



# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

young adult 

**QUALITATIVE RESEARCH WITH YOUNG  
ADULTS AND EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS**

**Policies Supporting Young Adults  
in their Life Course. A Comparative  
Perspective of Lifelong Learning  
and Inclusion in Education and  
Work in Europe**

This Policy Brief summarises the evidence of the qualitative analysis of the interviews with young adults and experts conducted by YOUNG ADULLLT. This evidence suggests three policy implications regarding the relevance of the programmes for young adults, the design and evaluation of regional systems, and the participation of young adults in policy reviews.

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of the YOUNG\_ADULLLT project is to provide a thorough analysis of lifelong learning (LLL) policies in Europe. The research pays a special attention to young adults who live in situation of social vulnerability.

This policy brief highlights three major challenges of lifelong learning policies in the European Union. Responding to the expectations of young adults is the first of them. Instead of passive beneficiaries of policies, many youth are actively seeking for opportunities. A second issue is designing and evaluating salient programmes for a huge diversity of regional contents across the Union. Finally, reviewing these institutional arrangements on the grounds of sound participatory methods is an emerging and clearly urgent challenge.

## EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

UNESCO and other international organisations have endorsed the importance of lifelong learning. This concept mostly indicates education from early childhood until advanced ages, with a particular emphasis on both education and learning that take place in a variety of formal and informal sites during adulthood. Instead of focusing exclusively on the ages corresponding to school years, the point is planning and delivering education throughout the life course. This is important for justice to the extent that lifelong learning can tackle disadvantages even after the official school leaving age. Since our current societal challenges depend on a growing array of risks, lifelong learning may also equip governments, business, civil societies and individuals with indispensable tools for developing work-related skills and underpinning innovation systems.

Both the institutions of the European Union and the governments of member states have implemented a number of lifelong learning policies so far. Some of these policies attempt at underpinning vocational education in schools, other ones bridge gaps between schools and labour markets, and a third type provides social support to potential students and trainees.

The international qualitative analysis of YOUNG ADULLLT project sheds light on the views of both young adults and experts involved in a sample of programmes aiming at tackling social vulnerability. Many interviewees either had dropped out of school previously or faced unemployment. A number were sick, some of them suffering from mental health disorders too. A great number had a hard experience with migration. A handful lacked an income to care for their children.

The views of these recipients of lifelong learning policies depict a nuanced and complex scenario of potential impacts. A number of these youth blame themselves and their families for their current vulnerability. Many have assumed their problems are a consequence of personal failure to cope with educational and labour requirements. Others regret their family was unable to provide good enough care and housing conditions during their childhood. Only a few attribute their adversity to wider social problems that lied beyond their reach.

As a rule, their perception of lifelong learning policies matches with official expectations. Where apprenticeship or similar schemes are available to many youth, normally the interviews capture a widespread interest in using lifelong learning to improve the CV. Where these schemes are not so encompassing, many respondents often look for the necessary credentials to go ahead with their educational and professional projects.

On these grounds, it is reasonable to conclude that young adults welcome the bulk of lifelong learning policies. However, it is also necessary to point out that many also notice that apprenticeships are not sufficient. Even Austria, Finland, Germany and Scotland (UK), experts struggle to cater to apprentices when firms go bankrupt and some localities enter into economic decline.

Poor information and poor guidance worry young adults in many countries of the European Union. Aligning skills development with local and regional labour markets is often problematic, not least because many youth are happy with these policies but remain uncertain on the value of the skills they are acquiring. Biased or unrealistic selection is often so contentious that triggers strong complaints.

YOUNG ADULLLT explores lifelong learning policies in diverse contexts, where a variety of authorities is in charge of this responsibility. Remarkably, these authorities understand both the rationale of the policy and the definition of the target groups differently. Among this diversity, it is reasonable to distinguish two patterns.

In Austria, Finland, Germany and Scotland (UK), expert interviewees easily refer to a general rationale of lifelong learning policies. This rationale defines final and intermediate goals in order to integrate social disadvantaged groups in vocational education, apprenticeships and on-the-job training. In their view, the target groups live in special circumstances such as social exclusion, poor mental health and seeking for asylum.

However, the view of experts on the general rationale of lifelong learning is much unclear in Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Portugal and Spain. While some experts are fully respectful of the social image of young adults in these countries, others associate lifelong learning with social welfare measures. Here, some experts directly blame young adults for their vulnerability.

Certainly, it is not justified to extend these findings to all the experts in these nine countries. The reports also qualify this generalisation according to concrete measures in concrete regions. In fact, the variation of understandings indicates that, while differentiation of lifelong learning policies helps including disadvantaged groups, sometimes it goes along with deficit-orientation, selectivity and stigmatisation, which often contributes to de-motivation and drop out.

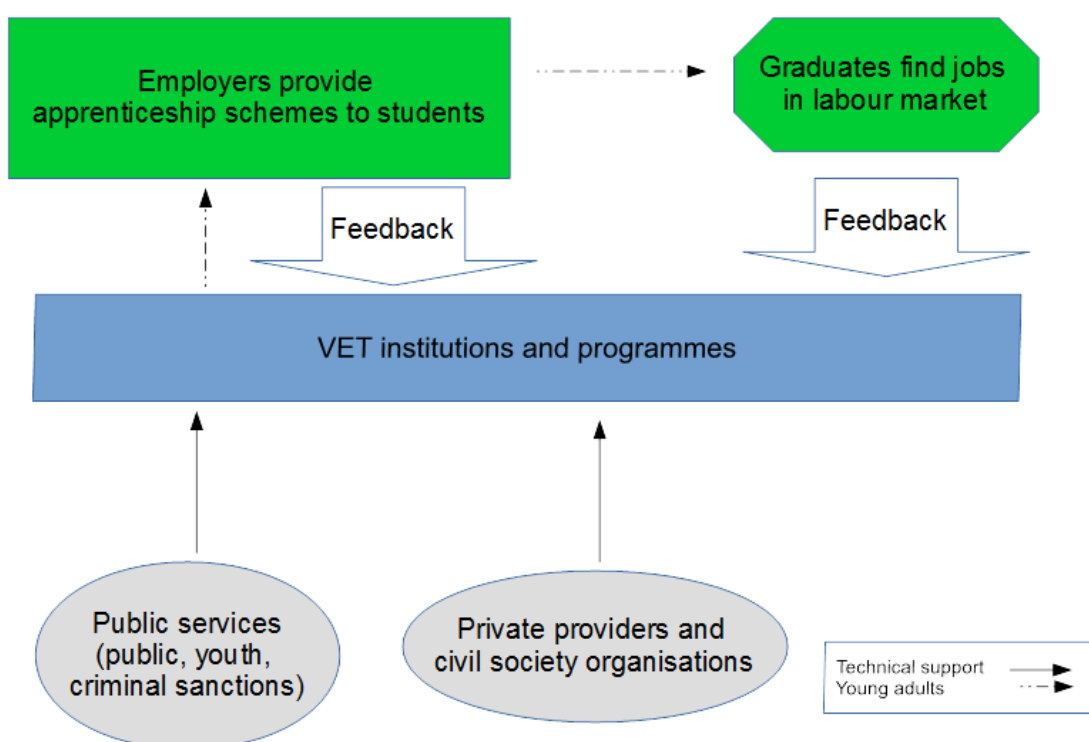
Remarkably, partnerships vary greatly across regions. In some regions, there are complex webs of actors who collaborate smoothly. In a few regions, private providers compete and hoard information in some places. In other places, NGOs draw on EU guidelines to put pressure on authorities so that they improve their lifelong learning policies.

Figure 1 maps out the main institutions that normally intervene in lifelong learning in many regions within the European Union. The labour market is the common destination of most youth who benefit from these policies. Vocational education schools and programmes are the key component of regional arrangements, altogether with apprenticeship (on-the-job training, or similar) schemes. However, the development of these schemes is quite uneven. Other public services and the civil societies complete the picture by playing some complementary roles.

On the one hand, the regional governance of lifelong learning coordinates schools and programmes with an array of public agencies, private providers and civil society organisations. On the other hand, these institutions convey students to apprenticeships, and ultimately labour markets. In addition to these institutional components, three types of fluxes configure the regional governance of lifelong learning. First, agencies, private providers and civil society organisations provide technical support to vocational schools and programmes. Second, vocational schools and programmes prepare students to go through apprenticeships and get jobs. Third, the youth provide feedback of their experience with these later stages to their process to schools so that teachers can improve further editions of the courses.

While the development of apprenticeships is quite uneven across regions, apparently feedback is the weakest component of the chain. Some experts mentioned they regularly ask the youth about their views. In some regions, local experts report that sometimes they gather the local youth to discuss some actions that had to do with lifelong learning. However, a general conclusion of YOUNG ADULLLT international qualitative analysis is that so far Finnish authorities have been the only ones who have institutionalised proper participation of young adults in the reviewing of the existing regional arrangements of lifelong learning.

**Figure 1**  
**Regional governance of lifelong learning policies**



Thus, the European Union has a long tradition of lifelong learning policies that deal with school transitions, vocational education and training, higher education and preventing early school leaving. Five years ago, the Council of Europe<sup>1</sup> (2013) launched a new initiative in this area, the Youth Guarantee Scheme (YGS). Generally, this scheme is quite visible in most EU regions. According to the YGS, member states must “ensure that all young people under the age of 25 years receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education” (European Council, 2013: pagesC120/3). The available evidence strongly suggests that this goal is far from accomplished. Young adults are generally satisfied with the LLL policies they contact with, but they often miss some crucial and relevant opportunities in their regions. Experts are not confident enough to claim they cater to the needs of all the vulnerable youth. Key elements of regional governance are in place, but the reach of apprenticeships and the strength of participation remain significant weaknesses in many regions.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In a variety of regions, diverse samples of young adults, who were enrolled in several programmes related to lifelong learning – suggested quite relevant reflections when responding to YOUNG ADULLLT interviews. National and regional experts also contributed to a well-grounded discussion of these programmes. The findings of the international qualitative analysis conducted by this research project suggest a number of policy implications.

- The youth reflect on their current conditions and their real opportunities. Although they need guidance, information and training, they are active players in the field of lifelong learning. Therefore, there is a need of "breathing" lifelong learning policies that are reflexive enough to identify, reflect and prioritise the specificities of young people's individual needs and expectations over ideological discourses. These policies need to take the dysfunctional, exclusive and demotivating effects of deficit-orientation into account. To be precise, there is a need of professionalisation in the field especially with regard to counselling in order to support young people's decision-making.
- Regional arrangements of governance are in the making throughout the European Union. Rather than national authorities exclusively, a variety of local governments, private providers and civil society organisations run the actual lifelong learning policies on the ground. Therefore, the Commission, member states and regional authorities should develop more sophisticated and contextualised systems that monitor and evaluate lifelong learning policies including effects of deficit-orientation. Although the European Social Fund has coined a standard set of indicators that guarantees some comparability, this is clearly not enough for real decision-making and policy-making at the regional level.
- The reach of apprenticeships and the strength of participation are particularly problematic. The former is very limited in both Southern Eastern and Southern Western Europe. The latter is a significant flaw almost everywhere. In order to tackle these shortcomings, lifelong learning should undergo as participatory and regular policy reviews as possible. Civil society organisations should have a say. Mostly, the youth themselves should become active agents of relevant policy-making for lifelong learning. Otherwise, this approach has not a clear point for them. The conclusions of the periodic reports should be binding for authorities. At least, Parliaments and local councils need formal and proper information about them.

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<sup>1</sup> Council of Europe (2013). “Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee”. Official Journal of the European Union. 2013/C 120/01-06.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Against the background of a high fragmentation and persistent weakness and ineffectiveness of adult education policies across Europe, YOUNG\_ADULLLT sets out to enquire into the specific forms of embeddedness of these policies in the regional economy, the labour market, the education and training systems and the individual life projects of young adults.

In the focus of attention are lifelong learning policies aimed at creating economic growth and social inclusion that target young adults in vulnerable positions, for instance those not in education, employment or training (short: NEETs) or those in situations of near social exclusion.

YOUNG\_ADULLLT uses three different entry points:

- On an **institutional** level, the project starts by focusing on various LLL policies and analyses their potentially competing (and possibly ambivalent) orientations and objectives;
- On an **individual** level, the project focuses on the young adults' perceptions and expectations of these policies regarding their life projects. The objective is to yield insights into how the young peoples' life courses are impacted by these policies in terms of intended and unintended effects;
- On a **structural** level, the project aims to critically analyse current developments of LLL policies in Europe to prevent ill-fitted policies from further exacerbating existing imbalances and disparities as well as at identifying best practices and patterns of coordinated policy-making at regional/local landscapes.

The main contributions of the YOUNG\_ADULLLT research project are:

- **New knowledge on the impact of LLL policies on young adults' life courses**, identifying the conditions, strategies, and necessities for policies to become effective;
- **Insights on the innovations and potentials LLL policies unlock**, with a view to informal and non-formal learning to better address vulnerable groups;
- **A better understanding of the structural relationships and functional match** between education and training and the labour market sectors;
- **A thorough review of regional policies and initiatives** in the countries studied, identifying best practices and patterns of coordinated policy-making at local and regional levels.

The approach of YOUNG\_ADULLLT responds to the following criteria:

- **A comparative study** of 18 regions in 9 countries: Austria (Upper Austria & Vienna), Bulgaria (Blagoevgrad & Plodiv), Croatia (Istria & Osijek-Baranja), Finland (Kainuu & Southwest Finland), Italy (Genoa & Milan), Germany (Bremen & Rhein-Main), Portugal (Alentejano Litoral & Vale do Ave), Spain (Girona & Málaga), and Scotland (Aberdeen and Glasgow), which brings together institutional and policy analyses;
- **A multi-method multi-level research design** to grasp the interaction of the three levels (structural, institutional and individual);
- **A particular focus on qualitative research** with young adults, employers and trainers/providers of education and training, complemented by quantitative analysis of the young adults' living conditions across Europe;
- **In-depth case- study analyses** of selected policies and regional/local landscapes within the project.

The evidence, analysis and recommendations of this policy brief are drawn from the nine national reports from a YOUNG\_ADULLLT sub-study on Qualitative Research with young adults (WP 5) providing evidence and analyses based on semi-structured interviews with young adults (N= 164) and experts (N= 128). The national reports focused on the interviews with both young adults and experts as well as on the interaction between these two types of social actors.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

<b>PROJECT NAME</b>	Policies Supporting Young People in their Life Course. A Comparative Perspective of Lifelong Learning and Inclusion in Education and Work in Europe (YOUNG_ADULLLT)
<b>COORDINATOR</b>	Prof. Dr. Marcelo Parreira do Amaral University of Münster (WWU) Münster, Germany parreira@uni-muenster.de
<b>CONSORTIUM</b>	University of Münster – WWU – Münster, Germany University of Education Freiburg – PHFR – Freiburg, Germany Goethe University Frankfurt – GUF – Frankfurt am Main, Germany Plovdiv University – PU – Plovdiv, Bulgaria South-West University Blagoevgrad – SWU – Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria University of Zagreb – UNIZG – Zagreb, Croatia University of Glasgow – GU – Glasgow, United Kingdom University of Lisbon – IE-UL – Lisbon, Portugal University of Porto – UPORTO – Porto, Portugal Autonomous University of Barcelona – UAB – Barcelona, Spain University of Genoa – UNIGE – Genoa, Italy University of Vienna – UNIVIE – Vienna, Austria University of Granada – UGR – Granada, Spain University of Turku – UTU – Turku, Finland European Research Services GmbH – ERS – Münster, Germany
<b>FUNDING SCHEME</b>	Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020), Societal Challenge 6 – “Europe in a changing world: inclusive, innovative and reflective societies”, call YOUNG-3-2015, topic “Lifelong learning for young adults: better policies for growth and inclusion in Europe”
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<b>WEBSITE</b>	<a href="http://young-adullt.eu/">http://young-adullt.eu/</a>
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<b>FURTHER READING</b>	Rambla, X.; Kovacheva, S.; Verlage, Th.; Walther, A. & Jacovkis, J. (2018) Quality Analysis International Report. <i>YOUNG_ADULLLT Working Paper</i> . Cerdanyola del Vallès (Barcelona): Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.