

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Constructing meaningful transitions in a vulnerable situation— The role of lifelong learning policies in European regions

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Abstract

This article draws on interviews with 164 young beneficiaries (of) and 128 professionals in charge of lifelong learning policies in eighteen regions located in nine member states of the European Union in 2017. Drawing on the concept of ‘opportunity structures’, we analyse variations between regional institutional arrangements and interactions between professionals and young adults. Our findings suggest that the crux of lifelong learning policies is the coordination between different policy areas so that they can respond to the multidimensional challenges that young adults face during their life transitions in diverse regional contexts.

KEYWORDS

education and training policy, life course research, lifelong learning, youth and young adults, youth transitions

INTRODUCTION

In the European Union social and employment policies increasingly revolve around the participation of people in lifelong learning. Twenty years ago, an early document defined lifelong learning as “all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective” (European Commission, 2001, p. 9). Later on, the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights booklet declared that “everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market” (European Commission, 2017).

We present an analysis of interviews with groups of young adults exposed to social vulnerability that benefit from these policies, and the professionals that provide learning and guidance services to them. Our analysis acknowledges quantitative disparities across youth and life course transition regimes

(Chevalier, 2016; Walther, 2017) as well as across diverse socio-economic types of regions (Scandurra et al., 2020). This baseline is extremely helpful to inquire further about regional variation of opportunity structures. We also draw on previous research on the predicaments of professional discretion, managerialism and paternalism in the welfare services state (Bonvin et al., 2018), but expand the scope of analysis towards interactions between learners and educators, who are often the beneficiaries of (and the professionals in charge of) welfare services. Our analysis finds that regional circumstances shape opportunity structures, and additionally, documents that many of the young beneficiaries of lifelong learning policies endeavour to learn and plan for their life despite adversity.

The first section outlines our theoretical framework on opportunity structures. The next section argues that regional variation does not only depend on socio-economic circumstances but also on the breadth of apprenticeship schemes and the institutional capacity of local authorities. A further section attempts to make sense of the experience of young adults and educators,

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since both parties muddle through the opportunities and the constraints of the official programmes. Finally, our discussion of the room for meaningful transitions and some concluding remarks link these findings with the theory that inspired our analysis, and briefly posit a takeaway for welfare studies.

OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES, LIFE COURSE REGIMES AND SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

An important strand of research on youth transitions has shed light on the structures that impinge on the opportunities of young people (Furlong, 2009; Roberts, 2009). This concept draws on mainstream debates in sociology in order to observe how structures both constrain and facilitate agency. Structures are social circumstances that have been constituted beyond the range of action of subjects, while agency is a property of conscious individuals who are capable to take action. The connections between family origins, education and the labour market fashion variable structures depending on factors of inequality such as place, gender and ethnicity. In the midst of these circumstances that do not depend on their will, young people find certain opportunities to construct their life trajectories.

Our analysis of meaningful transitions in nine member states of the European Union draws on both previous literature and new evidence to spell out the structures that shape these transitions and the opportunities that emerge. We notice some important differences between regional life course regimes and investigate social interactions between professionals and young adults.

Certainly, life course regimes depend on socio-economic conditions (Cefalo et al., 2020; Scandurra et al., 2020). However, these regimes are complex mixes of policies, professional practices and individual biographies that institutionalise variable sets of itineraries across the member states of the EU (Walther, 2017). In addition of societal diversity, the policies convey differing concepts of youth citizenship. For instance, while Scandinavian regimes underpin individual notions of social welfare and encompassing skills formation, Central European regimes articulate familiarised notions of welfare with encompassing skills formation, while Southern European regimes endorse restrictive notions of both welfare and skills formation (Chevalier, 2016).

Taking stock of Roberts' (2009, p. 355) acknowledgement of place among the factors of youth transitions, we highlight the variation of regional life course regimes. This author argues that employers' recruiting practices eventually shape national, regional and local structures of labour markets (Roberts, 2018). Ulterior research has confirmed the importance of place for youth transitions (King et al., 2018; Savage et al., 2018). Our point is that structural political arrangements such as the array of apprenticeships and the

articulation between levels of government also make a difference on structures at different geographical scales.

But agency also makes a difference. On the one hand, young adults themselves elaborate and share their opinion on the strengths and the weaknesses of local lifelong learning programmes. On the other hand, not only professionals are capable to deliver relevant individual guidance but also, in some regions, the local professionals can recommend small targeted reforms of policy designs that might foster young adults' agency too.

The social interactions between young adults and professionals are also embedded in the interface between opportunity structures and agency. Nowadays, a powerful structural barrier has to do with the huge risks of social vulnerability that large sections of the youth endure. For instance, many children are growing in poverty, and many youths have to shift once again between unemployment, short-term training schemes and precarious jobs (EUROFOUND, 2014; EUROSTAT, 2017). In fact, since official indicators take a static picture of these processes, the resulting data conflate very heterogeneous situations and experiences into rough categories, such as those not in employment, education and training (Cuzzocrea, 2014; Furlong, 2006). However, our evidence also shows that these youths neither present themselves as undefended victims nor as reactive targets of a social programme, but quite often claim that they are active subjects in search of any structural crack that may help them to improve (Verlage et al., 2020).

At the same time, the official agenda puts increasing structural pressure on street-level professionals so as to adopt standard practices that allegedly reduce the number of the unemployed and the beneficiaries of welfare (Caswell et al., 2010; Evans, 2018; Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016). However, their discretion is indispensable to cater to increasingly polarised and territorialised social and educational needs (Alexander, 2018). Our evidence shows that these professionals are neither passive recipients of these forces; on the contrary, most of them are aware of the complexity and multi-dimensionality of youths' activities. In some places, they face poignant tensions between official goals and (often subterranean but influential) derogatory accounts of the problems of young people.

Young people live increasingly longer and more diverse transitions from youth to adult life (Furlong, 2013; Kogan et al., 2011; Sanderson, 2020). Individual lives follow many circuitous paths that often transit back and forth between the conditions previously ascribed to adult life and other emerging conditions. Additionally, many young people undertake education and training at the same time as employment, many young adults return to their parents' residence after long periods living on their own, some middle-aged persons enrol in education and training, and unemployment is sometimes the waiting room of retirement (Arundel & Lennartz, 2017; Schoon & Bynner, 2020). However, amidst such diversification of biographies, despite many and multifarious risks of vulnerability, young people form their character by making decisions on education

and training, employment, housing and relationships at varying moments. These decisions configure life plans which depict different time horizons according to perceived opportunities (Brockmann, 2010; Leccardi, 2012; Nowotny, 1988).

The literature on adult learning and education has documented that agency is a crucial ingredient of learning at varied points of the life course. Rather than an outcome of certain training or certain guidance, agency is an integral part of the biographical learning process (Hallqvist et al., 2012). Informal learning which occurs in everyday or crisis situations is valuable for young people in building their identities and creating a sense of autonomy. Life narratives often become the vehicle of learning insofar as subjects review their past experiences to elaborate future plans at the very moment of learning in a new context or undertaking some formal training (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Interestingly, this type of learning helps people to face routine, adapt to new circumstances, generate valuable knowledge and skills for certain purposes and change their self-identity (Jarvis, 2009, pp. 193–194).

METHODOLOGY

Units of analysis

We draw on the analysis of the interviews with young adults living in conditions of social vulnerability and with the professionals in charge of lifelong policies addressed to this target group that YOUNG_ADULLLT project conducted.¹ The project took the different units of analysis into consideration. The final version of the article will include references to working papers that fully describe all the methodological details.

YOUNG_ADULLLT drew on the previously presented research questions in order to compare a heterogeneous sample of regional opportunity structures. Thus, it articulated three units of analysis, namely: regions, policies and individuals (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). A sample of 18 regions and 54 policies provided evidence on the variation of structures across the European Union. In some regions, this sample also shed light on the agency of professionals. Moreover, two other samples were instrumental to spell out the interactions between these two types of actors. Thus, the project interviewed 164 female and male 19- to 30-year-olds in the regions, and 128 professionals (e.g., service and NGO managers, case workers, educators, counsellors) in charge of lifelong learning policies there.

¹Although our article is not attached to a public set of data, the national and international (WP5) qualitative reports published as Working Papers in the project website describe the fieldwork, the analysis and the findings in the nine participating member states. The national reports include short biographical portraits of the young interviewees as well as extensive quotes from the interviews. The URL is <https://www.young-adulllt.eu/publications/working-paper/index.php>.

The interviews were also helpful to investigate how these subjects experimented social structures and availed of certain structural circumstances to undertake action.

Sample of regions and policies

The project estimated the averages of the sampled NUTS2 regions² across a set of indicators. Table 1 summarises the main classification in terms of access to education and the labour market.

The project selected 54 lifelong learning policies that were implemented in these 18 regions. Four types of policies were identified (reference deleted to keep the project anonymous). First, a group of the chosen policies attempted to reduce early school leaving and cater to the needs of young people neither not in employment, education and training, mostly targeting to young people living in vulnerable situations. Second, other policies delivered information and guidance and fostered entrepreneurship skills. Third, another type were active labour market policies that directly put the beneficiaries in job search, real workplace or simulated workshops in order to strengthen their employability skills. Forth, a small group of policies transcended the focus on employment by providing wide-ranging counselling and support related to life planning and creativity.

Interviews with young adults

The researchers approached some young adults that were beneficiaries of these policies. Each interviewee read an information form and signed a consent form guaranteeing anonymity, confidentiality and data protection.

The interviews invited young adults to openly narrate some biographical experiences. They were allowed to elaborate on their account for as long as necessary. Afterwards, the interviewer asked some questions to clarify certain points. At the end, other questions asked for their family life, their educational trajectory, their skills, their experience with lifelong learning policies, the timeline of their biography and their socio-demographic profile.

The analysts coded the interviews according to the guidelines proposed by Corbin and Strauss (1990). They agreed on a grid of codes, which they piloted with a small number of interviews. Then they reviewed the initial grid and decided how to generate further codes if necessary. In this article we report on analyses that took the following codes into account: presentation of the interviewee's self, construction of her/ his life story, elaboration of a life plan, and experience with the selected lifelong learning policy.

²For a long time, the EU has defined regions at different levels in order to monitor the effects of its policies. NUTS stands for *Nomenclature des Unités Territoriales Statistiques* in French.

TABLE 1 Access to the labour market and education in the eighteen project regions

Access to education in 2014	Access to the labour market in 2014	
	Above the average of the sample	Below the average of the sample
Above the average of the sample	Bremen and Darmstadt ^a (Germany), Etelä-Suomi [†] and Pohjois-järvi-Suomi (Finland), North Eastern Scotland and South Western Scotland (UK), Oberösterreich (Austria), Yugoapaden (Bulgaria)	Catalonia (Spain), Liguria and Lombardia (Italy)
Below the average of the sample	Jadranska Hrvatska (Croatia)	Alentejo and Norte, (Portugal), Andalusia (Spain), Yuhzen Tsentralen (Bulgaria) and Kontinentalna Hrvatska (Croatia)

^aIncluding Frankfurt.

Interviews with professionals

A sample of professionals were also contacted. They accepted to participate on the grounds of an information form and signed a consent form guaranteeing anonymity, confidentiality and data protection.

The interview schedule briefly framed the theme so that the professionals were aware of the main interests of the project. Then, they were free to elaborate on their own understanding of their challenges, their tasks and their results. Afterwards, if they had not addressed certain issues, the interviewer reminded them to take these issues into consideration. At the end, a few questions asked about wicked problems such as contradictions between jurisdictions or overlaps between policy areas.

Corbin and Strauss (1990) were also helpful to code these interviews. Since the questions followed a more rigid structure, the grid of codes was much simpler and did not change significantly after a pilot trial. Mostly, our analysis draws on their responses about the objectives of the policies, the target groups, the living conditions of the beneficiaries and their autonomy.

REGIONAL VARIATION OF OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

In 2017, the transitions, the employment and the participation of young people in education and training differed along the array of institutional itineraries in each region and the capacity of local policy arrangements. Our analysis shows how policymakers, professionals and the very young adults dealt with varying opportunity structures as a consequence of these heterogeneous circumstances.

The array of institutional itineraries was remarkably large in Central Europe, where wide-ranging apprenticeship schemes aim at putting all youth in a specific pathway

of education, training and professional prospects. However, many Southern European regions attempted to reform their employment and lifelong learning policies in a similar vein.

According to the interviews, in Germany, Austria and Finland many trainees were surprised to find that apprenticeship schemes relied on another style of teaching which allowed them to ask questions and find someone who listened. This professional support greatly strengthened the confidence and self-esteem of the youth. Sound career guidance, improved placements and encouragement to persist in learning made them feel recognized as learners with their abilities as well as their special needs.

In Bremen, policymakers and professionals had developed programmes to respond to industrial decline by overhauling the regional system of vocational education and training. Thus, the Job Centre designed the *Jugend Stärken* (Youth Strengths) programme for delivering counselling services to the youth at risk of exclusion in a very diverse array of settings. The programme expected that the beneficiaries built a structured daily routine on their own so that they were able to complete an apprenticeship successfully. A young man expressed his satisfaction as follows:

I learned far more than basic skills because we really learned a lot and lots of processing methods that can be transferred one to one to almost all crafts and trades and I think this brought me very fast forward in the craft of goldsmith.

In Litoral Alentejano (Portugal), a similar perception of the pedagogic advantages of work-centred education and training through practical activities was common too. In the region, professionals made the most out of a modular structure that allowed for different teaching methods and personalised strategies. However, the youth resented a very narrow scope of courses. One of them replied to a question about his motivation to undertake a course on welding in a bold and poignant way:

Because it was the only one.

Simultaneously, the capacity of local policy arrangements was significantly disparate, for instance, in Vienna (Austria), Girona (Spain) and Osijek-Baranja (Croatia). While the Federation and the municipality had deployed many lifelong learning programmes in the former, regional and local policies hardly collaborated in the second case, and a few professionals catered for the needs of many young people in the latter.

Vienna is a global city with an extremely diverse social composition. The city stages really affluent neighbourhoods and extremely deprived areas. Since many immigrants and refugees have recently moved in, a substantial share of the population hardly earns a sufficient income and needs to learn basic skills. In reaction, the local authorities have not only deployed an encompassing apprenticeship scheme that aims at enrolling all the youth but have also contracted some transitional programmes with non-profits. These programmes simulate working conditions in special settings, thus opening opportunities to deal with emotional development and some mental health problems. Our professional interviewees normally adhered to the official rationale of the programmes, which clearly prioritised direct experience in working places.

To teach them what is about to get totally lost with youth, what is work, why do they need work and how does employment work.

Some young interviewees reported on the capacity of both apprenticeships and transitional programmes to reach young people despite social vulnerability. For instance, two immigrant women from Romania and Serbia acknowledged how their counsellors had helped them to go ahead despite their troubles with the language and their frustration not to save any money. One of them also mentioned some health problems due to overwork in informal jobs that she did in very precarious conditions. Finally, she had found a viable apprenticeship that had helped her to plan how to build a family, leaving those problems behind.

In Girona (Catalonia, Spain), lifelong learning programmes mostly repaired negative experiences during school years and conveyed a few months' long vocational courses. In 2017, some innovative programmes had strengthened an emphasis on comprehensive career guidance in order to instil self-esteem in their young beneficiaries so that they made more mature decisions when choosing either a job or a course. However, these programmes could hardly reach young people who either lived out of the metropolitan area or could not easily catch a train in the only regional railway line. In some localities, the local non-profits that ran vocational courses had been reluctant to adopt this emphasis on guidance, because they feared to lose potential students and thus to reduce their public funding.

Some young adult interviewees framed their involvement with lifelong learning as a second chance after their negative experiences with the school system. Thus, a boy who had arrived from Senegal at the very threshold of majority of age narrated his deep frustration because he was not allowed to pursue further education. Instead, he started working, and contacted the local job centre in a town located in the nearby of Girona. Since the professionals were quite supportive there, he felt they had helped him to develop his soft skills and eventually find a job. Another young man commuted to Girona by train for some guidance a few days a week. He expressed his satisfaction to find support in order to have acquired the necessary qualification to work in a warehouse. He had felt very badly at school due to learning problems and unsupportive teachers. But he was relieved when the same teachers had addressed him to a lifelong learning programme that delivered guidance and teaching in a more personalised way.

In Osijek-Baranja County (Croatia), only a few professionals were in charge of small lifelong learning programmes at the local level. Although they could neither meet the needs of the potential beneficiaries nor counsel them appropriately on their dilemmas on emigration, they stressed the potential of voluntary work for growing up, experiencing personal feelings and showing how to learn. Despite weak institutional capacity, these initiatives were satisfactory insofar as induced the beneficiaries to feel good with some activities. Thus, the manager of a small NGO made the following comment:

Young people that have taken part in volunteering have continued to be active in the community and have also received a confirmation that they matter and that they are worthy. Many (...) have made contacts in the community and have therefore felt more included.

To wrap up, our qualitative evidence found out significant regional variation in opportunity structures. Not only some programmes were opening new opportunities everywhere, but also most youth welcomed these alternatives although they were enduring harsh circumstances. Quantitative analyses have already mapped out the diverging socio-economic indicators in European regions (Cefalo et al., 2020; Scandurra et al., 2020). Moreover, interviews with young adults and lifelong learning professionals have also unveiled that the actual array of itineraries and the institutional capacity of local arrangements open some opportunities while closing other ones. In a variety of regions, these structures constrained the margin for professionals and young adults to act by themselves, but also opened some opportunities, and sometimes alleviated the most extreme pressures.

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS BETWEEN YOUNG ADULTS AND PROFESSIONALS

Our research showed that young adults in vulnerable situations were an extremely heterogeneous group considering their family backgrounds, educational trajectories, migration status and current life circumstances. The interviewees coped with difficult life transitions between their parents' home, their school life and the job market. Many had suffered from biographical disruptions because of health problems, family conflicts, and violence at home and school. At the same time, instead of a desolate group of passive underachievers, they were active subjects struggling for their social integration.

Bullying at school had provoked serious consequences for the learning career of many. For example, Maria, a young woman in her early twenties, involved in a preparatory training for vocational school in Kainuu, Finland, explained that she was often treated brutally by her classmates when she did not understand something right away: *"I somehow then felt that I was like inferior to others. And ... I was ashamed"*. Most of them suffered without informing teachers or parents, but even those who did found out that the intervention of adults did not stop such practices effectively. These experiences often aggravated depression, learning disabilities and other mental health problems.

Since many interviewees came from families with limited socio-economic resources, they felt under pressure to search for income from work or training allowances. Some parents were the role models for the young in their vocational orientation, who wished to be either *"technician like my dad"* or *"plumber like my grandpa"*. However, quite often a change in the family situation had narrowed their opportunities and exposed them to social vulnerability, for instance because of a parent's illness, death or drug addiction, traumatic divorce, migration, and sometimes abuse by a parent or sibling. These experiences made young people lose self-esteem, eroded their interest in studying, and eventually led them to dropping out of the formal school system.

Our analysis throws light into the diverse construals of vulnerability. In their biographical narratives young people did not define themselves as vulnerable although various forms of adversity had disrupted their life paths. More often they spoke about a troubled phase, that is, in the words of a 23-year-old man employed by a social enterprise in Aberdeen, the UK: *"a very dark period of dealing with a lot of mental and physical stuff"*. Furthermore, a significant group were eager to show that they were already in a process of overcoming the pitfalls in their transitions or at least capable to do so in the near future. Another young man in a training course offered by the public employment agency in Vienna claimed: *"I just needed time for myself ... and yes, now I am in this phase, where I slowly begin to build up everything anew"*. Certainly,

we have to keep in mind that the interviewees retrieved both their biography and the research focus of the interviews to present themselves in these terms.

In a similar way, young mothers who were defined as a target group of a specific lifelong learning program in Frankfurt, Germany, considered that motherhood had a positive effect on their life trajectories by the determination to succeed that such a responsibility gave them. One participant in a training course who grew up in an environment characterized by crime, drug abuse and violence, said that she had made a strong resolution to achieve stability in her trajectory for the sake of her child:

I still take detours, but I have initiated a lot by myself and have gone through a lot, but I have a small child sitting at home who calls me 'mother'. That is wonderful and I do not regret anything.

Many felt that they were often stigmatized as a particular group that had deviated from the standard life course. While participating in the Civic Service at the age of 28 in Genoa, a man regretted that people like him were normally labelled as "unemployed professionals" and "forever young". In his view, employers used those definitions as an excuse to allocate the present-day youth to the low-paid precarious sector of the labour market.

When reflecting upon obstacles in their life trajectories, overwhelmingly, most interviewees accepted the discourse of self-responsibility for their choices at critical moments in their life. Even more so, they considered that exit from the vulnerable situation was in their own hands thanks to a great diversity of coping strategies. Several young people were considering emigration, mainly from Southern and Eastern European countries. A few were inclined to withdraw into themselves while waiting for an improvement of the labour market situation. While recognising their difficulties including physical or mental special needs, some of the young people presented themselves as fighters ready to defend their right to social integration. Thus, a young woman from Frankfurt with a history of mental illness and experience of violence in her family and in school, insisted to be recognised as a "full" citizen with the rights to learn, to work and be part of the 'normal' society.

Many of our 164 young interviewees felt that lifelong learning empowered them by improving their ability to plan for their life trajectories and construct a positive relationship with their biographical time. In general, all aimed at achieving independence, which they described in varying shapes and details. Their visions of the future reminded of their exposure to vulnerability as well as of their capacity to take control of at least some aspects of their youth transitions.

Our qualitative analysis mostly distinguished three groups. The first group had overcome previous biographical ruptures by elaborating their own life projects. Not only illness and family violence but also family breakdown and early school leaving had disrupted their trajectory. Many hoped that vocational training would lead them back to the right path towards their initial life projects. Although this group was visible everywhere, in Austria, Finland, Germany and Scotland it was very noticeable that they praised the help of apprenticeships. In Scotland, a young man expressed this satisfaction with his apprenticeship:

In the next 5 years I will obviously finish my apprenticeship but once I finish my 4th year I would like to stay with this company if they keep me on for another year for a bit more experience and then my goal is to go away and work offshore or in a different bit.

The second group had indeterminate life projects or rather general plans with undefined timing. Many of these youngsters aspired to reproduce a standard life course insofar as they emphasized dreams of a house with a garden, a number of children and a stable job. A young woman from Finland illustrated this point by describing how she saw herself in ten years:

At least I think that I would have a job and a husband and perhaps also a child. And an own home. Just kind of basic dreams, but I also dream about moving abroad at some point, to work abroad.

The third category included overwhelmed young adults, who did not feel capable to face serious social constraints. For them, lifelong learning was an opportunity to avoid making plans while “living day by day”. Some lived training as a socially acceptable waiting period and claimed that timetables helped them to structure daily routines. As a 25-year-old woman from Croatia worded it, the majority were concerned that “the years are passing by, and I am unable to plan anything in my life”. These interviewees felt anxious because their decisions about leaving the parental home or starting a family were delayed for an undetermined future.

It is complex. I have a lot of wishes, but I don't know how to realize them or even if I should realize them. (female, Rhein-Main Region, Germany)

Our analysis contrasted the voice of young beneficiaries with the voice of professionals who ran lifelong learning programmes. Many of these professionals agreed that the priority of lifelong learning programmes was improving young people's employability. In their view, learning, guidance, counselling and qualifications were crucial instruments to find a job. Rather

than looking at other facets of education and training that might foster empowerment and autonomy, most of them compared training with either a wake-up call or real life. In Vale do Ave (Portugal), a professional highlighted the changes of the labour market:

Only a fifth of the labour force that was necessary 10 years ago is needed today.

Similarly, in Vienna (Austria) another professional argued that the priority of programme was “to place people concretely in employment”.

But to place people concretely in employment, yes (...) It's really close to reality, because it almost is (...) a brutal way of showing young adults quite plainly.

Some professionals showed an increasing interest in personalised counselling and guidance on the grounds that it simultaneously dealt with educational choice and professional vocation. A number of programmes were either piloting or implementing broad guidance schemes that provided individual support for substantial periods of time. According to our research findings, this type of guidance normally assumed that young people would overcome personal and socio-economic adversity by finding a job in the short term.

Other programmes attempted to help young adults to cope with social vulnerability by stimulating volunteering. In Genoa (Italy) and Osijek-Baranja (Croatia) local authorities encouraged many youths to develop their transversal and social skills by becoming volunteers. However, in the same way as counselling was biased toward job-search in the short term, these programmes often conceived of volunteering as a waiting room for the labour market.

Similarly, in Croatia, Italy and many other countries, professionals and educators appraised the capacity of young adults to start elaborating their life plans since they realised they “had learned” or “had done” something. In other cases such as Bulgaria and Portugal, professionals acknowledged how lifelong learning programmes taught basic skills that greatly contributed to heal the scars of extreme (often, deeply entrenched ethnic) discrimination.

These professionals faced multifarious contradictions between opposing concepts of youth citizenship. Apparently, not only the member states have endorsed differing concepts of youth citizenship (Chevalier, 2016), but street-level professionals have also developed varying capacity to cope with those contradictions. Certainly, most street-level professionals adhered to the official rationale of lifelong learning, which eventually share the commitment of the EU Pillar of Social Rights. However, two extreme cases highlight how this rationale transcended the mainstream focus on

employment- centred learning in Turku (Finland), whereas some professionals drew on stigma to cope with the challenges of incipient lifelong learning policies in Bulgaria.

In Turku, many professionals showed a broad understanding of individuals' predicaments. Instead of short-term employment, they emphasized empowerment and life skills. A dense network of local agencies and civil society organisations was involved in facilitating access of all the youth to some sort of on-the-job training. So, the rationale of the programmes was notably wider than job search in the short term.

I mean everyone has difficulties in admitting their own problems and challenges in life. And when you talk and talk and talk about them, they become something you don't have to be ashamed of. (---) Finding them and talking about them has in a way influenced the fact that this young person finds it easier to accept themselves and get experiences of success and so on. So that all kinds of support and help are incredibly important there.

The responses of our interviewees in the two Bulgarian regions illustrate a set of contradictions that were also explicit in other Southeastern and Southwestern countries. There, lifelong learning policies had only been implemented recently, while the country was making its way through a new scheme of professional practices. The policies predominantly focused on providing access to the labour market while neglecting other hardships, including special mental needs of the young. Even when they were placed in training in real work settings, some youngsters complained that the employers did not spend time explaining the tasks to the trainees. In the words of a young woman from Plovdiv, employers expected them to "already know everything". In Blagoevgrad, some policy makers and street-level professionals engaged in stereotyping on gender and ethnic grounds. Since most programs had fixed short-term goals, the youth often leaped from one to another training opportunity. Albeit an exception, these programmes also had some potential of fostering elaborate life projects often thanks to the high level of personal involvement of the responsible trainer. For example, in a training program of an NGO in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, a 29-year-old father who had previously dropped out of school engaged in biographical reflection and decided to sign up for an individual form of studies to get a high school diploma. He felt he needed to set up a personal model for his two very young children to follow in the future.

In sum, our interviewees showed that many young beneficiaries of lifelong learning programmes endeavoured to elaborate simultaneously on their learning and their life plans although they were exposed to severe risks of social exclusion. The professionals who ran these programmes mostly

focused on job searching. Some also realised that employment did not cater to all the needs of the youth. In some countries, the professionals dealt with contradictory views on the needs and opportunities of the youth.

THE ROOM FOR MEANINGFUL TRANSITIONS

Our qualitative evidence underpins the literature that has captured in which ways youth transitions (Furlong, 2009; Walther, 2017) and adult learning (Jarvis, 2009) take place at the interface between structures and opportunities. Our findings on regional variation and social interactions also expand some previous conclusions.

First, regions vary along socio-economic and institutional axes. Besides prosperous and declining regions, further research must investigate the breadth of apprenticeships, since many of these schemes have been implemented across the Union, albeit the ranges of options are uneven. Moreover, the weakness of local governments seems to hinder the expansion of these schemes. However, street-level professionals and the youth are quite aware of these shortcomings and quite eager to push for some reforms.

Apprenticeships as such do not guarantee meaningful transitions to the extent that they may be paternalistic (Bonvin et al., 2018) and biased towards employment in the very short term (Parreira do Amaral & Zelinka, 2019). However, new innovative and pragmatic ideas may emerge from the interplay between local policy actors, provided local authorities, employer boards and unions are endowed with some capacity and engage in stable negotiation.

Second, neither street-level professionals simply reproduce standards of practice nor young adults are merely waiting for training opportunities tightly coupled with particular jobs. Otherwise, both the literature and the recent evidence on social work and education professionalism indicate that lifelong learning policies uncover connections between employment, housing, leisure, urbanism and other areas of policymaking. Their expertise makes these professionals aware of these intricate connections.

At the same time, young people do not exclusively need lifelong learning initiatives that are subservient to employment policies. They are capable to avail of a wider scope of options—or a richer concept of welfare, training and employment itineraries. The young are active in searching for more training opportunities and/or negotiating more flexible conditions for program implementation that fit better with their individual needs. Alternative approaches of policy design that emphasise individual empowerment may help people to construe their transitions and their learning in more meaningful ways.

Finally, narrow understandings and weak institutions do not seem to be the initial stages of a linear and seamless diffusion of apprenticeships and a gradual widening of the room for meaningful transitions. Although it is hard to generalise on Southeastern and Southwestern Europe (the former is not even included in Chevalier's typology), our evidence warns of likely perverse effects of these shallow forms of lifelong learning. If weak local institutions are in charge of these programmes, it will be hard to prevent derogatory perceptions of the youth to prevail. Simultaneously, if these programmes become remedial itineraries that alleviate the vulnerable conditions of a few youths, the frustration of the life plans they are elaborating despite adversity threatens to break their psychological well-being, to unbind their rage and to condemn many to despair.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Currently, lifelong learning programmes have become a key instrument of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Many beneficiaries are young people who could not follow an easy transition from school to work due to multifarious troubles derived from social vulnerability. These young participants often frame lifelong learning within the horizon of wider life strategies. Crucial to our argument is that, across the European Union, many young adults are capable to learn despite social vulnerability. Although the majority of programmes focus on basic skills and only expect to boost employment at the shortest possible term, most young adults associate this type of training with wider processes of biographical learning.

A key conclusion indicates that the prevailing institutional arrangements and the actual interactions between young adults and professionals eventually qualify the general construal of social vulnerability. Local and regional authorities have variable capacity to deploy apprenticeship schemes. While the youth praise the potential of even the weakest lifelong learning programmes, policymakers and professionals face predicaments regarding coordination, priorities and social representations of the beneficiaries.

Although we interviewed young people who endured very heterogeneous factors of social vulnerability in a very diverse sample of EU regions, in all of them we found out interviewees who availed of (both shorter and longer) training programmes in order to elaborate and carry out their own life plan. This commonality strongly reverberates with the previous literature on the agency of individuals during youth transitions and the persistence of biographical learning despite the pressure of social vulnerability as a consequence of social divides associated with class, gender, ethnicity and place.

Our conclusions posit an important takeaway for social welfare. The European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2017) has transformed coordination across policy sectors into a huge challenge for most initiatives of family

support, compensation of early school leaving, vocational education and training, active labour market policy and social welfare. However, this goal will not be at reach unless education, training and lifelong learning are meaningful for the people who are exposed to social vulnerability. Even though the policies may establish encompassing schemes of services and pathways, these schemes will not be effective if the beneficiaries (many youths among them) are not protagonists of their learning. The crux seems to be helping them to plan for their life and cope with adversity over long periods of time.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare they have any conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study were extracted from interviews conducted in nine EU member states in Bulgarian, Catalan, Croatian, English, Finnish, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. The national reports including an English summary of the interviews with young adults are published in URL www.young-adults.eu. Each partner of the consortium keeps the transcripts of the interviews in an institutional repository. These documents are not fully available due to ethical considerations, particularly, because the full transcripts cannot guarantee confidentiality and anonymity.

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