European
POLICYBRIEF

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

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SUMMARY

This policy brief highlights the main policy messages resulting from research and dissemination activities at local and regional level conducted in YOUNG_ADULLLT.

The policy messages refer to the five most important results:

- The alignment of lifelong learning (LLL) policies with a dominant, European-wide 'employability' discourse narrows down the possibility to respond to specific local/regional challenges and needs of young people.
- The definition of beneficiaries/target groups of LLL policies emphasizes notions of vulnerability rather than focusing individuals/groups at-risk of social exclusion due to structural barriers. This practice risks 'blaming the victim' by assuming a standardised life course trajectory, which individuals are able to follow (or not).
- Young adults are most often not included in processes of policy formulation and implementation, narrowing down the ability of policies to recognize and respond to their needs.
- Centralised processes of formulation, implementation, and monitoring of policies makes their adaptability to the different regions highly dependent on the performance of local actors to translate them adequately to sub-national conditions and needs.
- A key policy issue in LLL – namely devising policies that both address the needs of the labour market and economy and tackle issues of social exclusion – is possible and feasible through a more fine-grained understanding of regional variations in skills ecologies and through the coordination of LLL policies.

INTRODUCTION

This policy brief puts forward main policy messages resulting from research and dissemination activities at local and regional level conducted in YOUNG_ADULLLT. The project carried out a mixed-method, multi-level comparative study in nine EU-member countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. Two functional regions (FR) were analysed in each country, totalling 18 case studies. The project sought to identify parameters for future decision-making support systems by understanding LLL policies for young adults in their interplay between economy, society, the labour market and education and training systems at regional and local levels. To do so, it observed how LLL policies seek to create economic growth while guaranteeing social inclusion. Like many policies, YOUNG_ADULLLT was particularly concerned with young people in vulnerable situations.

Specifically, YOUNG_ADULLLT set three major objectives:

1) Understand the relationship and complementarity of LLL policies in terms of orientations and objectives to their specific target groups; this includes analysing their potential implications and intended and unintended effects on young adult life courses.

2) From the perspective of the young adults, the project enquires into policies' fit and potentials for successfully appreciating and exploiting the hidden resources of young adults for building life projects.

3) Research LLL policies in their embedding and interaction in the regional economy, the labour market and the individual life projects of young adults in order to identify best practices and patterns of coordinating policy-making at local/regional level.

This required analysing the compatibility, complementarity and implications of a wide range of LLL policy orientations, objectives, measures and target group constructions, always with a particular focus on regional specificities and young adults in vulnerable situations. Thus, it was also necessary to assess the ways in which the living standards of young adults condition their ability to pursue their life projects as well as young adults' outlooks on lifelong learning. Finally, fulfilling these objectives involved analysing the local and regional LLL policy networks, skills formation systems and best practices.

Three specifications are in order:

First, while YOUNG_ADULLLT uncovered a number of dimensions where diversity – both between and within countries – needs to be duly considered when designing and implementing LLL policies, this European Policy Brief focuses on elements that are relevant to all or, at least, the majority of the FRs studied.

Second, while policies typically equate 'employability' with the fulfilment of an economic goal through the adaptation of individuals to the labour market, either through prevention, compensation or activation strategies, YOUNG_ADULLLT suggests that 'employability' also needs to consider their empowerment. This means understanding individuals' needs and offering them tailor-made solutions that may relinquish further institutional and structural re-arrangements.

Lastly, in order to avoid essentialising young adults', YOUNG_ADULLLT understands 'vulnerability' as a social-relational notion, as exposure to social disadvantages that emerge from complex configurations of risks affecting various life domains, namely the economy, demography, education, participation, health and the labour market.

Lifelong learning policies supporting young adults' life courses: Meanings and impact

- 'Employability' is commonly applied by LLL policies, either as a main objective or a rationale for framing the policy agenda and practice, and this is implemented through four logics of intervention (prevention, compensation, activation and empowerment);
- 'Vulnerability' has been instrumental in framing the target groups of LLL policies, which tend to regard it more as an individual feature in need of compensation, correction and prevention rather than deriving from structural conditions and relations. Against this background, target groups are usually understood as problematic and the absence of a 'standard' life course is often taken as an indicator of 'vulnerability'. LLL policies, then, tend to be implemented as a series of ordered, normalised steps that need to be followed in order to fulfil social expectations and thus attain a desired 'normal' life course. However, life-courses are increasingly de-standardised and individualized, and young people's educational trajectories increasingly diversified.
- Target group construction is based on broad, standard criteria (age, educational qualifications, gender and immigration status, among others), often failing to consider the context-specific situations, living standards and specific needs of young adults. One reason for this is that young adults are rarely included in the processes of policy design and implementation.
- Resulting from the increased relevance of LLL, the vast majority of the policies analysed could hardly be clearly distinguished and attributed to a single policy sector (education, labour market or youth/social policy).

Regional landscapes of LLL policies in Europe

- There are significant differences in living conditions of young adults across countries and even between FRs. Also, the economic recession of the past decade has had a greater impact on the less developed regions, pointing to the need for understanding the dynamics of supply and demand in the specific contexts of the FRs and over time.
- FRs are complex configurations, and mismatches occur between their territorial/administrative boundaries and relational dynamics. Furthermore, their skills equilibrium is challenged by local dependencies, national structures and global economic development. There is need for data that illuminate how particular skills regimes and LLL policy and programme options play out at the FR level and in different sectors–and a co-ordinated approach to managing this. This also underlines the need for vigilance concerning the potential mismatch between programmes and the regional labour market –e.g. preparation for jobs that won't exist or jobs that are not 'decent'.
- Data that might assist in informing policy-making is scarce at the level of regions. Data available is more often than not aggregated at the national level, undermining their ability to offer a contextualised picture of the risk profiles related to the living conditions of young people in different European regions.

> **Coordinated policy-making in LLL: supporting decision-making**

- The ability of LLL policies to support young adults is weakened by the divergence of policies' designers, implementers and addressees on the issues at stake, the adequate solutions derived from them as well as on what counts as success. Young adults are more often than not perceived as passive beneficiaries, preventing thus their active involvement and participation.

- Policy-making patterns is the different regions studied is heavily influenced by mixed forms of governance—or metagovernance constellations: hierarchical (focused on accountability, strict proceedings, and process management); market (emphasising competition, output and decentralization of structures); network (focused on interdependence, interactive cooperation and more or less informal networks).

- Three main 'knots' were identified that offer insights in distinct phases of LLL policy-making, i.e. the *planning* of a particular policy, its institutional and organisational *regulation*, and its *provision* through the enactment in specific pedagogical arrangements.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Questioning the dominant representations of young adults put forward in policies requires recognising their active role not only as learners, but also as shapers of their own lives. Considering young adults 'vulnerable' because they do not follow a standard life course locates the responsibility for their vulnerable situation on their individual behaviour, disregarding structural economic and socio-demographic conditions. Characterising LLL target groups in negative undertones risks generating social stigma against, for instance, VET, regarded as a second – or even a last – choice for underachievers.

- Taking a wider perspective when defining LLL policy goals and orientations requires avowing a narrow view of 'employability' as simply intervening in individual's preparedness for work. Eliding goals related to distinct sectors (labour market, social and youth welfare and education) creates ambivalences and contradictions in the functions of LLL policies. Recognizing that promoting employability does not fully or necessarily equals promoting equity, the empowerment of individuals and tackling poverty and social exclusion.

- Acknowledging that lifelong learning policy-making and, even more so, LLL implementation are extremely context-specific, and accounting for the observation that each Functional Region has its unique pattern of governance of skills production and use, involving different actors, institutions and structural settings. Coordinating LLL policy-making requires increasing our understanding of the contexts within which measures are implemented – in particular by enhancing and improving data availability at regional and local levels. It is necessary to tap into new data sources not restricted to education and labour market status. The availability of information related to dimensions such as housing, social and political participation, individual well-being, relational and vital space and skills are needed for the construction of a more fine-grained analysis of the indicators of contextual living conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Avoid the pathologisation of individuals when defining target groups by distinguishing clearly the causes and the symptoms of their situation. Acknowledge that the unintended circulation of negative stereotypes will impact the motivation and expectations of young addressees of lifelong learning policies.

- Customise policy solutions that are neither too broad nor too narrow in addressing local/regional needs and expectations, and that engage with the current paradox of devising individual solutions to structural problems.

- Take particular attention to those in vulnerable situations, to 'low-achievers' and youths at risk in order to avoid creating an 'underclass' living in extreme and entrenched exclusion.

- Include training for trainers for those implementing policies on the ground, as they need to be able to provide guidance and information for young adults.

- Incorporate a more flexible approach at the core of LLL policies, one that can deal with features such as the regional definition of target groups, the precarity of professional careers, growing individualization and the globalization of markets.

- Involve young adults as active stakeholders in the design and assessment of LLL policies and alternative educational trajectories, both to better design LLL policies and to better gauge their response to contemporary youth's needs and expectations. Consider the subjective/biographical expectations of young people when defining the goals and success criteria of LLL policies.

- Ensure that clear, accessible and relevant data are available at the regional (NUTS 2 and NUTS 3) level so as to facilitate the adaptation of LLL policies to local contexts, improve the performance of local actors and enhance the adequacy of sub-national arrangements that are crucial to the implementation of LLL policies.

- Improve policy formulation, coordination, and monitoring at different levels, including the compatibility between policies in the education, labour and social/youth policy sectors.

- Consider (and allow for) local and regional variation in monitoring, evaluation and policy-making (e.g. in the design of national skills policies) processes.

- Improve the articulation between the educational system and the labour market, namely through an enhanced understanding of regional differences in labour market demand and supply, an assessment of the equality of access to VET, and weighing up regional employment opportunities with skills training.

- Improve the coordination, flexibility and attractiveness of educational offers in two dimensions: a structural one, encompassing investment in higher secondary education, improvement of the coordination between higher secondary and university programmes and adult education, the revision and update of the technical and professional education system, and the provision of more flexible modes and paths of training in real work environments; a communicational one, aimed at increasing the attractiveness of vocational education and training.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Policies Supporting Young People in their Life Course. A Comparative Perspective of Lifelong Learning and Inclusion in Education and Work in Europe (YOUNG_ADULLLT)
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