
SOCIAL MEDIA: NO SECRET WEAPON FOR PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL CHOICES WITH FAVORABLE LABOUR MARKET PROSPECTS

Summary, conclusions and policy recommendations¹

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¹ This summary relates to the final report of a research project on promoting educational choices for programs with good labour market prospects among secondary school students and examines the role of social media in this process. This project was made possible with the support of *Instituut Gak*. See also: <https://www.instituutgak.nl/onderzoek/onderzoeken/beinvloeding-kansrijke-studiekeuzes-door-leerlingen/>

S1. INTRODUCTION, CENTRAL QUESTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The mismatch between labour demand and supply results in labour market shortages across different fields, such as technology, healthcare, and education. Excess demand leads to staff shortages, which in turn cause production delays and hinder economic growth. Major societal needs, including the rising demand for healthcare and the energy transition, may therefore come under pressure. Thus, improving the match between education and the labour market is crucial. This requires insight into how students make educational choices and how these processes may be influenced, so that more students opt for programs with strong labour market prospects. Given that social media are an integral part of students' lives and may play an important role in educational decision-making, this study pays particular attention to the role of social media in this process.

The central question of this study is:

How can the study choices of students aged 14 to 19 be influenced so that they are more likely to opt for programs with better labour market prospects, and in particular: what role can social media play in this?

The underlying research questions are:

1. What study choices do students aged 14 to 19 in secondary education make?
2. Which factors, particularly those that can be affected by policy instruments, influence these study choices?
3. What role do social media play in the decision-making process of students? How could social media be leveraged to promote choices for programs with strong labour market prospects?
4. How can different stakeholders—such as schools, businesses, and government—affect the decision-making process?
5. What (potential) drawbacks are associated with stimulating study choices oriented towards favorable labour market outcomes?

S2. RESEARCH APPROACH

To answer these questions, the following research activities were conducted:

1. Using meso-level data to map developments in student transition flows during secondary education and into further and higher education, to identify which transitions are relevant for entry into programs with favorable labour market prospects, and how these transition flows have evolved over time.
2. A review of existing national and international literature on policy initiatives aimed at influencing educational choices, and evidence on their outcomes.
3. An online survey among marketing managers and education managers at senior secondary vocational education colleges (*mbo*) and universities of applied sciences (*hbo*) on the use of social media.
4. Four focus groups in which first-year *mbo*- and *hbo*-students reflected on their decision-making process and the role of social media.
5. Two workshops with policy, education, and business experts to discuss preliminary findings and possible policy options.
6. Presentation and discussion of the main findings at a dedicated conference on the match between education and the labour market, organized by Instituut Gak in late 2024.

The first two activities were discussed in a first interim report², while the third and fourth were addressed in a second interim report³. The final report integrates the key findings from these earlier stages and presents possible policy options. It also considers potential side effects of the proposed measures⁴.

The main findings are presented below, structured according to the research questions, followed by a concluding section.

S3. FINDINGS

What educational choices do students aged 14 to 19 make?

- The distribution of enrollments in senior secondary vocational education (*mbo*) and higher education (*ho*) programs across fields of study has remained fairly stable over time. No clear shifts are visible towards fields with better labour market prospects, particularly not towards technology. In *mbo* however, healthcare and welfare programs have seen a modest increase in enrollments in recent years.
- Students in the upper grades of secondary education already begin to specialize to some extent through so-called subject profiles. A transition from secondary education to technology-oriented further and higher education is strongly shaped by students' subject profile selection in secondary education. This phenomenon is less pronounced for healthcare and welfare programs. Students with an economics profile in secondary education are more likely to switch to healthcare and welfare programs in further and higher education pathways than to technology-oriented fields. Since its introduction in 2007, the "Services and Products, *D&P*" profile in pre-vocational secondary education (*vmbo*) has become highly popular. Despite its broad orientation, students from this track are more likely to pursue healthcare or economics programs in further education rather than programs in technology.

Which factors, particularly those subject to policy instruments, influence these choices?

- Educational decision-making is a complex process shaped by various factors, including personal characteristics, interests and abilities, parents, teachers, peers, features of both secondary and tertiary institutions, communication channels, program availability and quality, and financial considerations.

² Arie Gelderblom, Daniël Bos, Fabian Dekker, Yvonne Prince and Arie-Jan van der Toorn (2024), *Keuzeprocessen door leerlingen in het voortgezet onderwijs (career decision-making processes in secondary education)*, Rotterdam: SEOR. See <https://www.instituutgak.nl/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Deelrapport-1-Keuzeprocessen-door-leerlingen-in-het-voortgezet-onderwijs.pdf>

³ Fabian Dekker, Daniël Bos, Yvonne Prince, Arie Gelderblom and Arie-Jan van der Toorn (2024), *Sociale media: de inzet door mbo- en hbo-instellingen en (mogelijk) gebruik door studenten bij hun studiekeuze (Social media: how applied sciences universities and vocational colleges use it, and how students may (potentially) use it in their study choice)*, Rotterdam: SEOR. See <https://www.instituutgak.nl/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Def-Deelrapport-2-Potentieel-gebruik-van-sociale-media-bij-kansrijke-studiekeuzes.pdf>

⁴ Arie Gelderblom, Fabian Dekker, Yvonne Prince and Arie-Jan van der Toorn (2025), *Sociale media: geen geheim wapen voor kansrijke studiekeuzes. Syntheserapport en beleidsopties in het kader van het project: Kansrijke studiekeuzes door vo-leerlingen en de rol van sociale media daarbij. (Social Media: No Silver Bullet for Promoting Educational Choices with Favorable Labour Market Prospects. Synthesis report and policy options in the framework of the research project: Promoting educational choices for programs with good labour market prospects by secondary education students and the role of social media in this process.* Rotterdam: SEOR. See also: <https://www.instituutgak.nl/onderzoek/onderzoeken/beinvloeding-kansrijke-studiekeuzes-door-leerlingen/>

- Existing studies identify several policy instruments for influencing study choices: labour market information, counseling, role models, company visits and internships, parental interventions, tuition fee differentiation, *numerus fixus*, and other forms of program regulation.
- Evidence indicates that some of these instruments—particularly labour market information, role models, *numerus fixus*, and parental interventions—have measurable effects. For others, evidence is limited or effects are minimal.

Important caveats include:

- o The availability and robustness of empirical evidence vary widely. While labour market information has been studied relatively extensively, many interventions remain underexplored, and few studies use control group designs to establish robust effects.
- o The size of effects differs considerably, even among similar interventions. Many observed effects are modest. The quality of implementation appears to strongly influence outcomes (e.g., how labour market information is presented).
- o Much of the available evidence comes from international contexts, raising uncertainty about applicability to the Dutch system. Moreover, many international studies focus primarily on universities rather than on other education levels such as *mbo* and *hbo*.

What role do social media play in students' decision-making?

Existing literature offers little insight into the role of social media in educational choices, particularly in *mbo* and *hbo* contexts. Research has mainly addressed social media's influence on the choice of higher education institutions, often in academic education. This study therefore conducted fieldwork to explore the topic through an online survey of *mbo* and *hbo* managers and focus groups with first-year students.

Survey findings among managers:

- Almost all institutions use social media to reach potential students, with Instagram being the most widely used platform.
- Opinions differ on social media's effectiveness. Some consider it an important channel, while others believe students rarely follow institutional accounts. Several institutions involve current or former students in creating social media content. Some also target parents.
- Labour market shortages have little impact on institutions' social media strategies. Instead, content mainly focuses on generating enthusiasm and providing information about programs and open days, with limited attention to labour market prospects. Institutions generally do not choose to focus their social media efforts primarily on programs with strong labour market prospects.

Focus group findings with students:

- Students' educational choices are primarily shaped by personal interests and social networks. Labour market considerations, such as salary, are acknowledged but play a minor role, partly due to limited access to clear information.
- Traditional channels, such as open days and websites, remain more influential than social media. Social media are often seen as part of students' private lives, used at most in later stages for confirmation of a choice. Students stress that content should be authentic and realistic, ideally featuring older students or alumni rather than influencers.
- Students believe educational choices should remain as free as possible, with realistic information playing only a supportive role.

Overall, fieldwork suggests that social media are barely used to promote choices for programs with better labour market prospects. Institutions do not prioritize this, and students do not expect it. Similar findings are

reported in ongoing ROA research on *mbo* students' decision-making. In this study, social media play only a limited role in young people's considerations when choosing study programs⁵.

S4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

How can stakeholders influence educational choices, and how could social media contribute?

- Fieldwork indicates that social media currently play only a limited role in shaping educational choices towards programs with better labour market prospects, and neither institutions nor students view expanded use in this context as obvious. Strong reliance on social media for this purpose is therefore not advisable.
- However, the type of content of social media (short, engaging, and realistic videos) could highlight programs and professions with good labour market prospects in contexts where educational choices are indeed an issue. These include contexts such as career guidance (*LOB*) in schools and on specific websites to facilitate educational choices like [Studiekeuze123](#) and [Kiesmbo](#). Further research is needed on how to design such materials effectively and how to incorporate labour market information in accessible ways. Tailoring content to different audiences (students, parents, mentors (guidance counselors)) is crucial, and user testing is recommended. Institutions such as *SBB*⁶ and the *LCSK*⁷ could take a leading role here.
- Career guidance (*LOB*) helps students align their interests, abilities, and motivations with study and career paths. Explicitly integrating labour market opportunities into counseling conversations and parental involvement is important, as misconceptions are common. Educational programs and professions with good labour market prospects should receive attention during exploratory activities. (More) attention within career guidance (*LOB*) to programs and professions with better labour market prospects is primarily a responsibility of individual educational institutions. However, they should be supported in this, for example through specific attention to such choices and labour market information within career guidance materials and through assistance from organizations such as the *LOB Expertise Center*, *SBB*, or other external labour market experts, as well as via connections with regional businesses. These forms of support are increasingly available, but they remain a point of concern—also for schools themselves in terms of making effective use of them.
- Policy options that rely on financial incentives for students (such as differentiated tuition fees) are less advisable. The literature shows that their effects are often limited, particularly when certain preconditions—such as sufficient awareness—are not met.
- Supply-side measures likewise call for considerable caution. Instruments such as a *numerus fixus* can be effective but entail various side effects (see Section 5 below). Moreover, defining appropriate criteria for their application is highly complex.
- Other policy options involve implementing systemic changes in education. Here, caution is of course even more critical. Nonetheless, we wish to emphasize their relevance, as it is important that the structure of the education system does not create unnecessary barriers to entering programs with strong labour market prospects. This implies, for example, that:
 - o Pre-vocational secondary education (*vmbo*) students should not be prevented from choosing a technical subject profile simply because their school does not offer one.

⁵ This concerns an ongoing study by ROA, of which Didier Fouarge presented preliminary findings at the conference 'The match between education and the labour market: room for improvement?!' organized by *Instituut Gak* in Amsterdam on December 3, 2024. The report of this study will be published at the end of 2025. See: <https://www.instituutgak.nl/onderzoek/onderzoeken/kansrijk-kiezen-overwegingen-van-jongeren-bij-hun-studiekeuze/>

⁶ Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education and Training and the Labour Market.

⁷ National Center for Study Selection.

- Students from other subject profiles than technical profiles should have easier routes into technical programs in vocational or higher education, for instance through greater opportunities to take technical or STEM-oriented electives.
- Orientation tracks in senior secondary vocational education (*mbo*) should devote specific attention to programs with strong labour market prospects. Young people can enter such orientation tracks if they are still uncertain about which program to pursue.
- Vertical progression within the education system (“stacking qualifications”⁸) should remain possible. Stacking qualifications provides a route to better opportunities by allowing students to attain a higher level of education, which often leads to stronger labour market outcomes. Within the current system, stacking qualifications thus plays an important role in ensuring alignment with the labour market. Ideally, however, the education system would be structured in such a way that stacking becomes less necessary. If secondary school students are required to make choices about their educational level at a slightly later age, their interests and abilities will already be more clearly developed, and their decisions more durable.
- Policy advice on the structure of education—for instance from the *SER*⁹ and the *Onderwijsraad*¹⁰—should not only consider the implications of proposed changes for differentiation by level, but also explicitly address their implications for differentiation by field of study, such as subject profiles in secondary education. Currently, this receives only limited attention.

S5. SIDE EFFECTS

What potential drawbacks are associated with promoting educational choices with strong labour market prospects?

Encouraging secondary school students to choose educational pathways with strong labour market prospects may also entail adverse side effects:

- A potential risk is that students who are steered too strongly towards programs with favorable labour market outcomes, but who lack strong intrinsic motivation or sufficient aptitude, may be more likely to drop out or switch programs more frequently. Empirically, however, there is little evidence that such mechanisms are currently occurring.
- If financial incentives were introduced whereby educational institutions were rewarded for the labour market outcomes of their graduates, this could result in more targeted recruitment of “high-potential” students, as their likelihood of labour market success would be higher. Other objectives of vocational and higher education could then recede into the background, such as providing as many students as possible with a qualification and preventing early school leaving and dropout. Moreover, developing clear and suitable indicators for labour market success is highly complex.
- In the case of stronger central regulation of program offerings (for instance through a *numerus fixus*, or by withholding permission for institutions to offer a given program), it is difficult to apply robust criteria. Programs with weaker labour market performance could still serve as stepping stones for students to progress to higher levels of education, which do provide better prospects. Furthermore, some programs may only offer weaker prospects temporarily, for example due to economic cycles. It should be noted, however, that differences in labour market prospects across various programs have been present for a considerable period. Shortages in technical fields and healthcare have persisted for some time. Given demographic ageing, labour shortages in healthcare in particular are expected

⁸ the Dutch practice of sequentially progressing through multiple levels of education.

⁹ Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands.

¹⁰ Education Council of the Netherlands.

to remain structural. The argument that shortage sectors fluctuate too strongly over time to warrant targeted policy therefore does not hold for these sectors.

For the time being, there is little evidence within the current policy context of large-scale adverse side effects from promoting educational choices with strong labour market prospects. Either such side effects are limited, or the instruments with which they are associated have not been implemented extensively. In evaluating the effects of (new) policy, these potential side effects nevertheless warrant careful attention. Such evaluations can be conducted through small-scale experiments, which can then be scaled up if they prove successful. It should be noted that even relatively small positive effects may already be sufficient to offset the costs of a measure.

S6. CONCLUSION

This study shows that social media play only a marginal role in promoting educational choices with strong labour market prospects. Vocational colleges and universities of applied sciences primarily use social media to build visibility among prospective students. For students, social media belong largely to their private domain and are used only occasionally to confirm choices already made. Both institutions and students consider it unlikely that social media will become a key tool for promoting study choices with good labour market prospects.

However, social media features—for example short, appealing, and realistic videos—may serve to highlight educational programs and occupations with strong labour market prospects in contexts where educational choices are indeed an issue, such as career guidance lessons or specific websites. It is important that such videos also incorporate labour market information presented in a form and style accessible to the target audiences. Senior students and alumni can serve as role models in these videos as well. Parents are likewise an important target group for such videos and labour market information, as they play a key role in the study choice process.