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Exploring Young Adults' Lifelong Learning Policy Participation Styles: Comparative Perspectives from Finland, Scotland, and Spain

Jenni Tikkanen, Judith Jacovkis,
and Ellen Vanderhoven

5.1 Introduction

A wide range of interventions and support measures—often taking the form of lifelong learning (LLL) policies—has been developed to tackle the significant challenges today's young people face in their transitions to

J. Tikkanen (✉)

Turku Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

e-mail: jenni.tikkanen@utu.fi

J. Jacovkis

Autonomous University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

e-mail: judith.jacovkis@ub.edu

E. Vanderhoven

University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

e-mail: e.vanderhoven.1@research.gla.ac.uk

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adulthood and, particularly, to facilitate their progression through education and into the labour market. These LLL policies bring together active labour market strategies, vocational education and training policies, adult education initiatives, and social welfare and support measures (Rambla et al., 2020; Rodrigues et al., 2019). Across Europe, LLL policies targeting young adults differ in their understanding of “what the problem is” and how it should be solved. Therefore, they represent differing policy orientations, objectives, and timelines (Parreira do Amaral & Zelinka, 2019; Rambla et al., 2020). Furthermore, these policies are conveyed by varied youth regimes and modes of governance (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012; Walther, 2017), and they reflect different understandings of the problems related to transitions to work and foster different solutions to tackle those problems. Thus, the way in which policies unfold depends both on national and local contexts introducing distinct opportunities and constraints affecting the social realities of young adults (Parreira do Amaral & Zelinka, 2019). While individuals are not passively acted upon by such forces and instead make choices and compromises based on the alternatives before them (Elder et al., 2003), the negotiation and construction of life courses are always embedded in particular structural contexts providing varying kinds and degrees of opportunities.

In their national, regional, and local contexts, LLL policies interact with differing institutional and discursive opportunity structures within which young adults’ agency “filters and influences the institutional policies and practices regulating youth transitions and social integration” (Kovacheva et al., 2020, p. 166). Despite an abundance of different LLL policies, many leave a lot to be desired. For example, measures aimed at young adults rarely begin by investigating the needs and wishes of their target groups, nor do they provide opportunities for young adults to participate in policy design, implementation, and evaluation (Kovacheva et al., 2020). Furthermore, the perspectives of policy experts and professionals do not typically align well with those of young adults (Rambla et al., 2020).

This chapter sets out to explore the meanings and motivations that young adults attach to their participation in LLL policies and, by adopting a comparative lens, aims to identify different LLL policy “participation styles” among young adults in three functional regions: Kainuu in

Finland, Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Region (ACAR) in Scotland, and Girona in Catalonia, Spain. By drawing on qualitative interviews with both policy experts and participants, we examine these participation styles in relation to young adults' life course progression, social and agentic resources, and the central features of the LLL policies in which they participated. We ask whether there is room for young adults' own voices and initiatives within the LLL policies—and if and how young adults are able to negotiate and “customise” their policy participation in personally meaningful ways.

Based on previous research, we assume that if such space for negotiation and customisation exists, it is rarely formal or institutionally foreseen (Kovacheva et al., 2020; Rambla et al., 2020), which leads us to look for informal forms of leeway. Here, the concept of relational opportunity structures appears especially relevant, emphasizing the interplay between objective and subjective dimensions in shaping actors' choices and actions within systems of opportunity structures.

It is important to note in this regard that an individual's life course is a cumulative process and (dis)advantages do not occur randomly during a lifetime, instead following a logic of path dependence that begins with early (dis)advantages brought about by an individual's social origins. Also, psychological resources, such as cognitive complexity and flexibility, self-directedness, and personal control (Elder et al., 2015; Levy & Bühlmann, 2016), all of which relate to individual agency,¹ accumulate over the life course. Consequently, not all young adults are equally equipped with the social resources and agentic capacities to navigate purposefully their educational and occupational trajectories—or to negotiate LLL policy participation to meet their individual needs and wishes.

5.2 Methodology

This chapter draws on qualitative interviews with 21 policy experts and 27 young policy participants (Table 5.1). Policy expert interviews were thematic and followed a common schedule, opening with a reference to a key focus around which experts could construct their own narrative. In the case of young adults (aged 18–29), interviews were biographical,

Table 5.1 Summary of the sample

Region	ACAR	Girona	Kainuu	TOTAL
Experts				
Managerial experts	4	4	2	10
Street-level experts	3	6	2	11
Total	7	10	4	21
Young adults				
Male and non-FBP	4	5	4	13
Female and non-FBP	2	0	3	5
Male and FBP	2	4	0	6
Female and FBP	0	3	0	3
Total	8	12	7	27

Source: Author's own

Note: FBP = foreign-born parents

which allowed them to highlight and focus on the events, processes, emotions, and opportunities for agency that were most relevant to their personal transitions and policy experiences (Aaltonen, 2013). A narrative approach that did not prioritize chronology was used, recognizing that young adults' most notable life events and reflections might fall outside the critical transition points and chronological narratives commonly focused on in youth research (Aaltonen, 2013; Harding, 2006).

To describe patterns or regularities in the data and identify shared participation styles, we used qualitative content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). We chose this approach for its usefulness in "addressing not only manifest content but also the themes and core ideas found in texts [...] [including] contextual information and latent content" (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, p. 85). The analysis was developed in a number of stages: firstly, each author conducted a first round of extraction on the interviews from their corresponding national context, meaning transcripts could be treated in the original language by a native speaker (Filep, 2009; Wong & Poon, 2010). We then summarized the content of the interviews based on pre-determined categories.² In the case of policy expert data, we analysed interviews in conjunction with policy literature to allow triangulation of expert responses with formal policy narratives.

Secondly, each author focused on one aspect of the analysis, synthesized the extracted content across policy cases to describe the opportunity structures in which young adults were embedded and the different participation

styles they adopted. Throughout this phase, we worked collaboratively to tentatively suggest, revise, and finalize analysis at frequent intervals, including revisiting and modifying analysis categories. This iterative approach based on “close teamwork” between co-researchers supported inter-subjective validity (Döös & Wilhelmson, 2014) and allowed the leveraging of both insider and outsider positionalities in the analysis (Chavez, 2008).

5.3 LLL Policy Landscapes

As an in-depth discussion of the national scale lies beyond the scope of this chapter, we focus instead on the features and challenges that are most relevant to the three functional regions.³ Furthermore, we take care to present the context in specific temporal as well as geographical terms, profiling the regions as they were in 2017 at the time of data collection.

In order to understand how institutional policy settings shape the opportunity structures within which young adults form their life course, we focus on those elements of the LLL policy landscapes in ACAR (examined policies UK_P1⁴ and UK_P2), Kainuu (FI_P1 and FI_P2), and Girona (SP_P1 and SP_P2) that set the limits and rules for policy participation. We highlight the most relevant commonalities and differences regarding policy goals, salient practices, and degrees of rigidity or flexibility in policy design.

5.3.1 Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Region (ACAR)

ACAR is located in the north-east of Scotland, housing 9% of the Scottish population (NRS, 2020). The region comprises two council areas—urban Aberdeen City and rural Aberdeenshire—which are united by the Strategic Development Planning Authority partnership. The regional economy is dominated by the oil and gas sector, attracting young people with high educational qualifications. In the most recent census, the share of people aged 16–29 in Aberdeen City was 25.6%, well-above the Scottish average (Scotland's Census, 2011). Furthermore, the share of

young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET) has historically been well below national averages (Eurostat, 2020). However, the 2014–16 global oil price crash led youth unemployment rates to double in the area (Aberdeenshire Council, 2018), with recovery only beginning to take place at the time of data collection (Scottish Government, 2018). The downturn also contributed to widened inequalities between local communities, which further challenged limited institutional capacity for supporting young people in vulnerable situations.

The two selected policies in ACAR aim to smooth young adults' transitions within education and into the labour market and increase the desirability of vocational pathways as alternatives to higher education. Both policies target young adults from the end of lower-secondary education until their early twenties and tend towards leveraging participants' existing skills rather than developing new ones. Thus, in many cases—despite being formally universal—neither policy provides alternatives for young people that do not reach a threshold of required skills.

The policies primarily assume that young people and their families lack relevant information about labour market needs and educational and training resources. A website and newsletter (UK_P1) and provision of career guidance in schools (UK_P2) are the means adopted to improve information flows and availability. However, this information and guidance often focuses more on labour market needs than on young adults' own interests. A further goal of the policies is to improve collaboration among regional policy actors (e.g., companies, schools, and other public and private training providers). This often proves problematic as local actors lack a global view of the landscape and overlapping coordination mechanisms result in competition rather than collaboration.

UK_P1 offers a broad menu of alternatives to participants distributed weekly via its website and newsletter, while UK_P2 focuses on careers guidance and a narrower menu. In both cases, most options have strict access requirements, which are often too high for those young adults in the most vulnerable situations, leaving them outside the scope of these policies in practical terms. Some individualized support is available for policy participants when choosing from the different options, but most of the responsibility is on young adults to make informed decisions from the available options. If a young person is unable to access their desired

option, they are diverted to an alternative, but little support is provided to improve their skills prior to entry or alter the access conditions. Furthermore, UK_P2 provides no individualized support once young adults leave compulsory schooling. Neither one of the two policies has strong institutionalized relationships between practitioners and participants, but informally these relationships tend to be somewhat closer. In addition, as previously mentioned, practitioners are very distant from each other and from the higher levels of policymaking. Overall, these elements reveal a fragmented structure of intervention, subject both to the discretion of practitioners and participants' ability to establish sound relationships with them.

5.3.2 LLL Policies in Girona

Girona is a densely populated province of Catalonia in the north-east of Spain, accounting for 1.6% of the Spanish population (INE, 2020). As an autonomous community, Catalonia has regionally devolved powers over education and youth policy and partial powers concerning the labour market. Embedded in infrastructural connections between France and Barcelona, Girona is relatively affluent, with higher per capita income and lower unemployment and poverty rates than in Spain overall (Eurostat, 2020; INE, 2016b). Catalonia accounts for nearly a quarter of Spain's tourism (INE, 2016a), which dominates the regional economy of Girona. The region is also characterized by high levels of immigration and an above-average share of foreign-born young people. The social and economic integration of this demographic group and the poor quality of employment opportunities available to young people are significant regional challenges.

The main goals of the selected LLL policies include increasing young adults' employability and helping those without a lower-secondary education certificate to attain one. The two policies assume implicitly that young people in vulnerable situations lack the personal and social resources to enter the labour market and, thus, the policies aim to provide young adults with guidance, training, and networks to improve their chances of finding employment. The primary target group is young adults

aged 16–24 with NEET status. For some of the policy measures, participants are required to have at least a lower-secondary education certificate, but this is not always mandatory. In both policies, the participants are required to register in the Youth Guarantee Scheme, although this is not compulsory for some parts of the SP_P2.

Regarding their practices, both policies combine group and individual guidance sessions with short training programmes and apprenticeships. The participants are also provided with space and support for improving their CVs and searching for employment. Practitioners conduct labour market forecasting to assess the most salient labour market needs that can be fulfilled by low-skilled adults and work to establish permanent relationships with companies in the area. Options are rather limited within the two policies. In SP_P1, when participants express interest, practitioners try to offer some vocational courses, but face bureaucratic hurdles as providing training of this kind requires legal permits and funding. Participants of SP_P2 must decide which course they want to access before entering the policy, after which no changes can be made.

Provision is more individualized in SP_P1 than in SP_P2 and is oriented towards improving participants' self-confidence and self-knowledge. Conversely, participants' relationships with practitioners appear to be closer in SP_P2, which is more established and well known in the area. Thus, it can also provide young adults with some informal support beyond policy participation. SP_P1 is a more recent policy and has regular practitioner turnover, which could hamper relationship-building between practitioners and participants. In both cases, requirements for participants' active involvement vary, except when they undergo training, and the policies are therefore adaptable to participants' changing circumstances. Policy managers decide the options on offer, while trying to avoid overlap with other relevant organizations in the area.

5.3.3 LLL Policies in Kainuu

Kainuu is a mostly rural and sparsely populated region in north-eastern Finland, with its largest urban centre, Kajaani, having only 38,000 inhabitants (total regional population 72,000; Statistics Finland, 2017a). From

2004 to 2012, the area operated under the “Kainuu Model”, which unified all the region’s eight municipalities under one political body and informs regional governance to this day (Regional Council of Kainuu, 2015). In 2017, both youth unemployment (22.8%) and the NEET rate were above national averages (Eurostat, 2020; Statistics Finland, 2017b). Limited employment combined with few post-compulsory education opportunities contribute to significant out-migration of young people and to relatively low proportions of inhabitants from migrant backgrounds. Therefore, primary regional challenges lie in providing attractive opportunities for young locals and encouraging in-migration from across Finland and abroad to fulfil the demand for a skilled workforce and maintain the region’s vitality.

The overall goals of Kainuu’s selected LLL policies are reducing youth unemployment and social exclusion. At the participant level, policy goals are adapted to each participant—although the ultimate aim is typically to build their capacities for entry into education or the labour market. The target group of these policies includes young adults struggling to define their own life plans and mid-term goals, as the policies provide support to define and work towards goals with participants.

The target groups of these policies differ mainly in the severity of their vulnerable life situations and the educational attainment required of them. FI_P1 focuses on young adults with upper-secondary education who are struggling to either find employment or a suitable vocational field for further study, typically due to a lack of self-confidence and self-awareness. In contrast, FI_P2 targets young adults in the most vulnerable situations and, thus, is not a preventive policy measure. Instead, it aims to bring young adults “back” from social exclusion resulting from various and often accumulating factors. Irrespective of their target group, the two measures adopt a highly individualized approach, which translates into practices and methodologies that work to develop participants’ autonomy in defining their own goals and commitments.

Both policies contribute to larger LLL policies. These overarching policies have broader target groups, but, when necessary, all their support services are available to participants of FI_P1 and FI_P2. Accordingly, both policies offer a broad range of options from which participants can choose. Many of these options are provided in conjunction with a wide and strong

network of regional policy actors (e.g., educational institutions, employment officials, health care professionals). The options are typically not mutually exclusive but can be cumulative depending on young adults' particular (changing) situations. In this context, relationships between practitioners and participants are close in both policies, although the need for non-bureaucratic relationships is especially emphasized in FI_P1. While there are no formal mechanisms for young adults to alter either of the policies, the boundaries on what is offered are not strongly defined and activities depend greatly on the individual plan created for each participant.

Table 5.2 illustrates some key dimensions of the policies. Thus, it is not an exhaustive list depicting all the measures' characteristics but focuses on those features that provide us with clues for understanding the different participation styles of young adults. Regarding the autonomy and motivation expected of participants, it is important to note that we do not refer only, or even mainly, to the access criteria of the policies, but to the entire process of policy participation. Interestingly, despite the formal policy goals of activating young people and promoting their educational and occupational prospects and trajectories—and despite the policies' varying expectations for autonomy and motivation—the six examined policies did not seem to produce any significant added pressure regarding the life choices of the policy participants. On the one hand, for those young people with lower levels of autonomy and agentic capacities, the policies provided typically the support and encouragement that the participants needed and wanted, and, in the interviews, they did not express feelings of being pressured by policy experts to make certain choices or perform in certain ways. On the other hand, regarding those young people who were well-resourced and displayed high levels of agency, it was more common for them to put pressure on the policies to give them what they already knew they wanted, rather than the other way around.

5.4 Young Adults' Policy Participation Styles

Here, we present four LLL policy participation styles identified from the 27 young adult interviews. These styles are discussed in relation to how young adults found their way into the policy, their goals and motivations

Table 5.2 Central features of the LLL policies regarding young adults' participation

Policy	Target group and accessibility	Available options	Expected autonomy and motivation	Nature of relationships	Available support
UK_P1	Broad target group within a strict age limit, varying accessibility	Broad menu of options	Intermediate autonomy, low motivation	Formally weak, informally intermediate	Formal standardized, with some individualized support
UK_P2	Broad target group within a strict age limit, flexible but demanding access	Limited menu of options	High autonomy and motivation	Formally weak, informally intermediate	Standardized support varying between institutions
SP_P1	Specific target group, access limited to most disadvantaged	Limited menu of options with possible add-ons ^a	Intermediate autonomy and motivation	Formally strong, informally intermediate	Individualized support
SP_P2	Specific target group, access limited to most disadvantaged	Limited menu of options	Intermediate autonomy and motivation	Formally intermediate, informally strong	Formal standardized support
FI_P1	Specific target group (broad in the overall policy), flexible access	Broad menu of options	Intermediate autonomy, high motivation	Formally and informally strong	High degree of individualized support
FI_P2	Specific target group (broad in the overall policy), flexible access	Broad menu of options	Low autonomy, intermediate motivation	Formally and informally strong	High degree of individualized support

Source: Author's own

^a If a critical mass of participants is interested and the related bureaucracy can be accomplished

for participation, their gains from participation, and the social resources and individual agency displayed in their life stories—as well as some central features of the LLL policies.

5.4.1 Proactive and Purposeful ($n = 10$)

The first participation style, “proactive and purposeful”, is characterized by young adults’ clear, tangible goals for policy participation, such as pursuing an apprenticeship or finding a job in a particular field. Furthermore, the ten young adults with this participation style displayed relatively high levels of agency. They had most often deliberately sought out the policy and made an informed decision to participate based on their learning preferences and career goals. They were, therefore, able to realistically reflect on their educational and occupational interests and abilities as well as suitable or preferred ways of learning—and adjust their plans accordingly. Many of them had family connections to their aspired vocational fields, which gave them further advantage. The interview excerpts below illustrate some of the proactive and purposeful features of this participation style.

I just decided for myself [to pursue an apprenticeship], there was never anybody from the school encouraging you to do it, and when I was in school I didn’t do any technical [...] workshops. And I decided after, while I was doing my exams, I want to do [work in a certain vocational field], just because I thought that would be interesting and my dad does it, and I just thought if he can do it I can do it. (UK_Y8)

I thought that I’ll come here [to the policy], because I get to do work [in a vocational field] here, so that I can do that to refresh my memory about that stuff a bit [before entering further vocational training leading to employment accessed with policy support]. Yeah, I contacted this place by myself. (FI_Y1)

[S]o I have been back here this week with the counsellor, and she is helping me to look for a job and to see how things go. Because staying at home makes no sense, and if I work, then maybe someday I can [afford to] attend [aspired vocational institution]. I would really like that. (SP_Y11)

Regarding social background and life course progression, these young adults can be divided into two groups. In the first group, the young adults were generally better off, and their life stories did not include any major accumulation of disadvantage. They were from stable middle- or working-class families with whom they had positive relationships, and who provided support and guidance. They did not have physical or mental health issues, nor did they mention any developmental challenges (e.g., learning difficulties, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder). Furthermore, these young adults reported no significant challenges or interruptions in their educational pathways, but they did express their disinterest in academic learning, preferring practical, hands-on learning. By contrast, young adults in the second group were from more disadvantaged social backgrounds. Even though they had mostly positive relationship with their families, they did not provide significant support in educational and occupational decision-making. These young adults also had more fragmented pathways in education and the labour market (e.g., dropping out of vocational education and training, irregular employment), which motivated their policy participation.

It is hardly surprising therefore that these young people tended to participate in policies that demanded high levels of autonomy and self-management, allowing them to exercise agency and reflexively progress towards their goals. Relationships between policy practitioners and participants were typically intermediate in closeness for this group, and more standardized support was sufficient for their needs. The young adults who displayed this participation style benefitted from policy participation in two main ways: by gaining positive learning experiences, which further validated their choices, and attaining professional gains, such as labour market connections, increased professional confidence, concrete progression towards the aspired occupation, or finding employment.

5.4.2 Supported Capacity-Building ($n = 9$)

The distinguishing feature of the second participation style, “supported capacity-building”, was young adults’ motivations for participation. The majority wanted to study or work but were unsure which vocational field

to pursue and were looking to policy participation for direction in their lives. Many also sought personal growth gains, such as significantly improving their self-confidence or social skills, in order to enter education and, later, the labour market. Another characteristic of this participation style was that the young adults were guided to the policy by employment officials, youth workers or other experts. Correspondingly, and in contrast to the first participation style, the young adults in this group displayed lower levels of agency in their interviews. While they were motivated to move on with their lives and exit unstable educational and occupational situations (e.g., early school leaving, NEET periods, severe long-term consequences of being bullied at school), they either lacked the intrapersonal resources to do so, or were not able to explore options and make decisions without external support:

So, life has been more like this kind of searching, and I haven't had the courage to apply anywhere, and I haven't really known where I could apply to. [---] I'm kinda running out of faith, like where to, like I want to study and work, but I don't really know where, what I would like to do. (FI_Y3)

I thought "let's see if I can exit the [vocational field where was working before policy participation]", because I was fed up with it. [---] At least here you develop a routine, you come here, know the adults, you do something useful, you talk with the counsellor to see where you are going. (SP_Y6)

The policies in which these young adults participated most often required intermediate or low levels of autonomy, provided participants with individualized support, and fostered close practitioner-participant relationships, at least informally. The young adults themselves came from working-class backgrounds or socially disadvantaged families. While most had positive relationships with their families, the support they received varied notably from having one very supportive parent to being abused—and certainly not supported—by the family. Roughly half of the young adults identified themselves as facing developmental challenges, mental health problems, or both, which were clearly reflected in

their life course progression. As such, individualized support and close relationships with practitioners met many of their needs and facilitated progression towards intangible goals, for example, by increasing their functional abilities and social trust. Indeed, many of these young adults indicated that their agency had increased during policy participation. More generally, young adults' gains from policy participation can be described as personal growth as they became more aware of their personal interests and strengths as well as possible educational and occupational pathways:

Yeah, I have changed a lot as a person [due to policy participation] and become stronger and braver. (FI_Y8)

Truly, the programme saved my life a bit, because it gave me quite an important opportunity, let's say. I did this [course], and I liked it pretty much, I learnt many things and I liked the experience I had, and all this. (SP_Y3)

5.4.3 Arbitrary and Incidental ($n = 4$)

The “arbitrary and incidental” style of policy participation was displayed by four young adults who were looking to be occupied, rather than continuing to “do nothing”. Participation was arbitrary in that it was not initially motivated by any tangible or intangible goals related to studying, working, or improving intrapersonal resources. It was incidental in that the young adults came into contact with the policy only because of external guidance and would have accepted any opportunity presented to them; the young adults' participation in a given policy was largely a question of happenstance. One slight exception was a participant who was invited to join a policy and told that it would provide eligibility for benefits, which then became an important motivator. The first interview excerpt below is a rather typical example of the motivations expressed in the interviews, while the second shows how little information the young adult in question had about the policy upon entry, which was typical for this participation style.

Mm, [the policy participation] gives me a reason to wake up each morning. (FI_Y7)

I went to Skills Development, and they brought up [name of organization]. I only really knew it was a 12-week course. It's like a 12-week employability course. (UK_Y3)

The only shared feature of the policies in which these young adults participated was their relatively low expectations of autonomy and motivation from participants. Therefore, it is unsurprising that policies such as UK_P2, which expect high levels of both autonomy and motivation, did not have young adults with this participation style. However, despite initially displaying a low level of agentic capacities, particularly in relation to planning and pursuing particular trajectories, these young adults' interviews indicated increasing agency during policy participation. Indeed, despite entering with low intentionality and no discernible goals, all of them reported that they had gained some form of personal growth, such as increasing independence, social trust, or self-confidence.⁵

When I ended [a language course], I was recommended to enrol in the Youth Guarantee, and so I registered there, and they recommended that I do a course, any course. [---] I chose [a course], and the worker was very good with me, because I'm very shy and she helped me a lot: "You need to do it this way, you need to try to speak". (SP_Y5)

The family background of these young adults can be described as either working-class or socially disadvantaged, and while their family life had not been very stable in most cases, they had some family members from whom they got at least some emotional support. Their life courses included several disruptions and severe challenges, and three out of the four young adults had either developmental challenges, physical health problems, mental health issues, or a combination thereof. Out of the four participation styles, this group, while sharing some similarities with the previous one, was overall in the most vulnerable situation due to low agency and the multidimensional accumulation of disadvantage in their life courses.

5.4.4 Selective Utilization ($n = 4$)

The fourth participation style identified from the data is “selective utilization”. A distinct feature of this group was that the four young adults felt that they did not *need* policy participation, tending to state that they could “do it by themselves” when reflecting on their educational and occupational goals. Nevertheless, these young adults did have reasons for participating, but their goals were quite “narrow” in comparison to the actual scope of the policies. For example, one young adult used policy activities to support mental health recovery before applying to higher education—despite the policy being targeting young adults with limited future planning capacity. Another young person hoped to readjust to a normal working pattern following long-term physical illness before enrolling in higher education, instead of developing job-seeking skills and employability in line with intended policy goals:

I came here also because, like, to be able to get myself prepared for studying five days a week. Like getting prepared for that, so that I'll be capable of coping with going to the [higher education institution] five days a week.
(FI_Y4)

Gains corresponded with young adults' goals, but also outstripped them in some cases, as aspects of participation were unexpectedly enjoyable and useful to participants. Typically, prior to participation young adults had been progressing rather smoothly in their educational (or occupational) pathways, before facing abrupt and unexpected blockages or disruption. This often led to further challenges, such as depression, feelings of social isolation, or anxiety. Examples of disruption included not being able to access higher education, post-recession unemployment, and serious physical illness. The young adults who adopted this participation style came from working- or middle-class backgrounds and had positive relationships with their stable and supportive families.

All young adults in this group displayed high levels of agency and typically recognized their distinction from fellow participants with significantly fewer agentic resources and abilities. This was also recognized by practitioners, as illustrated by the second interview excerpt below:

At first, I didn't feel at all like I belonged here. More like, not because the other participants were mean of anything or not accepting me, but because of their backgrounds. Like I feel that I've had a good childhood and everything has been going really well for me. And then, what they've, it's nothing like what I have experienced. Like up to now I haven't had any problems or anything. (FI_Y9)

She [the practitioner] helped me in finding jobs. She always called me: "I have sent your CV there", but she told me that I didn't need her help. (SP_Y8)

In the case of the two Finnish young adults displaying this participation style, the policies in which they participated had flexible access, a high degree of individualized support, and close practitioner-participant relationships. Therefore, it was relatively easy for these "selective utilizers" with high levels of personal agency to negotiate access to the policy and be "selective"—despite not really corresponding to the target group or sharing the institutionally foreseen policy goals. Nevertheless, both access and selectiveness required space for negotiation and relatively trusting relationships with the policy practitioners. Thus, what made selectiveness possible was a combination of the policy features and their own agency, which was further supported by high social resources.

While the two Spanish young adults belonging to this group also had high levels of personal agency and positive family relationships, they differed from the Finnish young adults in that their social resources were lower and, in that sense, they corresponded to policy target groups. However, their selectiveness was not based on any particular negotiations with practitioners and their motivation for participation differed. For one individual, enrolling in the policy was only one of many things they had done to improve their skills, expand their social network, and find employment. The other Spanish "selective utilizer" used participation to break with bad habits and gain routines while planning next steps. Table 5.3 presents the distribution of participation styles among the examined policies.

Table 5.3 Participation styles by LLL policy

Participation style	Policy					
	UK_P1	UK_P2	SP_P1	SP_P2	FI_P1	FI_P2
Proactive and purposeful	2(1)	4(4)	–	3(1)	1	–
Supported capacity-building	–	–	4	2	2	1
Arbitrary and incidental	2(1)	–	–	1	–	1
Selective utilization	–	–	1	1	1	1

Source: Author's own

Note: The number in brackets indicates the number of policy participants able to customize the policy to their individual needs and wishes (see the next section)

5.5 Agency and Access to Informal Leeway

During analysis, a pattern emerged from the data related to the existence and accessibility of informal leeway to adapt and customize policies to participants' personal needs and wishes. While the four individuals adopting the "selective utilization" participation style displayed comparatively high agentic resources through somewhat instrumental participation, other young adults were able to go a step further in leveraging informal leeway within the policies by actually altering the conditions of the policy offer. These seven young adults (see Table 5.3) enrolled in LLL policies in ACAR and Girona not only selected aspects of the policies but also customized them to meet their individual needs, deviating from what was institutionally foreseen.

The leeway that these seven young adults utilized was indeed informal in nature. Thanks to the relationships they built with policy actors (whether policy practitioners, policy managers, or employers), they were able to access a degree of customization that was not typical for the policy. Therefore, it is not surprising that this kind of customization was not found in the Finnish cases, as the original policy designs offered such a high degree of individualization and flexibility that any changes made by young adults could not be considered informal. Instead, in the Spanish and Scottish cases, these young adults were able to leverage trusting and positive relationships with policy actors who had the power and resources to find pockets of leeway within the policies and make adaptations on a case-by-case basis. In some instances, these relationships were the result of existing family connections, indicating the role of social advantage in accessing informal leeway:

Actually, I came in [to dad's workplace], asked for an apprentice or a job, and I was told to come back once I'd finished all my exams. So, the next, second time I came in, I was told to come in on Monday to work. [...] Even though I have failed my maths, I have been allowed to just stay on my apprentice. (UK_Y6)

In every case, the customization took place at the interface between training and employment components of LLL policies, with young adults able to shorten training periods (in order to begin working or achieve qualification more quickly), alter working conditions, or organize desired work placements outside the usual channels.

I had done my exams and then decided that I was leaving [...], but then, before I left, I set up a summer job at the [company] that I am at just now. [...] And then, I was coming up to the end of my summer job, and then I said to the boss, I have got into college. [...] But I said I could go three days a week to that and, if I can, come and work two days a week [contributing to LLL qualification]. Then I would do that, if you would let me. [...] So the two days I worked paid my fuel, obviously to get there [to college], so that was good. (UK_Y5)

I didn't even finish the [policy participation]. It would have lasted three months, and after one and a half months I was already working. I kept attending within my availability, but I started working. [--] The [policy practitioners] they saw I was really serious in the course, I was trying very hard and they got me an interview in this [company]. (SP_Y10)

Six out of the seven customizers adopted a “proactive and purposeful” participation style,⁶ which is hardly surprising. The high level of agency, clarity of purpose, and strong interpersonal skills required to build relationships, formulate desires outside the confines of the policy, and articulate and pursue these goals with policy actors are notable and correspond to the characteristics of this group. Furthermore, where these young adults made use of existing family connections to help achieve customization, it indicated a high level of social capital and family support, which were also more typical of this group. Nonetheless, there was one unexpected case of an “arbitrary and incidental” customizer. This young

person described how policy participation itself increased their confidence and agency to the point where they felt able to make a request of the policy practitioner, who, impressed by the young person's progress in the policy, went out of their way (and pre-existing policy mechanisms) to secure the young person's work placement of choice.

I asked [...] if I was able to get a [work experience] place at [a company that the interviewee visited often as customer]. He [policy practitioner] tried his hardest to get this placement for me, and he got it for me, and I couldn't be more happy. (UK_Y3)

Interestingly, the process of customization itself further empowered some young people, as the recognition, validation, and fulfilment of their needs bolstered self-confidence.

5.6 Discussion

The four different LLL policy participation styles identified from the data illustrate the relevance of agentic and social resources stemming from social background and previous life course experiences (c.f. Dawson, 2012; Elder et al., 2015; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Levy & Bühlmann, 2016) for how young people orient to, and participate in, LLL policies. As expected, participation styles also reflected certain features of the surrounding institutional and discursive opportunity structures (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2015) formed by the policies and their local/regional/national contexts (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012; Parreira do Amaral & Zelinka, 2019; Walther, 2017). Successfully accessing and manoeuvring in these policy opportunity structures requires varying degrees of autonomy and agency, and the structures afford varying levels of formal and informal leeway to young adults.

Some leeway in the policies can be perceived as institutional or formal, such as differing menus of options for participants. These options are not always (equally) well communicated; thus, making informed choices requires knowledge of the options' existence and meaning. Making choices—instead of being directed to a policy option—also requires a

certain amount of confidence and agency from participants. There was also “hidden” or informal leeway in most of the policies, which was revealed by the experiences of the seven Scottish and Spanish “customizers” and the two Finnish young adults who adopted the “selective utilization” participation style. Regarding the latter, what made their rather instrumental selectiveness possible was a combination of highly flexible and individualized policy features and their own agency, which was further supported by their relatively high social resources.

In addition, for those seven who were able to customize policies, this was only possible thanks to relationships that young adults fostered with policy actors. Furthermore, the importance of these relationships for the trajectories of these seven young adults is something unaccounted for by either discursive or institutional understandings of the opportunity structure. Formally, this leeway was not a feature of the policies, nor was it a product of broader social norms about the policies and their participants. Instead, these adaptations emanated from the micro-level of policy implementation, where personal relationships between individuals fostered self-confidence, trust, and mutual dedication. It is notable that this informal, relational leeway comes into play when individualization and flexibility has not been institutionalized in the policy design (as in the Finnish case study). In other words, most of the policies under study, even those that were institutionally more rigid or pre-determined, did offer a degree of leeway for customization, but when not formally offered, it could be achieved through informal, relational means. This has important consequences for equity, as, based on our results, only those young adults with the highest agentic resources were able to articulate and pursue a desire for customization, resulting in unequal participation experiences and outcomes and further disadvantaging of more vulnerable policy participants (Palumbo et al., 2019; Palumbo et al., 2020). The Finnish policies follow a universal individualization approach, thus supporting fruitful experiences for participants regardless of their ability to foster personal relationships with policy actors. In contrast, the Spanish and (even more so) Scottish policies adopt a universal standardization approach that requires participants to be able to build close relationships with policy workers in order to move beyond standard policy goals or mechanisms.

In conclusion, our findings confirm the assumption that how young adults orient to LLL policies and the policy participation styles they adopt reflect both their personal capacities and resources and the opportunity structures formed by the policies. Furthermore, in line with previous research (Rambla et al., 2020), our findings show that the meanings and motivations young adults attach to their participation in LLL policies do not always align with formal policy objectives. This observation is not particularly surprising given that LLL policies rarely provide opportunities for young adults to participate in design or implementation (Kovacheva et al., 2020). Lastly, in general, those young adults who were most motivated and positive about their LLL policy experiences and who exercised the most autonomy over their participation were those who had greater social resources and, as a result, were more able to adhere to a formalized and standardized LLL pathway. By contrast, young adults with more disrupted life courses and fewer sources of support were more likely to continue with a disrupted trajectory under the LLL policies they participated in, reproducing processes of social exclusion (Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Kotthoff et al., 2017).

Notes

1. While life course research typically views structure and agency as analytically distinct (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), we eschew this unproductive dualism and adopt a more Bourdieuan understanding (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Instead of viewing agency simply as “bound” by structures, we understand individuals as coming into being through active engagement with systems of power relationships and agree with Coffey and Farrugia (2014, p. 472) who emphasize that “Youth studies cannot simply continue to celebrate actions that resist existing power relationships as manifestations of agency. To do so results in conceptual frameworks that portray young people who do not resist as lacking active subjectivity, erases the efforts that these young people are making to build lives in conditions not of their own choosing, and imposes pre-existing normative commitments on young people to whom they may not be relevant”.

2. Expert interviews: policy description; goals; target groups; collaborative mechanisms; dimensions of leeway in the policy.
Young adult interviews: family and social background; accumulation of (dis)advantage in the life course; events leading to policy participation; policy participation (reasons, goals, impacts); displayed agentic abilities.
3. For more information on the regions, see Kotthoff et al. (2017) and Scandurra et al. (2018).
4. To safeguard the privacy of the interviewees, the official names of the policies and measures at the core of the case studies analysed in this chapter have been replaced by codes. Specifically, the codes report the abbreviation of the country name followed by “P” (“Policy”) and a sequence number on the basis of the order of appearance of the policies in the book.
The codes attached to the quotations from interviews report the abbreviation of the country name followed by “Ex” (“Expert” for street level professionals, policy managers, and policymakers) or “Y” (for young adults) and the sequence number attributed by the different research teams while collecting the interviews.
5. It is important to note that while virtually all the young adults in our sample stated that they had experienced some gains from policy participation, some of them also expressed criticism, such as insufficient timeframes or narrow menus of options. However, these complaints were not predominant for any one participation style and none of the styles was defined by a critical stance among the young adults. It is also necessary to emphasize that the young adults who agreed to be interviewed were likely those who had a positive attitude towards the policies and were relatively eager to share their life experiences and views.
6. The reason we do not propose that these young adults display a distinct participation style is twofold. Firstly, in other regards, their participation style is a good match to the participation style groups discussed above. Secondly, the customization that they were able to achieve did not define their whole participation style but was a narrow—although significant—aspect of their policy experience. While we define participation styles by the different meanings and motivations for participation that young adults attach to LLL policies, here, we particularly look at the extent to which they could alter the very definition of the policies through their relationship with policy actors.

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