

REALITY CHECK

TRY IT OUT AND DISCOVER YOUR TALENT

HANDBOOK

An inspiring guide to strengthen
the connection between school
and working life



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Project Partners



Schulpartner is a non-profit education and social service provider based in Berlin, working in collaboration with schools to develop and implement modern teaching and learning concepts. The organisation is dedicated to empowering all students to discover, practise, and enhance their skills and talents. With a multi-professional team, Schulpartner supports schools as a reliable partner and is an active part of a professional network of social service providers.

STVG – Styrian Association for Education and Economics – is a Not-for-Profit NGO in Styria, Austria, working at interfaces between education systems and world of work. Main task is bringing together young people in school with enterprises to support successful transition processes from initial education to further pathways in education, training and professional life. Main regional scope is the province Styria, but additional with strong cooperation and activities at national, European and international level.

Eurocultura is a non-profit organisation set up in 1993 and based in Vicenza, Italy. The organisation's core activities are European mobility programmes, international research and cooperation projects, and career counselling. Eurocultura supports people's growth by promoting the acquisition and updating of skills through international mobility experiences. All our projects, activities and services are aimed at improving employability, in the conviction that the achievement of this goal can be facilitated by qualified study, training and work experiences abroad, starting from a European dimension and with a global horizon.

Urkraft is a work-integrating social enterprise, run according to cooperative principles, with the overall goal is to integrate people who have great difficulty getting and/or keeping a job, into working life and society. With a current workforce of 16 staff, including social workers, teachers and counsellors, we provide personally tailored Vocational Education and Training (VET) to disadvantaged target groups. We believe that it is the variety of different backgrounds and experiences that makes Urkraft inclusive, creative and competent.

Introduction

The handbook introduces the Reality Check project, its objectives, and expected impacts, serving as a guiding tool for stakeholders.

① Focus on Networks

Provides meta-level descriptions of regional networks in Austria, Germany, Italy, and Sweden, highlighting their structures, roles, and contributions.

② Showcasing Reality Checks

Details the principles, criteria, and innovative elements of the showcased Reality Checks, offering inspiration for new implementations.

③ Step-by-Step Guidance

Provides meta-level descriptions of regional networks in Austria, Germany, Italy, and Sweden, highlighting their structures, roles, and contributions.

④ Practical Insights

Features a "Do's and Don'ts" section with recommendations and lessons learned to guide effective implementation and avoid challenges.

⑤ Comprehensive Toolbox

Offers templates, revised descriptions, and source materials for Reality Checks, enabling replication and adaptation in different contexts

The importance of building networks

Cooperation is a core element of life. No living being can exist without cooperation. This basic principle applies in particular to human society.

Concerning "RealityCheck" this principle is applied to one of the most crucial steps young people take in their lives: for the transition from initial school education to further education, training and career paths.

Even though there are many opportunities today for switching, second and third chances, changing careers and lifelong learning, the better and more consciously the first transition steps are taken, the more likely it is that further educational, professional and personal life paths will succeed.

Many influencing factors are decisive for the success of these transitions. School and further training institutions play in the process of transition an essential role as well as the family and close relatives, business and companies, also supporting institutions that offer advice and support. The better people and institutions work together in the respective living environments of young people, the more effectively processes of educational and vocational orientation, vocational preparation and transition can be designed.

Several levels are crucial for this:

It's about **communication**: the actors in a region must know about each other, know each other and exchange ideas with each other in order to be able to assess who can contribute what to which question. It is about **cooperation**: the better actors in a region define interfaces and starting points in order to offer services and provisions, and act together, the more effectively the competencies and capacities of all those involved are used. It's about **coordination**: if there exist an agreement that it makes sense to coordinate services and offers to support encounters between young people and the real world of work – RealityChecks – then the best effects will be achieved. This requires understanding, trust and responsibility. The conditions for this are different in different regions. In the "RealityCheck" project, detailed instructions for action were developed, accessible here: link.guidelines.com (establishing ...).

In conjunction with the concrete, innovative offers for young people to get insight into the real world of work – we call that "RealityChecks", transitions for young people will succeed in the long term.



Network

① Facilitating Communication

The network acts as a platform for exchanging information and perspectives among schools, companies, and other stakeholders, fostering mutual understanding and coordination.

② Improving Quality

The network supports the development and implementation of quality standards, enhancing the effectiveness of career guidance and vocational education initiatives.

③ Strengthening Collaboration

It promotes interdisciplinary cooperation and resource pooling to address cross-sectoral challenges in education-to-work transitions.

④ Regional Development

By identifying gaps and advocating for political support, the network contributes to regional education and labour market policies.

⑤ Building Sustainability

The network aims to establish long-term connections between education and the workforce, ensuring its impact continues beyond the project lifecycle.

⑥ Increasing Visibility

Through lighthouse projects and targeted public relations, successful models and best practices are highlighted and adapted across different contexts.

A regional network in Styria



In Austria, there is basically a good background for cooperation between educational institutions, schools and economy and business, with companies and the working world.

This is also the situation in Styria. However, there are considerable differences in the regions, between urban and rural areas, also due to historically grown structures as well as geographical, traffic and economic framework conditions.

In the Reality Check project, it was therefore analysed exactly where networks between schools, the world of work, institutions, etc. work, and where they are missing or where they are needed

Based on this analysis, the region of Upper Styria East was chosen in order to develop in accordance with the objectives of the project to establish new networks. Schools, companies, regional institutions, administration, etc. were approached and involved to jointly define goals in the sense of the real encounter of young people with the world of work.

This resulted in very concrete developments and offers that were developed for different target groups at primary, lower and upper secondary school levels and are used with the active participation and involvement of regional companies.

Regional symposia and working meetings support this process, ensuring a sustainable impact for the future, with active, concrete contributions and developments by regional companies.

Details on the developed offers of "Reality Checks" can be found in the further descriptions.

A regional network in Berlin



The Berlin Regional Network links stakeholders from schools, public institutions such as the Federal Employment Agency and the Senate Department for Education, the chambers of commerce and skilled crafts, social organisations, and educational service providers.

Together, they combine their expertise to provide students with practical insights into the world of work and to proactively and sustainably shape the transition from school to employment.

The network focuses on key challenges, including the often inadequate cooperation between schools and companies, the need for better coordination in career guidance, and the sometimes out-of-touch methods by which young people are introduced to professions. Best practices are shared through regular exchanges, and innovative approaches are developed. Examples include the three Reality Checks: CareerCraft, JobAction, and Internships with a Purpose. These initiatives not only encourage students to discover their strengths and abilities but also help companies connect with future talent at an early stage.

One of the network's priorities is fostering dialogue between stakeholders. At regular meetings, needs are analysed, experiences shared, and concrete solutions developed. Topics discussed to date have included how to make internships more effective, career fairs more appealing, and disadvantaged students better integrated. This creates a space in which cooperation is strengthened, and mutual understanding and shared responsibility among all participants grow.

The network lays the foundation for long-term, practical solutions that benefit schools, companies, and young people. It aims to present career orientation as an inspiring and flexible process that opens up new perspectives, promotes talent, and creates lasting connections between all parties involved.

A regional network in Veneto



The Italian network is composed of members coming from the Veneto region, most specifically from the Vicenza area and its province. The network presents a heterogeneous mixture of actors, including representatives of educational institutes and companies, as well as freelance professionals.

The professional profiles involved are therefore teachers, employers, employees, career counsellors, and trainers. A network composed of different stakeholders was seen as the best basis for discussing RealityChecks from different perspectives, resulting in a broader and more comprehensive view on new possible forms of cooperation between the school and the world of work. Indeed, this idea was confirmed during the first contacts with stakeholders during the network-creation phase, in which different interpretations and interests on the Reality Check project already emerged. The regional network follows the guiding principles of Communication-Cooperation-Coordination (Co-Co-Co). For instance, for an effective management of workloads and coordination, working groups and subgroups are created every time that a new initiative is under construction.

Examples of main objectives pursued by the regional network are:

- Providing a forum for discussion of key strategic issues and establishing a common definition of RealityChecks.
- Identification of existing offers and identification of supply gaps.
- Stimulation of interdisciplinary cooperation and coordination for specific activities (events, projects, research); cross-cutting initiatives on multi-sectoral issues.
- Development of better structures and strategies for supporting and promoting cooperation between education and business as an integral part of national education, employment and social inclusion policies; where needed, seeking political support to fill gaps in existing services.

A regional network in Skellefteå



A regional network in Skellefteå, Västerbotten.

The following steps has been central in building the network:

The overall goal of the network, and priorities for the Swedish network is strengthening the supply of skills and the connection between school and working life for the students. We started by Identifying relevant actors, such as schools, companies, trade associations, and municipal authorities. We analyzed both labour market's skills needs and the education's prerequisites in order to set up a relevant network. Together we set a common vision that all actors could get behind, for example to increase students' employability and strengthen the connection between schools and the world of work.

We created a forum for regular meetings to use as a platform for dialogue – where schools and employers can share information and ideas. We agreed in which joint ventures we would cooperate and who would be responsible for what. For example, a possible result in future can be to create collaborative projects where companies and schools develop training courses that match the needs of working life.

We agreed on how we would communicate with each other and how often we would see each other and in what contexts this would take place. A possible result of this project could be to build a clear channel for communication between the actors, for example a digital platform to match schools and employers for internships and collaborations.

We will follow up the network's work and goals regularly through network meetings and evaluate what works, identify areas for improvement and adapt the way of working. A success factor for a network is to create a culture of long-term cooperation where all actors see the value of investing in the workforce of the future. Hopefully this project will lead to a sustainable network.

Reality Checks



Reality Checks

Reality Checks aim to create meaningful, hands-on experiences that bridge the gap between education and the world of work, motivating students and providing clear perspectives on their future educational and career paths.

- ➡ **Integration into Education:** These initiatives foster stronger connections between schools and companies, ensuring that students understand the relevance of their studies to real-world occupations.
- ➡ **Targeted Support:** Reality Checks emphasize inclusivity, offering tailored guidance for students with special needs and addressing disparities in access to career opportunities.

Core Principles

- ➡ **Relevance to Students' Needs:** Activities are designed to align with students' skills, interests, and aspirations, making career exploration engaging and personalized.
- ➡ **Collaboration Across Sectors:** Effective Reality Checks require joint efforts between schools, companies, educators, and counsellors to create practical, impactful experiences.
- ➡ **Focus on Inclusivity:** Programs aim to reach diverse student groups, regardless of socio-economic background, educational level, or location.
- ➡ **Innovative Approaches:** Leveraging digital tools, interactive activities, and real-world exposure to make career guidance modern and accessible.

Criteria for Development

- ➡ **Context-Specific Design:** Reality Checks are tailored to address regional labour market needs and specific challenges in the school-to-work transition.
 - ➡ **Student Engagement:** Activities should actively involve students through interactive and practical methods, such as workshops, role-playing, or virtual simulations.
 - ➡ **Sustainability and Scalability:** Initiatives should not only address immediate needs but also offer frameworks that can be adapted and expanded across different contexts and regions.
 - ➡ **Evaluation and Feedback:** Continuous assessment ensures that programs remain relevant, effective, and aligned with stakeholders' expectations.
- This framework ensures that Reality Checks are impactful, inclusive, and adaptable, creating sustainable connections between education and the workforce.

Reality checks in Styria

STEM Boxes for Primary School

At four stations, children explore exciting topics with local companies that show how what they learn in school is applied in real jobs: precision measurements in metal technology, the basics of Morse technology, pH testing of everyday liquids, and generating electricity with a lemon battery. Guided by apprentices and trainers from the companies, the activities encourage teamwork, practical skills, and interest in STEM subjects in a playful way.



Why this project?

Local businesses in this region primarily offer jobs that require STEM knowledge. Children often ask, "Why do I need to learn this? What will I use it for?" Especially in math, computer science, natural sciences, and technology, it is often difficult to connect classroom learning to the real world. This project shows children aged 8 to 10 why these subjects' matter, how they are applied in everyday life and careers, and why it's worth learning more about them.



"Everything was very well organized, and the experiments were age-appropriate, exciting, and educational." – **Anna L., Teacher**

"Very nice and curious students – they all eagerly got involved in the tasks."
– **Apprenticeship Trainer**

"I never thought math could be so exciting – it was like a puzzle game, but with real problems!" – **Elias, 8 years old**

Reality checks in Styria

Bring Your Child to Work - DAY

On this day, students from grades 3 and 7 (about 9 and 13 years old, primary and lower secondary levels) accompany their parents or close relatives to their workplace. They experience firsthand what a workday looks like and gain their first impressions of jobs, tasks, and work environments. Parents and companies help establish a direct connection between school knowledge and the real working world.



Why this project?

The day brings career orientation into real life: children discover their interests and values early, while parents see their children in a new role. It fosters family dialogue and offers companies the opportunity to present themselves as family-friendly and committed to nurturing future talent. This strengthens the connection between school, work, and family, a crucial step toward informed career orientation.



"I always thought my dad just sat in front of a computer – but there's actually so much cool technology involved! Now I get why he likes his job." – **Paul, 13 years old**

"My daughter (9) was thrilled – she's still talking about how exciting my workday was. For both of us, it was a special day that brought us even closer."
– **Petra L., Mother**

"A student (13) told me the next day: 'I never knew my dad did such important things.' – That's what it's all about: experiencing jobs and seeing parents in a new light." – **Bernhard, Teacher**

Reality checks in Styria

STEM Boxes for upper secondary School

At four stations—math, computer science, natural sciences, and technology—students work with local companies to explore engaging topics that show how school learning translates into real-world jobs. In small teams, they solve practical tasks and simultaneously strengthen their social skills.



Why this project?

Even if students have already chosen a vocational school or high school, they often don't understand how school subjects connect to concrete job opportunities, both regionally and beyond. STEM Boxes, combined with conversations with professionals from companies, quickly clarify these links and provide valuable insights into the working world for young people.



"The STEM boxes really engaged our students – finally something hands-on and tangible!" – **Karin E., Teacher at a Business School**

"Whether programming, solving puzzles, or taking measurements – the STEM boxes showed how exciting math and computer science can be in real life."
– **Hubert, Training Manager**

"The experiment with plant colors was truly fascinating – it was the first time I realized how exciting biology can be." – **Lea, 16 years old**

Reality checks in Berlin

The three Reality Checks—**CareerCraft**, **JobAction**, and **Internships** with a Purpose—were developed to address the key challenges in transitioning from school to work. They focus on innovative approaches that combine practical relevance, real-life contexts, motivation, and individual support.



CareerCraft is designed to offer students practical insights into skilled trades. Through interactive role-playing games and workshops, young people can discover their strengths and gain inspiration for their first career. This format also strengthens teamwork and problem-solving skills.

JobAction transforms career fairs into interactive learning environments using the Actionbound app. Gamified elements encourage active participation and motivate students to engage in more in-depth conversations with exhibitors.



*Finally, a format that makes (not only) skilled trades tangible – for the first time, our students truly experienced what they're capable of.” – **Peter, Teacher***

*“I had no idea I was so good with tools. Now I’m seriously considering a career in the trades.” – **Yannick, student***

*“Thanks to the app, we connected with students much faster – their questions were more focused, and their interest was real.” – **Jörg, company trainer (at the fair)***

Reality checks in Berlin



Internships with a Purpose prepares students for internships tailored to their interests through talent checks and targeted advice. Parents are actively involved in promoting a sustainable approach to career choice.

Innovative elements: All three formats rely on practical and interactive approaches to make career guidance tangible and relevant. They provide space for individual learning and strengthen connections between students, schools, and companies. Through these Reality Checks, we create solutions that increase motivation, enable practical experiences, and open long-term perspectives.



"With the talent check, we were able to match students with internships that truly fit – their motivation increased significantly"

– **Andrea, career counselor**

"I was surprised at how well prepared my son was – this wasn't just an internship, it was a real step toward his future."

– **Doris, mother of a student**

Reality checks in Vicenza

The Wheel of Professions is a learning-by-playing activity aimed at giving young people (13-16 years old) a broader understanding of the diversity in the labour market and supporting them in developing their career aspirations and goals. Through a spinning wheel displaying several different professions, participants are encouraged to explore occupational fields and job profiles through playing, teamwork, and autonomous information gathering.



Why we decided to develop it: The schools in the Italian network reported a lack of engaging activities to introduce lower secondary-school students to the world of professions. Therefore, the Wheel of Profession was created to offer an innovative and interactive learning experience to awaken young people's interest in the world of work and motivate them to explore their career options actively.



"I liked the practicality and the game, because these approaches are beautiful and are often lacking in school!" - **Davide**

"The activity was fun and useful, I understood things I like and things I don't like." - **Maria**

Reality checks in Vicenza

What Happens in a Company?

Touch it with your own hands! enables students (15+ years old) to learn real working materials and equipment through practical workshops organised by companies directly in the school. Companies bring along the equipment and materials they use to give young people an authentic insight into work processes and students can develop an interest in new professional fields or activities.

Why we decided to develop it:

What Happens in a Company? is the answer to the lack of opportunities to experience the world of work first-hand through practice-orientated activities. The direct involvement of companies in the educational context and the provision of real work materials and equipment give young people a realistic impression of a professional field. This promotes their understanding of the requirements and processes in companies and motivates them to explore their professional interests further.



"Thinking about a career and the future often gives us anxiety and despondency. Activities like these make us have fun and see things from another perspective, in a positive way." - **Rachele**

Reality checks in Vicenza

Your First Work Experience:

What to know before? offers young people (15+ years old) the opportunity to learn about the world of work directly from the experiences of other young people and employers through peer-to-peer educational videos. Viewers are informed about challenges, obstacles and situations they may face in their first work experience, as well as strategies to avoid or overcome them. They gain more awareness of the difference between expectations and reality.

Why we decided to develop it:

The Italian network agreed on the creation of this activity based on the shared perception of a lack of preparation of young people for their first work experiences. Therefore, Your First Work Experience promotes an understanding that working environments are complex and include various elements such as rights, duties and work processes. This RealityCheck encourages an open, adaptable and resilient attitude to the challenges of working life. By sharing the experiences of other young people and engaging employers, the videos help to set more realistic expectations of the world of work.



“At school we lack the time to address certain topics during school hours, the curriculum is already dense and the time available is limited. However, talking to the students about career guidance is essential, Reality Checks are interesting and practical for us teachers precisely because they are immediate and easy to apply and create. Very interesting project!”

- School

Reality checks in Skellefteå

When we started thinking about Reality checks in Skellefteå, we felt it was important to develop activities that, even if they were in first glance very site-specific, still could be adapted to other places and environments for other organizations to use. The activities we developed in collaboration with schools and companies in Skellefteå can be adapted to other cities and places with quite small adjustments. In the Reality Checks Toolbox, you will find more information and clear instructions as well as in depth descriptions of each reality check, along with tips and tricks regarding modifications and adaptations that could suit the conditions of your organization and your city/region.



Skills training Kulturparken offers pupils practical experience in various areas such as carpentry, mechanics, garden, maintenance and restaurant. The programme includes a short career guidance session focusing on personal interests and motivations and allows participants to experience work processes up close and gain practical and theoretical insights into everyday working life.



"Att koppla skola och arbetsliv närmare är något som känns väldigt relevant – detta forum är ett bra tillfälle att lyfta dessa frågor" – **Rikard, lärare**

Jag visste inte att mina klasskompisar var så bra på att bygga och meka."
– **Jon, elev**

Reality checks in Skellefteå

Training for Skills offers a practical training experience at the T2 Vocational College on Skellefteå campus. The students can familiarise themselves with various work steps in the industry (carpentry/woodworking and welding/CNC operations) through a site visit and practical tests. The programme includes a short career guidance session focusing on personal interests and motivations.



Film Competition in which school classes make short films about various professions to gain insight into the world of work. The pupils research a profession, write scripts and use mobile phones to produce a short film. The best entry wins a prize that can be determined according to local or regional conditions and/or in cooperation and regulations with the participating schools.



""Vilken rolig dag! Jag har både lärt mig saker och skratta mycket' - Elsa, elev

"Det har varit en ögonöppnare även för mig. Inte bara att se mina elever ta sig an dessa utmaningar men också se att de har andra skills än vad jag sett i min vanliga undervisning. En nyttig dag.."

- Lärare

How to create your own reality check

Step-by-step process



① Your target group

Define your target groups and set clear goals and objectives for your reality check: What are the students expected to learn or achieve through the reality check? The goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART goals).



② Needs analysis

Carry out a good analysis of the local, regional and national labour market needs in order to find out which industries/professions your reality check should focus on.



③ Regional network

Create your regional network based on the needs analysis and get inspiration and hands on tips and advice from our handbook.



④ Partners

Select suitable industries and professions. Get all partners; companies, schools and organisations involved.

How to create your own reality check

Step-by-step process



⑤ Competences

Involve a Career counsellor who can assist on the guidance sessions and also plan for the guidance and interest tests to use before the practical part at the company or at the vocational school where the Reality check is taking place.



⑥ Inspiration!

Get inspired by the already existing Reality checks from different regions presented in this handbook. "The wheel of....", Film contest or



⑦ Structure and Process

Define the structure of the Reality Check with an orientation, practice and reflection phase. Make sure the process and format is adapted to the target group.



⑧ Feedback, Follow-up, Evaluation

Always finish by **handing out a survey** to the students so that you can see if this provides the knowledge you set in your initial objective with the effort to give the students better knowledge about a future professional life.

Do's & Dont's

What we recommend

A good stakeholder and needs analysis before you start!

Make sure you have a career counsellor or similar competence involved when planning your reality checks.

The students want to do things that are fun, but the most important thing is that it arouses interest in a future professional life!

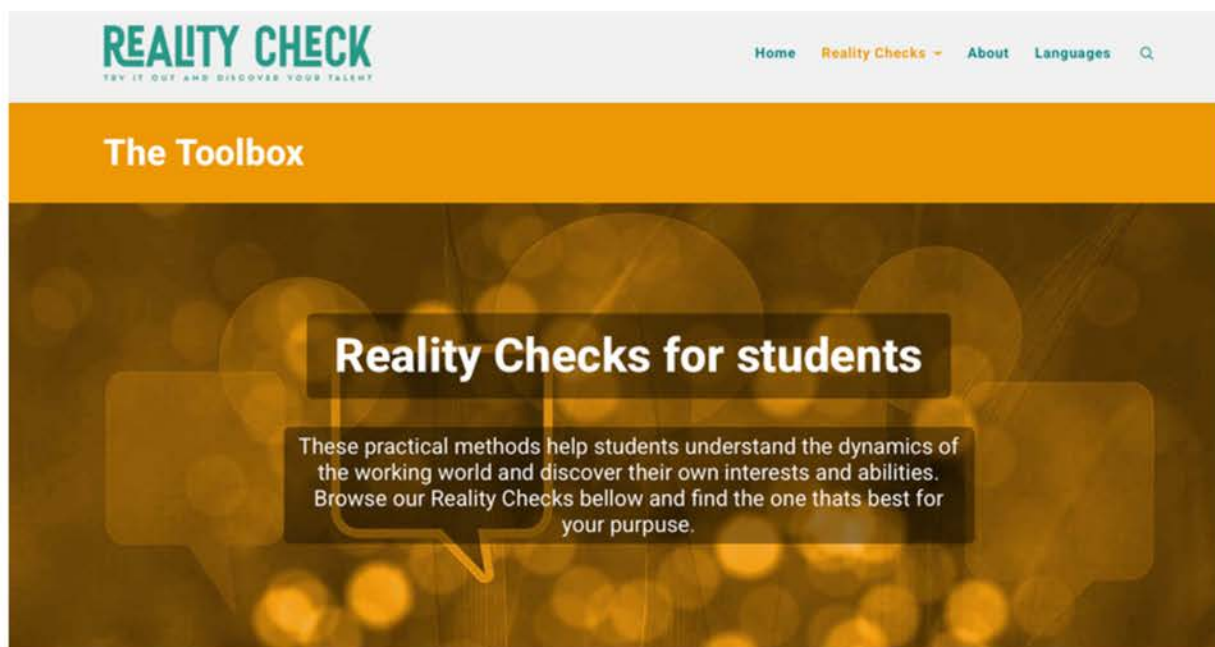
Be creative and try to think outside the box when planning for your reality check.

What we would avoid

Reality checks that are too complicated to implement or that take too much time.

Through lighthouse projects and targeted public relations, successful models and best practices are highlighted and adapted across different contexts.

Toolbox



Please use our toolbox for more materials and in-depth information about how to create Reality Checks for your students.

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