



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

young adult 

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

**COMPARATIVE
PERSPECTIVE ON THE
REGIONAL GOVERNANCE
OF SKILLS**

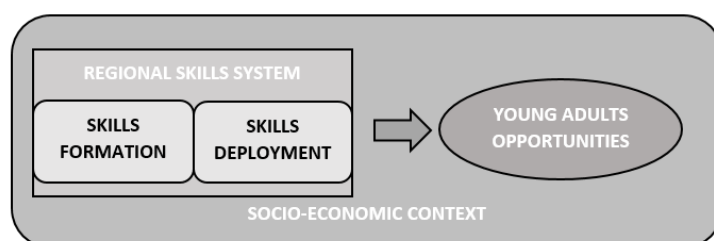
Skills agendas are commonly drawn at the national level, but their enactment usually takes place at the regional and local level. The differences in educational and employment opportunities experienced across regions and varying socioeconomic contexts influence young adults' educational and labour experiences. This document addresses the challenges experienced by regions when governing skills systems, and the consequences for young adults.

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February 2018

INTRODUCTION

- *The aim of the YOUNG_ADULLLT research project* is to provide a thorough analysis of lifelong learning (LLL) policies in Europe, paying special attention to young adults who live in a situation of social vulnerability. The research addresses the existent tension in LLL policies that aim to combine economic growth and social inclusion.
- *This policy brief focuses* on to the regional governance of the skills supply and demand across European countries. The policy directions on skills formation are commonly drawn at the national level, but their enactment usually takes place at the regional and local level. The different educational and employment opportunities experienced across regions are likely to influence young adults' educational and (un)employment experiences.
- In order to understand the *regional governance of skills* it is important to identify relevant actors and institutions involved in it, the way they interact and collaborate with each other, their interests and mechanisms of coordination, and how these affect the educational and employment opportunities of young adults in the region. Moreover, each region has to face its specific skills challenges, such as skills shortages, overqualification or unemployment.
- *The objective of this policy brief* is to present the lessons learnt from the comparative analysis of the regional governance of skills in 18 regions located in 9 European countries, outlining the different challenges faced by regions in their skills agenda.
- *The recommendations* highlight some poignant issues that cannot be overlooked in any open discussion on regional skills agendas and aim to promote policy learning across European regions.

- *The comparison of the regional governance of skills* in the 18 regions under study — corresponding to 9 European countries — has been based on four main points: 1) the actors and institutions involved in the governance; 2) their degree of involvement and commitment with Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems (e.g. funding and provision); 3) the levels and mechanisms of coordination among actors to govern the region; and 4) the regional socioeconomic context and relevant skills (mis)matches. These have been identified as the main factors constituting the *regional skills ecology*.



1) Actors and institutions:

- A comparative approach across regions shows that the main similarity refers to the presence and direct influence of national institutions in the region. Similarities can also be drawn between regions within the same countries, as most of them present the same — or fairly similar — formal actors involved in the regional governance of skills.
- In most regions there is at least one institution mediating the supply and demand of skills formation, although with different degrees of involvement and action. Most regions also present an institution that aims at smoothing the relationship between the supply and demand of skills in the labour market. Similarly, most regions institutionally link the relevance of skills formation in the region to the labour market needs. A series of regional challenges – which are discussed later on – can be identified in these three key points where institutional arrangements are considered to mediate different parts of the regional skills system.

2) Commitment to VET:

- Across most countries, the institutions and coordination mechanisms with regards to the VET system are established at the national level and enacted at the regional one. Most countries have stressed the high public commitment to skills formation, mainly based on the provision and funding of VET. Several countries have pointed out the relevance of European Social Funding (ESF) to support VET and other employability courses in the regions.
- Despite the relevance of VET and apprenticeship policies across countries, the degree of employers' involvement in VET is low in most of them, Austria and Germany being the exceptions. In most cases employers only contribute to the provision of VET if no extra direct costs are to be assumed on their part. However, some countries have pointed out the variation of employers' involvement across sectors.

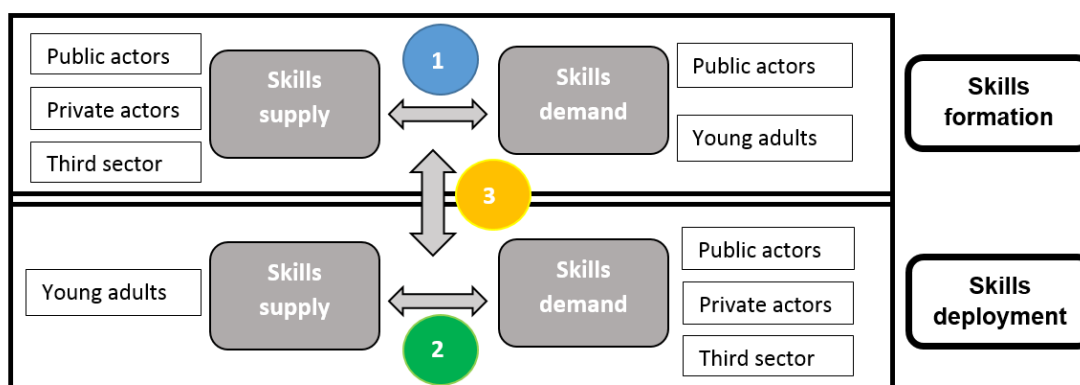
3) Levels and mechanisms of coordination:

- There is certainly some variation across regions on the degree of decentralisation, although within countries it remains stable. The extent to which the steering and value of skills comes from a public or a market perspective is more controversial.
- The mechanisms of coordination at the regional level, between the education and training system and the existing firms, vary widely across countries. While Austria

and Germany — and to a lesser extent Finland — base their overall coordination in institutional arrangement, in Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy and Portugal institutional coordination is project-based. Scotland and Spain tend to do it based on providing information to address market failures.

4) Social and functional skills mis(matches):

- Regions experience a range of different types of skills (mis)matches. Several regions are affected by skills shortages, either in specific sectors of the economy, for specific educational levels or during different seasons of the year. In some cases these skills shortages are more related to the employability of youths, while in other cases these are more related to the unattractive working conditions and salaries of the jobs available.
 - Skills surplus is another of the mismatches affecting several regions. In some cases this translates into unemployment (e.g. in Croatia), whereas in others it turns into overqualification (e.g. in Bulgaria and Spain). Skills equilibrium at the low and high level is experienced to a larger extent in regions with a predominant urban area (e.g. Bremen, Glasgow, Milan and Vienna).
 - Low-skilled youths in urban regions are the ones facing more difficult educational and employment trajectories and are usually trapped in unemployment or low skills equilibrium. In many cases it is strongly related to young people's social background, especially in countries with educational pathways leading to dead ends or limited funding for VET.
 - Youth from an immigrant background or belonging to ethnic minorities are more affected by unemployment, overqualification and low skilled equilibrium in several regions. The social groups most affected by unemployment vary widely across regions, being in some cases higher educated youths, low skilled women or youths with immigrant background or belonging to an ethnic minority.
- *The formal enactment of the national structures at the regional level* can be considered fairly stable across regions. However, the actual functioning of these institutions, the relationship between actors involved in the skills system, and the influence of these interactions on young adults' lives are very much influenced by the structural and contextual regional factors.
 - *A set of regional challenges* perceived by key regional actors interviewed have been identified. These can be classified in three groups which refer to key transition: 1) in the lifelong learning system; 2) from education to work; and 3) the relevance of skills formation for regional labour market needs.



- 1) *The transitions within the lifelong learning system* is where less overall challenges have been encountered. In some countries the main threat refers to rigid educational pathways leading to dead ends, which becomes a trap for skills upgrading for the most disadvantaged youths. The role of European Social Funding (ESF) has been mentioned as a very relevant source of funding for several regions, but the question remains as to what extent regions should be dependent on European funding or be able to sustain themselves in the long term.

- 2) *The education and labour market spheres* are largely disconnected in several regions. While in countries with less-developed VET systems and apprenticeship schemes its development is regarded as the only way to smooth youths transition to the labour market, those regions where VET and apprenticeships have a long-standing record struggle with the scarcity of vacancies in which to place students, and the quality of the training. Unsurprisingly, the most affected by these problems are socially disadvantaged youths.

Regional data systems providing information on current skills supply and demand are in place and have been deemed useful in several regions. However, the limitations of these labour intelligence systems have also been stressed, as their slow pace does not cater for the rapid socioeconomic and labour shocks, and struggles with the forecasting of future skills needs.

Initiatives to address the school to work transition vary across regions. While in some regions the solution proposed is to improve youth skills to meet the labour market demands, in other regions they claim that the main problem is the limited number of jobs available in the region or the precarious working conditions offered in the predominant sectors, which youths do not find attractive.

- 3) *The relevance of skills formation for the regional labour market* is a recurrent topic. In most regions the tension identified is to what extent the publicly-funded skills formation system should serve the needs of the private employers, even if it promotes youth employment. While most public authorities are willing to fund and provide general skills, employers are more interested in occupation, industry and firm-specific skills. The tension is even stronger in those regions where there is a predominant industry or sector (e.g. oil & gas, tourism), as it might be the only feasible source of employment.

A cross-cutting issue across regions and countries is the employers' wish list with regards to youths' transversal and soft skills, as well as their positive attitudes and commitment to work. To what extent employers' claims might realistically fit with the standard level of maturity among youth at that life stage, and the working conditions offered by them, remains under discussion, as well as to what extent public institutions have to consider and fund transversal and soft skills.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Skills policies are usually promoted and designed at the national level, and they do not always address cross-regional heterogeneity:
 - *Consider regional differences and skills challenges when designing national skills policies* that are to be enacted and implemented at the regional and local level. Additional resources and support might be needed in some regions to attain the expected policy objectives.
 - *Spare a thought for allowing for some degree of flexibility* in the decision- and policy-making at the local and regional level to better address specific local and regional needs.
- Most lifelong learning systems are designed to fit learners with specific characteristics, paying little attention to learners with non-standard trajectories:
 - *Take into account alternative and/or more flexible educational pathways* to avoid dead-ends and limited opportunities for those young adults that do not follow a standard trajectory.
 - *Consider regional variation*, as the profile of these young adults is likely to change across regions, as well as the educational and employment opportunities around them.
- Vocational education and training (VET) and apprenticeship schemes are regarded as the most common form of smoothing the transition from education to work for young adults, but it is a complex system that requires a lot of previous consideration and it might not be the solution for all youth:

- *Take into account equality of access* to VET and into apprenticeship positions, as well as the *quality of the work-based training* to promote equality of opportunities and outcomes among youth.
- *Consider alternative and/or complementary forms of facilitating labour market insertion* for youth with other educational levels who also struggle to find a job.
- Most skills policies aim to improve youth employability, but sometimes the main challenge might be in the limited and/or poor labour market demands:
 - *Weigh up regional employment opportunities* with skills training.
 - *Consider youth's expectations and preferences* when designing the offer of regional skills training, in addition to regional labour market needs.
- Most regional skills policies focus on the relevance of skills for the labour market demand, without bearing in mind that public funding should also commit to youth's and societal concerns:
 - *Weigh up the funding and provision of skills formation* relevant to regional labour needs among public authorities, employers, third sector institutions and youths.
- Employers have high expectations with regards to youth transversal and soft skills, as well as positive attitudes and commitment to work. However, they might not be aware of their level of maturity:
 - *Raise awareness* among employers about youth skills levels and expectations, as well as their need for working experience opportunities.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

- Against the background of 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 LLL 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 (NEETs) or those in situations of social exclusion.
- YOUNG_ADULLLT uses three different entry points:
 1. On an **institutional** level, the project starts by focusing on various LLL policies and analyses their potentially competing (and possibly ambivalent) orientations and objectives;
 2. 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;
 3. 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:
 1. ***New knowledge on the impact of LLL policies on young adults' life courses***, identifying the conditions, strategies, and necessities for policies to become effective;
 2. ***Insights on the innovations and potentials LLL policies unlock***, with a view to informal and non-formal learning to better address vulnerable groups;
 3. ***A better understanding of the structural relationships and functional match*** between education and training and the labour market sectors;
 4. ***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.
- YOUNG_ADULLLT approach to the work is characterised by:
 - ***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;
 - *An 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 WP6 national reports providing evidence and analyses based on semi-structured interviews with key regional policymakers and stakeholders (n=81) and the review of relevant grey literature in the country and region (n=129).

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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FUNDING SCHEME	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”	
DURATION	March 2016 – February 2019 (36 months).	
BUDGET	EU contribution: 2 499 075 €.	
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FURTHER READING	- Capsada-Munsech, Q. et. al. (2018), <i>WP6 International Report: Comparative Analysis Skills Supply and Demand</i> , YOUNG_ADULLLT, Working Papers. University of Glasgow. Online at: http://www.young-adulllt.eu/publications/working-paper	
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