

EUROPEAN CASE STUDY

Careers guidance in German schools: recent reforms, best practice and lessons learned



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This case study is part of a series of analyses that are being conducted in 2015/16 on aspects of European skills issues and labour markets. These case studies will be compiled in a format that allows for cross-country comparisons to be made and lessons to be drawn for both policy and practice.

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ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

The JPMorgan Chase New Skills at Work programme aims to identify strategies and support solutions that help improve labour market infrastructure and develop the skilled workforce globally. The initiative brings together leading policymakers, academics, business leaders, educators, training providers and nonprofits with the goal of connecting labour market policy with practice, supply with demand and employers with the workforce – all to strengthen the global economy.

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1. Introduction

Today, German universities offer more than 7000 different bachelor degree courses, and there are 330 professions in which it is possible to take up vocational training (HRK 2015, BIBB 2015a). Working out which way to go after leaving school, therefore, is no easy task.

Despite the many possibilities, youths in Germany continue to experience significant difficulties during their journey from school to further education. On the one hand, a high number of youths face problems during the transition from school to post-secondary education: every year, 250,000 prospective apprentices fail to access initial vocational training (BIBB 2015a). On the other hand, among those who do access either higher or vocational education, attrition rates are high. According to data from the Federal Ministry for Education and Research, around 28 percent of all first-year university students drop out of their courses every year (BMBF 2014). In 2014 every fourth training contract was ended prematurely (BMBF 2015). A nationwide survey of students who opted out of their university studies revealed that a major reason for early termination is that students had the wrong expectations of their chosen discipline or course of study (HIS 2010). In vocational education, a study concerning prematurely ended training contracts reported that when asked about their reasons for dropping out, half the respondents said that the training programme was not the right choice for them (BIBB 2013). In addition to the problems that youths experience during the transition from school to post-secondary education, significantly low levels of social mobility have been documented. Looking at students who graduate from secondary school with a certificate to enter university, significant differences can be observed between those students who had at least one parent with a university degree and those students whose did not have a parent with a degree-level qualification. While 82 percent of the former go to university, only 65 percent of the latter do (AGBB 2014).

Careers guidance in schools has gained popularity as a remedy for these difficulties.¹ Politicians, business leaders and educators have urged the improvement of careers guidance activities provided in schools. They expect that this will contribute to a better transition from school to post-secondary education and, eventually, to a better integration of young individuals into the labour market. In fact, although careers

¹ The concept of careers guidance that we use in this article includes guidance and advice about university studies, not only the choice of profession or vocation. Even if pursued after vocational training, the choice of an academic degree is closely related to the transition to a profession and to the labour market.

guidance is not a silver bullet, the transition from secondary education to vocational training or university is key, since in Germany the risk of unemployment for young adults is three times higher for individuals without a vocational qualification than for those who have completed a vocational degree (BSt 2015a).

Yet German schools do not lack careers guidance activities – at least not in number. In fact, the last 10 years have seen an impressive growth in guidance activities taking place in schools throughout all federal states (Schröder 2015). It is, however, difficult to work out which initiatives are effective and which are not, since most of them lack continuity or a clear concept to guide their implementation. Making in-school careers guidance effective is more easily said than done.

2. Careers guidance in schools and the school-to-work transition

The Federal Institute for Vocational Training and Education defines careers guidance as a two-sided process: on the one hand, young individuals are looking for a career that interests and stimulates them and in which they can develop their competences and achieve their goals; on the other hand, the world of work entails a series of requirements and exigencies that young prospective workers must fulfil. Both sides must be regularly adjusted to each other. The purpose of careers guidance is therefore to help young individuals to cope with the transition from school through further education and into the labour market (BIBB 2015a).

Careers guidance helps students to estimate their abilities and interests, giving them a better sense of what they want to do and whether they have the skills necessary to do it. This guidance is important regardless of whether one plans to pursue university studies or vocational training. Furthermore, learning about different educational and professional pathways allows students to develop a concrete picture of their plans and aspirations. By providing early insight into the world of work, careers guidance encourages students to take responsibility for their own professional development (BSt et al 2015). This makes careers guidance a potentially powerful tool to alleviate the difficulties and obstacles that the school-to-work transition entails.

Although careers guidance is primarily concerned with improving young people's prospects, its benefits extend to employers and educational institutions as well, since they are adversely affected by the inefficient functioning of the school-to-work

transition. After all, better-informed students and apprentices are more likely to make good decisions, thereby entering careers that suit them and in which they can make worthy contributions. In Germany this is particularly important for youths who want to follow vocational training, since it is they who must take the initiative in the search for a training place (as opposed to other more centralised allocation systems). Furthermore, the transition from school to the working world plays a crucial role in the future of young individuals, and so one of the most important and central tasks of secondary schools is to foster a personalised process of vocational and academic guidance for each student, regardless of whether they want to pursue vocational or higher education after leaving school.

Phases of careers guidance

Most models of careers guidance distinguish between three phases: the orientation phase, the decision phase and the realisation phase (Figure 1). These three phases are valid for students who wish to pursue vocational training as well as for those interested in a university degree.

Phases of careers guidance

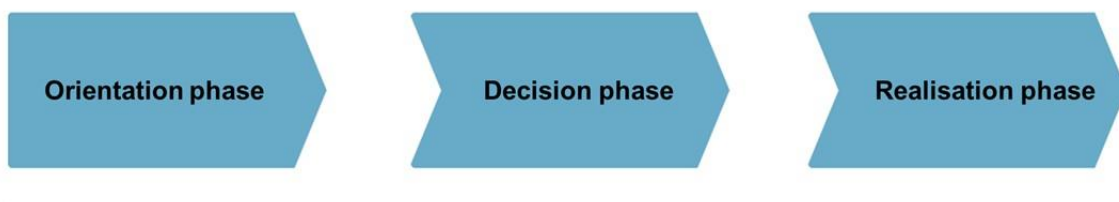


Figure 1: Phases of careers guidance. Source: BSt et al 2015, translation by the authors.

During the orientation phase, students acquire knowledge of different occupations and professional sectors. They learn about the demands and challenges of each profession and about the existing education and training that are offered. In addition, students learn about themselves, their goals, their capacities and their interests. In the decision phase students obtain practical experience, which helps them to decide which profession they wish to pursue, in addition to learning about alternative professions that they may also be interested in. The realisation phase includes the search for an adequate training place; the application process, which may entail some failed attempts; learning how to appear confident, for example during job interviews; gathering information about training contracts; and enrolling in a vocational school. These three phases are similar for students choosing a field of study at university. They show the overarching nature of the process of careers guidance, which encompasses the whole of secondary education but also the choices that are made

afterwards. It is therefore necessary to promote in-school careers guidance from an early age (BSt et al 2015).

Dimensions of careers guidance

In-school careers guidance should prepare young people to face the next steps in their professional lives after leaving school. It must therefore rest on an assessment both of students' abilities and interests and of the demands of the workplace. Careers guidance is thus often carried out not only in school but also outside it. Accordingly, guidance activities can generally be assigned to one of four different dimensions of careers guidance (BSt et al 2015):

1. in-class activities
2. extracurricular activities
3. cooperation between school and industry
4. cooperation between school and other partners.

In-class activities

Careers guidance is often considered to be an additional complement to the central mission of schools, and is seen as an extracurricular activity. Yet the classroom – the main 'business' setting of a school – is precisely the right place to foster careers guidance. Every subject can contribute to careers guidance: the writing abilities acquired during German class, for example, can very well be practised through the composition of motivation letters and application portfolios for an internship; while a mathematics lesson could be devoted to discussing the accounting of a company. In addition, in-class activities can include inviting experts to the classroom, or a research assignment where students present information about the three most popular subjects at university and in vocational training (BSt et al 2015).

Extracurricular activities

Various projects and measures can be undertaken outside the classroom to promote careers guidance. While still in the protective environment of the school and under the guidance of teachers, students can continue to acquire knowledge that relates to the working world, applying it in practical situations and gathering practical experience. One example of an extracurricular activity is a seminar on how to apply for a job. Another is setting up a student company within the school: students would run the company, being responsible for providing services or creating products under the supervision of their teachers. They could carry out various tasks, such as the recruitment of personnel, marketing or accounting (BSt et al 2015).

Cooperation between school and industry

Companies are extremely important partners in careers guidance for youths, since they are representatives and examples of the training and working world. Collaborating with companies allows students direct access to practical knowledge of different professions, their characteristic tasks and their everyday life. Students actively gather their own experiences in a professional context through internships or visits to a company, benefiting from the practical knowledge and experience offered by company representatives during school trips or events organised in their school. For their part, companies can get to know potential future trainees, and evaluate whether they will fit the company or not. Youths can evaluate and develop their perception of certain professions, and this could eventually lead to a lower dropout rate in vocational training and universities (BSt et al 2015).

Cooperation between school and other partners

The first and most important local cooperation partners for careers guidance are parents and legal guardians. Research has shown that parents have the largest influence on their children's career choices – even more than their peers. Experience suggests that parents need help from schools in order to better support their children's careers guidance process. One example of this dimension of careers guidance is the parent-student evening, which allows parents to be actively involved in careers guidance activities. Students invite their parents to spend an evening at their school, during which parents and students work together on various topics (related to careers guidance) that the students have previously dealt with in class.

It is also important for schools to seek the collaboration of regional public institutions such as employment agencies, universities, vocational schools and youth support services and associations. Developing a long-term relationship with a local university, for instance, can be very fruitful. One example of this kind of cooperation is the organisation of study information days or open days, during which universities present an overview of the courses they offer to secondary school students. Information displays and presentations can provide students with more detailed insight into a specific discipline or profession (BSt et al 2015).

Quality framework for in-school careers guidance

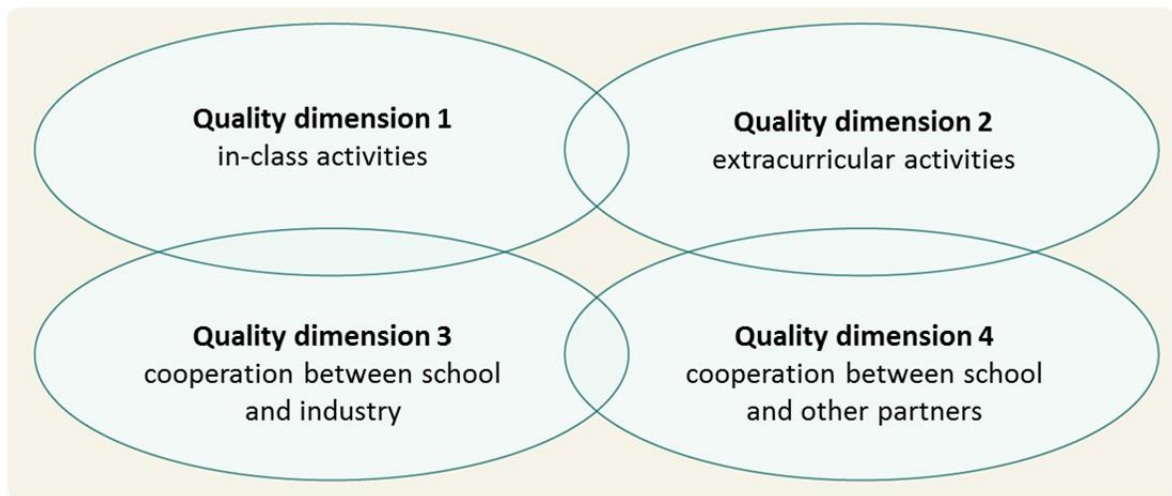


Figure 2: Quality framework for in-school careers guidance. Source: BSt et al 2015, translation by the authors.

Needless to say, these dimensions overlap, and many guidance activities can be assigned to several dimensions (Figure 2). Activities relating to application procedures, for example, can take place inside the classroom (such as by writing CVs and motivation letters during German class) as well as outside it (such as by simulating job interviews in role play during a project day). For careers guidance to succeed, activities relating to different dimensions must be integrated. The topics that students have worked on at a theoretical level in the classroom can be experienced in practice and in depth during an internship, for example. This allows students to be engaged with important aspects of careers guidance at different levels, and allows them to understand more clearly the connections between theory and practice (BSt et al 2015).

3. Careers guidance in German schools: federal level and state level

In Germany, as pointed out in the introduction, careers guidance is considered to play a significant role in helping students in the transition to post-secondary education. Diverse and numerous initiatives have taken place at both the federal and state levels. The number of careers guidance programmes and activities is staggering, and so even experts in the field find it difficult to make any kind of general statement about the current state of careers guidance in German schools. In fact, a quick glance at German schools shows a growing and wide range of careers guidance measures – such as

internships, student-run company projects and factory tours – and it is obvious that there is no shortage of concepts and projects. However, the lack of evaluation means that it remains unclear whether there are too many or too few programmes, and, more importantly, whether students are being adequately prepared to face the decisions about their future: are they receiving a solid introduction to the working world or are they simply following a chaotic compilation of random activities? This chapter aims to gather and systematise the current policy in and practice of careers guidance across Germany, at the federal as well as the state level.

Recent reforms and initiatives at the federal level

In Germany, education is a competence of each federal state. The federal government, therefore, lacks any kind of executive power over educational policymaking. Its engagement with careers guidance in schools is bound to national agreements, initiatives and programmes that encourage guidance measures without making them mandatory.

The Ministry for Education and Research and the Federal Employment Agency have encouraged careers guidance in schools through several framework agreements, such as the ‘School-Economy/Working World’ programme. Different initiatives fell within the framework of this programme, each one being concerned with individual aspects of careers guidance (analysis of students’ potential, giving out certificates of excellence for guidance programmes, and so on), yet none addressed the topic of careers guidance as a whole (Schröder 2015).

In addition to the many government initiatives, the so-called Netzwerk Berufswahl-SIEGEL (Network for the Careers Guidance Approval Certificate) has gained recognition as a certifier of careers guidance in schools. This network was born out of a pilot project launched in 2000 by the Bertelsmann Stiftung in the region of Eastern Westphalia/ Lippe and that sought to award certificates to schools that conduct high-quality careers guidance. Criteria include how the school handles industrial placements, its cooperation with local companies and its inclusion of career-oriented content in the curriculum. After the pilot phase, several towns and regions showed an interest in adopting this concept. In mid-2004, the Bertelsmann Stiftung decided to form the Network for the Careers Guidance Approval Certificate in order to secure the quality of careers guidance as the concept spread among schools throughout the country (BSt 2015b). Today, the Careers Guidance Approval Certificate is awarded in 27 regions in all 16 German states. A total of 54 sponsoring institutions conduct the

certification process in these localities. Among them are trade associations, chambers of commerce, school authorities, government ministries and local political institutions, as well as foundations and research institutes. So far, 1,463 schools have been awarded the certificate of approval. Around 500,000 students attend schools that have received this certificate. In 2010, 'SCHULEWIRTSCHAFT' (National Alliance for School and Business) assumed responsibility for the sponsorship and national coordination of the Careers Guidance (Netzwerk Berufswahl-SIEGEL 2015).

Germany is not the only country where the idea of a Career Advising Seal of Approval has taken hold: In 2006, the concept was adopted in Chile – in a cooperative effort involving the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (Association for Technical Cooperation, GTZ, now GIZ), and the Chilean Ministry of Education. (BSt 2015b)

However, as has already been mentioned, education is the responsibility of the state administrations, and so the federal government cannot pursue structural policies with regard to careers guidance. It can only promote such policies in the form of agreements and temporary initiatives such as those just described. Careers guidance practice ultimately depends on each school's resources and initiatives, rather than on federal or state policymaking. The frameworks laid by (state) governments are important and should strive to make careers guidance accessible in all regions and schools, but the success of careers guidance in schools depends heavily on each school's understanding of what it actually is – that is, on whether schools are able to design and implement consistent and effective guidance plans for their students.

Careers guidance practices at the state level

During the last 10 years there has indeed been a trend towards more careers guidance in all federal states, yet the form of these measures and their degree of implementation differ considerably between states and between schools. Gender-sensitive approaches, for example, are present in most states but are mandatory only in some. Certificates for good careers guidance programmes are also voluntary; that is, every school decides whether to apply for a certificate or not. Furthermore, contact with employers and real working life are dependent on the regional context. Finally, and most importantly, although most states describe careers guidance as a comprehensive task, its implementation in schools differs widely in terms of who is responsible (such as the school principal or a special coordinator). Developing an overarching vision of

careers guidance as part of each school's mission seems to be particularly difficult in the face of the many guidance activities that can be adopted (Schröder 2015).

As these examples show, the problem in Germany is not a lack of good ideas but rather the differences between schools in careers guidance activities, as well as the lack of coordination between the actors and stakeholders involved. The next chapter presents some recommendations and guidelines for the improvement of careers guidance in Germany.

4. Recommendations for in-school careers guidance policy and practice

Over the past 10 years political and economic actors have invested a considerable amount of resources in the development of careers guidance. The voluntary involvement of many other actors should not be underestimated, either. As the analysis of reforms and the current state of their adoption in the different states has underlined, a high number of reforms and programmes in careers guidance have been initiated. However, the extent to which these reforms point in the same direction is limited. At the same time, the high number of careers guidance activities on offer is a challenge to schools: they must choose adequate measures, integrate them into their vision of careers guidance – if they have one, that is – and interweave them with the regular curriculum.

Schools could therefore benefit from a more consistent, stable and quality-orientated system of careers guidance. Taking examples of successful practice into account, we have developed recommendations for improving careers guidance in Germany. We have grouped these recommendations into three areas of concern: the consistency and direction of careers guidance policies and programmes; the continuity and stability of programmes and the financial mechanisms that make them possible; and the evaluation and quality-management of careers guidance programmes. The goal of these recommendations is to increase the effectiveness of existing practices for the benefit of students.

More consistency and direction

The consistency of careers guidance practices and policies must be strengthened, both across states and within states, but also in schools. Increasing the consistency of careers guidance across states would make it easier to create support programmes

that benefit all states. Increasing the consistency of careers guidance within states would make it easier for schools to develop their own concept of careers guidance and to discern which of the many practices fits their students best. In addition, consistency at the school level could be increased by making careers guidance an integral part of a school's overall development plan; that is, by making careers guidance part of a school's vision. Finally, careers guidance should be intensified at the Gymnasium, the academic track within secondary education. To date, most careers guidance has been limited to the vocationally orientated tracks in secondary education. Yet a large number of young people pursue a university degree at some point after completing vocational training, thus combining vocational and higher education in their educational pathway. In addition, in Germany many apprenticeships require a university entrance qualification, meaning that their applicants will come from the general academic track in secondary education and not from the vocational track (the overwhelming majority of apprentices originally went through vocational tracks in middle school). Needless to say, it is of paramount importance to inform students in all secondary education tracks about the possibilities of access to university after vocational training. Vocational training should not limit career options – in fact, it can be a vehicle for enhancing social mobility.

More continuity and stability

Financing structures for careers guidance practices must be designed for long-term success. Schools experience difficulties in sustaining their careers guidance activities, because they must re-apply for different programmes every two years, which often leads to the interruption of programmes that are working well. Giving schools enough funding for careers guidance would facilitate schools' ability to sustain their programmes and activities over time. In this sense, it is also important that the cooperation with local and regional employers be maintained over time. Moreover, the continuity and stability of careers guidance practices in schools rely on collaboration between all levels. The high number of actors involved in careers guidance demands better coordination at the regional level as well as at the level of the state governments.

More quality-management and evaluation

The effectiveness of measures for careers guidance should be evaluated more carefully. It is important for both schools and governments that such measures be effective, especially in terms of the possibility of improving practices and the allocation of resources. In general, the effectiveness of careers guidance is concerned with individual students, that is, with the extent to which they choose a path that suits them

or not. Results are therefore difficult to translate into benefits for other actors. As with many other aspects of education, teachers play a crucial role in the effectiveness and quality of careers guidance practices. Beyond the structural changes that are required in state and federal policymaking, it is schools that are at the core of careers guidance. Schools are the ultimate and most decisive actors when it comes to the quality of careers guidance. In order to allow schools to provide their students with good careers guidance, it is crucial to embed careers guidance activities into a quality-management system. The next chapter describes how such a system might look.

5. Quality-management system for in-school careers guidance

Embedding careers guidance activities into a quality-management system can be of great help in the conception and effective implementation of a careers guidance programme. A quality-management system for careers guidance consists of a description of the whole process of careers guidance as it takes place in a school. It helps to connect all activities in one system, so that they complement one another and so that they lead to concrete achievements. Establishing a system of this kind requires initial effort, but in the long term it contributes to the quality of the guidance being given to students, and its clear structure reduces the workload of educators and teachers. It is also worth noting that the establishment of such a system makes careers guidance independent of individuals, since its structure is stable enough to be maintained by different individuals at different times (such as when a different teacher becomes responsible for the careers guidance programme) (BSt et al 2015). An example of such a quality-management system is shown in Figure 3.

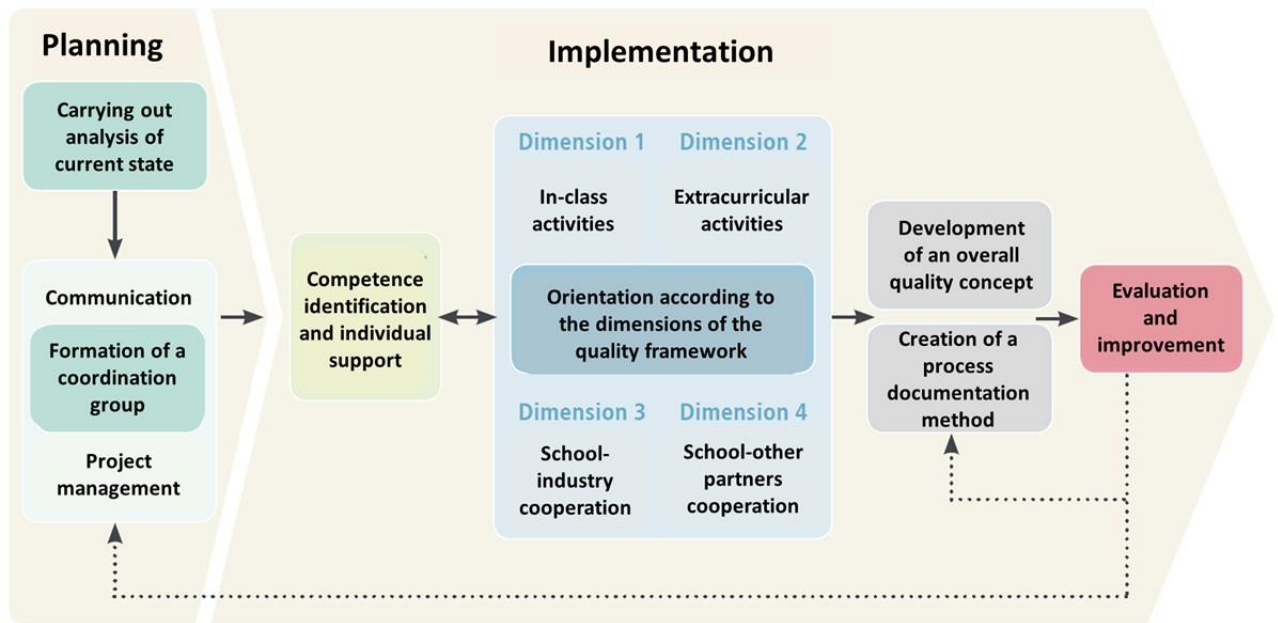


Figure 3: Quality-management system for in-school careers guidance. Source: BSt et al 2015, translation by the authors.

The quality-management system shown above describes the careers guidance process in a school as a cycle. This cycle consists of four main phases: planning, implementing, evaluating and improving (BSt et al 2015).

- Planning consists of analysing the current state of the school’s careers guidance practices and forming a coordination group that will lead the reconfiguration of these practices. During this phase, the school develops its vision of careers guidance, which is reflected in the concrete structure of the plan devised by the coordination group.
- Implementing a careers guidance plan starts with an assessment of students’ abilities and needs for support. After that, activities should be decided on and assigned to one of the following four dimensions: in-class activities, extracurricular activities, cooperation between school and industry, and cooperation between school and other partners (such as centres for careers guidance and employment agencies). This allows practitioners to filter the existing resources and place them in a clear structure.
- The evaluation of the implemented practices and activities rests on the development of a quality concept and the creation of a documentation system for the whole careers guidance process (by means of a portfolio, for example).
- The improvement of existing careers guidance strategies refers to the coordination group, which is responsible for monitoring the process. After improvements have been decided on, the process returns to the planning and

implementation phases. Having evaluated current practice, the coordination group will modify old strategies or devise new ones.

As mentioned before, careers guidance does not consist only of a simple accumulation of individual activities. It has been stressed throughout this paper that in-school careers guidance requires a systematic approach that responds to a clear concept. Individual activities form part of a larger whole. The quality-management system presented includes the four dimensions (introduced in the first chapter of this paper) to which individual activities can be ascribed in order to give clarity and structure to the school's plan for careers guidance: in-class activities, extracurricular activities, cooperation between school and industry, and cooperation between school and other partners. Different activities can be assigned to one or more dimensions.

Connecting their careers guidance practice to the quality-management system offers schools a systematic organisational and structural framework for their activities. The coherence of individual activities – be they internships, application training or self-confidence coaching – is enhanced through their embedding in a quality-management system, which in turn increases their effectiveness. This happens mainly through the integration of individual activities into a shared concept of careers guidance, through the documentation and evaluation of activities, and through stable cooperative relationships by means of the four dimensions of careers guidance. The standardisation and continuous improvement of the iterative process of careers guidance not only leads to higher quality in the long term, but also significantly reduces the workload of educators by helping them to filter and structure the constant flood of new information about careers guidance that they receive (BSt et al 2015).

6. Lessons learned (for transfer): some principles of good careers guidance

Over the last decade, in-school careers guidance has gained popularity among educational policymakers, employers and educators in Germany. Advocates of careers guidance have demanded its implementation and improvement in schools, and vastly diverse practices and programmes have emerged over the years and across states. At this point, the problem is not so much quantitative – there are plenty of careers guidance activities in German schools – as qualitative. Educational policymakers must gear their efforts towards a clearer, more consistent structure of careers guidance,

make sure that effective programmes continue to receive funding and promote a culture of quality-management among careers guidance practitioners.

At the school level, it is also important to provide school staff with enough tools to navigate the current sea of possible careers guidance activities that they can implement in their classrooms. The phases of careers guidance and the four dimensions of activities introduced in chapter 1, together with the quality-management system presented in chapter 4, can significantly help the work of school staff. With the aid of a quality-management system, schools across Germany are supported in coming up with a vision and strategy for careers guidance, pursuing it consistently, providing useful activities for their students, and ensuring the quality of their services. The aim of this kind of quality-management system is to support schools in devising a cohesive careers guidance plan, changing ineffective practices and supporting those that work, and acquiring a habit of quality-management and evaluation.

Moreover, the quality-management system is a tool that can be transferred across schools and across countries. Germany is not the only country in Europe that struggles with the transition between school and work. This is reflected in different phenomena: while in Germany it is large dropout rates and a lack of access to vocational education, in other countries it might be a high youth unemployment rate. Although careers guidance is not a solution to any of these problems, it can nonetheless alleviate the doubts and insecurities that youths go through in choosing their future occupations. The quality-management system presented in this paper can be particularly helpful: its holistic approach to careers guidance means that it can usefully be transferred to contexts different from the German one. The strategy for transfer is relatively simple: it entails keeping the phases and dimensions of careers guidance but changing the content to suit local needs. The structure of the quality-management system for careers guidance can be left intact, but the examples for each dimension and best-practice cases should be drawn from each country's specific experiences (Fundación Bertelsmann 2015). The assumption is that the careers guidance process as defined in this article is universal enough to be applied in other countries as long as the particularities of each educational system are taken into account.

To conclude, we propose a series of principles for good in-school careers guidance. In our experience of careers guidance, engaging with schools, teachers, students, parents and employers, we have gathered valuable knowledge about careers guidance. We have synthesised that knowledge in the following principles or

recommendations, which we think belong to a good careers guidance and which policymakers and educators should take into account in their work.

First and foremost, effective careers guidance should be started early, somewhere between 12 and 14 years of age, so that students' needs and abilities can be addressed in good time. Furthermore, in our information age it is more important for careers guidance to develop students' motivation and competence than to provide them with information about different professions. Therefore, careers guidance should be orientated towards practice, actively engaging and cooperating with actors in the labour market and other related partners. The involvement of parents and legal guardians is equally important, since they often have a significant influence on students' decisions. In order to keep options open for everyone, it is important to promote careers guidance in all tracks within secondary education (in Germany, at least, careers guidance has often been neglected in the academic track). Finally, the quality and effectiveness of careers guidance should be a responsibility of schools: whether a specific plan is successful or not depends on each school's quality- management of its own plan for careers guidance.

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