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Study profile guidance: perspectives of students, school counsellors and tutors in Dutch secondary education

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CHAPTER 1

General introduction

Problem Statement and Aims of the Research

Before entering upper secondary education, students in the Netherlands choose a combination of subjects in which they will take their final school examinations. These combinations are referred to as “study profiles”. All schools offer career guidance to support students in their career orientation and career decisions. This thesis maps career guidance focusing specifically on study profile choices from the perspectives of students, school counsellors, and tutors.

Prior studies have suggested that choices of study profiles and subjects can be explained in part by the ways in which students perceive various school subjects (e.g., Biddulph & Adey, 2003; Kuščević et al., 2022; Uitto, 2014), for example, the difficulty and relevance of history (Biddulph & Adey, 2003) and the importance and usefulness of visual arts (Kuščević et al., 2022), as well as interest and self-efficacy in and attitudes towards biology (Uitto, 2014). In addition, by providing career orientation and career guidance activities, school counsellors and tutors guide – and possibly influence – the subject choices of students. The ways in which these educational professionals perceive the processes involved in study profile choices are not known, however, nor are the factors that they think students should consider when making study profile choices. Their perceptions of the various study profiles are also unknown.

In this thesis, we study the guidance services provided by school counsellors and tutors, based on a variety of theories and perspectives. Several theories relating to career (and career guidance) assign an important role to the social environment of students, and especially to educational professionals (e.g., school counsellors and tutors). Examples of such theories include Holland’s personality theory of career choice (1959), Super’s life-span, life-space approach (Super, 1990; Super et al., 1996, as cited in Hartung & Niles, 2000), social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994), the career construction theory (Savickas, 2013), and the life design counselling approach (Savickas, 2015). Scholars have also described a variety of functions (Smith, 2011) and perspectives on career guidance (Hearne & Neary, 2021). To date, however, these theories have not provided any clear explanation of exactly how counsellors and tutors fulfil this role and how it actually affects the career choices and choice processes of students. Similarly, little in-depth information is available on the content of study profile guidance and how it is perceived by students. To address these gaps, this study investigates several aspects of study profile guidance from the perspectives of school counsellors, tutors, and students.

The primary aim of the current research is to map study profile guidance according to a variety of perspectives. More specifically, we investigate how counsellors and tutors perceive the various study profiles, as well as how they perceive the processes involved in study profile choices. We also map the experiences of students with study profile guidance. This multi-informant or multi-perspective approach was chosen in order to provide a more holistic view of the subject under investigation (Offerman et al., 2022). With this approach, neglected issues may acquire heightened importance if they appear in more than one layer, or if significant tensions and conflicts are identified between layers (Bevitt, 2015). By comparing and contrasting both sources (i.e., educational professionals and students), we are thus able to develop a fuller picture of perspectives on study profile guidance.

It is likely that educational professionals and teachers are not fully aware of their own views – or those of their colleagues – on processes involved in the choice of a study profile. In addition, they are unlikely to perceive all subjects and profiles as equally suitable to every student or student group. For example, gender stereotypes regarding STEM domains (i.e., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) could lead to the perception amongst teachers and school counsellors that women do not belong in these fields (van den Hurk et al., 2019). Such stereotyped views are also likely to affect the study profile choices of students. This thesis is intended to generate insight into these matters, thus possibly contributing to the improvement of career guidance activities provided by educational professionals. The results of this thesis could also help educational professionals gain insight that could enhance their understanding of how they make recommendations to students, how they view the different profiles, and how students perceive career guidance. This knowledge could be used to inform educational policy and practices aimed at supporting the career decisions of students (e.g., in the development of training curricula for tutors and counsellors). Such efforts could result in career guidance services that are based more on common objective grounds and less on subjective viewpoints. The overall result could contribute to more informed and less gender-stereotyped profile choices and career choices in general.

Study Profile Choices in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, secondary education includes pre-university, senior general, and pre-vocational education tracks (in Dutch: *vwo*, *havo en vmbo*). The pre-vocational tracks include theoretical, combined, middle-management, and basic sub-tracks (in Dutch: *theoretische, gemengde, kaderberoepsgerichte en basisberoepsgerichte leerwegen*), which prepare students for different levels of vocational education. The senior general and pre-university tracks prepare students for higher education.



As part of a new educational concept known as “the second stage of secondary education” (in Dutch: *de tweede fase*), four study profiles were introduced in the senior general and pre-university tracks in 1998 (Korpershoek, 2011; Rekers-Mombarg, 2015). One important objective was to improve the link between secondary and higher education, as it had been observed that many students did not have appropriate knowledge and skills upon entering higher education. Other objectives were to modernise the study programmes in upper secondary education and to provide students with more recognisable and coherent study programmes that could focus their preparation for specific courses in higher education. The study profiles were updated in 2007, resulting in the “renewed second stage” (in Dutch: *de vernieuwde tweede fase*; Rekers-Mombarg, 2015).

Efforts to modernise the study programmes in the pre-vocational tracks included replacing 35 vocationally focused programmes with 10 study profiles from 2016 onwards. Another objective of these changes was to increase student mass within each profile, thereby improving the manageability and cost-efficiency of education. Moreover, it was expected that pre-vocational schools would make agreements with each other concerning who will offer which profiles, thus establishing a region-wide supply of profiles. The changes were also intended to improve coordination between the vocational education system and the labour market, such that the regional supply of profiles would match regional needs (van den Berg et al., 2017).

Students choose their study profiles at the end of the 3rd year (for the pre-university or senior general secondary tracks) or at the end of the 2nd year (for the pre-vocational secondary tracks). Study profiles include mandatory subjects for all students, as well as a study profile component (a combination of subjects; see Tables 1.1–1.3). They also include optional courses, which may be dropped in some cases. Students take their final examinations in all these subjects. For basic, middle-management, and combined pre-vocational education, all schools offer at least one of the 10 study profiles (Table 1.3). Some profiles (e.g., Maritime and Technology) are offered only in some schools. The theoretical track of pre-vocational education comprises the following profiles: Business; Engineering and Technology; Agriculture; and Care and Welfare (Table 1.2; Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS; Statistics Netherlands], n.d.). The pre-university and senior general tracks also have four study profiles, all of which are offered at every school: Science and Technology, Science and Health, Economics and Society, and Culture and Society (Table 1.1; Rijksoverheid [Government of the Netherlands], n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

Table 1.1 Study profiles and profile components in the pre-university and senior general tracks

Pre-university and senior general tracks	Study profile components: Mandatory subjects in senior general education	Study profile components: Mandatory subjects in pre-university education
Culture and Society (CULT)	History Modern foreign language	History Basic, Applied or Advanced Mathematics
Economics and Society (ECON)	History Economy Applied or Advanced Mathematics	History Economy Applied or Advanced Mathematics
Science and Health (HEAL)	Biology Chemistry Applied or Advanced Mathematics	Biology Chemistry Applied or Advanced Mathematics
Science and Technology (TECH)	Physics Chemistry Advanced Mathematics	Physics Chemistry Advanced Mathematics

Table 1.2 Study profiles and profile components in the theoretical track of pre-vocational education

Theoretical track in pre-vocational education	Study profile components: Mandatory subjects
Care and Welfare (CARE)	Biology
Engineering and Technology (ENGI)	Mathematics Physics
Agriculture (AGRI)	Chemistry Mathematics
Business (BUSI)	Economy

Some profiles are more popular than others are (CBS, n.d.; see Appendix, Tables A1–A4). In the basic and middle-management tracks of pre-vocational education, the most common profiles in 2022 were Care and Welfare (CARE; 27% and 26% respectively) and Services and Products (SERV; 19% and 23%, respectively). In the combined track within pre-vocational education, SERV was chosen most often (48%). In the theoretical track within pre-vocational education, Business (BUSI) was most popular (50%), followed by CARE (33%), Engineering and Technology (ENGI; 15%) and Agriculture (AGRI; 2%; Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen, n.d.). In the senior general track, Economics and Society (ECON) was chosen by 40% of all girls, as compared to 50% of all boys. The Science and Health (HEAL) profile was chosen by 29% of all girls and 19% of all boys, and the Culture and Society (CULT) profile was chosen by 17% of all girls and 5% of all boys. The Science and Technology (TECH) profile was chosen by 5% of all girls and 16% of all boys (CBS, n.d.).

Table 1.3 Study profiles and profile components in the combined, middle-management, and basic tracks in pre-vocational education

Combined, middle-management and basic tracks in pre-vocational education	Study profile components: Mandatory subjects
Building, Housing, and Interiors (BUIL)	Mathematics Physics & Chemistry 1
Engineering, Fitting out, and Energy (ENGI)	Mathematics Physics & Chemistry 1
Transport and Mobility (TRAN)	Mathematics Physics & Chemistry 1
Media, Design, and IT (MEDI)	Mathematics Physics & Chemistry 1
Maritime and Technology (MARI)	Mathematics Physics & Chemistry 1
Care and Welfare (CARE)	Biology
Business and Commerce (BUSI)	Economy
Catering, Baking, and Leisure (CATE)	Economy
Animals, Plants, and Land (ANIM)	Mathematics
Services and Products (SERV)	n/a

Amongst pre-university students, 21% of all girls chose ECON, as compared to 29% of all boys. The HEAL profile was chosen by 26% of all girls and by 16% of all boys, and the TECH profile was chosen by 11% of all girls, as compared to 25% of all boys. The least popular profile in 2019 was CULT (chosen by 11% of all girls and 3% of all boys). A combination of CULT and ECON was chosen by 9% of all girls and by 6% of all boys, and a combination of HEAL and TECH was chosen by 19% of all girls and 18% of all boys (CBS, n.d.). Profile choices thus reflect substantial gender differences, especially with regard to TECH and CULT.

Study profile choices may restrict the options available to students in tertiary education, due to subject or profile requirements for some post-secondary programmes. For example, TECH or HEAL is required in order to pursue further studies in most healthcare fields. In addition, some profiles (especially Media, Design, and IT [MEDI]; Building, Housing, and Interiors [BUIL]; ENGI; and other technology-related profiles) are related to sectors characterised by a tight labour market in the Netherlands (Heyma et al., 2022). Moreover, students in senior secondary vocational education who wish to enter advanced programmes that are unrelated to their profiles in secondary education are more likely to drop out than are those whose profiles and further vocational education are aligned (Vugteveen et al., 2016).

School Counsellors and Tutors

The ways in which school counsellors, tutors, and students perceive study profile guidance (Chapters 2, 3, and 5) and school counsellors and tutors perceive school subjects (Chapter 4) are shaped within the context of school policy regarding career guidance. In many Western countries, school counsellors, tutors, and teachers guide the subject choices of students by providing career orientation and career guidance activities. In the process of organising and guiding these activities, educational professionals are likely to influence the choices of students. In several countries (e.g., England and Turkey), students have identified the views of school counsellors and teachers as important sources of information for their subject choices in general (Cuff, 2017; Hanımoğlu, 2018; Vidal Rodeiro, 2007), as well as specifically in relation to career choices in STEM fields (e.g., Kubiatico et al., 2017; Prokop et al., 2007; van Langen & Vierke, 2009).

In the Netherlands, career guidance in secondary education is provided largely by tutors and counsellors (van Langen & Vierke, 2009). In most cases, counsellors are in charge of subject choice guidance and organise most activities, while tutors usually have conversations with students on a more regular basis. Most schools offer classes, activities, written information, and conversations with students and parents, in addition to using digital career guidance programmes. As reported by van Langen and Vierke (2009), 97% of the counsellors surveyed and 98% of tutors were somewhat or strongly involved in subject choices. Furthermore, 68% of the counsellors stated that they spoke individually with all students, and 79% said they spoke with students who were unsure.

Flow-VO Research Project

The current study was part of the “Flow-VO” research project, which was funded by the Netherlands Initiative for Education Research (NRO). Conducted at the University of Groningen, the project investigated educational trajectories and study profile choices. It was approved by the ethics committee of the Department of Pedagogical and Educational Sciences. All data were collected in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation. The Flow-VO project included two doctoral research projects. The overarching goal of the project conducted by Monique Dijks (2023) was to generate insight into the decision-making process of secondary school students with regard to subject choices. Report card marks and questionnaires completed by students in the senior general and pre-university tracks were collected from the same schools examined in this thesis. The research conducted by Monique Dijks consisted of a large-scale quantitative study investigating factors that play a role in the subject choices of Dutch students, as well as possible changes in the decision-making processes of these students in the year leading up to the definitive decision.



For the present thesis, a qualitative approach was applied in order to generate in-depth understanding of the views of school counsellors and students on study profile guidance. The doctoral student conducted semi-structured interviews with students, counsellors, and tutors at 14 secondary schools throughout the Netherlands. To add information on student perceptions concerning whether the career guidance provided had helped them in the process of choosing their study profiles, Chapter 5 also draws on questionnaire data from the study conducted by Monique Dijks (2023).

Additional information on the collected data, the research design, and the career guidance activities that the participating schools provided to help students with their profile and subject choices is presented in the section on data and research design at the end of this introductory chapter.

The Current Thesis

The four empirical chapters in this thesis examine the role of education professionals in study profile guidance in secondary education from several different perspectives: tutors and counsellors (Chapters 2, 3, and 4) and students (Chapter 5). Each chapter was written as an individual article and can be read as a stand-alone paper. A short overview of each chapter is presented below. The data and methods used for each chapter are described briefly in subsequent sections.

In Chapter 2, factors underlying the study profile recommendations made by school guidance counsellors and tutors to fictitious students are investigated, starting with an explanation of the various functions of these education professionals (Smith, 2011). For example, they can act as gatekeepers, using subjective criteria to label and sort students and discourage aspirations that they deem inappropriate. This could possibly restrict opportunities for students of non-dominant social class, race, ethnicity, and gender. From this perspective, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES) of students could be considered in the study profile recommendations. Moreover, according to the “impartial cultivator” model, counsellors and tutors provide information indiscriminately, using a “one-size-fits-all” formula, as if the opportunity structure is completely porous. In the “mediators of opportunity” model, educational professionals connect students to contacts, information, recommendations, and other resources by building counselling infrastructures and providing individual advice. From this perspective, counsellors and tutors should focus on what students enjoy or are interested in, as well as on positive career perspectives.

The research question of Chapter 2 is as follows: *Which factors characterise student counsellors' and tutors' study profile recommendations, and what is the role of student gender*

and SES? This question was examined according to case studies, in which several types of vignettes were used to collect data and to elicit the subsequent explanations of participants. The vignettes consisted of very short stories describing fictitious students who were seeking advice on their study profile choices. The first version of the vignettes was presented to 12 counsellors and tutors, and the second version was presented to 16 counsellors and tutors. The participants were asked to indicate which recommendations they would make with regard to both product (specific study profiles) and process (important factors in making choices).

In Chapter 3, the focus shifts from recommendations made to fictitious students to recommendations made to actual students. Four theories of career (and career guidance) are discussed, along with their implications for study profile recommendations made by counsellors and tutors. These theories represent a broad variety of perspectives on career development and career decisions. Following Holland's personality theory of career choice (1959), educational professionals should focus on congruency between the personalities of students and their study profile choices. According to Super's (Super, 1990; Super et al., as cited in Hartung & Niles, 2000) life-span, life-space approach, career choices should be adapted to the life stages and self-concepts of students. Social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994) focuses on self-efficacy and outcome likelihood. According to this theory, counsellors and tutors should guide students in the process of examining positive and realistic expectations and help them to develop specific goals to meet these expectations. Career construction theory (Savickas, 2013) and the life design counselling approach (Savickas, 2015) emphasise adaptability between individuals and a changing society. For example, study profile guidance could focus on acquiring adaptability to societal needs, based on life stories.

The research questions addressed in Chapter 3 are as follows:

1. *According to student counsellors and tutors, what factors should inform secondary school students' study profile choices?*
2. *Into which types can student counsellors and tutors be categorised?*
3. *According to counsellors and tutors, which factors should secondary school students consider when choosing their study profiles in a forced-choice situation?*

In semi-structured interviews, 70 educational professionals were asked what they considered to be strong and weak arguments for making a given study profile choice. They were further asked how they would respond to four dilemmas concerning the role of students' interests, abilities, and future usefulness in study profile choices.



Chapter 4 concerns the views of tutors and counsellors regarding the various profiles. It begins with a description of how educational professionals throughout the world perceive different subjects and tertiary study programmes. In particular, although gendered stereotypes have not been identified in all studies, gender stereotypes relating to STEM fields have been well documented (e.g., Nathan et al., 2010; Nürnberger et al., 2016), and language learning tends to be largely associated with the abilities and interests of girls (e.g., de Kraker-Pauw et al., 2016; Li et al., 2021). The ways in which Dutch educational professionals perceive the various subjects and study profiles have yet to be mapped. To this end, Chapter 4 addresses the following research question: *What are the views of secondary school counsellors and tutors on the different study profiles, and to what extent do these views reveal gendered stereotypes?* Semi-structured interviews were held with 45 student counsellors and tutors. They were asked what they tell their students about the four study profiles. In addition, all quotations on the four study profiles were analysed to determine which subjects and higher education programmes the tutors and counsellors relate to the profiles, as well as their perceptions of the relative difficulty and status of the profiles.

In Chapter 5, the focus shifts from the perspectives of professionals to those of students. It begins with an explanation of prior studies on the experiences of students with career guidance. The literature seems to suggest that students perceive more active components of career guidance as especially useful. Examples of these components include sample classes (van Langen & Vierke, 2009), career days (Welde et al., 2015), career fairs (Payne & Sumter, 2005), campus visits, and open days (Wiese et al., 2009). According to one study, Dutch students in the senior general and pre-university tracks identify guidance conversations with counsellors and tutors as having had the greatest impact on their subject choices (van Langen & Vierke, 2009). The exact content of these activities is not known. In addition, the studies cited here are relatively old, and they therefore do not reflect the experiences of current students with career guidance in secondary education. The research question addressed in Chapter 5 is as follows: *How do students experience career guidance in secondary education?* The mixed-method design included a questionnaire completed by 817 students and semi-structured interviews held with 112 students. The questionnaires explored the students' perceptions of whether the career guidance provided had helped them in the process of choosing their study profiles. The interviews examined their experiences with five commonly provided guidance activities: career conversations with (a) school counsellors 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 counsellors. The interviews also addressed the content of these activities, their consequences for the choices, choice processes, and perceptions of

students concerning particular subjects and study profiles, and any suggestions the students had for improving career activities.

Data and Research Design

To conclude this introductory chapter, this section provides information on the participating schools, as well as an overview of the research design and all data collected for the studies presented throughout the thesis. Table 1.4 presents a description of the topics addressed and number of participants involved in the various studies (and thus chapters). Additional details are provided in the Methods sections of Chapters 2–5.

In the current study, 14 schools participated. In our sample, the average number of students in each school was somewhat lower ($M = 1,213$, $SD = 481$) than in Dutch secondary schools in general ($M = 1,501$, $SD = 1,145$). In addition, 12 participating schools were located in the three northern provinces of the Netherlands. Of the 14 schools in our sample, 11 (73.3%) were located in highly urbanised municipalities, with one located in a moderately urbanised municipality and three in slightly urbanised municipalities. In contrast, of all schools in the Netherlands, 63% are located in (highly) urbanised municipalities. Regarding denomination, six of the participating schools were public, six were Protestant Christian, one was Catholic, one was general particular (in Dutch: *algemeen bijzonder*), and one was a combination of two denominations. Of all Dutch secondary schools, 29% are public, 18% are Protestant Christian, 22% are Catholic, 8% are collaborations between the latter two, 15% are general particular, and 0.1% are of another denomination. Our sample thus consisted of slightly smaller schools, with an over-representation of schools in urbanised areas and of public schools.

Semi-structured interviews with 70 educational professionals were held from January 2019 to September 2020. The participants included 38 tutors, 29 counsellors, a teaching assistant, an educational developer, and a student affairs coordinator from 14 Dutch secondary schools (Table 1.4). The participating schools all contained at least two tracks of education to enable us, within the Flow-VO research project, to also investigate the flow of students between tracks. In most schools, all counsellors and one tutor from each track participated. In two schools, the basic and middle-management tracks were combined into a single track, so there was only one tutor for these tracks.

Vignettes were presented to a sub-sample of 28 counsellors and tutors. These vignettes were very short stories describing fictitious students in the 2nd year (for



the pre-vocational tracks) or the 3rd year (for the senior general and pre-university tracks) – depending on the level taught by the participant – who were seeking advice on their study profile choices (Chapter 2). Further, all 70 participants were asked what they regarded as strong and weak arguments for making a study profile choice. They were also presented with four dilemmas concerning the interests and abilities of students (Chapter 3). A sub-sample of 45 counsellors and tutors were asked what they tell their students about the four study profiles (Chapter 4). For this study, we also analysed all quotations from the interviews having to do with study profiles. Several other topics were discussed in the interviews as well, including activities focusing on study profile choices, the roles that the participants played in these activities, and possible combinations of subjects and study profiles.

Semi-structured group interviews were held with 112 students from all tracks of 14 Dutch secondary schools (Chapter 5). Three students were in the basic pre-vocational track, and five were following a combination of the basic and middle-management tracks. In addition, 18 students were in the theoretical track of pre-vocational education, 32 were in the senior general track, and 54 were in the pre-university track, including grammar school (in Dutch: *gymnasium*). All students were asked about all study profile guidance activities offered by their schools (e.g., conversations with tutors, recommendations of subject teachers, and profile-choice tests). Other interview questions included perceived reasons for making study profile choices, perceptions of the content of the study profiles, and the students' own study profile and subject choices (either actual or intended).

Table 1.4 Topic and number of participants involved in each thesis chapter

Chapter	Topic	Number of participants
2	Study profile recommendations made by school counsellors and tutors for fictitious students	28
3	Views of school counsellors and tutors concerning arguments for making a study profile choice	70
4	Views of school counsellors and tutors concerning the various study profiles	45
5	Student experiences with study profile guidance	112 interview participants, 817 questionnaire respondents

All participating schools provided several career guidance activities to help students with their profile and subject choices (Table 1.5). In all schools, subject teachers provided information about their subjects in upper-level education. They also provided students with subject recommendations. Schools used a variety of

systems for this purpose. They gave students negative, conditional, or positive recommendations regarding one subject, all profile subjects, or all subjects. Moreover, students from all participating schools could request a meeting with the tutor and counsellor. In some schools, these conversations were mandatory (see also Chapter 5). Chapter 5 provides a description of the content of and student experiences with study profile guidance activities in relation to school counsellors, tutors, and teachers.

Table 1.5 Study profile guidance activities offered at the participating schools

Guidance activity	Number of schools (N = 14)
Subject information provided by subject teachers	14
Subject recommendations provided by subject teachers	14
Conversation with tutor	Mandatory in 9 schools, possible in 14
Conversation with school counsellor	Mandatory in 3 schools, possible in 14
Career-choice programmes (e.g., DeDecaan, Qompas, Droomloopbaan, Yubu, or self-designed programme)	13
Classroom information by school counsellor	13
Career-choice test or games	10
Information provided by institutions of vocational and higher education	9
Profile and subject choice form	9
Information booklets and guides, including booklet on entry requirements for higher education	8
Internship or shadow days	7
Career choice day(s) or week	4
Profile-choice motivation letter	2
Theatre skit on career choices	2
Conversation with subject teacher	2 schools, not mandatory
Conversation with parent(s), tutor, student	2

