



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

young adult

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

Initial results from cross-national analyses of lifelong learning (LLL) policies in Europe

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of the YOUNG_ADULLLT project is to provide a thorough analysis of lifelong learning (LLL) policies for young adults in Europe, particularly for those in situations of social exclusion. The project not only analyses the coherence of these policies at national, regional and local levels, but it also examines their limits, their intended and unintended effects, highlighting some resulting challenges in the near future. LLL policies are shaped by needs and demands from different societal sectors – mainly education, labour market as well as social and youth policy – and have been subject to significant changes in recent years. A number of reasons makes it imperative to improve their coherence and adequacy:

- countering the high fragmentation of LLL policies across Europe;
- reversing the persistent weakness and ineffectiveness of adult education policies;
- understanding LLL policies in their specific regional and local contexts;
- assessing the impact of sustainable solutions and estimating their overall applicability;
- accounting for cultural differences across European countries and formulating contextualised LLL policies that are well suited to the target population.

While essential progress has been made towards improving LLL policies in Europe, there is still considerable lack of knowledge on how LLL policies interact between the European, national and regional/local levels as well as on the extent to which they cater for the needs of young adults.

YOUNG_ADULLLT focuses on the specific embeddedness of LLL policies in different regions across the European Union.

The project starts from the assumption that it is by looking into the specific regional and local contexts that these policies are best understood and assessed. Thus, the project provides a thorough overview of the highly heterogeneous LLL policies and their specificities across the nine participating countries: *Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Scotland and Spain.*



Figure 1. Participating countries in YOUNG_ADULLLT

YOUNG_ADULLLT set out to conduct research aimed at understanding LLL policies in terms of their:

- orientations and objectives to their specific target groups by mapping LLL policies at regional level;
- reviewing their relationship and complementarity by enquiring into their (mutual) compatibility and integration with other social policies at local level, and especially
- analysing their potential implications and intended and unintended effects on young adult life courses;
- identifying sustainable policy solutions and patterns of coordinated policy-making by examining their functioning and embeddedness in regional landscapes of LLL policies from a comparative perspective.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

The findings summarised in this Policy Brief stem from a sub-study in YOUNG_ADULLLT, documented in *the International Report on LLL Policies and Inclusion in Education and Work* (see *Kotthoff et al., 2017*). The Report compared LLL policies across nine European countries highlighting *common issues and diverging developments*, scrutinising *tensions and challenges* in the implementation of LLL policies, and assessing the intended and contrasting the explicitly stated intended and the unintended impact of LLL policies on young adults' life courses.

These first findings suggest that there are severe tensions and challenges in implementing LLL policies across the different levels and that the impact of LLL polices on different target groups differs significantly.

Different definitions of LLL and the heterogeneity of LLL policies make it difficult not only to identify LLL policies, but also to fulfil the needs of the target population.

The research shows two visions of LLL: the first one promotes a series of values strictly related to the personal development of human beings (and their relationship with the principle of equal opportunity and democratisation), while the second vision is more related to LLL's contribution to economic growth and market competitiveness; i.e., a utilitarian vision that places more emphasis on the instrumental and short-term aspects of learning/training. The tendency to give more importance to the latter vision in order to fulfil the needs of the labour market (particularly after the economic crisis of 2008) has diminished the potential social change ambition that encompasses LLL.

Furthermore, the debate about these two visions of LLL is related to the fact that, contrary to common assumptions, LLL policies do not predominantly originate in the educational policy sector. As can be seen in the following figure, from the 183 LLL policies mapped across Europe in the participating countries, 39.3 % (72 policies) are associated more directly with the labour market policy (LMP),

33.8 % (62 policies) are social and youth policies (SYP) and 26.7 % (49 policies) may be defined as educational policies (EP).

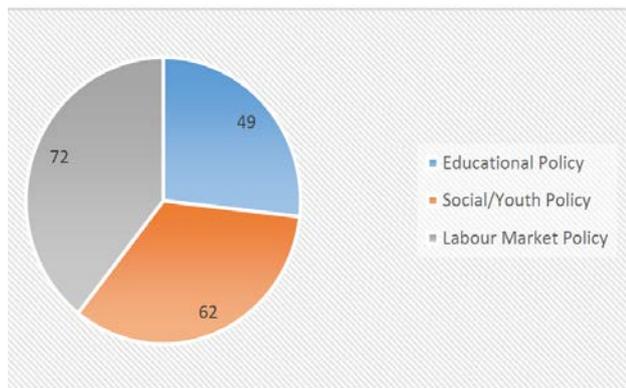


Figure 2 – Distribution of LLL policies among the three main policy sectors (Labour Market Policies; Social & Youth Policies; Educational Policies)

The distribution of LLL policies across these different policy sectors reflects different orientations, time horizons and preferred views of problems and associated solutions.

The heterogeneity of LLL policies not only complicates the identification of LLL policies, it also triggers tensions and contradictions when it comes to the prioritization and implementation of these policies. Finally, the perceived differences between LLL definitions and LLL policies can lead to administrative and communication problems and, most importantly, to a disregard of the needs of young adults, due to the lack of involvement of the target groups in the development of LLL

policies.

LLL policies are still largely formulated under the assumption of standard life courses. LLL policies are still developed and defined under the assumption of standard life courses rather than de-standardised life courses, which implies that they have been created following the model or the ‘belief’ that there is a ‘normal’ trajectory in life. Research has evidenced that young people are themselves blamed for their failure to enter the labour market because they did not follow a ‘standard’ life course. This approach of LLL policies must be characterised as obsolete and demonstrates that something has to be done in order to reformulate and develop LLL policies that are relevant to the real social and individual worlds and life trajectories of young adults.

LLL policies disregard the fact that the construction of target groups and features of social exclusion differ from one country to another. The research shows clearly that LLL policies depend on cultural, social, and political features that must be taken into consideration. This does not only present a vital challenge for national policy-makers who are concerned with the development and implementation of LLL policies, but also points to the urgent necessity to create a deep awareness of this on the European level. Only in this way LLL policies will be able to relate to general cross-national features without disregarding specific needs and particularities of the target population, and the understanding that there are different definitions and procedures to tackle social exclusion. The evidence gathered in the international report on LLL policies in Europe suggests that there is not yet a detailed reflection describing in which respect social exclusion is particularly associated with concrete aspects such as having the chance to study or the possibility to work and in which ways it also takes into account symbolic aspects such as the lack of participation of young adults in the construction of LLL policies or the lack of voice of young people with regard to the formulation of their life expectations at a young age.

The European Social Fund (ESF) represents the main funding agent of LLL policies. In Europe, the ESF has far-reaching implications for the development of both national and regional LLL policies. The cross-national analyses show clearly that the ESF policies have an overarching significance, which leads to two main conclusions: First, without the ESF there would be very little LLL policy activity in some European regions, if any at all; second, the predominant presence of ESF can be detrimental to the relevance of LLL policies in the regions. Thus, instead of addressing local and regional problems directly, European initiatives could be far from the specific realities of the countries and weaken the relationship between the regions and the EU. In addition, the pre-dominance of ESF

as the main funding agent of LLL policies could weaken or even hollow out regional and local funding and thus endanger sustainability of LLL policies after the ESF funding has terminated.

The leverage of LLL policies in the regions is closely related to differences between centralised / decentralised structures and to the autonomy of the regions. Differences between centralised and decentralised systems affect the definition and implementation of LLL policies at different levels. In countries with a centralised structure (such as Bulgaria and Portugal), there is a difficulty to find autonomous LLL policies in the regions. However, the success of these policies does not exclusively and necessarily depend on the scope of the decentralisation processes (which can be observed in countries like Croatia, Finland, Italy, Scotland and Spain), but on their 'true' implementation; i.e., on the ability and autonomy of the regions to decide to implement those LLL policies within their own reach which are tailored to the needs of their young adults (which could be found to some extent in countries with a federal structure such as Austria and Germany).

The research findings show how important it is to deepen the study of the decentralisation processes in each European country at all levels in order to better understand the implementation of LLL policies (from public spending and income to political decision-making power). On the basis of this understanding it would be possible to define more precisely the governance and leverage of regions and how pertinent LLL policies can be.

The successful implementation of LLL policies depends on establishing and maintaining effective partnerships and sharing responsibilities – This aspect represents a key challenge at all levels and its aim is to recognize the crucial role of having effective partnerships and to share responsibilities when it comes to implementing the LLL policies. The analyses carried out to date in the YOUNG_ADULLLT Project suggest that there are not enough effective partnerships between the public and private sectors and that the participation of members of the target groups of LLL policies is reduced (some exceptions can be found in countries such as Finland and Scotland and to a lesser extent also in Austria and Bulgaria where there are examples of Public-Private-Target Group-Partnerships). Establishing relevant networks and cooperation mechanisms at European level requires a high degree of organization. Reaching this level will be difficult, if one takes into account the heterogeneity of LLL policies at national, regional and local levels, and how complex it is to identify and fulfil the needs of the target population.

Apart from the identification of the intended effects of LLL policies in Europe, there is also evidence suggesting that there are unintended effects of LLL policies, which do not necessarily benefit young adults. The cross-country analysis has identified two intended and two unintended effects in particular. The first intended effect is to reduce unemployment rates among young adults, which is strictly related to the economic vision of LLL and the idea that learners have to be prepared for the labour market. This intended impact should be carefully analysed because it can contradict LLL's main objective to promote learning in different stages of life and for different reasons and not exclusively at a specific time and primarily to answer to market competitiveness. The second intended effect is to improve the educational opportunities for young adults. However, the available evidence suggests that the intended improvement of educational opportunities for successful participants of LLL programmes is often used rhetorically and far from fulfilling the expectations of the target population.

With regard to the *unintended* effects of LLL policies, the first effect is related to the suggestion that extending the course of education of young adults through LLL programmes is merely a strategy to avoid higher rates of youth unemployment. This gives the impression that LLL does not really contribute to the personal development of young adults and thus confirms the finding that LLL policies are far from meeting the needs of young adults (see above). The second unintended effect

is to create the wrong impression that young adults can be offered the same educational opportunities through LLL policies, while research has shown repeatedly that migration status and/or social background affect educational opportunities in a significant way.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the evidence and findings of the YOUNG_ADULLLT sub-study presented in the previous section, it is possible to formulate the following policy implications and recommendations with the aim of improving the quality of LLL policies at the European, national, regional and local level:

The definition of LLL should not lose its original intention of furthering the personal development of individuals by responding exclusively to the demands of economic crises and the labour market. LLL policies must be aware of the consequences of economic crises particularly for young adults without disregarding the importance of LLL policies promoting a set of values strictly related to the personal development of human beings. Proposing public policy alternatives to solve economic issues has neither to affect the 'true' meaning of education for life nor change the values on which education has been founded.

LLL policies should not simply be a reflection of a 'standardised' vision of life courses. The evidence so far generated in the YOUNG-ADULLLT project suggests that it is essential that policy makers realise, from the very beginning, that the main objective of LLL policies is not to promote 'standardised' life courses, but rather to defend the idea that it is possible to follow different paths through life. This aspect is of the highest relevance and must be considered before the implementation of any LLL policy, because without it any attempt to take the needs of a target population seriously will be doomed to failure.

The construction of target groups in Europe in relation to LLL policies has to take account of the cultural, social, and political differences that exist within the countries. Most LLL policies in the regions analysed answers to specific cultural, social and political differences. At the European level, LLL policy initiatives must take these differences into account in order to promote general trends keeping in mind attention to, and respect for, regional and local particularities. This means that not all LLL policies can be directed from the EU level, but that they should be primarily positioned at national, regional and local levels. In addition to this, it is important to be aware of the heterogeneity of LLL policies in order not only to avoid the development of numerous LLL policies tackling essentially the same issues, but also to avoid unnecessary expenses.

The ESF has to cooperate more directly with the regions in order to make them part of a common LLL policy project. A key issue of LLL policies at the EU level is to better understand the context in which ESF funding takes place. This funding must not only be related to the improvement of education and training of young adults in order to be more competitive on the job market, but also respect the LLL processes and needs of each region (some of which are not strictly related to an economic need and/or market competitiveness). In this sense, the autonomy and leverage of the regions are key elements for the successful implementation of LLL policies. A successful implementation of LLL policies depends on a deeper understanding of how regional autonomy and leverage interact with EU policies and how this interaction can be improved through effective partnerships. Therefore, it is essential to deepen the analysis of how to build solid partnerships across different levels in order to propose concrete measures and to study to what extent decentralisation is fundamental for the development and implementation of LLL policies (as briefly discussed in the national reports).

Carefully weigh different policy objectives when formulating intended effects in order to foreclose unintended effects of LLL policies. If the intention is to keep the original meaning of LLL, an intended effect of LLL policies should be not only the reduction of unemployment rates among young adults, but also strengthening and enhancing young people's unique, personal capabilities. In addition, it will be necessary to attenuate the discourse according to which the educational opportunities of all young people can be improved through LLL policies and programmes. The evidence suggests that the improvement of educational opportunities can be achieved much more effectively by proposing concrete and targeted LLL policy measures for young adults with migration backgrounds and/or LLL programmes which try to curtail the influence of social background on education.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The research project YOUNG_ADULLLT departs from the observation of a high fragmentation and persistent weakness and ineffectiveness of adult education policies across Europe. It set out to enquire into the specific forms of embeddedness of these policies in the regional economy, the labour market, the education and training systems and the individual life projects of young adults. The focus is on lifelong learning policies aimed at creating economic growth and social inclusion that target young adults in vulnerable positions, for instance those not in education, employment or training (short: NEETs) or those in situations of near social exclusion.

The research project uses three different entry points:

- On an *institutional* level, YOUNG_ADULLLT starts by focusing on various lifelong learning policies (LLL) and analyses their potentially competing (and possibly ambivalent) orientations and objectives;
- On an *individual* level, the project focuses on the young adults' perceptions and expectations of these policies regarding their life projects. The objective is to yield insights into how the young peoples' life courses are impacted by these policies in terms of intended and unintended effects;
- On a *structural* level, YOUNG_ADULLLT aims to critically analyse current developments of LLL policies in Europe to prevent ill-fitted policies from further exacerbating existing imbalances and disparities as well as at identifying best practices and patterns of coordinated policy-making at regional/local landscapes.



Figure 3. YOUNG_ADULLLT's thematic entry points and analytical dimensions

The research project contributes, first, new knowledge on the impact of LLL policies on young adults' life courses, identifying the conditions, strategies, and necessities for policies to become effective. Second, the project provides insights on the innovations and potentials they unlock, with view to informal and non-formal learning to better address vulnerable groups. Third, the research contributes to a better understanding of the structural relationships and functional match between education and training and the labour market sectors. Fourth, in order to do so, we will provide a thorough review of regional policies and initiatives in the countries studied, identifying best practices and patterns of coordinated policy-making at local and regional levels.

In order to do so, the research project YOUNG_ADULLLT compares 9 different countries in the EU: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom. To

analyse the embeddedness of the LL policies, the research brings together institutional and policy analyses. YOUNG_ADULLLT brings together a broad variety of methods using a multi-method multi-level research design to grasp the interaction of the three analytical levels – structural, institutional and individual. We pay particular focus on qualitative research with young adults, employers and trainers/providers of education and training, complemented by quantitative analysis of the young adults' living conditions across Europe. Moreover, the research in YOUNG_ADULLLT provides an in-depth case-study analysis of selected policies and regional/local landscapes within the project

The results presented in this document are drawn from a sub-study (Policy Mapping, Review and Analysis), in which LLL policies in the participating countries were examined using a common analytical framework. The mapping and review of LLL policies covered the labour market, the educational and the social and youth policy sectors and led to the identification and re-formulation of research questions that guided the analyses of national and regional/local LLL policies. This sub-study has compared the national findings in the participating countries and produced an 'International Report on LLL Policies and Inclusion in Education and Work'. This research, also included a policy analysis of the participating countries and an in-depth analysis of national and regional strategies of LLL policies for young adults in terms of their specific orientations and objectives, underlying success criteria, as well as issues of (mutual) compatibility and integration with other social policies at local level. The International Report identifies both common cross-national patterns as well as divergent developments at the national level and more precisely at the regional level in 18 functional regions (two per country), which provide the basis for understanding regional disparities, planning and implementing labour market and economic policies.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Policies Supporting Young People in their Life Course. A Comparative Perspective of Lifelong Learning and Inclusion in Education and Work in Europe (YOUNG_ADULLLT)
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FURTHER READING	Kotthoff, H.-G., Bittlingmayer, U., Carrillo Gáfaró, J. F., Boutiuc-Kaiser, A., Parreira do Amaral, M., & Rinne, R. (2017): International Report on LLL Policies and Inclusion in Education and Work. YOUNG_ADULLLT Working Paper. University of Education Freiburg.