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## **Regional lifelong learning policies and the social vulnerability of young adults in Girona and Vienna**

7036 words

This article explores the interface between lifelong learning policies and the definition of social vulnerability of young adults in two regions located within the European Union. Girona (Spain) comprises a constellation of small towns with important industry, service and hospitality sectors. Vienna (Austria) is a global city where many key international operators are based and employ a large number of highly qualified professionals. The article explores to what extent the meta-governance and the ‘causal narratives’ of lifelong learning policies contribute towards shaping the prevailing images of youth vulnerability in these regions. In Girona, bureaucratic governance patterns lifelong learning policies, which strongly rely on the potential of career guidance to encourage the youth to undertake further education. Correspondingly, policy designs and professional discourses emphasise that the beneficiaries previously failed at school. In Vienna, authorities govern lifelong learning by means of both bureaucracy and complex networks of employers and non-profit organisations. The ‘causal narrative’ of the policies straightforwardly claims that all youth must have an experience with employment, whether in apprenticeships or in transitional workshops that emulate real jobs. There, policies portray beneficiaries according to their capacity to undertake and finish apprenticeships.

Keywords: lifelong learning, young adults, vulnerability, functional regions

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## **Introduction**

This article compares lifelong learning policies targeted at young adults in vulnerable situations who live in two regions within the EU, namely: Girona (a part of Catalonia) in Spain and Vienna in Austria. Local and regional governments draw on the support of the European Social Fund (ESF) to implement a Youth Guarantee Scheme (YGS) that conveys some lifelong learning policies.

The first section of the article develops the theoretical concepts that inspire the research questions (as summarised in table 2). The second section outlines the key research decisions on sampling and interviewing professionals and young adults as well as on comparing two EU regions. The third and fourth sections delve into in-depth descriptions of lifelong learning policies in both cases. The final section discusses this analysis and presents some brief comparative conclusions.

## ***Governing lifelong learning***

Although lifelong learning policies include school education, the concept is much wider. Among others, it also encompasses measures that provide education and training to the population above the school leaving age. In addition, it articulates these measures with active labour market policies and social welfare.

The European Council (2013) has endorsed lifelong learning policies in the European Union by recommending the member states to enact a Youth Guarantee Scheme (YGS). The YGS foresees that all youth who either leave education or lose a job have an opportunity within a maximum period of four months, which may consist of enrolling in education or training, doing a traineeship, undertaking an internship or getting a job.

Previous research has convincingly shown that, in the European Union, lifelong learning policies actually prioritise employability rather than other objectives (Butler and Muir, 2016). Research has also observed that varied youth regimes and modes of governance convey lifelong learning policies (Walther, 2017; Bussemeyer and Tampush, 2011; Green et al, 2015). Crucial to our analysis is the observation that these valuable precedents have not yet accounted for regional policies.

Policy-making normally involves meta-governance, that is to say, the intended mixing of markets, bureaucracies and networks to achieve the best possible outcomes from the point of view of participants. Markets are competitive social fields where participants aim to obtain profit through different means. Bureaucracies are vertical organisations that normally operate through hierarchies of positions and norms. Networks are variable sets of connections between these stakeholders. A crucial feature of networks is that participants easily change the objective and the partners of their connections (Jessop, 2004, 2007; Sorensen and Torfing, 2017).

Meta-governance varies across functional regions as defined by regular connections between places that share common local labour markets and transport systems (Klapka et al, 2013). Although bureaucratic governance deals with regions within specific administrative jurisdictions, it also influences functional regions beyond these limits through the powers of municipalities and regions. Network governance also shapes regions by constituting spaces of mobilisation and representation.

In general, the European Union implements policies at two regional levels (NUTS2 and NUTS3). Some previous research on the geographical scales of the EU itself and the member states has found out that variable configurations of bureaucratic and network governance greatly contribute to differentiate these regions (Keating, 2009: 22).

Lifelong learning policies constitute training provision markets and involve bureaucracies such as Public Employment Services (PES) and networks of several types of stakeholders. National and local governments, specialised departments such as the PES, employers, unions, professionals, training providers and other actors join these networks. Our analysis asks two research questions on the role of regional bureaucracies and networks of stakeholders in the making of lifelong learning policies (see Table 2).

In the European Union, lifelong learning policies invite an array of stakeholders to collaborate on the grounds of a shared ‘causal narrative’. Policy studies have widely observed that policies normally convey (either explicit or implicit) sets of causal beliefs that construct narratives on the changes that the policy is expected to provoke. This pattern of policy-making is instrumental for the European Commission to influence an increasing array of policy areas. At the same time, these narratives equip all the parties with a set of factual claims that posit problems, establish goals and suggest criteria for evaluation (Radaelli et al., 2013).

The European Council (2013: 3-5) has explicitly invited these stakeholders to frame their activity within a shared ‘causal narrative’ that emphasises the hypothetical effect of lifelong learning on employability. Remarkably, a Council Recommendation encourages both national and sub-national governments to use the EU funds according to conditions that require building partnership-based approaches, deploying early intervention and activation, fostering labour market integration by enhancing skills and partially subsidising wages, and finally, improving schemes by means of continuous assessment. Clearly, most of these measures address labour market policies, including social benefits in some countries.

The Recommendation hypothesises that partnerships, early intervention and activation,

labour market integration, skills development and continuous assessment significantly contribute towards guaranteeing minimal opportunities for all youth. In terms of the official benchmarks and indicators of the Europe 2020 Strategy, it is plausible to interpret that, if the previous conditions are in place, the Recommendation envisages a substantial reduction of the proportion of youth who leave school too early and who are not in employment, education or training. In order to assess the reception of this narrative, we ask a specific research question on how regional stakeholders understand lifelong learning in their practice. It is important to observe convergences in this aspect (see Table 2).

In each region, policy actors eventually construe portraits of social vulnerability by engaging in the webs of social relations that convey meta-governance and disseminate ‘causal narratives’ (Radaelli et al, 2013). Although the literature has already observed that employment-centred ‘causal narratives’ underpin some views on vulnerability, this article will qualify this generalisation by exploring the same phenomenon in two different functional regions.

Apparently, the focus on employability portrays a number of circumstances as factors of vulnerability. On the one hand, although youths undertake a varied array of education, training and guidance pathways, the policies that focus on employability reduce these to a linear view of transitions between non-employment and employment (Castel, 1995). On the other hand, although the proportion of the population who are not in employment or training and the youth who are not in either of these conditions form a very heterogeneous collective, this negative definition has become the mainstream criterion to select the target group of lifelong learning policies (Furlong, 2006). In this vein, we ask a final research question on the perception of social vulnerability. The

analysis contrasts the view of professionals and young people in order to analyse which portraits of social vulnerability prevail. It is important to make sense of either similar or dissimilar local connotations.

In short, the academic literature has spelt out three clues that connect regional lifelong learning policies and the social construction of vulnerability. An initial set of questions inquire about the role of regional bureaucracies and networks of stakeholders. A second theme has to do with the official narratives that articulate professionals' causal beliefs on the expected outcomes. Finally, a third theme lies in how professionals and young adults construe vulnerability.

### ***Comparative Analysis: the cases of Girona and Vienna***

In this section, we report on the methods of data collection and analysis and briefly contextualise the living conditions of young adults in Girona and Vienna.

This article is a product of the YOUNG ADULLLT<sup>1</sup> research project. This project conducted more than 150 interviews with young adults and more than 100 interviews with experts in Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain and

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<sup>1</sup> YOUNG\_ADULLLT is the acronym of the European project 'Policies Supporting Young People in their Life Course. A Comparative Perspective of Lifelong Learning and Inclusion in Education and Work in Europe'. The European Commission funds YOUNG\_ADULLLT under the call H2020-YOUNG-SOCIETY-2015 (Contract Number: 693167). The following partners conducted the study between 2016 and 2019: University of Freiburg, University of Frankfurt, Plovdiv University, South-West University of Blagoevgrad, University of Zagreb, University of Glasgow, University of Lisbon, University of Porto, Autonomous University of Barcelona, University of Genoa, University of Vienna, University of Granada, University of Turku and European Research Services GmbH. The University of Münster coordinates the project. Project website: <http://www.young-adulllt.eu>.

the United Kingdom (Scotland). In all these nine member states of the EU, researchers selected two functional regions — Girona and Vienna among them, in order to investigate lifelong learning policies at the local level. Then, researchers focused on policies in each region, such as the Centre for New Opportunities in Girona and Back to the Future in Vienna.

Girona and Vienna are two relevant case studies because of their very geographical features. Local functional connections are looser in the former. In addition, Table 1 outlines the regional economy, education, labour market and social exclusion of Catalonia and Vienna compared to the average of 28 EU countries. These data simply contextualise the information of the two following case studies. Particularly, the indicators show that not only the economy but also the education system and the labour market are quite different.



As a rule, the population of Vienna is wealthier and better educated than Catalonia<sup>2</sup>. It is also noticeable that there are more students enrolled in vocational education in Vienna. Young people are at risk of vulnerability in terms of education and employment in Catalonia. However, a significantly smaller share of the population of Catalonia suffers from a risk of poverty and social exclusion. Actually, big cities normally have a greater share of the population exposed to factors of vulnerability. In Vienna, a couple of circumstances have recently strengthened this trend: social benefits were more generous and many of the refugees who arrived in 2015 live in the city.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Mostly, Girona and Vienna illustrate varying configurations of meta-governance, causal narratives and social perceptions of vulnerability. These regions are relevant case studies for the following reasons. On the one hand, both are similar to the extent that bureaucracy plays the predominant role and the causal narrative revolves around employment. On the other hand, networks are weaker in Girona. Therefore, it is plausible to inquire whether professionals and the very young adults attribute the same connotations to social vulnerability.

### ***Analysis of the Centre of New Opportunities (CNO) in Girona***

Girona is the north-eastern administrative province of Catalonia, located next to the border with France. It is a constellation of small towns with both important industry and

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<sup>2</sup> Since Girona is a NUTS3 (included in the NUTS2 of Catalonia) but Vienna is both a NUTS2 and a NUTS3, we cannot compare all the indicators in Girona and Vienna. Instead, Table 1 attempts to outline some differences by simply comparing Catalonia and Vienna.

service sectors as well as an appealing catalogue of cultural activities. The province also has well-known tourist resorts on the coast. Thus, a significant share of the labour force works in manufacturing, high-value services and the hospitality sector. These sectors enrol some professionals and technicians, but hospitality also creates many low-skilled jobs.

#### MAP 1 ABOUT HERE

Only a loose set of functional connections configure Girona as a region. In fact, many people commute to Barcelona and the railway and bus systems are subsidiary to the capital. However, a regional labour market and some train and bus services link the neighbouring towns located in the plain of Empordà, Garrotxa, Gironès and La Selva. Thus, only a few western counties that pertain to the mountain economy of the Pyrenees lie beyond these connections (Government of Catalonia, 1995).

Although the province scores well on socio-economic indicators in comparison with Spain, it is not particularly privileged compared to most EU regions. In fact, the number of years of education is average and youth unemployment is relatively high (Scandurra et al, 2017).

The Government of Spain has regulated the Youth Guarantee Scheme (YGS) with a decree that lists the measures that cater to the youth, which the ‘autonomous communities’ have reproduced. In 2015, the Catalan Public Employment Service (PES) reformed this general approach by opening public tenders to select external institutions which are in charge of Centres for New Opportunities (CNO). Each CNO operates in a given territory, either a district of the Barcelona conurbation or a region such as Central Catalonia, Girona, Lleida, Tarragona and Terres de l’Ebre.

In Spain, the majority of vocational training programmes have delivered short-term courses to the unemployed, many of whom have been young people since the financial and fiscal crises. In contrast, Centres of New Opportunities (CNOs) consist of a two-year programme that provides guidance to low-skilled 18-to-24 year-olds, helps them to find training courses, and convenes Jobs Fairs where trainees showcase their skills to local employers.

In Spain, governments normally commit the bulk of training programmes to companies and non-profit organisations which compete according to the conditions of yearly public calls. In contrast, the Catalan PES commits CNOs for two-year periods to consortia formed by either companies or non-profit organisations. This solution is a response to ongoing debates on how public departments should outsource public services.

The CNO is accountable to a hierarchy of authorities, not least because it must comply with the legal dispositions established by the Catalan PES. Moreover, the success of the programme depends on a set of standard indicators that the Catalan PES, the Spanish Ministry of Employment and the European Social Fund monitor regularly.

However, the interviews unveiled three important weaknesses of bureaucratic monitoring. First, disparate time schedules and institutional capacity significantly hinder coordination. Although the PES contracts out the CNOs to a consortium of non-profit organisations for a number of years, municipalities run training programmes for at most one-year periods. Municipalities are the main authority in charge of vocational training and active labour market policies, but local governments struggle with this responsibility in small towns. Second, since the qualifications framework only allows courses that meet very restrictive criteria to be certified, many training programmes do not provide official vocational certificates. Therefore, the trainees only get informal

certificates. Third, in the interviews both municipal public officers and the managers of the CNO were disappointed with many private training providers. Training providers receive a lump sum per course. In contrast with municipalities, unions and the Chamber of Commerce, most private providers fully depend on this money. On the ground, professionals are wary of some providers who apparently attempt to increase their subsidy by leading the youths to enrol in their own courses (Rambla et al, 2017).

Although some spurs of network governance are emerging, they are all far from consolidated (Rambla et al, 2017). Thus, the Girona Municipal VET Council will gather a variety of stakeholders, but it was not yet operating in 2017. At that moment the Catalan PES funded municipalities, the Chamber of Commerce and some unions to hire YGS Facilitators for Girona and neighbouring towns, but further meetings revealed that budget constraints had wounded the scheme down one year later.

At most, the interviews indicate that some informal networks are in the making. For instance, the CNO Girona links with other services as well as with employers. The programme regularly consults schools, social services and municipal employment services about the profile of the youths registered in their YGS lists. In addition, it also meets employers in the annual Jobs Fair. However, these networks consist of regular, short meetings between professionals who contact each another personally (Rambla et al, 2017).

The Catalan PES conceives the CNOs as programmes that compensate for early school leaving by means of active labour market policies. The interviewed professionals endeavoured to encourage beneficiaries to make well-grounded decisions about their employment and vocational projects. In their view, the programme helped the

beneficiaries to take a step forward by providing guidance and support as well as some direct contact with workplaces (Rambla et al, 2017).

The bulk of the young interviewees who were participating in the CNO reported severe disengagement from school during their adolescence. Some of them had suffered from bullying too. Some had learnt about the CNO from their secondary education teachers. Others had found out about it after dropping out of vocational education (Rambla et al, 2017).

Regarding the CNO itself, young interviewees declared that they were learning how to prepare for work. They felt they were also developing some attitudes that might be instrumental to get a job. Since many beneficiaries of the CNO felt satisfied because someone listened to them and helped them to go ahead, they started thinking about their life projects. For example, one interviewee said he had become more patient than he used to be. Others said now they felt capable of coming to agreements with tutors. A few of them illustrated their learning by arguing that they had realised they could bridge their hobbies with vocational perspectives (e.g. football, cooking). Some were very happy because, in the short internships the programme schedules for them, they had seen real work places (Rambla et al, 2017).

Since 2015, CNOs have delivered systematic support to young people who are exposed to social vulnerability. Legal dispositions clearly state criteria for eligibility, an emphasis on guidance, conditions to enrol in training courses, the length of the participation of each beneficiary and a set of outputs regarding further education and employment.

According to the official policy brief, 2,875 youths participated in CNOs between 2015 and 2017. Of these, 861 decided to continue their further education while 263 decided to look for a job. The same document reports on the amount of participating employers and non-profits. It also collects indicators of positive impacts, but does not document how many youths had benefited from more than one of these impacts. Thus, 30% had signed a job contract, 50% had achieved a formal qualification and 29% had engaged in volunteer work (Government of Catalonia, 2018).

This policy brief indicates that the programme essentially draws on bureaucracy. Although these conclusions mention employers and the third sector, the brief does not define the role of these stakeholders but simply presents a concise count of participants. In addition, although CNOs are regional by definition, the report overlooks any geographical information. The point is that official documents portray the beneficiaries of CNOs as individual subjects who make their choice regardless of the concrete, local opportunities.

Thus, in 2017 and 2018 the ‘causal narrative’ of CNOs was exclusively focused on employment. Although street-level professionals were aware of the multi-dimensional aspects of young adults’ lives, in the last judgement they expected the labour market to heal the scars of previous bad experiences in the school system.

In the end, the stakeholders of the Girona CNO served as a quick fix of the labour market. Although the programme was designed to upgrade skills, the professionals struggled to find a job in the short term. In fact, only a few youths really expected much better opportunities, and many local SMEs only looked for low-skilled employees. Either these employers refused to hire qualified workers or felt incapable of availing of more skilled human resources (Jacovkis et al, 2017).

In this vein, the CNOs had become a remedial programme targeted at those groups of young adults who experience the most severe factors of social vulnerability. Remarkably, by roughly identifying the CNOs with the YGS, the abovementioned official brief states that ‘the YGS provides opportunities to youths and delivers some grants’ to support this target group in Girona (Government of Catalonia, 2018). In contrast, newspapers report that ‘enrolment is open for youths who face more difficulties, those who need an adapted school curriculum, those who live in foster care, and migrant youth who lack family role models’. The same piece of news interprets that professionals mostly provide guidance to these beneficiaries, who allegedly need empowerment in order to overcome their biographical uncertainty and thus unlock their potential (Pladeveya, 2018).

In a nutshell, CNOs convey lifelong learning by bureaucratic means and avail of very weak synergies with networks. Most participants roughly agree on the importance of psychological support for young adults who live in vulnerable social conditions. By drawing on this pattern of meta-governance and this causal narrative, CNOs seem to institutionalise an extremely personalised understanding of social vulnerability but are unaware of regional circumstances and implicitly transform the YGS into a targeted policy for the worst-off. Although the CNO Girona is a regional programme, available official accounts rely on statistical targets that overlook the regional dimension.

### **Analysis of Back to the Future in Vienna**

Vienna plays a significant role in the regional, national and international context beyond national borders. Since the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia are located in a range of one hundred kilometres, the city is connected to middle-sized cities beyond the national borders quite well by regional train. Approximately 180,000 people commute

to Vienna on a daily basis from within Austria (Brezina et al. 2015). In this urban labour market, two particularly visible trends are the expansion of the service sector and a significant rise in the number of jobs with a high qualification profile in both the industry and the services sectors. Currently, only 20% of the labour force works in manual jobs (Eichmann and Nocker 2015: 2). For these reasons, the indicators of youth employment and education score significantly high in Vienna compared to other EU regions (Scandurra et al., 2017).

## MAP 2 ABOUT HERE

However, due to the substantial population growth, in 2015 the unemployment rate of Vienna rose to 13.5%, that is, four percent points above the 9.1% Austrian average (AMS Wien 2016: 4). Similarly, in 2013 the city recorded a higher rate of young NEET population (10.4 %) than the 6.9 % Austrian average (AK OÖ 2015). In June 2016, municipal primary care services catered to 21,000 asylum seekers (ÖIF 2016). Consequently, the apprenticeship scheme must respond to more difficult challenges in Vienna than in Austria. While 27.4 job seekers compete for each vacancy in the city, this rate is only 12.1 for the whole country (AMS Wien 2016).

In Vienna, as in the rest of Austria, LLL policies are based on neocorporatist actors and documents like directives, which were produced on higher hierarchical levels (National or European) and influence the regional agenda. A good example of this influence is the “Vienna Qualification Plan 2020”, which was introduced in 2013 by a set of institutions (Social partners, Service Department of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and Municipal Authorities). It is particularly targeted at formally low qualified people, who are provided with schooling, training, motivation activities and information. Concerning the Youth Guarantee, Austria went a step further than Spain and in 2017 implemented



compulsory education and training until the age of 18. Early school leavers receive support to complete their secondary education.

In spring 2016 the Municipal Department for Social Affairs (MA40) and WAFF (Vienna Employment Promotion Fund) drafted a call for the project “Back to the Future”, which responds to the regional objectives by offering transitional part-time employment for a period of 12 months for approximately 200 young adults (age 18-24 years), who receive minimum income subsidies (*Mindestsicherung*). Private providers, supported by the Public Employment Service (PES), implement it and counteract the growing number of unemployed and dependent youth in Vienna. The official goal of the project is to provide a regular, meaningful job and to integrate the participants in the first labour market (25% of the participants should be in employment three months after the programme).

According to the respondents, “Back to the Future” compared to most other projects stands out in terms of the amount of funding, number of participants and its remarkable practical approach. This makes it outstandingly efficient, which the experts describe as rising dogma in regional policymaking.

In general, a systematic rationale underpins a consortium of authorities to command “Back to the Future”. Despite some problems with administrative work, experts report on multi-sided cooperation. They are also assertive regarding the regulation of private providers. Constant monitoring and financial pressure enables the authorities to ensure the policy is correctly implemented.

As previously indicated, local authorities are involved in all facets of lifelong learning and collaborate with diverse institutions within a network, contributing to a stable

system. Instead of single stakeholders, the interlocutors of negotiations are associations of unions and employers such as the Chamber of Labour and the Chamber of Commerce.

In recent decades, Austria's active labour market policies have shifted from passive to active. Social subsidies are not paid tacitly any longer. The activation paradigm became the prevailing approach and the people in need are increasingly forced into employment or training programmes.

In Vienna, Public Employment Services (e.g. MA40, WAFF) shape the agenda of lifelong learning policies according to European regulations by consulting private providers and often commissioning research. In the final implementation, street-level professionals have considerable freedom to adjust to diverse situations, as long as they stay within the given regulations.

In the interviews, these professionals criticised the lack of clarity and the administrative complexity of the overall institutional setting. Since some responsibilities are unclear, instead of immediately taking care of the problem, authorities tried passing it on to the next authority by arguing that they were not responsible—one expert described it as a game of jackstraws. Furthermore, the administrative complexity of the ESF (European Social Fund) was a common concern in many interviews. Experts joked that the preparation of all bills takes longer than the actual policy.

Authorities have an almost free hand over the private providers, as they are in charge of the entire finances (including the option to extend the project period), drafting the calls for new programmes and monitoring the process of ongoing ones. The providers' street-level professionals did not mention underground competition among them, although

they are paid according to the number of participants they have in their programme. However, private providers fight for visibility among PES consultants, who send unemployed clients to their policies. Since the consultants work with a diffuse system of indicators and excel tables, much depends on their individual knowledge. In order to draw attention to the own policy, social providers organize presentations and guided tours for PES staff.

Local Authorities -especially the PES- limit the competition of private providers, who have to apply for their calls. The criteria of those calls limit the access. For instance, the call for *Back to the Future* demands many years of experience and enough infrastructure to offer at least 35 transitional work places. This excludes a good share of new and smaller providers.

In Vienna, active, labour market policies are generally aimed at employment or at improving employability, which can be seen as an investment –education or work experience- by the individual to ease his/her way into the labour market. Unlike traditional social subsidies, current schemes compel beneficiaries to accept unattractive jobs and enrol in training courses (Betzelt & Bothfeld 2011). Most expert interviewees interpreted that young adults are not living in the “sobering reality of work”. In their view, the beneficiaries of *Back to the Future* need to learn this by means of direct counselling and practice in work routines in a regular job.

These professionals perceived the complexity of multi-dimensional aspects in young people's lives and were aware of the importance of their individual aspirations, but thought that those aspirations had to be adjusted to "the reality" –thus filtering out ungrounded expectations. Paradoxically, while the policy insists on personal independence, the eventual rationale is paternalistic.

The young interviewees reported on falling into resignation concerning their future work life before they entered *Back to the Future*. This was due to multiple frustrating part-time jobs, bad experience with education and/or inconvenient circumstances. However, they experienced the programme as very stimulating and as ordinary work rather than many other programmes of vocational training. However, most of them were aware that *Back to the Future* did not operate in the primary labour market. For this reason, while they were proud that they had finally found a job, many felt ashamed of relying on subsidised projects. Overall, the positive aspects like daily structure and meaning predominated, leading to mental/social stability, and boosted their self-esteem which they had previously lost under the pressure of societal exclusion. Although some participants – in particular those in the production sector – complained about the monotonous work routine, and others mentioned too few chances to speak to social workers, the majority would have liked more counselling regarding their applications, curriculum vitae and the like.

*Back to the Future* targets the very distinctive group of low-educated and unemployed young recipients of social subsidies. Policy-makers and street-level professionals are familiar with statistics and research findings that stress how over-hasty integration in low-quality, undesired jobs bears a negative effect on the subjective employability of unemployed youths (Steiber et al. 2017).

Moreover, *Back to the Future* enables young participants to change their life course and leave their track, which are highly institutionalised “one way roads”, especially in Austria. However, although professionals attempt to respond as well as possible to individual aspirations, the choices are still to a large extent (but not exclusively) predetermined, oriented towards market needs and limited in their number. Therefore, their interventions eventually seek to encourage the beneficiaries to jump between tracks instead of choosing a way on their own.

A central point of critique on the programme is that it does not provide a job certificate. Not holding a relevant certificate means systematic discrimination in the Austrian labour market, which is highly institutionalised through the dual system and based on collective agreements. Formal qualifications are points of reference for wage calculation and needed to access certain labour market sectors. If *Back to the Future* only favours transition to the primary labour market under these conditions, most participants cannot fully leave the vulnerable situation.

In short, *Back to the Future* seeks to improve the skills of the youth who live in the global city of Vienna but face huge barriers to follow institutional pathways towards the many jobs that demand some developed skills. The municipal and federal authorities steer the programme by means of quite stable agreements, which align the action of different levels of government. *Back to the Future* also relies on the cooperation of the dense network of unions, boards of employers and non-profit organisations that have built the Austrian tradition of neocorporatism. Roughly, this pattern of meta-governance has been in place for several decades. Managers and street-level professionals draw on a common causal narrative that asks the beneficiaries to adapt their routines and expectations to the conditions of actual employment. Therefore, these beneficiaries are

eventually portrayed by their low skills. In the programme, they are expected to start with a personal and professional transition towards higher-grade skills and qualifications that may lead them to better opportunities in the labour market

### ***Discussion and concluding comments***

This section takes stock of the theoretical framework and the case studies presented in the previous sections. We summarise the research questions in a table and then interpret the common features and differences of lifelong learning policies in Girona and Vienna.

Below, table 2 maps out the answer to the framing research questions in the two functional regions where this article has analysed lifelong learning policies. The table explores to what extent meta-governance, official causal narratives and the prevailing views of vulnerability are similar. Such a comparative exercise leads to general conclusions on the relationships between these three components of lifelong learning policies in each region.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

In short, the comparative analysis of Girona and Vienna strongly indicates that meta-governance depends on regional circumstances. In contrast, the core claims of causal narratives seem to travel across regions without substantial modification. Variable governance and similar causal narratives eventually shape disparate interpretations of social vulnerability in the two regions.

According to the evidence analysed in Girona and Vienna, meta-governance proves to be very sensitive to the factors that configure functional regions. Girona is made up of small towns, rural areas, tourist resorts and some industrial districts which are partially but not systematically connected among them. In the same way that the labour market

and the transport system experiment a tension between the centrality of neighbouring Barcelona and the formation of a distinct region, lifelong learning policies experiment a tension between the central command of the PES and some spurs of decentralisation. Although weak, regional networks seem to be in the making. Professionals struggle to build informal, local networks with schools and small employers. In contrast, Vienna is a global city where national and municipal authorities openly coordinate their lifelong learning policies with a dense network of social partners that have cooperated in this area for a long time. These patterns of collaboration between the stakeholders of lifelong learning policies eventually strengthen the formation of a specific regional space.

However, the prevailing causal narrative of lifelong learning policies is not attentive to the reality of territories and regions. As a rule, authorities and stakeholders share the view of the European Council (2013) Recommendation. In both regions, the bulk of professional interviewees assumed that the youths' risk of vulnerability was mitigated simply by entering the labour market. The particularities of regional labour markets were not significant enough from these perspectives. Only a few street-level professionals discussed the implications of these particularities in detail.

Despite such homogeneous causal narratives, the youth are not attributed the same markers of social vulnerability in Girona and Vienna. In the former, lifelong learning policies lead the beneficiaries to compensate for their previous misbehaviour at school. In the latter, these policies encourage the beneficiaries to participate in apprenticeships and employment in conditions that are as realistic as possible.

This comparative regional analysis unveils two different patterns of cumulative effects. In Catalonia and Spain, lifelong learning policies are evolving from a focus on

vocational training courses to a wider concept that underscores career guidance and longer training. Regarding meta-governance, this shift of perspective has entailed a review of bureaucratic procedures but no longer establishes synergies with networks of stakeholders. At the scale of Girona, some stakeholders are aware of the potential of networks, but this mode of governance is extremely weak. In this context, the bulk of stakeholders perceive vulnerability as a burden, or a workload, that schools transfer to local employment services. In this vein, both the PES and employers only expect to find a job for low-skilled young people in as short a term as possible.

In Austria, a national tradition has built on inter-connected school itineraries as well as a wide-ranging apprenticeship scheme for decades. In Vienna, national and municipal authorities have designed their own arrangement of multi-level coordination. Employers actively participate by catering for apprentices in their companies. For these stakeholders, a transitional labour market may emulate real job experience and thus enhance the employability of the young people who otherwise would not have access to apprenticeships. In this scheme, although non-profit organisations enrol apprentices like in the main market, their revenue does not only come from selling the output of apprentices' work but also from public subsidies. During this type of apprenticeship, officers expect young adults to learn a trade at the same time as they overcome vulnerability by developing realistic life plans.

Therefore, the analysis shows that vulnerability is not a personal feature of some young adults but a situated social position. Even though employability posits the same core of causal narratives, in Girona, street-level professionals perceive vulnerability as a burden for social services, while in Vienna these professionals think that some groups of youth are 'vulnerable' in such a way that they do not have a realistic life plan. Despite a



shared causal narrative, varying local institutional arrangements render differing construals of vulnerability. Although all professionals agree on the alleged priority of employment, the underlying implications of this agreement are quite different in Girona and Vienna.

The previous conclusion is also practical for experts in lifelong learning. Future designs of lifelong learning policies should address issues of meta-governance, causal narrative and social vulnerability. Decision-makers must embed bureaucratic and network governance in functional regions. The regional interfaces between hierarchies of positions and norms (i.e. bureaucracies) and the networks of stakeholders vary quite significantly across the regions of the European Union. Since these interfaces are the outcome of intentional actions that carry out very complex outcomes, it is crucial that policies make explicit decisions on these issues. In doing so, decision-makers may widen the room for the youth to develop meaningful life plans. In addition, if policies realise how employability intermingles with other realms of life, lifelong learning may also become more attentive to the real experiences of such a group of beneficiaries as the addressees of the Youth Guarantee Scheme.

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