

**Lifelong learning policies shaping the life courses of young adults. An interpretative analysis of orientations, objectives and solutions**

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## **Lifelong learning policies shaping the life courses of young adults. An interpretative analysis of orientations, objectives and solutions**

**Abstract:** In the following article, we share our findings from the comparative analyses of 54 lifelong learning policy measures implemented in nine European countries, with a particular focus on their orientations, objectives, and solutions devised. Informed by the theoretical framework of Interpretive Policy Analysis (IPA), we have further reasoned on the impacts and unintended effects on young adults' life course transitions, especially those in vulnerable positions, as well as on the hidden ambivalences and incompatibilities in the objectives and orientations of lifelong learning policies. The article provides, first, a brief discussion of the conceptual and methodological choices made. Second, it gives an overview of the design and data basis of our research. In the third section, we present and discuss the central findings from our interpretive analyses, and we finally conclude with a discussion on current trends in lifelong learning policymaking and on their impact on young adults' transitions.

**Keywords:** life course transitions; LLL policies; Europe; vulnerability; interpretive policy analysis; Cultural Political Economy; young adults.

### ***Introduction***

Lifelong learning (LLL) policies have a long history in the EU context (cf. EC, 2000). However, only more recently have they focused on dimensions beyond vocational (and recurrent) training for employment of adults to include economic, political and social aspects of younger generations, but also aspects of general and higher education and the support for so-called 'vulnerable' groups (cf. Rasmussen, 2014; Riddell et al., 2012). The concept of LLL stems from long and rich debates that emphasise different connections from early childhood to adult learning and stress the universal right to education. 'Learning to be' was seen as a lifelong process along the whole life course. From this understanding, it was derived that policies should be organised on the principle of a humanistic, rights-based and holistic view of education. Later on, the political focus on LLL was shifted to labour market security and economic competitiveness, with a stronger orientation towards human capital development and employability.

More recently, amidst the European strategies—especially Lisbon and Europe 2020—the conceptions of LLL have again shifted towards a more biographical orientation based on a continuous personal transformation on the one hand, and a functional and instrumental orientation on episodic learning—usually work-related and with attention to competences and outcomes during certain life phases—on the other hand. In this context, LLL policies often aim at preparing, structuring, correcting and improving the transition from education to the labour market, in particular for young people that are not in employment, education or training (NEET), or are defined as early school leavers (ESL). While this broadening of the scope of LLL policies hints at how policy-making is tackling urgent contemporary issues, it has also increased the complexity and raised the stakes for policies to be effective in creating human capital while securing social inclusion. The challenges and dilemmas confronting policy-makers and young adults alike derive in substantial part from the complex overlapping of needs, interests and contexts of adult learning policies. In particular, regarding groups that are in vulnerable positions, policies may have unintended effects that exacerbate rather than improve their situations—or as phrased in this special issue, there is risk for young people of getting *lost in transition*.

In this contribution, we present and discuss analyses of a mapping and review exercise of LLL policies across nine participating countries in a European research, the YOUNG\_ADULLLT project.<sup>i</sup> Starting from Cultural Political Economy (CPE) conceptual perspective, we adopt an interpretive approach to policy analysis that allowed us to discern the various meanings of LLL policies. We assume that the numerous (and oftentimes fragmented) LLL policies and initiatives set up to support the transitions of young adults in precarious situations differ not only in terms of their overall goals – economic growth *and* social inclusion – but also in terms of their distinct objectives, different orientations, and time horizons. Although the goals of economic growth *and* social inclusion may be complementary to each other, they are not causally linked in a linear way. Conflicts and adverse effects for the target groups may arise not only due to the complex overlapping of needs, interests and contexts of adult learning policies across Europe, which is in itself a reason for concern; these may

also be the result of incompatible and/or ambivalent orientations, target group constructions and ill-matching problem identification and solutions devised.

In the following sections, we *first* introduce the conceptual and methodological choices we made. These refer to CPE as a conceptual lens and to interpretive policy analysis as a research method. *Second*, we present and discuss the research design and process as well as the data basis of our analyses. *Third*, we share and describe our findings, focusing particularly on the objectives and logics of intervention, as well as the target group construction of the policies analysed. *Fourth*, we briefly discuss the findings and their relevance to and implications for policy-making in LLL. In doing so, we also highlight some of the contributions of the research approach chosen to aid a better understanding of lifelong learning policies for young adults, in particular those in vulnerable situations.

### ***Conceptual and Methodological Discussion***

Three complementary theoretical perspectives inspired the research conducted in YOUNG\_ADULLLT: Life Course, Governance, and Cultural Political Economy (CPE). For reasons of space and focus, we concentrate in this paper on the conceptual contributions of CPE to researching the topic at hand.

*Cultural Political Economy* highlights the relevance of the cultural dimension in understanding and analysing the complexity of social formations such as policies (Jessop, 2010; Sum & Jessop, 2013). CPE is a recent analytical approach in social science and policy studies that looks at “the articulation between the economic and the political and their embedding in broader sets of social relations.” (Jessop, 2010, p. 337) In general, CPE responds to criticisms towards more traditional political economy analyses, and offers crucial insights to enquiring into the mobilization of policy ideas, the perceptions of political actors as well as of other stakeholders, and to the explanation of education policy dynamics and outcomes. Thus, the CPE perspective helps us to examine the role of semiotic or meaning-making (cultural) and extra-semiotic (structural, power asymmetries) aspects of policy processes. In particular, it explores the role of discourses in shaping ‘economic imaginaries’ between economic and political institutions and their social embedding (Sum & Jessop, 2013). As the ‘economy’

does not exist in a vacuum (Best & Paterson, 2010), the approach focusses on pre-existing interpretations of imaginaries (as instances of complexity reduction) in policy discourses, their translation into hegemonic strategies, and the institutionalisation of these procedures into structures and policies.

Regarding LLL policy analysis, CPE examines the utilisation of resources in power asymmetries and the underlying paradigms that frame policy-making in education as a solution to economic issues. Drawing on critical discourse analysis, CPE focuses on interactional realities produced and institutionalised between discourses and social elements (e.g. power, ideologies, etc.). In doing so, it focusses on the ‘orders of discourse’ (Fairclough, 2003, p. 3), which are structured and stabilised along the constitutive role of language in bringing about the social. Thus, CPE seeks to explore the changing cultures that generate and influence dominant imaginaries on the hegemonic procedures, practices and structures of policy and economy. The production and institutionalisation of dominant imaginaries is described, according to Bob Jessop, as the result of interaction of material and semiotic factors. The approach departs from the assumption that the world’s complex and chaotic social realities are reduced by the production of imaginaries in a still complex, yet manageable, meaningful and structured narration (Jessop, 2010; Jessop & Oosterlynck, 2008). As a result, these social realities give meaning to the world in form of semiotic, often globally shared, systems (cf. Best & Paterson, 2010, p. 7). CPE provides a critical view on policy orientations and objectives as it reveals the selective interpretations and solutions for social, economic and political problems of specific groups of actors and clarifies the legitimations of certain political practices. The conceptual lens of Cultural Political Economy has helped us to operationalise a novel approach to policy analysis—Interpretive Policy Analysis (IPA)—that proved particularly useful in capturing and describing the manifold variations of LLL policies in their respective cultural meaning and constructed nature.

Until very recently, policy-making has been mostly informed by a research based on ‘positivistic presuppositions’, which confine the focus “to description, explanation, and prediction of events in the political world” (Hawkesworth, 2015, p. 41) with the intent to “devise ‘value-free’ definitions of politics grounded squarely upon observable phenomena” (ibid.). However, central to our analysis

is the fact that “each definition is value laden and that each subtly structures the boundaries of the political in ways that have implications for the practice of politics” (ibid.). Rather than seeking to displace or compete with the positivistic-based research style, YOUNG\_ADULLLT aims at providing an complementary analysis to those developments that are seen to have important transformative implications for policy-making in education and particularly for young peoples’ life courses.

In response to the cultural developments hinted at above, many policy analysts turned to an interpretive approach to policy analysis that departs from the traditional understanding of policy as (rational) instruments for problem solving in linear or cyclical manners. Instead, they aimed at acknowledging and incorporating conceptual and theoretical discussions most often referred to as the ‘cultural turn’ (Jameson, 1998), ‘linguistic turn’ (Rorty, 1967), ‘argumentative turn’ (Fischer & Forester, 1993), or the ‘ideational turn’ (Béland & Cox, 2011). These ‘turns’ reject a positivistic view of reality, i.e. reality as something fixed and static that could be simply ‘captured’ by researchers who wish to understand it. From a post-positivistic perspective, reality is mediated by culture, language and ideas and must be seen as the result of social processes in which people construct their identities, define their values and beliefs, and make sense of their own world.

Indeed, it is the attribution of meaning to social problems and policy solutions, which opens up the window for policy variation and change. Yet, in the end, not every policy solution can be selected, retained and institutionalised. In line with the CPE perspective, Interpretive Policy Analysis applies methodological tools that “are based on the presupposition that we live in a social world characterized by the possibilities of multiple interpretations” (Yanow, 2000, p. 5). From this perspective, the analytical task is not simply to optimise policy solutions or make their outcomes more predictable, but to understand the conceptual frames and discursive processes that underlie actors’ practical reasoning in specific situations (cf. Yanow, 2000, 2014). As a research approach, Interpretative Policy Analysis uncovers the processes by which social problems are recognized, construed and constructed (cf. Münch, 2016). This offers a means of discerning different orientations and objectives of LLL policies. Moreover, this

approach allows distinguishing, how policy makers identify and construct their target groups, which in turn affects the types of solutions deemed possible and desirable for them. Understanding such processes proves a precondition to deliberate on the intended and unintended consequences of LLL policies for the target groups and yields knowledge that can help to formulate well-suited, sustainable policy solutions. In short, Interpretive Policy Analysis opens new vistas to research by showing “how and why has something become a problem and who is the winner and the loser of this way of seeing things” (Münch, 2016, p. 140), rather than asking what and how something functions and how it could be improved, or eventually transferred to other sites.

### ***Operationalising Interpretive Policy Analysis***

In this section, we draw specifically on results of a sub-study on policy mapping, review and analysis of LLL policies in eighteen European sites (two Functional Regions per country). Functional Region (FR) refers to a sub-division of territories that results from the spatial differentiation and organisation of social and economic relations rather than to geographical boundaries, administrative particularities or to historical developments. FR is understood as “a region organised by functional relations that are maximised within the region (maximisation of intra-regional flows) and minimised across its borders (minimisation of inter-regional flows or interactions) so that the principles of internal cohesiveness and external separation regarding the intensities of spatial flows or interactions are met” (Klapka, Halás & Tonev, 2013, p. 96). The comparative design of the study suggests meeting the challenge of developing a research framework that can capture the several understandings of ‘policy’ in the different places as well as the various and oftentimes contradicting meanings of ‘lifelong learning’. In YOUNG\_ADULLLT we adopt a broad definition of policy, in order to be able to cover the wider scope of LLL activities in each research site. Policies in this understanding include different forms of political measures ranging from a low level of materiality and concreteness, such as discourses, to very concrete policy programmes, such as professional training courses. They go beyond the field of education and encompass other related policy sectors, such as the labour market, youth and social sectors. While the heterogeneity of the phenomena described here as ‘policy’ poses

challenges for comparability in terms of level, reach and scope, by focusing on the processes of policy construction we assume that regardless of whether policies come from different levels, have different institutional origins, or wide/narrow remits, they can be treated as functionally equivalent instances of problem perception (including the construction of ‘problems’) that aim at intervening and ‘solving’ specific issues at local level.

LLL policies were selected in relation to the *age range* of 18-29-year-olds in order to accommodate the different definitions and understandings of young adults in the participating countries. Also, with regard to the *timeframe* of the policies the focus was laid on policy documents and initiatives between 2010 and 2016 for two particular reasons: first, this timeframe corresponds to a ‘post-crisis period’ and, second, a shorter timeframe was thought to be necessary because of the large number of relevant LLL policies in each country. Finally, selection was also made in terms of the focus of policies on specific *target groups*, which included young adults neither in employment nor in education or training (so-called NEETs); early school leavers (ESL); young immigrants; young entrepreneurs, and young adults who formerly were NEET. Aiming at variation and diversity, instead of representativeness, three LLL policies were selected in two Functional Regions in each participating country (N=54) (cf. Kotthoff et al. 2017).<sup>ii</sup> For each policy, thick descriptions were produced that presented in condensed and concise manner the specific regional and national challenges and the main targeted groups (What is the policy about? And for whom?); gave account of the overall objectives of the policies (What is it aiming at?); and, described their modes of working (How does it work?). The policy profiles were drawn based on policy documents, website information, and grey literature, such as policy leaflets, newsletters or action plans. Information from interviews with policy experts and policy practitioners was used to ‘cross-read’ the interpretive analyses conducted. In presenting and discussing selected findings of interpretive analyses that focus on orientations, objectives, and target group constructions of LLL, we elaborate on the frames that informed the perception and construction of ‘problems and issues’ to be addressed as well as on the ‘policy solutions’ devised.

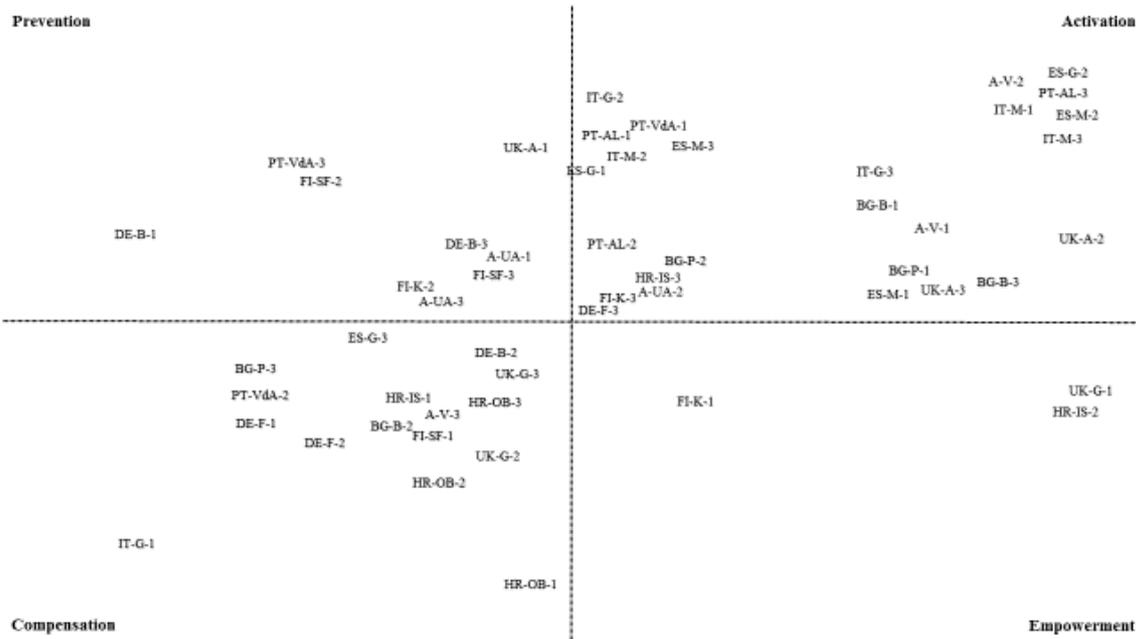
## ***Understanding LLL Policies for Young Adults: Findings from Interpretive Analysis***

The thorough review of policies in the nine participating countries of YOUNG\_ADULLLT, which included Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Scotland/UK, has showed intense activity in the realm of LLL within the observed period (cf. Kotthoff et al. 2017). In terms of orientation of the LLL policies, we first explored more generally their relation to specific policy sectors. The assumption was that, from a policy sector perspective, LLL policy-making will invariably set priorities for the issues to be tackled that relate to the sectoral and functional requirements in question. Policy makers will also define target groups either more generally in terms of social categories (age, gender, migration status, competence or qualification levels, etc.) or from a more functionally focused perspective of a policy sector in terms of perceived (behavioural or attitudinal) problems of the individuals or groups in question. Following this line of reasoning, this framing would then have impacts on the time horizons as well as on the definition of success criteria of the policies.

As expected, it was hardly possible to distinguish and attribute LLL policies to one policy sector, for instance to the policy sector education. The majority of LLL policies involved measures that could be attributed almost equally to the education, labour market, and social/youth policy sectors. Nonetheless, despite important sectoral differences across all sites, raising levels of employability was identified as the principal aim of policies. From a comparative perspective, this finding is unsurprising given that the 18 sites studied share the European context (for instance, the strategic framework ‘Education and Training 2020’ or the ‘Renewed Agenda for Adult Learning’), implement Europe-wide policies (such as Youth Guarantee), and draw widely on resources from the European Social Fund. For this reason, we enquired further into the logics orienting the policies in pursuing this common objective. A further analysis of the stated objectives of the selected LLL policies yielded interesting insights that corroborate the observations made about the overall orientation of the LLL policies discussed above. When looking at the objectives of the LLL policies more closely, we were able to identify various *logics of intervention* that guided the implementation of the policies. The different logics have been

reconstructed from the interpretive analyses of the policies and include the logics of *prevention, compensation, activation, and empowerment*.

Figure 1 below shows how the LLL policies were mapped in relation to each of these four different logics and how they framed and set their objectives. Since the policies referred to more than one of the above-mentioned logics, it was deemed sensible to establish their respective position within four quadrants by linking them proximally to other features of the policy. Inspired by CPE, this involved an interpretive cross-reading of the stated objective of the respective policy against the issues it purports to tackle as well as against the means it uses to achieve it. Defining the primary logic behind the objectives started from the explicitly stated objective of the policy. Then, depending on the relationship it had to issues to be tackled (these ranged from perceptions of individual deficits, characteristics or dispositions to structural issues faced by individuals), and to the solutions it devised (these were interventions at the level of the individual or solutions at institutional level), the position of the policy was shifted within the quadrant towards other corners. The aim was to position the policies within each of the four quadrants in a way that would best reflect their relation to the logic of intervention, prevalent perception of problems, and the types of solutions it devised. The closer a policy is placed to the outer corners of the quadrant, the more it corresponds to the respective logic of the quadrant. In contrast, the closer a policy is placed to the centre of the figure, the more commonalities it shares with other logics. In short, if a policy is positioned within one quadrant, but placed closely to another quadrant, this means that although it states its objectives within one logic it also includes central aspects from the logic of the other(s) quadrant(s). Therefore, the position of each policy in Figure 1 aims at illustrating in how far it shares and/or combines various logics identified.



**Figure 1. Four different logics of intervention that orient the implementation of LLL Policies**

In the following, we briefly discuss the four underlying logics of intervention reconstructed from the objectives of the LLL policies:

- In terms of a *preventive* logic, policies usually follow a rather linear understanding of causation and aim to avoid (in the present) the occurrence of an anticipated specific problem (in the future) (cf. Billis, 1981; Gough, 2013). Policies examined aimed primarily at reducing the rates of early school leavers (ESL), of those not in employment, education or training (NEETs), and school and training dropouts among young people, especially among those in vulnerable or socially and economically unstable situations. In general, although prevention could also mean that policies tackle issues related to the (living) conditions and (material) infrastructures under which youths participate in education and training, the policies reviewed focus on personal circumstances and foresee various forms of guidance/counselling, mediation or direct individual support related to education or vocational training. In this way, they try to prevent the deterioration of young adults' performance and the possible social exclusion issues for them. While some policies offer guidance and counselling, other focus more closely on improving studying and learning skills or preparing individual customized support for disadvantaged young people. Additionally, some policies aimed more generally at preventing crime and social and economic exclusion. In short, and paradoxically, LLL policies that frame their objectives in a logic of prevention seem to react to

social problems already affecting young adults rather than preventing them from happening.

- In terms of a *compensatory* logic, LLL policies seek to counterweigh or balance out a lack of, or missed opportunities, for (further) education/qualification, to give young adults (second) chances to pursue their studies/training, or compensate for individual deficits or personal and/or family problems. When grounded in distributive welfare terms, such policies are usually framed by norms such as compensatory justice and equality of opportunities (Kaufmann, 2009; Dean, 2012). However, the policies reviewed aimed more generally at providing information and guidance to young adults and raising their levels of entrepreneurship, and resilience at individual level. Moreover, some policies aimed at compensating for insufficient or missing educational programmes by offering work-life coaching and psychosocial support for young adults to enhance their life and civil competencies. In sum, the objectives of LLL policies that applied a compensatory logic focused on individualised solutions, often independently of the availability of education, training or job opportunities. In doing so, rather than compensating for unequal and inequitable conditions and structures in which young people are immersed, the policies focus on spurring individuals to fill in the gaps that the labour market and/or social welfare policies themselves seem to leave behind.
- In terms of *activation*, policies have called for stronger individual responsibility of citizens by means of incentives or sanctions. As a policy concept, activation refers to a dual function of establishing more effective social control structures and mobilising the self-care of individuals to transform passive service recipients into active job searchers (Dingeldey, 2011; Barbier & Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2004). Quite a number of LLL policies reviewed focused predominantly on labour market (re)integration and employability skills and attributes of young adults. In order to help them to enter the labour market as soon as possible they offered various forms of training, seminars, or workshops to upgrade their skills, re-qualify them, support their possible future employers, adjust their job orientation to the labour market needs or enable a smooth transition from education to the labour market. Still other policies activated young adults through offering possibilities to reconcile work and family, or through recognizing their informally acquired skills. Therefore, the overall objective of these policies was to react to the ongoing labour market transformations by mobilizing young adults to participate more actively and independently in pursuing their career goals. In this case, young adults have been portrayed as in need of supervision and lacking the chance to realise themselves. The role of the policies was then to supply

them with necessary experiences and options that would increase their employability, so that they could meet the expectations of the labour market.

- In terms of an *empowerment* logic, there was a minority of policies (3 out of 54) attempting to create conducive conditions for young adults. These policy measures looked for solutions that could improve the capabilities of young adults and could allow them to develop and successfully pursue their own life projects (cf. Hilverdink et al., 2010; Otto et al., 2017). When choosing their objectives, these policies did not frame the policy ‘issue’ or ‘problem’ as being narrowly related to the individuals or groups targeted, but rather as lack of resources and information, inadequate legislation, as well as grim labour market structures. Against this background, they offered them free and confidential counselling and advice on life management and guidance, and strived to maximise their social, economic and environmental benefits, and, to increase their creative skills and experiences in international cooperation. In doing so, they aimed at improving the level of information around matching of skills supply and demand, changing legislation and expanding infrastructures, for instance, by including social impact clauses to public contracts with business service providers to create jobs and apprenticeship places. This cluster of policies offered an interesting insight as it shows how tackling the same issues could be approached from a less individualising perspective.

From a comparative perspective, a number of further considerations can be made from a cross-reading of the analysed policies and their underlying logics.

- *Prevention aims at an individual solution to school-to-work transition problems*

Policies drawing on prevention as a logic of intervention prevail in functional regions where apprenticeships, vocational education and training or on-the-job training schemes are well established. The core idea seems to be integrating professional orientation and pre-vocational education into lower secondary education to avoid dropout, “waiting loops” in the transition system or reducing the number of NEETs and welfare recipients. The exception here is Functional Region Vale do Ave (Portugal), where prevention of crime and social exclusion was the focus.

- *Compensation appears as a reactive rather than redistributive strategy*

Policies oriented by this logic of intervention generally react to highly individualised perceptions of deficits or personal and/or family problems, often disregarding both socio-economic and labour market structures. Also, they tend to focus on individual behavioural and dispositional issues almost in a pathologising way (as if vulnerability were an attribute), often resulting in ‘blaming the victim’.

- *Activation is the prevailing logic of intervention orienting policies focused on short-term labour market integration through individual employability*

An interesting observation pertains to the fact that nearly half of all analysed LLL policies (26 of 54) set their objectives based on the logic of activation. This once again, underpins the observation that labour market orientation and a narrow understanding of employability have become hegemonic in designing and implementing LLL policies. This was particularly the case in Italy and Spain where five out of six policies have been implemented along this logic. The role of long-term educational and professional projects in developing the life courses of young adults is threatened by the immense pressure of the state-driven welfare policies to ensure stable labour force supply operating on short-term horizons. This in turn re-defines the role of education and professional training, marking them as means to an end, and not the other way round. Related to this, when a logic of intervention becomes dominant in a particular Functional Region, young people have no other opportunities to develop their own life projects. Indeed, the findings show that the majority of Functional Regions (15 out of 18) framed their policies within one prevailing logic of intervention. In some Functional Regions, policies analysed set their objectives based on the same logic, i.e. either on the logic of activation or on the logic of compensation.<sup>iii</sup> In this situation, young adults are required to develop their life projects in line with the given logics of LLL policies and to conceive of education and/or training as either an investment into their employability or as a chance to make up for their lost time. In short, still a great number of policies stresses single issues to be tackled by specific problem-solving strategies, thus framing particular—and in some cases one-sided—ways of seeing and problematizing issues.

- *Empowerment of individuals may serve to eschew more institutional or structural solutions*

Only 3 out of 54 policies were seen as pursuing empowerment as an orientation, however they raise very intriguing questions.<sup>iv</sup> The LLL policy ‘NUPPA No-Threshold Guidance Centre’ in Functional Region Kainuu, Finland, provides individually tailored support in a comprehensive reading of the subjective needs of the young persons involved. While this entails a holistic approach that might serve to support de-standardised life courses, it could also risk normalising issues by intervening primarily at personal/individual level. It is worth noting that this policy is implemented in a region characterised by a single labour market (wood industry) that offers only scarce professional and labour market opportunities to young people. The policy ‘Community Benefit Clauses’ in Functional Region Glasgow City Region, Scotland/UK, puts in place requirements on those contracted by local government to contribute to delivering wider benefits in addition to the core purpose of a contract. They are seen as a key component in maximising social, economic and environmental benefits for individuals within the constituent localities of the region. This includes impacts for priority groups of people in the community, for instance support provision of LLL, skills, and employability services. While this policy aims at improving the local conditions for young people, research has also shown that the government has been reluctant in enforcing and monitoring its effectiveness. In addition, although networking and cooperation among stakeholders is key to this approach, young people are not actively involved and figure only as recipients of the benefits. Finally, the policy ‘Open public university Diopler’ in Functional Region Istria County, Croatia, is an international programme taking place both in Spain and in Croatia called ‘Community Makers’ that aims at providing opportunity for young people to build the necessary knowledge and skills needed to be active in media development projects. There is no condition for participation, and young people actively take part to create and maintain an Internet portal that will help them to get information on further skills development and job search. Still, the main locus of intervention is the individual.

- *Policy orientations are multiple only in a few functional regions*

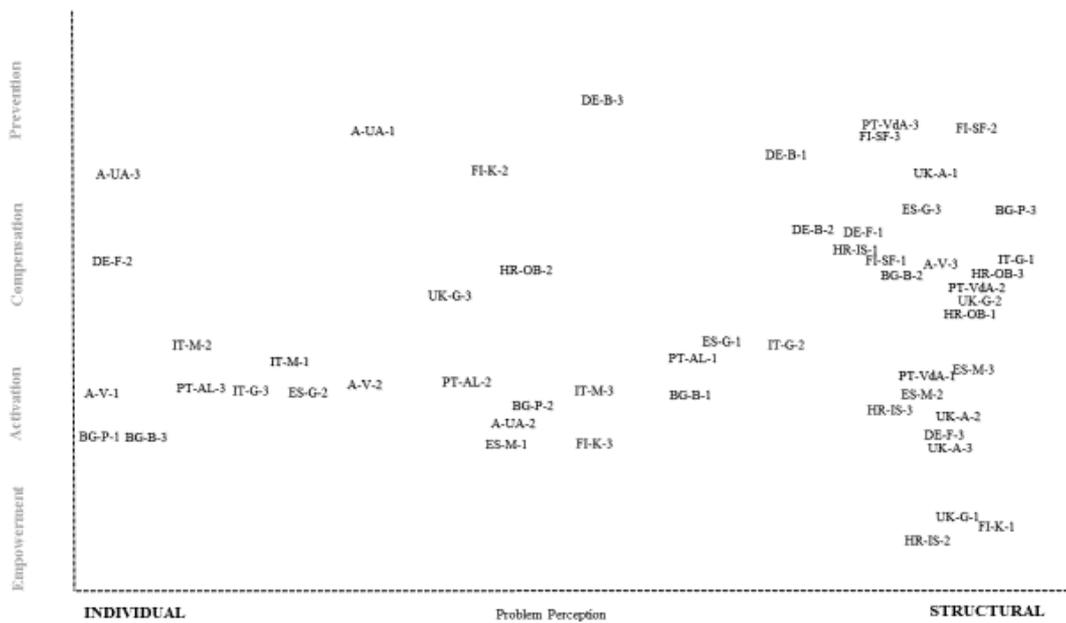
There are three functional regions (such as Functional Region Kainuu, Finland, see: FI-K-1, FI-K-2, FI-K-3), that have included a variety of policy orientations, promoting apart from the logic of activation also the logics of empowerment and prevention, the logics of compensation and empowerment, or the logics of compensation and prevention. This could trigger synergies. For instance, within these regions, policies may be seen as responding to the observed problems by means of different approaches, thus maximising the possible solutions and creating multiple options to tackle the existing economic and socio-political challenges. If implementation is rigid, however, this could also create contradictions in terms of catering to the specific needs of some groups or even produce stigmatisation effects. This remains an open question for further research.

### ***Recognising ‘Problems’ and Devising ‘Solutions’***

Subsequent to identifying the logics that oriented the implementation of LLL policies, we inquired further into the various approaches that the policies adopted to frame the problems and challenges to be tackled and to devise problem-solving strategies accordingly. As Figure 2 below shows, problem perception is distinguished by framing the issues either as an individual or as a structural problem. The figure below illustrates how the policy makers of 54 LLL policies analysed perceived, conceptualized and approached the problems they target.

Although clustered into four different logics of policy orientation, the policies nonetheless envisaged various problem-solving strategies. They were positioned between two different poles of problem perception: the individual problem perception on the left side or the structural problem perception on the right side. In the next step, considering them in more detail, they were then shifted either towards the left or the right side of the figure. The most important criterion of the placement was whether the policy approached problems as deriving from individual deficits and the inability of young people to integrate into the society and tackle their own issues, or whether it related to the emergent structural, political or economic difficulties or inefficiencies and the more general trends caused by current societal developments. Thus, the more the policy was

shifted to either the left or the right side, the more it related to one of the two poles of problem perception. Finally, based on the aspects of policy orientation it shares with other three logics, it was then moved upwards or downwards, depending on the policy orientation it affiliates with more closely. Displayed between these two poles, the LLL policies depict the tendency to ascribe perceived problems as either an individual failure or as a structural contradiction. Here, we observe that a great number of policies perceive and describe the issues they tackle as deriving from structural problems.

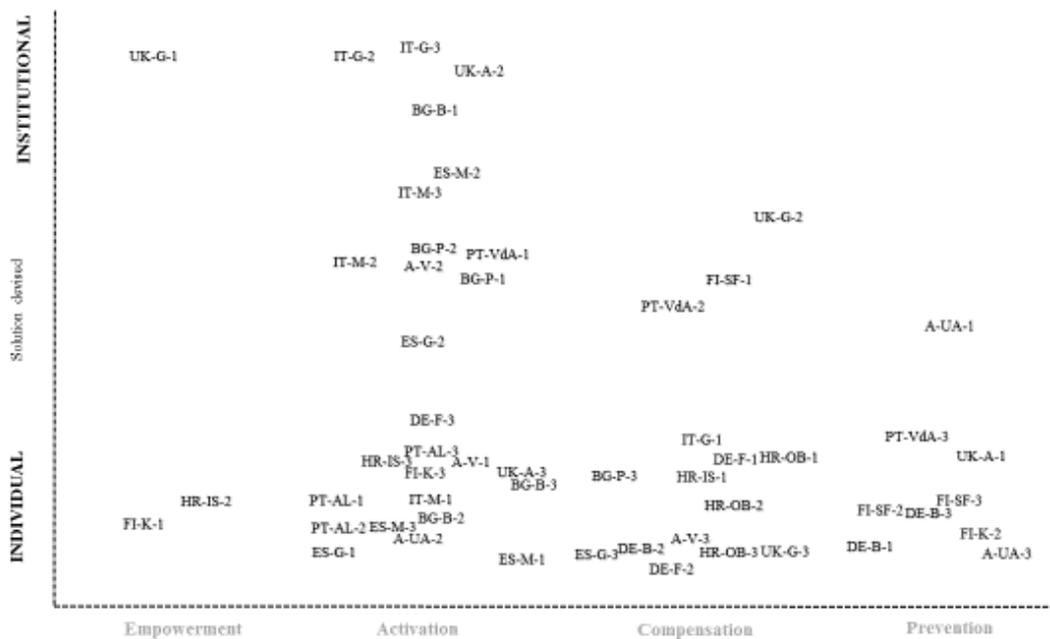


**Figure 2. Problem perception of the LLL policies**

When looking at the solutions the policies deemed necessary and appropriate, all 54 LLL policies could be again mapped between two poles, as Figure 3 below shows. The figure depicts the range of solutions devised by the analysed LLL policies.

Arranged in four different clusters of logics of policy orientation, the policies were now placed on the graph according to their proposed problem-solving strategy. If the policy proposed institutional changes, it was placed in the upper part of the figure. If, on the other hand, it was aiming at mobilizing individual resources and motivating young adults to a direct cooperation, the policy was placed in the lower part of the figure. Following the solutions adopted, they were then shifted on the figure reflecting the balance between individual or

institutional responsibility. If the policies were proposing a combination of both institutional arrangements and active personal contributions, they were shifted more towards the centre of the figure, respecting, however, their general focus. Finally, the policies were then moved to the right or the left side of the figure according to the aspects they share with other policy orientations.



**Figure 3. Solutions devised by the LLL policies**

When comparing results from Figures 2 and 3, several observations may be made: *First*, Figure 2 highlights the variety of problem perceptions among the analysed policies. The majority of the LLL policies (31 out of 54) have perceived the existing difficulties as more or less structurally conditioned. Only few of them (12), have clearly described the existing problems as individual deficits, whereas an even smaller number (11) has perceived them as a combination of both individual and structural problems. On the other hand, Figure 3 clearly shows that the overwhelming majority of the analysed LLL policies proposed individualistic solutions (37 out of 54), whereas some of them devised a rather combined approach (10). However, very few suggest institutional changes (7). The clear mismatch between the structural problem-perception and individual problem-solution points out to the fact that although the majority of the policy makers realise the structural difficulties that young adults are exposed to, they

nonetheless devise policy solutions grounded on individual interventions. In doing so, they risk further opening up the cleavage between young adults' possibilities and their chances to reach the socially- and culturally-created expected outcomes, reinforcing 'Matthews' effects' – i.e. accumulation of (dis-)advantages leading the successful to become more successful, the vulnerable become more vulnerable – and oftentimes leading them to frustration and/or disinterest.

*Second*, limiting the scope of analysis to Functional Regions, Figure 2 demonstrates that there was no Functional Region, where all the policies would identify only individual problems. However, in four of them every policy has perceived the existing problems as clearly structural. Only in three Functional Regions, each of the LLL policies identified different causalities, i.e. individual, structural, or combined. Regarding the solutions devised as seen on Figure 3, there was not a single Functional Region, in which the policies proposed only institutional changes. However, in one third of them, the policies have devised only individual solutions. Only in two sites, the policies proposed individual, combined, and/or institutional problem solutions. On top of that, among the Functional Regions, there was one particular case, where all policies implemented perceived the problems on-site as clearly structural, but proposed purely individual solutions. This was the case of Functional Region Istria County in Croatia, in which we have analysed three LLL policy programmes – 'Open public university Diopter', 'Community Makers', and 'INOVA'. The Functional Region Istria County is characterised by high numbers of unemployed, but well educated young adults. Although the policies envisage the structural inefficiencies on-site, they nonetheless opt for re-training and enhancement of individual skills and competences. This case manifests a clear mismatch between the structural difficulties and risks that young adults are facing, and the institutional inability to overcome them. Moreover, such critical situation blocks attempts to provide social inclusion and remains resistant to the economic changes it needs in order to foster growth and sustainable development.

### ***Target Group Construction***

In terms of the *target groups* of LLL policies, it became evident that these were more often than not constructed along the perceived deficits of young people, as illustrated by Figure 2 above. In other words, target groups were constructed focusing on individual characteristics and attributes, and oftentimes framed by pathologising characteristics such as not being mature, able or willing to progress through education and successfully transition to the world of work, or as lacking ‘life skills’. In doing so, LLL policies categorise target groups as a ‘problem’, particularly regarding their aptitude in participating in the labour market (cf. EENEE, 2012; cf. Schneider & Ingram, 1993, pp. 335ff.), thus marking a deficit or problematic position defined as deviant from a ‘normal’ life course. Target groups were very often depicted as in need of guidance and support to overcome behavioural and attitudinal issues, leading to their dominant representation as ‘being in need’ of activation, compensation and prevention. The latter hints at one important implicit assumption underlying the idea of ‘information’ and ‘guidance’ as a policy solution, namely that there is a secure and definitive knowledge about what to do and what kinds of skills and competences are needed in the labour markets of tomorrow. However, as target groups are not a static or natural category, whose categorisation may change under the different scopes of various policy-agendas, we assume that target group construction *first*, creates problem-definitions along individual ascriptions, and *second*, reveals a narrow definition of those ‘in need’. Such categorisation is thus limiting both the possibilities of participation, and the objectives and orientations of LLL policies. The construction of target groups according to predefined criteria referred to two main dimensions: age range and different conceptions of vulnerability. The latter were related either to different individual ‘deficits’ (for instance, lack of soft skills) or to structural living conditions.

Overall, the LLL policies target a distinct group of young people by setting specific access criteria in the form of requirements the young adults have to fulfil before participating in the measures. Almost all policies list, *first*, a set of rather static access criteria, such as age, school-leaving certificates, the receiving of unemployment benefits, and *second*, a more variable range of disadvantages and individual lack of skills, related to educational, health and social ‘needs’, intended to be supported by the measures. As other demographic criteria, such as gender,

class and migration background can hardly be found in the LLL policies description, the measures focus on specific individual characteristics and attributes of their target groups, narrowing down on educational developments as means to labour market inclusion.

### ***Discussion and Conclusion***

In this article, we have argued that analysing LLL policies by adopting an interpretive policy analysis approach is helpful in uncovering ambivalences and incompatibilities in the objectives and orientations of policies. While employability was identified as the dominant objective of the policies examined, the logics orienting them varied substantially. Four different logics of intervention were reconstructed – prevention, compensation, activation, and empowerment – which, in turn, framed how problem perception and devised solutions took place. In the sample of 18 Functional Regions, most LLL policies focused on employment and relied on individualised solutions.

Although discussions about an ongoing individualization and de-standardization of life courses started already during the 1980s, the analyses showed that a significant number of LLL policies are still referring to the model of a standard – educational and occupational – life course. For instance, employment-centred policies often view NEETs as deviant who simply need to be individually activated and guided, disregarding completely the processes of life course de-standardisation. This is intensified by the dominant preventive and compensatory logics of most policies. Consequently, LLL policies put additional pressure on young adults, exposing them to further vulnerability. The constant thematising of deficits of young people (re)produces assumptions of normality from which the groups targeted assumedly deviate. LLL policies often implicitly or explicitly suggest that participation will lead young participants (sooner or later) to a stable occupational career, notwithstanding the structural, economic or labour market landscape in which they are inserted.

A great number of the LLL policies analysed follow the assumption of a linear life course with defined stages and trajectories along specific life spheres, with formal education and work as central themes. Transitions become thus central pieces in smoothing the passage of young people from school to the world

of work. As a result, young adults are confronted with preconceived notions of a standard life course forcing them to adjust and adapt. The policies hardly take into account the diverse living conditions, uncertainty, 'yo-yo-effects', flexibilisation, or individual choices (Walther, 2006). A major potential negative impact is that when participation of young adults in various LLL measures and programmes does not lead to the desired occupational career, in the end, these empty promises may lead to a reduction of educational aspiration and motivation. This is problematic particularly for young adults in vulnerable positions. The odds for quick fixes are not high, not only because there is little certainty in contemporary economic developments due to abrupt technological changes, subjecting the labour markets to much volatility, but also because the impact of the LLL policies on labour market integration depends mostly on the actual infrastructures at regional and local level.

Since LLL policies unfold differently depending on the specific local contexts, each local context provides distinct opportunities or constraints affecting the social realities of young adults. As LLL policies are generally tailored based on information available at national level, and not necessarily in view of the needs and circumstances at local level, their competing and ambivalent orientations and objectives produce mismatches with young adults' life courses. The transfer of LLL policies framed at the EU level to the national and regional levels is difficult as national cultural, social and political features are often bracketed out in the construction of the policies and their target groups. For instance, the implementation is highly influenced by political features such as (de-)centralised structures and the autonomy of the regions. While in countries with a centralised structure (e.g., Bulgaria and Portugal) local policies can hardly be found, the decentralised structures only can promote successful implementation if they have the ability and autonomy to decide on the implementation and tailor them for the young adults' needs on site. Additionally, the networks and partnerships across and within the levels are crucial. Within the implementation process responsibilities are hardly shared – with exception of Finland and Scotland and to a lesser extend in Austria and Bulgaria with some Public-Private-Target-Group-Partnerships.

An important observation can be made that relates to the ability of individuals to take decisions about their own life trajectories, especially in reference to the point in time of their transition from education to work. LLL policies may be seen as narrowing individual agency and choice by narrowly focusing on labour market entry, in particular for those in vulnerable positions. For instance, the 'right' point in time of this transition seems to depend heavily on socio-economic status since policy-makers seem to draw quite distinct conclusions about, for instance, a 27-year-old youth still in education depending on whether he or she is from low, middle or upper social strata. Contrary to the general assumption that education is a lifelong process, LLL is reducing education to acquiring the formal credentials as a ticket to the labour market.

It becomes visible that while there is no agreement on what skills are needed where, when and at what levels, LLL policy-making emphasises their value for labour market participation and identifies the problem with young people lacking them. The preferred solution is prevention, compensation and activation of young people to participate in policies and programmes that only seldom lead to formal qualification. In other words, LLL is closely linked to productivity and employment for which formal credentials are a precondition, while LLL policies focus on 'soft skills' preparing for employability. Further national, cultural, social and political contexts are bracketed out in the construction of the policies and their target groups. In particular for young people in vulnerable positions, this has a doubly problematic impact. First, they are left out in the formulation process of LLL policies as no attempt is made to relate policies to their individual needs, interests and life projects. Second, their participation in LLL policy measures and programmes is streamlined towards preventive and compensatory activities that seldom lead to formal qualification or regular employment. The responsibility for creating opportunities lies here with the autonomous individual – by participating in learning and training to get the skills needed – and not with the institutions and structures of the labour market and welfare.

In conclusion, the interpretive approach chosen offer important insights into how policies identify and respond to social and economic issues that are to be tackled by LLL policies at local/regional level.

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- <sup>i</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 study is conducted between 2016 and 2019 in nine EU member states and is funded by the European Commission under the call H2020-YOUNG-SOCIETY-2015 (Contract Number: 693167). Following partners are involved: 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. YOUNG\_ADULLLT is coordinated at the University of Münster, Germany. Project website: <http://www.young-adulllt.eu>.
- <sup>ii</sup> For an overview of the policy cases, see: <http://www.young-adulllt.eu/policy-mapping/index.php>.
- <sup>iii</sup> For example: Activation: ES-M-1, ES-M-2, ES-M-3; PT-AL-1, PT-AL-2, PT-AL-3; IT-M-1, IT-M-2, IT-M-3; or Compensation: HR-OB-1, HR-OB-2, HR-OB-3.
- <sup>iv</sup> These were FI-K-1 in Kainuu FR, Finland, UK-G-1 in Glasgow FR, Scotland, and HR-IS-2 in Istria FR, Croatia.