# "Hear Us Out"

How Adolescents See Learning and Career Guidance during a Pandemic

September 2021 Babette Claas and Bendix Sibbel

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Each year, around 1,000 senior high school students at 70 schools in Germany, Austria, Italy, Albania, and Switzerland participate in business@school. They are supported by their teachers and some 400 volunteers from over 20 partner companies and BCG. Coaches from partner companies provide practical support on-site at schools, so that students get a real-life taste of the world of business and entrepreneurship. Students first learn business fundamentals by analyzing a large company, focusing on its structure, market, and competitors. Next, they analyze a small business in their school's region, concentrating on its strategy and positioning. Finally, they put their entrepreneurial skills to the test by developing their own business idea, including a business plan.

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"The entire innovation of our country comes together at our schools and universities. Those are the places education takes place. So, students need to be listened to a lot more." Homeschooling, distance learning, "new ways of learning" for more than a year, school has not been what it used to be. There is much talk about the (lack of) digitalization of schools as well as some things that have been successfully tested and changed. One group is not being heard nearly enough in this whole discussion: the student body. How are they experiencing the change—at school, when studying, and in preparing for life after school? Schools are transforming, which is providing a unique opportunity to rethink school—together with students.

Twenty students and young adults answered our invitation by coming up with new ideas about the future of learning beyond borders in a digitally led workshop that took place in April 2021. Their visions of the topics of the place, content, transfer, and measurement of learning can be found in chapter one.

The workshop was the impetus for a subsequent online survey of 395 high schoolers and 69 teachers at secondary schools between May and July 2021 on the topics of school digitalization and career guidance.<sup>1</sup> In regard to digital learning (tools), it was about more than just a snapshot of the current state of affairs at a time when most respondents were in full distance-learning mode. The experiences they have had were considered in a critical evaluation of the digital technologies—of their advantages, limitations, and even risks. A central question was also what digital learning tools could look like in the future once students return to the classroom.

One result can be mentioned up front: The majority want to continue down the path of digitalization and use it flexibly, with easy-to-use solutions.

Based on the aforementioned discussion of learning content, the second part of the survey was dedicated to estimating the future requirements of the training and labor market and the skills required—here, again, from the perspective of the students and teachers. Among other things, respondents were asked where these skills could be learned to promote career guidance. Students expect that modern technologies will have an impact on their career, while teachers see the potential effect they will have on curriculum design.

The results of the workshop and survey provide great insight into how learning and school have changed since the unusual year 2020 and what students and teachers want from the classrooms and workplaces of the future.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Over 90% of the students surveyed are age 16–18, 60% male and 40% female; 87% attend school in Germany, other students come from Austria (6%), Italy (4%), Switzerland (2%), and Albania (1%). For the teachers, the age groups 30–39 and 50–59 are the most represented at 30% each; 3% are over 60, 51% are female and 49% male.



The Starting
Point: Initial
Ideas about the
Future of Learning
Beyond Borders

What do students and young adults think about the future of learning after over a year of remote learning? With that experience in mind, what do they want for the future place, content, transfer, and measurement of learning? The 20 participants of the digitally held workshop agreed on one point: Remote learning has its pros and cons—and they are proud to have managed to cope during this atypical time.

#### Learning "anytime, anywhere"

As it turns out, school is more than just a place of learning. School is a place for social interaction. At the same time, there is no one place where students learn. So it comes as no surprise that our workshop participants want to learn "anytime, anywhere." Their vision is of a mobile place of learning. Even small digital solutions, such as educational and explainer videos, provide that kind of flexible place of learning.

# Adjusting learning content and enriching it with external experts

With the changing training and professional world, learning content is also under scrutiny: Is it up to date? We're not talking about the content of individual subjects, we're talking about a basic premise: The participants see the ability to think critically as a foundational element in learning specific subjects, since that is the only way to select and assess content. They also demand content to be integrated into the curriculum based on the opinions of experts, such as those from science, business, and social fields—external expertise enriches the educational experience.

#### Agile teaching of learning content

The external experts complement learning in flexible and varied settings, because the content should be taught in an agile way. Cross-class solutions with different learning methods are another demand. The fact that most of the workshop participants have collaborated with external experts as part of educational initiatives probably also plays a role. Participating in these initiatives also requires a high degree of self-organization and flexibility.

#### Evaluate competencies instead of knowledge

Although the participants don't want to completely let go of grades, they expect to be tested for more than just content: Competencies are "in demand." They see the challenge there in objectively measuring performance. For them, the main point is holistically taking different competencies and individuality into consideration, and the respondents emphasize the visibility of individual skills by awarding students accordingly.





2 Back to School:The View of over 450Students andTeachers on Digitali-zation at Schools

In light of the ideas of our workshop, the next step was asking a larger group of students and teachers about their current and future view of learning, more than a year into the pandemic. While hybrid or even remote schooling has been unavoidable during the COVID-19 pandemic, the prevalent teaching model after the pandemic has not yet been defined and could be shaped actively by those involved. Through the survey, we learned what the key obstacles to further digitalization currently are, which key advantages of digital technology for the education system should be embraced, and which key risks need to be mitigated when designing the teaching model of the future.

#### 2.1 Current Digital Learning Tools are Based on the Requirements of the Education Administration

Digital elements used in schools come in all shapes and sizes, from entire classes being taught via videoconferences, webinars, digitally shared exercise sheets for independent study, content via educational videos, mobile apps, or educational websites, to the use of a variety of channels with school-specific intranets, learning management systems, digital communication channels, and digital collaboration tools.

Surveyed about what digital learning tools are available at their school, both students and teachers indicated

• the use of school-specific intranets or learning management systems (e.g., Moodle—62% of the students and 77% of the teachers use them often),

- classes via videoconferences (60% of the students and 75% of the teachers use them often),
- educational videos (e.g., on YouTube or TV programs), used by students (26% often and 44% sometimes) and teachers (32% often, 57% sometimes),
- and less digital alternatives like digitally shared exercise sheets for independent study, used by students (40% often and 37% sometimes) and teachers (36% often, 54% sometimes).

One reason for these answers might be seen in the support of these tools by the education administration, therefore giving teachers and the heads of schools the permission and backing to make use of them. The ongoing insecurity of the school management, especially in Germany, on what is allowed due to privacy laws, might also explain why other low-threshold offerings such as educational websites (e.g.,

## Exhibit 1—Students say: Videoconferences, intranets, and digital exercise sheets are the new normal, but educational websites, webinars, and collaboration tools are not



Source: business@school survey

Note: Due to rounding differences, there may be deviations in the totals.

- 1. "Which of the following digital learning tools are currently available at your school, and which do you use?"
- 2. "Return to in-class learning: Which of the following digital learning tools would you like to use in the future?"

Khan Academy) or tools that are frequently used in a work context, such as digital collaboration tools (e.g., Trello), are mostly not available nor used at the moment and significantly less desirable in the future than the other digital tools.

The reason why digital communication channels are used by students (32% often and 27% sometimes) and teachers (48% often, 10% sometimes), even though there might also be privacy law issues, may be seen in the fact that these are their main channels of communication outside of school. An explanation of the low usage of education webinars by students (3% often and 10% sometimes) and teachers (9% often, 35% sometimes) could be the unfamiliar format, also requiring more research compared to, e.g., educational videos.

#### 2.2 Teacher Enablement Is the Key: Digitalization Will Only Work by Digitally Upskilling and Motivating Teachers in Their Working Environment

When schools were shut down from one day to the next in Germany on March 13, 2020, schools, teachers, and students were not prepared, digitally speaking. Teachers not only faced lacking digital equipment, both for them and their students, from one day to the next they were forced in a new way of teaching.

Basic framework conditions that the students' parents might be used to at their workplace were not in place in the school setting (such as an official employer/school e-mail address—both for teachers and students—, a computer provided for professional use, internet access both at work and at home, collaboration tools, functional learning management systems, or a school-specific intranet).

Future desirability of digital tools

% of respondents (n = 69 teachers)<sup>2</sup>

## Exhibits 2—Teachers say: All digital learning tools are already used or desirable except for educational websites, digital collaboration tools, and educational webinars

Current availability of digital learning tools % of respondents (n = 69 teachers)<sup>1</sup>



Source: business@school survey

Note: Due to rounding differences, there may be deviations in the totals.

1. "Which of the following digital learning tools are currently available at your school, and which do you use with your students?"

2. "Could you imagine using the following digital learning tools even after the return to in-class learning?"

FUTURE

### Exhibit 3—Students say: Digital skills of teachers (53%), network connectivity (40%), and motivation of teachers (28%) are seen as major obstacles to further digitalization at school



Source: business@school survey

Note: Due to rounding differences, there may be deviations in the totals.

1. "Does your school have the following prerequisites of digital learning in place?"

2. "What restricts the further digitalization of education at your school the most, currently?"

Available trainings were not sufficient, neither for learning to use the tools nor for learning how to teach in a remote setting. Statewide platforms broke down when faced with a suddenly huge number of users. There was no dedicated IT support for schools, forcing many schools to find quick fixes, often using privately owned computers in order to be able to stay in touch with and teach their students.

Not surprisingly, students (53%) and teachers (41%) unanimously identify the digital skills of teachers as the highest ranked obstacle to further digitizing schools. This displays a remarkable level of self-criticism by the teachers. While the vast majority of respondents state that these capabilities are in place (at least) to some extent, no other prerequisite of digital learning was named more often as a major obstacle. Given that most schools do not yet offer training courses on digital learning for teachers in sufficient number or quality, this could be an effective lever to improve those skills and accelerate digitalization at school. But success here is also dependent on getting as many teachers as possible to see the need for digitalization: 29% of the teachers and 28% of the students see the motivation of teachers as an obstacle.

As mentioned above, the digitalization of schools seems to be inhibited by the insufficient availability or capacity of digital infrastructure. While smart devices (e.g., laptops) and network connectivity (e.g., WLAN) are reportedly now available to some extent at most schools, there appears to still be considerable room for improvement: Network connectivity was named as the second most significant obstacle by the

### Exhibit 4—Teachers say: Digital skills of teachers (41%), smart devices (32%), and network connectivity (32%) are perceived as major obstacles to further digitalization



Source: business@school survey

Note: Due to rounding differences, there may be deviations in the totals.

1. "Does your school have the following prerequisites of digital learning in place?"

2. "What are the key obstacles to further digitalization of education at your school right now?"

students (40%) and teachers (32%). The need for smart devices was named by 32% of the teachers and 26% of the students. Potentially, more financial support for the schools from local and state authorities, which was named as one major obstacle by 42% of the teachers, could improve this situation. Overall, these findings are supported by a global survey among parents of school-age children employed at BCG about the digital culture of school education in mid-2020, where digital infrastructure and teachers' motivation were named as the two most significant obstacles.<sup>2</sup>

#### 2.3 Digitizing Schools: A Higher Degree of Flexibility and Stronger Focus on Future Skills vs. Lower Productivity and Inequality

Asked about the key advantages of digital technology for the education system, both students and teachers indicate a higher degree of flexibility (62% students, 55% teachers). With many of the responding students having taken part in educational initiatives and experienced many months of remote working and self-organization, seeing flexibility as a valued add-on is not surprising. Both students and teachers see advantages in the higher degree of personalization, which refers to multiple dimensions of schooling such as place, time, and content, as well as individual grading and support.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Sergei Perapechka et al. (2020), Digital Culture in School Education: Implications of COVID-19 for Middle- and High-School Education and Lessons Learned, p. 29.

Furthermore, 49% of both groups of respondents hope for a stronger focus on future skills and capabilities instead of just theoretical knowledge while digitalization at school progresses. This is in line with the findings of our workshop in April and the aforementioned survey among BCG parents, where the same question was asked.<sup>3</sup>

When asking about the risks of digitizing schools, one has to take into account that the survey participants experienced a remote-only setting over a very long time. The lockdowns meant huge restrictions on meeting friends and colleagues. So it's no surprise that both teachers and students see mental health issues as one of the key risks. They differ on their ranking of lower productivity and motivation for students and greater educational inequality. When asked for the key risks of digital technologies for the education system, students (55%) and teachers (52%) unanimously identified mental health issues (e.g., from loneliness) as one of the major threats to be mitigated. Additionally, the teachers caution against a greater educational inequality in case the availability of technical equipment and support by parents or private tutors significantly deviates across households (59% vs. 33% of the students). Both mental health issues and educational inequality are perceived as key risks by BCG parents as well.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, the students tend to associate digital technologies with a lower level of productivity and motivation (56% vs. 29% of the teachers) as well as learning inefficiencies (42% vs. 36% of the teachers). As such a remarkable level of

<sup>4</sup> See ibid., p. 28.

### Exhibit 5—Students say: While a higher degree of flexibility and stronger focus on future skills are key advantages, lower productivity and mental health issues are perceived as risks

Key advantages of digital technologies Key risks of digital technologies for education for education % of respondents (n = 395 students)<sup>1</sup> % of respondents (n = 395 students)<sup>2</sup> Lower productivity and 62 Higher degree of flexibility 56 motivation among students Stronger focus on future skills and 49 capabilities instead of just theory Mental health issues 55 (e.g., from loneliness) Accessibility of broader knowledge to students 29 Learning inefficiencies 42 Higher degree of personalization 28 Transfer of practical knowledge 29 Greater educational inequality 33 related to digital technologies Facilitation of teaching 24 Physical health issues 33 (e.g., from lack of exercise) 20 Equal access to quality content Weakening of communication skills 31 and other skills needed in the future Better control of learning progress Higher engagement and motivation of students 12 Diminishing role of teachers 15

Source: business@school survey

1. "What are the key advantages of digital technology for the education system?"

2. "What are the key risks of digital technology for the education system?"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See Sergei Perapechka et al., p. 28.

self-criticism is based on the students' actual experiences with homeschooling over the past months, it should be taken seriously and actively mitigated during the digitalization of schools. A recent study by BCG on the future of remote work<sup>5</sup> found that social connectivity is a prerequisite to improve productivity for collaborative tasks when working remotely. Thus, there seems to be a direct connection between the students' low level of productivity and mental health issues caused by loneliness or other social factors. Accordingly, the level of productivity might improve in times of hybrid or remote schooling once the students feel socially connected despite learning alone. To summarize digitalization at school, it seems that hybrid schooling will be both feasible and desirable even after the pandemic. Sixty-one percent of the students and 78% of the teachers believe that hybrid schooling would be feasible once the pandemic is over—at least for students in senior grades and subjects like humanities. Such a positive attitude toward hybrid working models is also reflected in BCG's recent study on global ways of working<sup>6</sup> and the survey among BCG parents.<sup>7</sup>

#### Exhibit 6—Teachers say: While a higher degree of flexibility and personalization are key advantages, educational inequality and mental health issues are perceived as risks

Key advantages of digital technologies Key risks of digital technologies for education for education % of respondents (n = 69 teachers)<sup>1</sup> % of respondents (n = 69 teachers)<sup>2</sup> Higher degree of flexibility 55 Greater educational inequality 59 51 Higher degree of personalization Mental health issues 52 (e.g., from loneliness) Stronger focus on future skills and 49 capabilities instead of just theory Weakening of communication skills 42 Transfer of practical knowledge and other skills needed in the future 39 related to digital technologies Higher engagement and motivation of students 32 Physical health issues 39 (e.g., from lack of exercise) Equal access to quality content 17 Learning inefficiencies 36 17 Accessibility of broader knowledge to students Lower productivity and Facilitation of teaching 29 motivation among students Better control of learning progress Diminishing role of teachers 0

Source: business@school survey

1. "What are the key advantages of digital technology for the education system?"

2. "What are the key risks of digital technology for the education system?"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> See Adriana Dahik et al. (2020), *What 12,000 Employees Have to Say About the Future of Remote Work*, p. 4 (https://www.bcg.com/de-de/publications/2020/valuable-productivity-gains-covid-19).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> See Rainer Strack et al. (2021), Decoding Global Ways of Working, p. 8 (https://www.bcg.com/de-de/publications/2021/advantages-of-remotework-flexibility).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>See Sergei Perapechka et al., p. 17.



3 Expectations Concerning Training, Work, and Career after Graduation

Hands-on and real-life teaching models need to bridge the gap between today's curriculum and the skill set required in the future. While the current educational system often focuses on a transfer of broad knowledge, that might not meet the requirements of employers on the job market of the future given the increasing adoption of modern technology and need for upskilling. For this reason, we asked the students and teachers what skills they deem most relevant for the future, where they could be developed best, and to what extent the current technology trends impact their career path and teaching content.

Students and teachers perceive soft skills as most relevant for the future. Communication, collaboration, complex problem-solving, and critical thinking are their top responses. That isn't surprising considering that most respondents have participated in educational initiatives, such as business@school. They have learned firsthand—when working as a team for an entire school year—how to communicate and collaborate. The relevance of communication and complex problem-solving is also reflected in a recent BCG study on global trends in upskilling and reskilling, while collaboration and critical thinking are perceived as less relevant in most countries.8

To develop the skills required in the future, students favor on-the-job training, with a strong preference of 73%. Fourtyfive percent of the student respondents feel traditional educational institutions (e.g., high school and university) are suitable for this purpose. This preference could also be seen in the "Mission Mars" workshop, with students asking for the opportunity of external training. For them "experts equal expertise" with external partners contributing their knowledge to the schools.

Possibly due to their own experience in initiatives such as business@school, students see a new role for the teachers as a guide and less as an instructor. On the other hand, 77% of the teachers still perceive traditional educational institutions as the most effective avenue of learning for their students. They, however, also acknowledge the relevance of on-the-job training (61%). Therefore, the interest of teachers in working with external partners could be a factor for success, bring new insights to schools, and help prepare students for their personal path after graduating from school and preparing them for a constantly changing work environment.

Recent BCG studies on global trends in upskilling and reskilling<sup>9</sup> and global reskilling and career paths<sup>10</sup> show a strong preference of workers for self-study and on-the-job training. While these reports indicate a marked rise in the popularity of online educational institutions and mobile apps among employees compared to the results from 2018, the students in our survey are less digitally inclined. Their age and possibly the online solutions on offer not targeted to their specific needs might be some of the reasons why educational institutions and mobile applications are currently the least preferred learning channels.

As most respondents will be graduating from school soon, we also asked them about their personal job criteria: For them an attractive job needs to provide interesting content (63%), adequate financial compensation (47%), career development opportunities, and a good work-life balance (45% each). Good relationships with colleagues and superiors as well as the learning curve and skills training are regarded as less important by the students. Once more, possibly also due to the age and comparatively limited experience of the participants, this is a significant deviation from results of a recent BCG survey among employees on global ways of working<sup>11</sup> where good relationships are the top job criterion, and interesting job content and career development opportunities are less relevant.

Students exhibit agility and see the impact of increasing adoption of modern technologies on their career path. Seventy-six percent of the students report that they adjust their envisioned career path based on technology megatrends. Among the teachers surveyed, 84% adapt the skills to be taught and knowledge to be imparted to their students based on these trends. This higher awareness is reflected by the findings of a recent BCG report on global trends in upskilling and reskilling<sup>12</sup> where 55% of German respondents (49% global average) feel that their jobs will be strongly affected by such technological trends.

Therefore, practice-oriented teaching models involving insights and input from external partners like business@ school may be an effective way to bridge the gap between today's knowledge-focused curriculum and the skills deemed most important on the job market of the future given the increasing automation and adoption of modern technologies such as AI.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> See Orsolya Kovács-Ondrejkovic et al. (2019), Decoding Global Trends in *Upskilling and Reskilling*, p. 8 (https://www.bcg.com/de-de/ publications/2019/decoding-global-trends-upskilling-reskilling). See ibid., p. 7 (https://www.bcg.com/de-de/publications/2019/

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> See Rainer Strack et al. (2021), *Decoding Global Reskilling and Career Paths*, p. 17 (https://www.bcg.com/de-de/publications/2021/decodingglobal-trends-reskilling-career-paths).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup>See Rainer Strack et al. (2021), Decoding Global Ways of Working, p. 14 (https://www.bcg.com/de-de/publications/2021/advantages-ofremote-work-flexibility).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> See Orsolya Kovács-Ondrejkovic et al. (2019), Decoding Global Trends in Upskilling and Reskilling, p. 4 (https://www.bcg.com/de-de/ publications/2019/decoding-global-trends-upskilling-reskilling).



4 The Path of Digitizing Schools Still Needs to Be Pursued

There is no going back, and the digitalization of schools needs to progress. By learning from the experience of the pandemic and integrating digital tools, hybrid schooling is also an option even post-COVID-19, once all requirements are met and the risks have been mitigated sufficiently: 61% of the students and 78% of the teachers could imagine hybrid schooling post-COVID-19.

In our educational initiative business@school, we have seen a huge shift over the past year. We started with the need for guidance and close-knit support during the beginning of the pandemic. Luckily, we already had a platform in place that students, teachers, and coaches were accustomed to. Within days we were able to offer a solution for online finals, giving our participants a clear way forward and honoring the hard work they put into business@school. With the new project year starting in the fall of 2020, we made sure to go a digital step further in supporting our participants by offering additional curated content and upskilling through new material and videos adapted to the digital setting. This also included moving all workshops and events to a digital format. On the content side, the students of business@school 2020/2021 themselves handed in impressive business ideas with flawless and engaging digital presentations. The students' ability to present digitally, adapt to the new surroundings, and be self-organized, agile, and resilient is something that cannot be taken away from them and should be recognized as a huge asset.

Unsurprisingly, teachers and students have reached out to us regarding the upcoming 2021/2022 project year, suggesting integrating hybrid models and new digital tools into business@school. Some teachers plan to do at least one digital presentation and possibly in a hybrid setting. Former participants are advising the next business@school class on useful digital tools. At the same time, they emphasize the fact that for business@school they see considerable value in the personal meetings and networking between students, coaches, and teachers and are aiming on returning to these in-person interactions at their schools.

There is still a lot of uncertainty and guidance needed. In terms of content, we support schools with curated content and in meaningfully integrating the more popular digital tools. The biggest step forward will be making sure that the teaching of skills will evolve even further according to the challenges and new ways of remote teaching. To start with, integrating tools like educational videos and digital communication channels and apps into the school routine and curriculum would be an asset: 70% of the students see that at least as somewhat desirable for the future. To support digitalization, schools need governmental administrations to back them. Schools and teachers need clear guidelines from the administration on what they are allowed to use or have the freedom to decide on, especially concerning privacy laws. We also need to honor and value the not insignificant amount of additional organizational tasks that teachers have taken on during the pandemic. Digitizing schools is more than providing worksheets online, having them printed out by parents, scanned, and uploaded. Upskilling teachers and providing them with a professional digital infrastructure that complies with privacy laws is a task that involves all of us. Teachers need a professional setting—that includes not only the hardware that has since been provided more and more but also the right software, content, and IT support.

There is great potential in using digital tools to individualize learning, making sure existing inequalities from losing students during the pandemic can be overcome. This also means continuing to meet the standard that all students have the same access to digital tools and support. Yet, as one of our workshop participants summed it up, the evolution of schools lies in the responsibility of each and every one of us. In answer to the question of how he would change his school, 15-year-old Béla responded, "You have to find an idea you think is exciting and that you're confident in. An idea you'd like to see become reality—and then you start working to get it implemented."

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# **CONTINUE ON DIGITAL PATH AT SCHOOL IN HYBRID SETTING** WITH FURTHER TRAINING AND GOOD INFRASTRUCTURE



Tools used: Videoconferences, intranet platforms, and digital worksheets are the "new normal." Limited adoption of digital education websites, digital collaboration tools, and webinars.



## **CAREER GUIDANCE:** STUDENTS WANT A PRACTICAL CURRICULUM TO LEARN RELEVANT SOFT SKILLS



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