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## Summary

Students are faced with an inherent paradox: they want to broaden their horizons, but also must choose specific educational tracks and their future profession as soon as possible. This dilemma translates into choice overload, stress, anxiety, and depression. In addition, students lead multiple, parallel lives. Studying, social contacts, online activities and work exist side-by-side as separate 'bubbles' with often few connections between them. Teaching staff are thus confronted with fluctuating motivation levels, delay in completing studies and drop-out. Also, in view of the COVID-19 situation and the professional insecurity this entails, finding and anchoring personal motives and choice have become imperative for student autonomy during and post educational trajectories. However: it is quite rare for study programmes to cover the topic of developing your own vision of the future based on self-knowledge and professional identity. Guidance is often lacking because of the presumed high costs of individual supervision and lack of space within the curriculum. Many students therefore suffer from insufficient knowledge of their personal vision and commitment. This renders our educational system into an expensive labyrinth of trial-and-error, where students must learn the hard and costly way what is -and isn't- right for them, providing more experiences of failure than necessary. A solution to this situation is offered by the *Learning My Way* approach. The mission of *Learning My Way* in the educational domain is to:

- help students find a flexible learning path that leads them towards realising their unique contribution to the world;
- support students in becoming healthy and engaged professionals in both life and work, who can deal autonomously with setbacks and uncertainty in different areas of life and profession.

Learning My Way (LMW) assists students to become owners and designers of their own path in career and life rather than consumers. It helps them light(en) their pathway toward making a real impact in the world. Assisted by smart IT and integrated intensive seminars, participants develop ownership in navigating by autonomous motives, developing their vision of the future, and acknowledging their own talent and patterns. LMW interactive charts and 360° feedback instruments help them explore how their competences develop in relation to their desired educational and professional profiles. The LMW approach enables intensive individual work in large populations paired to a relatively low staffing load (see also Figure 1). The toolset of Learning My Way is continually expanded, employing state-of-the-art educational principles. Currently, it is integrated in the Ba and Ma curriculum of Leiden University, at TU Delft, and Utrecht University.

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## Acknowledging the essentials of today's education

Students struggle not only with motivational questions and problems. Mental health issues are on the rise (Boot, Vonk, & Meijman, 2007; Dopmeijer *et al.*, 2018; Gaspersz *et al.*, 2012; Gorter *et al.*, 2008). More than three-quarters experience pressure to perform and this number is increasing (RIVM, 2018). In addition, 50% report problems with anxiety and depression, and 25% experience burn-out symptoms (Dopmeijer *et al.*, 2018). Various sources (RVS, 2018) identify the cause as the increasing pressure on students to compete and complete their degree quickly. Cuts in student grants mean that they often need to take extra jobs to ensure sufficient income, which comes on top of the pressure of performing well academically and building up an impressive CV (RIVM, 2018). At both national and European level, there are urgent calls for more attention to be given to students' wellbeing. Increasingly so in the current COVID-19 situation (Super & van Disseldorp, 2020).

Pressure and insecurity are intensified by professional trends. Traditional careers are disappearing from the job market and uncertain careers are becoming the rule (Pryor & Bright, 2011; WEF, 2016; OCW, 2015). As a result, self-regulation is currently an essential ability. Professionals are expected to be responsible for their own career and to take charge of it themselves (Meijers, Kuijpers, & Winters, 2010). This requires not only *self-regulation* but also *self-knowledge* regarding ones' desired life direction and professional identity (Wijers & Meijers, 1996).

Still, it is too uncommon that today's curricula include teaching on self-regulation and exploring one's own vision and professional identity. Guidance is mostly provided too late, when problems have grown into crises. For today's student, there is very little anchoring of their own long-term vision within the context of their study programme. The role of this omission should not be underestimated.

Having a clear picture of your own future vision is correlated with health, psychological wellbeing, and greater perseverance (Malin, Liauw, & Damon, 2017; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Pallant & Lae, 2002; Vignoles *et al.*, 2006). We also know that students with a clear future vision display greater resilience, especially when they experience stressors, such as disappointing study results (Pallant & Lae, 2002). Aware students are more likely to use adaptive strategies, more committed to the study programme, perceive it as more meaningful, and achieve better results (Malin, Liauw, & Damon, 2017; Yeager & Dweck, 2014). Greater commitment to studying before starting out also was found in Leiden University students to be directly correlated with academic performance after the first year (Meijer, Cleiren *et al.*, 2018).

Projecting their specific, meaningful role for the future allows students also to redefine unappealing, difficult or boring aspects of a study programme as (necessary) steps on their own path. Having self-knowledge leads to navigating by your own compass and the ability to motivate yourself to act and set priorities. Given the scale of the problem, we agree with Dopmeijer *et al.* (2018) that we should build online and blended structures that support the wellbeing of students.

## What *Learning My Way* offers

Learning My Way is used in student populations ranging from high school to PhD level, as well as post-initial and executive education. Our approach combines scientific insights with advanced individual training perspectives (e.g. De Dreu, 2003; Derkse, 1998, 2000). With *Learning My Way*, participants explore, anchor, and monitor their own professional and personal development over time. This is encouraged by an inventive combination of provocative questions posed in (online) preparations, 360-degree feedback from the student's own social circle or trusted mentors, and processing and anchoring findings during intensive (online) seminars. This incorporates intensive peer interaction and reflection. Students additionally record their own competence development over time, and intelligent charts are used to compare their development with self-chosen professional goals and their personal vision(s) of their desired future.

Systematic online self-assessment also enables (when implemented as a back-bone in the curriculum) to anonymously evaluate courses in terms of their impact on student competence. Pre- and post-measurement aggregate data can identify competence improvement profiles associated with specific courses by applying aggregated learning analytics. Current students thus provide future students with a picture of the contribution that a specific course may make to their own competence development.



Figure 1: The Learning My Way Portfolio system (web based) with reflective online preparation (left) upload of seminar results (middle), here using web access via a smartphone (right)

## Structure of Learning My Way

Learning My Way (LMW) uses an intensive form of hybrid, blended learning, either with *online* or *on campus* seminars, and knowledge clips, enveloped in clear pre- and post- portfolio tasks. This systematic approach reinforces the reflective process, as well as activates students to apply their acquired insights to their own study programme and social environment. The LMW intervention currently comprises at least three face-to-face seminars (or online knowledge clips + small work-groups), with a transformative pinnacle of individual coaching contact. Seminars are preceded by an Online Preparation assignment (*OnlinePre*: reflection on yourself) often followed by a Transfer assignment (*Transfer*: implementation of the learned insights in concrete activities) and finally an Online Integration assignment (*OnlineInt*: consolidation of the learned insights).



Figure 2: International and Dutch Honours students during Seminar I in non-COVID times. (March 2018, photo: M. Cleiren)

Students upload their reflective results before each seminar. Seminars themselves entail different educational methods, including breakouts for individual reflection (*Time-ins*) and interaction in pairs or larger subgroups (*Time-outs*). The LMW intervention has a modular structure (see also Figure 3) with a developmental sequence. Currently, five base modules are employed, selected, and combined according to the needs of the specific student context:

1. Module I: ***Personal & professional purpose***
  - a. OnlinePre1: Puzzling on Purpose; Competence Sliders
  - b. Seminar1: Identification of Core Purpose (Filling in diagram in-seminar)
  - c. Transfer1: Own competences in the wild (Competence Sliders instrument)
  - d. OnlineInt1: Upload competences and record of Core Purpose diagram
  - e. Individual coaching session
2. Module II: ***Conflicting motives***
  - a. OnlinePre2: Buddy invitation (online 360-degree feedback); VSNU Competences (delta)
  - b. Seminar2: Conflicting motives: talents and debilitating patterns
  - c. Transfer2: Buddy interview & talent/ observation in the wild
  - d. OnlineInt2: Upload buddy interview & talent observation
3. Module III: ***The Learning Quest***
  - a. Seminar3: Taking ownership of learning
  - b. Transfer3: Undertaking learning & vision quest (exercises).
  - c. OnlineInt3: Upload harvest of learning & vision quests
4. Module IV: ***Commitment***
  - a. Seminar4: Commitment as a multiple yes; how to commit; choosing a witness
  - b. OnlineInt4: Upload SMART commitment with buddy picture
  - c. Transfer4: Exercise free will (exercising in the wild)
  - d. OnlineInt4: Upload experiences with exercises, report commitment outcomes.
5. Module V: ***Harvesting knowledge & achievements & Vision of the future***
  - a. Seminar5: Present and future: Future Self and future plans
  - b. OnlineInt5: Upload Future Selfie, future briefing
  - c. Individual coaching session (optional)

Since March 2020, prompted by COVID-19, the entire LMW programme has been successfully adapted for hybrid online teaching. Seminars have been partly replaced by online knowledge-video clips, to enable spending valuable online contact time on interaction with- and between students. Audio-visual knowledge clips are embedded within the online system, so that watching is interspersed with self-reflective questions.

LMW instruments are based on current educational insights and have been developed specifically attuned for this approach. The *Competence Sliders* instrument allows students to evaluate themselves (or be evaluated by 'buddies') by means of 'sliders' on the 32 competences in the classification used nationwide by the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) for all academic and non-academic professions, thus offering a nationally applied definition and categorisation of competences. If desired, this VSNU system can also easily be replaced with other skills and competence-categorizations. *Puzzling on Purpose* is an open online questionnaire tool used for reflecting on the most central motives and ideals in one's own life. By exploring the issues, students will arrive at a provisional ranking, which is produced during the first seminar and can be consulted later via the LMW system with an option to update their views.

Supporting their LMW blended learning is the online workbook that contains more theoretical substantiation for the assignments and acquired insights. Core to continuity is the *Learning My Way*



IT environment that accommodates the personal online portfolio. This contains the student's own insights and assignments, next to the peer feedback, personalised profile scores (i.e. Competence score development) and the student's own competence reflection on course efficacy.

Fundamental to the LMW approach is that students themselves obtain and retain ownership of their learning trajectory. Our set of instruments therefore primarily focuses on self-reflection and development (intrapersonal). LMW is explicitly not designed for comparative and competitive use. This means that students can reflect and communicate honestly (and more validly) on their own situation. This maximally reduces social desirability influences or masking for social reasons, or embellishment with a competitive frame of mind. If desired so, the disciplinary curriculum of course may ask for papers or exercises that request the student to reflect on self-knowledge obtained in the LMW trajectory, but not the data themselves. In this way, fruitful integration is accomplished between personal insights and study related activities (e.g. in tutoring and mentoring, career choice, or curriculum planning).

Our LMW 2.0 IT web-application is GDPR- (AVG) proof. Students themselves determine explicitly whether and/or when data are disclosed to third parties outside the LMW teaching context. They can do this by means of 'tokens' that selectively grant specific people of their choice temporary access (i.e. coaches within and outside the students' own study programme, lecturers, tutors or mentors), enabling them to view the work on request together with the student, and give feedback on the content.

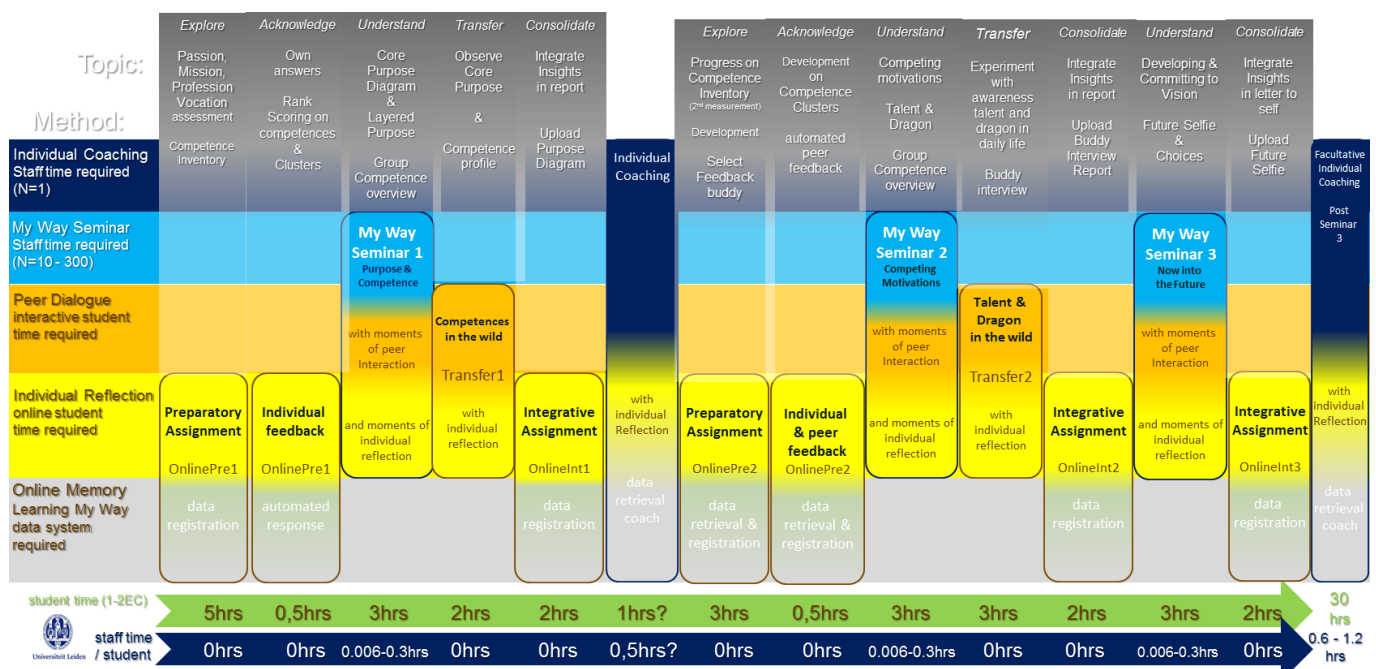


Figure 3: Blueprint of a Learning My Way (3 seminar) blended-coaching track.

## Organizations integrating Learning My Way

Over the past decade, *Learning My Way* has matured and successfully applied in diverse contexts. Currently it is being implemented as part of regular curriculums in secondary and higher (post initial) education.

Some examples:

- TU Delft – Ba Technische Natuurkunde – Learning My Way 3 seminar design embedded in tutoring trajectory Year 1 2020-2021;
- Utrecht University – Masteropleiding Management van Publieke Vraagstukken 2019, 2020 (LMW system & seminar).
- Leiden University – Honours College Faculty of Social & Behavioural Sciences. 3-year course: *Personal & Professional Development* (PPD: NL and ENG) integral part of the 3-year Honours track;
- Leiden University – Law & Criminology Masters *De Ongebaande Weg* (LMW summer course for Ma students finishing their studies).
- Leiden University – Faculty of Social & Behavioural Sciences *Skills Academy* extracurricular course (ENG, bachelor's Years 2 and 3, and master's).
- Leiden University – Cultural Anthropology *Personal & Professional Impact (PPI)* 5EC elective (bachelor's) course (ENG, bachelor's Years 2 and 3, and master's).
- Haagse Scholen – Samen10+ track for head teachers of schools working within the Samen10+ collaboration in the Schilderswijk neighbourhood of The Hague (Modules I and II).
- Kopklas (extra year between primary and secondary school) Leiden – LMW variant of Module I in a class of mostly refugee children (see Figure 5).
- Leiden University – Law & Criminology *Learning My Way* (LMW stand-alone). <sup>1</sup>
- Leiden University – Psychology (bachelor's Year 2) course *Perspectief op Carrière Planning* (NL) and *Perspective on Career Planning* (ENG): N=±700 (PoCP Module II).



(Photos: Taco van Erb)

Figure 5: Working with the LMW Purpose in Life diagram in kopklas (11- to 12-year-olds).

## Teaching & Development team

To accommodate the growing demand for LMW trajectories, we employ a specialized team of trained psychologist-trainers and coaches. Professional expertise training is provided in the Learning My Way Academy programme at the Personal Development Centre of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Leiden University.



## How do students experience LMW?

The LMW interventions are closely monitored. Routinely, after each seminar students complete a so-called *Reflection Point* in the Online Integration assignment where they report both quantitatively and in open statements what they found of value in the seminar and the various instruments. Student evaluations of the seminars and trajectory are usually highly positive (on average around 4 on a scale up to 5), with an especially high score given for relevance (usually around 4.5 on average). After transition to complete online versions since March 2020, valuation has been particularly high, with student appreciation across the board averaging over 8.0. The 2021 summer course 'De Ongebaande Weg' for law students was evaluated with an average of 8.5. More information about evaluations can be supplied on request.

*"The structure of the teaching was very good. The alternation between listening and being busy yourself worked very well. I found it difficult to fill in the purpose diagram at the beginning, but it got better once you got started. The discussions with fellow students were also very helpful."*

Law student, Leiden University 2018

*"I look back on a valuable day. A pity that we had to do this online, but your enthusiasm made it easy to keep your attention. Thank you!"*

Professional in one-day seminar  
Utrecht School of Business & Organization - Utrecht University 2020

*"I was very pleased I got to know myself a lot better in several areas. I am very happy with the way the seminars were given: approachable and informal. The coaching conversation was also very useful to me."*



Law student, Leiden University, 2019

*"I think the Dragon and Talent approach is great and really made me think about myself in a different way. By this I mean I often try to not think about my patterns and things that make me uncomfortable. Through these exercises, I was able to not only pinpoint my patterns but also how to address them and use them."*

Honours student, Leiden University 2019

*"Learning My Way has given me many insights."*

pupil of Pre-University College, The Hague, 2020

## Future of *Learning My Way*

*Learning My Way* is becoming ever more broadly used in education. In research universities and technical universities, as well as in secondary schooling and professional post-initial master trajectories. The LMW 2.0 IT system can be seamlessly integrated in education contexts through single sign-on (SURFconext /eduID integration). It offers clear dashboards with a high level of teacher and student side manageability. *Learning My Way*, because it is student, instead of programme focussed, enables people to take their online personal insight portfolio *with* them across different programmes, trajectories, and institutions. Currently it is integral to the 2.5-year Honours College programme at FSW and linked to study choice and planning. Preparation is underway to make it a regular backbone for study programmes at different universities, answering to the call for attending to Student Well-Being, and offering a solid background for the choices and commitments a student makes during their educational and professional career through Ba, Ma and Post-master professional tracks.

We are on track to embed *Learning My Way* in a growing number of standard curricula and study programmes across universities (both research and applied sciences) in the Netherlands, in concert with- and connected to career planning and skills development. An online *Learning My Way* workbook (in Dutch and English) is already available for most modules.



Figure 6: Example of a Time-in during Seminar II, international students Honours College, November 2018.  
Individual moment for self-reflection on the basis of earlier buddy interview (reviewed here online).  
(Photo: Justin Sijsma)

For more information: please contact the FSW Personal Development Centre at  
[LearningMyWay@fsw.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:LearningMyWay@fsw.leidenuniv.nl)



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