplace and focus on self-responsibility in learning and work. Business and Marketing studies has a well-designed career guidance system: there is a digital

portfolio, including a digital personal development plan. In career guidance conversations with career guides (teachers) every eight weeks, the personal development plan and portfolio of student are discussed.

Case 3 consisted of three teachers, one career counsellor and nine students enrolled in the third year of Business and Administration studies at a school for prevocational secondary education in the southern part of The Netherlands. Business and Administration studies is a Level 2 study in the Business and Administration sector. The school can be identified as rather traditional in its educational approach. It has a fixed curriculum with traditional teaching of different subjects and provides little practical experience. Since the beginning of 2006, a 'transition portfolio' has been implemented. The transition portfolio is an instrument used by several prevocational education schools in The Netherlands to improve career decision-making and career planning processes. The portfolio contains assignments that help students to obtain a better image of themselves and the beliefs they have about different professions or work. Its goal is to create a better transition from prevocational to vocational education by supporting students in their choices, and by stimulating communication between schools for prevocational and senior vocational education.

The first two cases were chosen because of their implementation of competence-based education. It was assumed that the implementation of competence-based education would heighten chances on the use of career guidance and the use of instruments to support the career development of students. The third case was chosen because of its implementation of a 'transition portfolio', which is specifically aimed at improving career guidance.

### *Procedure*

In all cases, data were collected by conducting individual, semi-structured interviews with students, teachers and career counsellors (or a staff member in a like function). The interviews were open and informal in nature, but the researcher monitored a list of topics or questions that would be covered. The teachers in the cases were selected because of their involvement in career guidance. They were directly responsible for the career guidance of students. In all cases, career counsellors had a more indirect role: they were available to students and/or teachers when extra career guidance was needed or development problems arose.

To answer the second research question, students were interviewed about their future plans and actions related to their career. This involved questions such as: 'What are you planning to do after graduation?', 'What do you do to obtain a better image of what you want to do or become in the future?'. Additionally, questions related to the (use of) instruments like the personal development plan or portfolio. Example questions were: 'Can you tell us something about the goal of the portfolio?', and 'Do you think the personal development plan is useful?'. To answer the first research question, teachers and career counsellors were interviewed for their perceptions of the role of instruments for career guidance and the career guidance system. Questions that were asked were, for instance, 'Can you tell us something about the goal of the portfolio?', and 'What is the role of the personal development plan in career guidance at your school?'.

### *Analyses*

Interviews were recorded on audiotape with the consent of the respondents. After transcribing the recorded interviews, data were analysed according to a *grounded theory approach* (Strauss and Corbin 1998) using Atlas-ti. In a grounded theory approach the researcher formulates categories and relationships between categories based on observations from the data rather than from theory (e.g. bottom-up or inductively). The first author assigned open codes to the fragments she believed



were relevant. These codes indicated a more general or conceptual idea shown in a given fragment and were formulated during the analysis. A typical code formulated was, for example, 'personal contact with the student'. Codes were added until saturation emerged. In a next step, strongly overlapping, equivalent or unclear codes were deleted or merged within larger categories.

In order to establish reliability, a trained research assistant read and coded the transcripts of three randomly selected interviews independently. After coding, codes were compared critically between the researcher and the independent rater. Differences in the two analyses were discussed and when differences were identified, relevant parts of the transcripts and memos were reread and discussed extensively in order to achieve consensus. If doubt remained, codes or fragments were not incorporated into the final coding scheme.

During the final stage of analysis, the researcher explored whether categories identified in the open coding phase could be related to each other. These findings were finally compared with existing research in order to validate findings theoretically. After analyses of the separate cases, a cross-case display was made, in order to detect differences and similarities between the cases (third research question).

## Results

In this section, each case will first be described separately. The codes that were derived from the analysis will be mentioned and indicated in italics. Whenever possible, codes and conclusions will be clarified or deepened with quotations from the interview material. After the separate within-case reports, a cross-case comparison will be presented. A summary of the case outcomes can be found in Table 1.

### *Case 1: Juridical Service studies (vocational education)*

#### *Perceptions and opinions of teachers and teacher-assistant about career development instruments*

All interviewed teachers indicated that the portfolio was being used as an instrument to collect records of achievements of students and that it contained assignments on learning things about yourself ('Who am I?'). The portfolio also contained documents with reflections by students on the assignments they had done in their daily schoolwork ('How did I do? What should I improve?'). One male teacher explained that the portfolio was being used to keep track of individual development, and to collect evidence for this purpose:

A part of the portfolio is about self-responsibility with respect to the learning process. Students have to collect things themselves and provide evidence.

A female teacher proposed that the portfolio is an important means to achieve more student responsibility:

It helps them by giving them something to grasp, or a kind of structure, to organise things.

A third, female, teacher added that reflecting on things done is not sufficient, and that a personal development plan for students is needed as well. She believed focusing on future goals, and steps taken to achieve such goals, to be of great importance:

From reflections on what has been done, points for improvement will become evident. In a personal development plan they [the students] should discuss these points and indicate what learning goals they have and how they would like to achieve these goals.

According to this teacher, personal development plans are focused on developing a realistic self-image and setting up learning goals for mentoring conversations:

Table 1. Cross-case display of the three cases, for perceptions of students and teachers/counsellors.

	Teachers and counsellors	Students
Juridical Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portfolio is a means to collect achievements and assignments about self-image and occupational image, and things achieved.</li> <li>• Personal development plan is aimed at reflecting on achievements, assignments and set-up of learning goals.</li> <li>• Instruments are used in combination with a 'personal approach': talking with students about career plans and focusing on personal activities and talents.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portfolio is a means to collect evidence about personal development and something that could be helpful for job application or continued study.</li> <li>• Personal development plan is an important means to support personal development.</li> <li>• Half of the students believe the portfolio and personal development plan are useful for career development and help to reflect on ambitions and future.</li> <li>• Personal conversations, showing interest, focusing on personal issues and being available for the students are seen as crucial.</li> </ul>
Business and Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a major digital system built around career guidance, but this system is not used by teachers.</li> <li>• Portfolio and personal development plan regarded as means to stimulate self-direction and to reflect on identity and future.</li> <li>• Teachers believe that actual conversation with students is important to support career competence development, but experience difficulties in realising this. Teachers argue there is lack of time to talk with students and the digital system does not allow for deep discussions with students.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No student sees the personal development plan or portfolio as a useful instrument for personal career development.</li> <li>• Almost all students argue the personal development plan and portfolio are only completed for credits to pass exams.</li> <li>• One student understands the goal of the personal development plan.</li> <li>• Students complain that teachers are always busy. They feel teachers do not have time.</li> </ul>
Business and Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers see the portfolio as something that makes things concrete, allows students to complete assignments and for collecting outcomes of these assignments, and allows to 'show' this at the intended vocational education school.</li> <li>• Teachers see the portfolio as a step forward in addressing career issues, but it still focuses strongly on assignments.</li> <li>• Teachers do not speak about students' personal issues or have reflective conversations with students.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Half of the students see the portfolio as a useful instrument because it helps to collect and present things done. It is helpful for entering vocational education,</li> <li>• Several students say the main goal of the portfolio is to facilitate sharing of files between student and teacher.</li> <li>• Very few students see the portfolio as an instrument that helps with choices for the future.</li> <li>• Students say that they hardly talk to their teacher about assignments made, or about other things related to career development.</li> </ul>

Students have to learn what their real talents are, and many of them have a self-image that is not realistic. When entering the career guidance process you must know who you are, what you want to learn and what your talents are.

Another female teacher added that personal development plans refer to building a model of oneself in the future:

In the personal development plan students are building a model of what they want to become.

All teachers, however, mentioned that these instruments work only when used in face-to-face contact with students:

You have to ask a lot of questions, and sometimes 'penetrate mental barriers' to really understand or motivate these students.

For a good developmental process in terms of the career, you have to supervise students, coach them, talk to them.

I talk a lot with them [the students], not only in personal guidance conversations, but also in the classroom during lessons. I go sit with these students and talk with them to get to know them really well. The important thing is: keep asking questions!

### *Students' perceptions and use of career development instruments*

Many students in this school perceived the portfolio as an instrument that was meant to collect evidence about what was done and something that had personal meaning. According to them, it could be used for job applications, for example.

It is an instrument that you can use to collect evidence about what you have accomplished in school, but also about who you are as a person and what your working experience is.

Although most students valued the portfolio positively in terms of collecting evidence about their personal development, the majority did not use it for making decisions about their future (career). A few students argued that the portfolio could be used to reflect on the things done and learned:

You could use it for something for the future, because you can look back at what you have done and in what way you have improved.

This, however, was not mentioned as a core function of this instrument; nor was the instrument frequently used for this purpose.

The personal development plan was used by students for setting learning goals, and sometimes for making choices about the future, and was seen as part of the portfolio. The personal development plan was seen as relevant, because it focused on the student as an individual and on guiding students' personal development, even though it did not always focus on career goals. According to students, the personal development plan focused mostly on behaviours such as impulsiveness, time management, or things they found difficult about a certain project.

Every eight weeks, students had a conversation with their career coaches about their personal development and their portfolio. Some students found these conversations helpful, including with respect to career issues:

This person helps you with personal things, but also with things at school. Yes, I also talked with my guide about what I want to do in the future; he often asked me about this!

Other students did not believe these conversations were helpful, because they were organised less frequently than intended or because the relationship or contact with the teacher was not perceived as warm, safe or supporting.

My career guide does not know me at all, but that is also because I have had three different career guides this year.

Students believed that the coaches who supervised them every day during projects were very helpful because they knew their students well. Students stated that they often talked to or asked these coaches about their future ambitions and also possible professions, or for example about the norms and values that are part of certain professions. One student suggested that if a teacher does not show interest in the portfolio, it will not be perceived as useful:

I am working very hard to complete the portfolio, but I could even write down nonsense... She just looked at it for five minutes and said 'OK, fine'. I thought: 'Why did I put so much effort into this if she is not interested anyway?'

### **Case 2: Business and Marketing (vocational education)**

#### *Perceptions and opinions of teachers and counsellor about career development instruments*

All teachers, as well as the counsellor in Case 2, believed that instruments such as a portfolio or a personal development plan could be helpful for guiding students in their career development. The career counsellor explained that the portfolio had a broader function in the school than the personal development plan. In the portfolio, evidence of achievements is also being collected. In her opinion, the portfolio could be used by students to reflect on things learned or achieved, and to discover their own developmental path.

Students can use their reflections to indicate how they perceive the world, school and themselves. These insights could be used in, for example, a job application.

One male teacher argued that a portfolio should have the function of stimulating self-direction and reflecting on achievements.

The portfolio should have the function of stimulating self-direction in career development, for example, and to help students reflect on what they have done.

In the school, a large digital system was implemented with multiple instruments for guiding the career development of students. It provided an opportunity to insert personal learning goals (personal development plan) and to collect documents that demonstrate achievements electronically (i.e. electronic portfolio). Interestingly, this system did not seem to be used by teachers for coaching students.

No, I do not use the portfolio, it is a digital thing that the student takes with him or herself during his or her career path. [...] No, I do not use it for career guidance. Well, I just don't use it. It is developed by someone far away from actual educational practice, and it does not work for me.

The female career counsellor confirmed the lack of use of instruments:

None of the students completed questions in the portfolio about themselves. And yes, this means that the teachers did not stimulate or assess this either.

One male teacher used personal development plans as a means to give students more responsibility for their own learning and career:

By obliging them to complete this tool, they are being forced to think about themselves. [...] it is something that provides structure as well.

This teacher believed that it was more efficient and effective to talk to students and make notes:

It is an issue of depth, the digital system does not allow us to deepen discussions with students. That is something that can be done by actually talking to the students.

All teachers argued that lack of time constrained them in having quality discussions with students – for example:

There is not much time available. I want to talk to the students, but in just 15 minutes you cannot have deep discussions with students. And we are so busy during the day with the implementation of competence-based education, developing scripts etc... that we hardly have any time for students.

### *Students' perceptions and use of career development instruments*

All Case 2 students argued that instruments like personal development plans or portfolios were present, but were not considered valuable, or were only used for monitoring course results and collecting credits:

Well, actually, I believe they are extremely useless, this personal development plan and personal action plan. Why would I use it? Only because it gives you the credits you need...

Nobody takes the personal development seriously.

I use the portfolio to collect study results, my credits.

The majority of the students also confirmed that personal development plans or portfolios were often not on the agenda during career guidance conversations:

No, in the career guidance conversations we do not talk about the personal development plan. It is more focused on how well you are doing concerning your studies.

Some students believed that thinking about learning goals once or twice, individually and without substantial feedback in career guidance conversations, makes no valuable contribution to career development. The students also felt conversations with teachers or coaches about their personal interests or opportunities, or future ambitions, hardly ever happened:

I do not talk with my teacher about things I can improve in my personal development plan. Neither do I talk about things that have to do with my future profession.

They felt uncomfortable with the fact that teachers did not have time to talk with them or to help them:

You are forced to do a lot by yourself, but sometimes you need the teacher for something. But they are so busy that you never get to talk to them. And getting an answer to your question always takes a lot of time.

### **Case 3: Business and Administration (prevocational education)**

#### *Perceptions and opinions of teachers and counsellor about career development instruments*

The majority of the teachers in this case argued that the goal of the transition portfolio was for students to become more active in thinking about choices for the future:

The portfolio is an important means to combine several activities, it frames career guidance. Students are more active, make several assignments with respect to thinking about their future career.

One male teacher argued that the digital transition portfolio was an important means of collecting all the things students have done for their career development:

Through the portfolio, students can see their own development, which in turn motivates them. Especially students in prevocational education have always heard or perceived that they are 'less' than others. Now they are building on something of their own, which only gets bigger and more beautiful.

The idea at this school was for students to work independently on their portfolio, in order to stimulate them to reflect on their own career, to influence their self-direction, and to encourage them to take their own initiative.

Two teachers perceived the digital portfolio as an important instrument for communication, used to share information with, for example, an institute for vocational education, or with parents.

In the instrument, students can justify their choices for a school for vocational education. One male teacher argued that students liked the idea of a digital portfolio, because it allowed them to exchange information with fellow students, parents and friends at home:

It is tangible for students, it works better than a conversation or advice from a student's mentor.

### *Students' perceptions and use of career development instruments*

Students in this case believed the transition portfolio had different goals. Some students thought the portfolio was connected to assignments related to personal development and future, and could be used as a showcase portfolio for the transition to vocational education:

I collect evidence of things I have done, so my next school can see what I have done here.

Other students felt that the portfolio could be used as a means to communicate digitally:

The goal of the portfolio is that it is easier to send homework to the teacher digitally. Especially for students who do not have a printer, this is very handy.

Many students commented that they had to complete assignments, but that these were not used in discussions with their mentor about their future ambitions:

For the portfolio, we have to do things such as searching for information on the Internet, doing tests, etc.

For the portfolio, we completed an assignment about what is needed for the work you want to do. But we did not talk about the assignment afterwards, we hardly ever do that.

If you want to talk with a teacher, or your mentor, about the future or things you want to do or become, you have to ask yourself.

I talked with X [the mentor] about what I wanted to do, but that was just five minutes or so...

### *Cross-case comparison*

In Case 1, instruments were used in combination with a 'personal approach'. Teachers as well as students considered the portfolio and personal development plan useful, but believed that a personal conversation and investment in a relationship (showing interest, focusing on personal issues and being available for the students) were essential for high-quality career counselling conversations. Compared to the two other cases, students in this case used the portfolio most effectively and were most satisfied about its intended function(s). Almost all students regarded the portfolio as an important means to collect evidence about personal development, and as something that could be helpful for job applications or ongoing studies. These students regarded the personal development plan also as an important means to support personal development. Approximately half of the students believed the portfolio could be used to direct their own career development and to help them reflect on their own ambitions and future.

The teachers and counsellor of Case 2 had similar ideas to Case 1, that personal contact and reflection is of central importance for the development of career competences. However, they experienced difficulties in establishing contact with one another. A major digital system was implemented, but this system was not used by the teachers, because they felt that (among other things) it was built by someone not familiar with educational practice. Teachers argued that, there was not enough time to talk with students, and students complained that teachers were always busy. They felt that teachers did not have enough time. None of the students perceived the personal development plan or portfolio as useful instruments for personal career development. Almost all students felt that the personal development plan and portfolio were completed only because of the credits needed to pass exams.



Teachers and counsellor in Case 3 regarded the portfolio as a means to collect assignments focusing at career development, but did not mention personal or reflective conversations with students. They believed the assignments in the portfolio to be sufficient for stimulating students to reflect on future ambitions. These findings are in contrast with Case 1 (and to some extent Case 2), where teachers emphasised the importance of a dialogue with students. In Case 3, approximately half of the students thought the portfolio was a useful instrument, because it helped them to collect and present achievements and activities, and because it could be helpful when entering vocational education, to show(case) what has been done. Very few students perceived the portfolio as an instrument to help with career or future choices, and some students felt that the main goal of the portfolio was to facilitate file-sharing (homework) between student and teacher. The portfolio did not affect students' reflections on their career or future ambitions.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the perspectives of teachers and career counsellors on the use of personal development plans and portfolios in career guidance, and the ways in which students perceived and used these instruments. The study investigated these perceptions through individual, semi-structured interviews with teachers, counsellors and students in three cases, one prevocational school and two vocational schools. The main findings of the study were:

- (1) A majority of the teachers and counsellors perceived portfolios and personal development plans as instruments to collect evidence of student development, to stimulate self-responsibility or self-direction of students, to support students in reflecting on identity and future ambitions, and to set up learning goals to achieve this;
- (2) Portfolios and personal development plans were often used instrumentally (Cases 2 and 3), but not to support career dialogues; the instruments were used by students mainly to collect information about themselves, but information was not used in conversations between teachers and students to stimulate reflection;
- (3) If instruments were not used in a context of dialogue, students perceived them as irrelevant and refrained from using them to reflect on identity or future plans.

If teachers used portfolios and personal development plans as a basis for a career dialogue (as in Case 1), students were more likely to appreciate the instruments and to reflect on their identity and future ambitions. These findings correspond to findings by, for example, Driessen et al. (2003) and Elshout-Mohr and van Daalen-Kaptejns (2003), who argued that a proper design of the portfolio in and of itself is insufficient for effective use. The quality of mentoring or coaching students in using the portfolio is very important, but teachers often lack the competences to achieve this. The findings also correspond to the research by Kuijpers, Meijers, and Bakker (2006), who found that actual dialogues between student and teacher on career development often did not take place, stressing that these dialogues were an extremely crucial aspect of career guidance.

How can we explain the limited and often inadequate use of portfolios and personal development plans and the absence of a dialogue on career development? The cases revealed some of the factors that hinder the realisation of a reflective dialogue on a student's career, such as time available to actually talk to students and the number of planned career conversations (which can be considered part of a school's management policy). The second case also suggests that teacher (and student) ownership of the creation and use of instruments (like portfolio and personal development plan) may stimulate them to actually use them in career guidance. These factors show alignment with factors mentioned in education improvement literature for successful implementations of innovations in general, such as school culture, transformative leadership by

the management (allowing teachers to become change agents by giving them ownership), and organisational conditions (time, opportunity, materials) (Sammons, Hillman, and Mortimore 1995).

There are some practical implications that can be derived from the results of this study. First of all, implementing instruments aimed at stimulating reflection on career guidance should be accompanied by quality guidance conversations with students. This is particularly important for vocational and prevocational schools, because their students may be considered to be disadvantaged to some degree and may tend to have more difficulty in planning and reflecting independently. They also tend to need more teacher supervision to engage in a reflective process. Schools have to invest time (for teachers and students) in order to realise individual, one-to-one dialogues. In addition, schools should invest in training teachers to develop coaching competences for supporting students in their reflective processes. Finally, when schools decide to implement career guidance instruments, teachers and career counsellors should be given ownership and leadership during the development process in order to investigate what is useful to them and what they need in order to realise quality career guidance practices.

Future research should describe and analyse the factors that stimulate (or hinder) the use of career guidance dialogues. Why do teachers in Case 1, for example, emphasise that dialogue is so important, and that contact with students is crucial? And what do they do to realise reflective dialogues? What kind of dialogue between career guide and student is needed to realise development of career competences; what are characteristics of a high-quality dialogue between teacher and student; how can a portfolio or personal development plan be used to set up and retain a good dialogue between student and teacher? And what competences should teachers have (or develop) to realise such a dialogue? The results of this study do indicate some specific elements that may be important for such a dialogue, for example showing interest in students, focusing on students' personal ambitions or characteristics, giving students a feeling they are appreciated. Kuijpers, Meijers, and Bakker (2006) have argued that, in addition to the above elements, such a dialogue should focus on students' practices and learning experiences, and on steps that students can take to achieve these goals. Nevertheless, the aforementioned questions require more in-depth study and systematic observation of career guidance conversations between career guide and student, which are beyond the scope of the present article but could be part of future research.

The present study was subject to a few limitations. This study was small in scale, included only one year of the curriculum per case, was conducted at particular schools for vocational and prevocational education and with particular departments within these schools. We studied first-year students enrolled in programs in vocational education, and third-year students in prevocational education. Moreover, participation in the study by teachers (and students) was voluntary, and it seems likely that students and teachers who were particularly open to reflection and competence-based education were sampled. Therefore, conclusions cannot be generalised to other years and departments or to the cases in general; nor is it possible to make an in-depth comparison between vocational and prevocational education. Furthermore, the present study investigated only (self-)perceptions of students and teachers; it remains to be seen if these perceptions can be confirmed with other sources of data, such as actual observations, school documents or more quantitative approaches (surveys, outcome measures).

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