

Do parents of intending 'first generation' students in higher education differ in their need for school support to help their child's career development?

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About 40% of the first-year enrolment in Dutch higher education (HE) are 'first-generation' HE students. Career education and guidance (CEG) can make a difference for their parents who have not experienced HE themselves. This article reports on the outcomes of a research project which explores the impacts of a school-initiated career intervention for parents, both those with and without HE qualifications. The results for parents without HE qualifications showed different patterns in their knowledge, self-efficacy and role definition.



Introduction

Participation in Dutch HE has grown in recent decades. In 2012, 34.4% of 25-64-year-olds were tertiary-educated compared with 30.8% in 2000 (OECD, 2015: 34). In 2013, the Netherlands surpassed the European benchmark of 40% of tertiary graduates in the 30-40 age bracket with 43.1% (European Commission, 2014: 2) which was forecast to rise to 45% in 2020 (Neth-ER, 2013).

Around 40% of those entering HE are 'first-generation', defined as 'a student with neither parent having HE' (Van den Broek *et al.*, 2016: 48 and 3). These students find it harder to talk about their study with their parent(s) and experience less support than those whose parents have attended HE (Nooijens, Rietdijk and Wijngaarden-de Meij, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). This finding raises the question as to whether the parents

of 'first-generation' HE students need more or different support in CEG from their child's secondary school in comparison with parents who have attained HE qualifications. CEG can play a specific role for 'first-generation' HE students and their parents in compensating for the lack of knowledge, skills and network contacts (Sweet and Watts, 2006).

Around the world, schools provide general, non-personalised, information-centred career interventions targeted at parents. It is less common for schools to provide career interventions that go beyond informing or which involve parents and/or communities (Oomen, 2016).

The career intervention

In 2012, I led a research and development project, funded by the Ministry of Education, to involve parents in CEG in six Dutch senior general secondary schools (HAVO). Pairs of parent(s) and child volunteered for four successive monthly sessions (ten hours in total), which took place in the school after classes, between September and December. Three schools delivered the intervention in the third year ($n = 92$) while preparing 14-16-year-olds for subject choices. The other three schools delivered the intervention in the fifth and final year ($n = 83$) while preparing 16-18-year-olds to choose HE options.

Based on a needs assessment among parents, objectives were set for the career intervention which aimed to support parents to facilitate their children's career building by helping them to be (A) up-to-date

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and well-informed about educational possibilities and their financial consequences, the labour market and the use of information resources; and (B) able to make considered career decisions with their child.

Table 1 provides an overview of the programme designed together with the career teachers of the six schools who delivered it with the support of tutors, teachers and heads of department.

The programme was designed as a learning activity for parents interacting with their child. Its pedagogy involved engaging participants actively in contributing

to the learning experience, and ensuring 'relevance' by providing participants with the opportunity to use and apply their insights 'on the spot' (Kirkpatrick Partners, 2009, 2015). Small group discussion alternated with selected plenary sharing of experiences and with opportunities for parents to work directly with their child. The physical presence of both parent(s) and the child facilitated family-learning. Parents as well as senior students from upper secondary and first-year HE alumni students served as role-models. These multiple resources, reflecting the diverse nature of the wider school-community, 'realised' community-interaction (Law, 1981).

Table 1: Overview of the career intervention's programme

Session	Focus
1	How the needs analysis outcomes have informed the design of the sessions; The role(s) parents perceive for school staff in CEG and vice versa; The school's aim and activities in CEG in general and this year; Do's and don'ts for parents in talking with their child and practising simple steps to initiate a conversation.
2	The non-linear nature of career development; Speed dating activity with parent answering the questions of students about their career development; Exploring in-depth the child's strengths and interests; Reliable tests and how to discuss test results.
3	Dilemmas in career choice making; Current information: upcoming choices, trends in HE enrolment/access; Experience-sharing by older students about career-decision-making; Comparing and using career exploration websites.
4	Study costs and (financial) issues related to HE study; Provisional study choices by students; Drafting a plan of follow-up steps.



Methodology

The opportunity sample consisted of parents, with differing HE level attainment (Table 3), who voluntarily registered to take part with their child.

Quantitative data were collected through an on-line questionnaire before (June 2012), immediately after (January 2013) and six months after the career intervention (June 2013), measuring the same concepts across time (Table 2). Respondents were asked how far they agreed with the items using a 5-point Likert scale. A total of 259 respondents from the third year took part and 213 respondents from the fifth year.

Table 2: Sample items in questionnaire

Concepts	No. of items	Example of item
Information level	five	'Currently, I understand my child's perspective on the labour market sufficiently.'
Information needs	five	'Currently, I need information on personal support in the career orientation of my child.'
information self-efficacy	four	'In the spring, I will be sufficiently able to work with my child on a considered cluster/HE course choice.'
Guidance and support needs	six	'Currently, I need support in stimulating my child to think about educational, vocational and career choices.'
Guidance and support self-efficacy	six	'In the spring, I will be sufficiently able to perform career interviews with my child.'
Parental role definition	five	'I stimulate my child to think about his/her own future.'
Parental statements	four	'I would steer my child to other thoughts if I dislike a cluster, study or profession'

Quantitative analyses were carried out using the Mann-Whitney test to investigate whether there was a discernible difference in each of the third and fifth years between each of the three measurements, with hypotheses related to the career intervention's objectives (A) and (B) above. To understand whether the impact of the career intervention differed for 'first-generation' HE parents, the responses were analysed by groups of parents involved in the career intervention (i) who had both attained HE qualifications ('both HE'), compared to parents (ii) where one of each ('one HE') or (iii) none of the

parents had attained HE qualifications ('no HE'). For this, the Kruskal-Wallis test was applied.

Semi-structured interviews with 27 parents took place immediately after the career intervention and six months later. These were recorded, transcribed and analysed with a grounded theory approach: manual coding, categories/thematic analysis, pattern identification, followed by interpretation.

One year after the career intervention (January 2013), an evaluative, on-line questionnaire with open

questions was filled out by 79 respondents: 49 from the third year and 30 from the fifth year.

Results

Parents involved in the career intervention improved their capacity to support their child's career development in the areas of broader knowledge of present and future possibilities, more self-confidence in being able to provide help and support to their child which pointed to enhanced parental self-efficacy (cf. Bandura, 1986) and a better understanding of their parental role. A stronger parent-child bond was reported one year later as well as lasting behavioural outcomes for the parents. Parents were coaching their child and encouraging and appreciating their child's own initiative.

Involved parents for the third and fifth year – at intervention and post-intervention – showed different HE qualification attainments levels (Table 3).

Table 3: Involved parent's HE qualification attainment in third and fifth year

	Total	Both HE		One HE		No HE	
	n	n	%	n	%	n	%
Third year	115	60	52.2	35	30.4	20	17.4
Fifth year	95	23	24.2	30	31.6	42	44.2

Both HE

The impact of the career intervention showed up least with 'both HE' parents. Only the third-year parents increased their information level and decreased their information, guidance and support needs. In both years, their self-efficacy in knowing enough, providing guidance and support to their child's career development did not change: it was there all the time. The career intervention made the difference in that the third-year parents had 'a boost' in their information level, and all 'both HE' parents' raised their 'awareness of the strengths and weaknesses' of their child.

One HE

'One HE' parents experienced an increase in their levels of information, a decrease in their information, guidance and support needs and increased their self-efficacy in making use of information, guidance and support tools to help in their child's career development. Fifth-year parents also were less likely to want to 'steer' their children's career. However, 'one HE' third-year parents showed a fluctuating parental self-efficacy. After the career intervention, they felt more able to make use of information, guidance and support tools, but six months later, compared to their rating immediately after the career intervention, they felt significantly less confident in their knowledge and ability to support their child's career development. These parents may have become less sure following the actual cluster choice making which took place a few months after the career intervention.

No HE

The parents of 'first-generation' HE students in both years increased their information level, yet with differing patterns. In contrast with third-year parents, fifth-year parents decreased their information, guidance and support needs and increased their knowledge and ability to support their child. They also gained confidence in themselves and in their child, the latter not being there before the career-intervention.

The importance of this finding is that the nature of parental involvement that is most beneficial to their child is expressing confidence, providing guidance and supporting autonomy (Carter, 2002: 3), which leads to the development of self-directed career exploration by students (Bryant, Zvonkovic and Reynolds, 2006).

The needs of 'no HE' third-year parents in both information as well as guidance and support, persisted and the evidence points to the likelihood that these parents still felt that they did not 'have' all the information, skills or tools that they perceived they needed to help their child or to make an informed decision with their child.

Parental role perception

No differences were found for any of the groups across the three measurements relating to role definition, i.e. parents' beliefs about what they are

supposed to do and their behaviour that follow those beliefs in relation to their children's career development. 'Role definitions are complexly shaped by family and cultural experiences...Subcultural differences (in terms of socio-economic class) are also evident' (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003: 46).

Differences in perspectives of the three groups on role perception showed on the parental statements. After being involved in the career intervention, 'one HE' third-year parents showed a decline in their support of the statement 'I would steer my child to other thoughts if I dislike a cluster, study or profession', revealing a rethinking of their view on influencing their child, while 'one HE' fifth-year parents increased their self-confidence: 'I am sufficiently able to support my child in his or her cluster/study choice'.

The parental statement showing the most significant differences was 'I am aware what are the strengths and weaknesses of my child' among two groups, six months after the career intervention. 'Both HE' parents showed a medium to large increase in their support of this statement, while 'no HE' fifth-year parents showed a medium increase.

The differences on the parental statements found before the career intervention between parents of 'first-generation' HE students are remarkable when compared to parents who were 'both HE qualified', supporting the previously mentioned finding of subcultural differences in parental role definition.



Differences of group on value

Differences between the three groups on value are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Significant differences of group on value

Both HE	One HE	No HE
		Pre-intervention
		Third-year parents showed a lower mean rank ($r=.20^*$) compared with 'both HE' for the statement 'I am aware what are the strengths and weaknesses of my child'.
		Fifth-year parents showed a lower mean rank ($r=.23^*$) compared with 'both HE' for the statement 'I wonder sometimes if my child has enough general knowledge and experience to make an appropriate cluster/study selection'.
	Intervention	Intervention
	Fifth-year parents showed a lower mean rank in guidance and support needs ($r=.36^{**}$) compared to 'no HE' parents.	Third-year parents showed a higher mean rank ($r=.31^{**}$) in information needs compared to 'both HE'.
		Third-year parents showed a lower mean rank in self-efficacy in knowing enough compared to 'one HE' ($r=.33^*$).
	Six months after intervention	
	Third-year parents showed a lower mean rank in self-efficacy in knowing enough compared to 'both HE' ($r=.40^*$).	

* = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$

Discussion and conclusions

The educational level of parents/mothers has been found to influence the extent of parental involvement in general (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003: 3). But having attained HE qualifications themselves seems not only to influence whether or not parents are involved in this career intervention, but also when they are involved. The imbalance in 'no HE' parents' participation in the career intervention in the third versus fifth year points (Table 3) to the likelihood of these parents not being aware of the consequences of early educational choices on their child's career development.

The impact of the career intervention differed for cases where both, one or none of the parents were HE qualified. The evidence also points to the likelihood that class or cultural differences existed between groups of parents as shown in Table 4

The pattern of persistent information, guidance and support needs after being involved as 'one HE' or 'no HE' third-year parents is remarkable. It resembles findings in the Australian 'Parents as Career Transition Supports Programme', involving about a similar group of cases, and after which 32% of the participants involved still felt they did not know enough to help their child and 16% were not sure (Bedson and Perkins, 2006: 16). Similarly, the parents in my research also indicated that they enjoyed the sessions and that following them they knew much more and were better able to talk with their child.

These findings are consistent with wider research on educational inequalities explained by secondary effects of social origin. Secondary effects relate to parents' and students' educational decisions made in secondary education (Boudon, 1974). These are found differing across socio-economic status (SES) groups for which Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) proposed their Relative Risk Aversion theory, which Morgan (2005) combined with time-discounting preferences (i.e. horizon in making educational choices). Children from advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds make, on average, more ambitious educational choices. They aim to go on to HE, especially if their parents did so, even if their actual educational attainment is modest and there is a risk of failure in HE. They tend to end up with higher levels

of attainment, but they and their parents tend also to look at the whole future educational and work-career that follows.

In contrast, children with the same level of school attainment but from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds will be less motivated to take such risks. Short-term motivations and current academic performance dominate their educational choices. These students and their parents are more averse to choosing an academically challenging track, tend to over-estimate what is required, and so may not pursue quite realistic goals (Goldthorpe, 2010: 10). Students' high time-discount rate (i.e. short-term horizon) is due to the pressure on students to leave school relatively early to contribute to family income or own earnings, related to the lower levels of economic resources in their families. Students from higher SES origin are less affected by risk aversion, due to a lower time-discount rate, i.e. a longer-term horizon (Breen, Van de Werfhorst and Jaeger, 2014: 266). These secondary effects are strong in the transition from Dutch secondary to HE, explaining for 81% to 94% the HE choice (Büchner and Van der Velden, 2013: 104).

If accepting this explanation for the patterns observed among third-year parents of whom one of each or neither attained HE qualifications, schools are advised to consider the following:

- To involve parents in CEG as early as possible. Third-year parents have the greatest information, guidance and support needs. The overall impact of the career intervention was higher for third-year parents, who were open to change aspects of their parental role perception, were talking more regularly with their child and were more confident in granting their child autonomy in decision making.
- Specific attention and effort are needed to involve 'one HE' or 'no HE' parents, as they seem less aware of the consequences of early choices in educational planning.
- In the career intervention's programme, the discussion should be opened up on the mechanisms of risk-aversion, time-discounting preferences and exploring related implicit assumptions of parents. Successful local

'models' of (parents of) 'first-generation' HE students could be brought deliberately into the career-intervention. Tutor-student-parents interviews seem necessary for parents where either only one or none attained HE qualifications.

- In the case of a large school population of 'one HE' or 'no HE' parents, a whole-school approach to parental involvement might be a sensible way forward. In contrast to the incidental career intervention in this research, the school should consider developing a comprehensive approach to engaging all staff, parents, students, staff, management and governing board. As Lusse (2013) discovered, the issue of career development appeared to be the most promising for the content of comprehensive parental involvement in secondary schools. She proposed three stages in this strategy: establishing contact; cooperating between school, parents and students; and supporting the career perspective of the student.



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