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Institutional, Economic-Material, and Discursive Opportunity Structures Influencing Support and Guidance Policies for Young People in Austria, Finland, and Scotland

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6.1 Introduction

A relevant number of Lifelong Learning (LLL) policies targeting young adults across Europe focus on providing support and guidance to smooth the transition from education to employment. Most of these policies are

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promoted at the supranational level (i.e., European Union), but these are usually reframed into national political discourses and institutions. However, in most European countries these nationally reframed LLL policies are implemented—and more importantly enacted—in a variety of regional contexts. Flexible solutions are usually required to allow regions to adapt to a wide range of socioeconomic factors that influence youth education, training, and employment opportunities. Therefore, even if similar LLL policy goals and approaches are disseminated across countries and regions, the final enactment is likely to vary depending on national institutions, perceptions, discourses, and regional socioeconomic structures, all of which partly influence the problematization of the situation.

In this chapter, we analyse the extent to which national education institutions and regional socioeconomic contexts influence the objectives (i.e., explicit goals) and orientations (i.e., interests, ideas) of LLL policies focused on supporting young people in the transition from education to the labour market. We also focus on the influence that the meanings attributed to these LLL policies have on governing young adults' educational and employment trajectories. Our approach assumes that the objectives and orientations of LLL policies are influenced by a set of institutional, discursive (Dale & Parreira do Amaral, 2015) and economic-material opportunity structures, which subsequently influence the governance of youth educational and early labour market trajectories. Throughout this chapter, we disentangle how each type of opportunity structure influences the objectives and orientations of LLL policies, and their subsequent configuration at the regional level.

To conduct our analyses, we employ the skills formation regimes classification laid out in the “Political Economy of Skills Formation” (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012) to identify different national institutional and organizational forms of skills formation for young people. These are based on differing historical pathways, understandings, and meanings (Jessop, 2010) attributed to LLL and skills policies.

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While Austria belongs to the collective regime (social partners collaboration), Finland can be classified within the statist model (state-led), and Scotland in the liberal regime (market-led).

For each country, we focus our analysis on two socioeconomically contrasting regions, allowing us to compare a variety of regional economic-material opportunity structures within and across countries. The main regional factors of variation are the comparative level of demand of intermediate skills (i.e., those typically acquired in vocational education and training—VET) and the existence of a predominant economic sector (e.g., gas and oil in Aberdeen). The selected policies are enacted in the Austrian regions of Upper Austria (AT_P1¹ in a context with high demand of intermediate skills) and Vienna (AT_P2, low demand for intermediate skills); the Finnish regions of Southwest Finland (FI_P3, high demand) and Kainuu (FI_P4, low demand); and the Scottish regions of Aberdeen (UK_P3, high demand) and Glasgow (UK_P4, low demand). For each region, we analyse a LLL policy that meets two criteria. First, it targets young adults and, second, its main focus is supporting young adults' transition from education to the labour market (e.g., career guidance, mentoring).

Our empirical comparative analyses are based on the information collected from interviews with relevant national and regional stakeholders. The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows. First, we discuss the analytical framework employed to conduct our analyses. Second, we present the methodology and data used for the analyses. Third, we discuss our empirical analyses based on the three relevant opportunity structures identified (i.e., institutional, economic-material and discursive). Finally, we summarize and conclude the chapter by pointing out the policy implications of the findings.

6.2 Analytical Framework

In this chapter, we analyse how a variety of national and regional institutional, economic-material, and discursive opportunity structures influences the objectives and orientations of LLL policies targeting young adults at the regional level. To distinguish between the different types of opportunity structures, we build on the discussion and conceptualization

proposed by Dale and Parreira do Amaral (2015). Building on Koopmans et al.'s (2005) ideas of opportunities and constraints, this understanding of opportunity structure argues that there is a set of structures that allow for what can be potentially said and/or done in a particular political area and context. In other words, opportunity structures are a set of potential actions available under certain structural circumstances. These opportunity structures (i.e., opportunities for action) vary across countries and, as argued by Dale and Parreira do Amaral (2015), "the governance of educational trajectories is embedded in discursive and institutional frames, which take different national forms and help shape its outcomes" (Dale & Parreira do Amaral, 2015, p. 24). Based on this idea, we employ opportunity structure as a tool to disentangle the (in)direct influence of institutional and discursive opportunity structures on LLL policies objectives and orientations that intend to partly govern young adults' educational and early employment trajectories.

In addition to the proposed institutional and discursive opportunity structures mentioned above, we also consider the regional economic-material opportunity structures. We understand this as an additional relevant type of opportunity structures influencing the objectives of LLL policies and, subsequently, young adults' educational and labour market trajectories. While the institutional and discursive opportunity structures are based on a long historical process involving cultural, social, and political assumptions, the economic-material opportunity structure of the regions are driven by medium- to long-term socioeconomic processes. While previous research has focused on the influence and interaction of opportunity structures between the supranational and national levels for LLL policies (e.g., Dale & Parreira do Amaral, 2015), and on the influence of EU on driving the LLL agenda (Rasmussen, 2009), we contribute to previous studies by incorporating the influence of the economic-material opportunity structure to this equation, as well as by shedding light on the relevance of the regional level for the study of the opportunity structures.

Therefore, we consider the following three types of opportunity structures in our analyses and disentangle the extent to which each one of them influences the objectives and orientations of LLL policies:

- *Institutional and organizational opportunity structures* are understood as the opportunities for action resulting from long historical processes of formal institutionalization of cultural, social, and political assumptions, values, and norms in a society. The national level becomes especially important, as it is where the most relevant institutional and organizational educational features tend to be shaped. A clear example is the formal education systems across European countries, and the type of skills these generate. A useful classification of this long historical process of institutional formation is the variety of skills formation regimes proposed by Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012). They employ variation along two dimensions to understand the different solutions to collective action problems in VET: the degree of firm involvement and the degree of public commitment. A higher involvement of firms in training might imply a higher specificity of training, while a higher commitment of the state will go beyond financial support to include its certification and standardization, as well as the recognition of VET as a viable alternative to academic higher education. The combination of these two dimensions results in four types of solutions: (1) the liberal solution of narrow on-the-job training (e.g., the United Kingdom); (2) the segmentalist solution of firms' self-regulation (e.g., Japan); (3) the statist solution of state-run training (e.g., France); and (4) the collective solution where firms, employers' and workers' associations, and the state collaborate in providing and financing skills (e.g., Germany). According to this classification, economies that combine high public commitment and high employers' involvement in skills formation will tend to be associated with high to intermediate skills, and a high level of adjustment between the skills of the workforce and job requirements (Estevez-Abe et al., 2001). Thus, we expect the objectives of LLL policies to differ across skills formation regimes.
- *Economic-material opportunity structures* are understood as the set of educational and socioeconomic relations that facilitate employment opportunities. The demand for skills in a particular region and the degree of (mis)match with the available supply of skills are the key elements in understanding this opportunity structures. Previous research on skills mismatch has traditionally been dominated by economists and functionalists' views of the labour market. Most of them have

heavily relied on the supply side fundamentalism of the human capital theory (HCT) (Becker, 1964), which assumes that people invest in education and training to get economic returns in the labour market once their skills are put into full use. Since HCT also assumes that both individual workers and employers are willing to fully utilize skills and maximize productivity, a perfect match between skills supply and demand is regarded as the final situation, with skills mismatch being only temporary. However, on several occasions, the reality has been shown to be far from the ideal skills match. In addition to the influence that the level and type of educational investment “chosen” by individuals (i.e., supply side) might have on their labour market situation, employment possibilities very much depend on what employers are looking for, the number of jobs available (i.e., demand side) and the pace of matching these with the supply of education and skills (Lauder et al., 2012). Therefore, given our selection of socioeconomically contrasting regions, we expect that the cross-regional variation in the demand of skills partly influences the differences in the objectives of LLL policies across regions.

- *Discursive opportunity structures* are understood as a set of meanings, rules, and practices that orient the possibilities of the construction of political and social relations, but which are not necessarily formalized in a document or institutional setting. Discursive opportunity structures refer to the meaning and interpretation that actors and stakeholders attribute to a situation in a particular context. For instance, as noted by several authors (e.g., Jessop et al., 2008; Robertson, 2008; Lauder et al., 2012) at the European level in the field of education policy, the rhetoric of the knowledge-based economy has become a necessary condition to justify any policy change or development. According to Hay (2010), “Interests do not exist, but constructions of interests do” (Hay, 2010, p. 79). Policies are promoted by individuals in a particular context, influenced by ideational foundations about what is feasible, legitimate, and desirable according to their perceptions (Hay, 2010, p. 69). Thus, we expect the orientations of LLL policies to vary across the selected regions given different meanings, rules, and practices attributed and mobilized by national and regional actors.

6.3 Methodology and Data

In line with our analytical framework, we organize our research questions and analyses according to the three types of opportunity structures proposed. First, we look at the influence that the national skills formation regime has on the objectives of LLL policies at the regional level. Second, we focus on the influence of the regional educational and employment context on LLL policy objectives. Third, we place the focus on the influence that the interests and meanings attributed to LLL policies by national and regional stakeholders have on the governance of young adults' educational and early labour market trajectories. Our analyses address these three analytical dimensions by providing answers to the following three research questions:

- to what extent are the **objectives** of LLL policies influenced by the **national** skills formation regimes (i.e., liberal, statist, collective)? (institutional opportunity structures);
- to what extent are the **objectives** of LLL policies based on the **regional** demand for skills (i.e., employer engagement) ? (economic-material opportunity structures);
- to what extent are the **orientations** of LLL policies influencing **youth** educational and employment trajectories? (discursive opportunity structures).

We selected our empirical cases based on three main criteria. First, to allow for cross-national variation, we chose three countries with different skills formation regimes (institutional opportunity structures) (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012). Austria fits into the collective regime of skills formation (i.e., high degree of firm involvement and high degree of public commitment), while Finland corresponds to the statist model (i.e., low degree of firm involvement and high degree of public commitment), and Scotland (UK) to the liberal regime (i.e., low degree of firm involvement and low degree of public commitment).

Second, to allow for cross-regional variation, we selected two socioeconomically contrasting regions per country (i.e., six regions in total)

concerning their educational and labour market contexts (i.e., economic-material opportunity structures). For instance, in Austria, the dominance of the industrial production in Upper Austria contrasts with the prevalence of the service sector in Vienna. The high share of young people with upper secondary education qualifications in Upper Austria and their high employment rate differs from the highly polarized youth qualifications landscape (i.e., low vs high) in Vienna and the comparably high youth unemployment rate among young people with low qualifications and skills.

In Finland, we can also find some contrast between the two selected regions. Southwest Finland's economy mainly consists of marine industry, metal construction and the service sector, whereas the most important sectors in Kainuu relate to the metal, forest, and mining companies. Southwest Finland offers a strong and diverse range of educational opportunities for young people that translates into a comparably low youth unemployment rate, while in Kainuu, educational opportunities are limited and youth unemployment is comparably higher.

We also observe contrast between the two Scottish regions. Aberdeen is well known for its oil and gas industry, which attracts young people with high qualifications, while the most relevant economic sectors in Glasgow are services and retail, human health, social work, and education. Both regions are economically active and show levels of (youth) unemployment below the Scottish average, but they differ significantly in their population profile. Aberdeen is characterized by a well-qualified youth workforce and, generally, a high presence of apprenticeship positions, while Glasgow displays one of the highest shares of socially disadvantaged people and/or with no formal qualifications in Scotland.

Third, to focus our analysis on a specific and relevant policy dimension of LLL for young adults, we selected ongoing policies that have supporting young people in the transition from education to the labour market as the main objective, allowing us to look at the underlying orientations (i.e., interests, ideas) of this set goal (discursive opportunity structures). In Austria, we selected AT_P11 policy in Upper Austria, and AT_P2 policy in Vienna. AT_P1 targets young adults aged 22 or above who have professional experience but have not gained an apprenticeship certificate or been employed in a trained profession for more than five years. Its

main intention is to facilitate the certification of informally acquired skills. It does so by providing short work-based learning (WBL) courses and officially certifying young people's skills. Similarly, AT_P2 in Vienna also aims at facilitating youth employability, but it does so by providing transitional work activation (e.g., transitional employment, coaching, and specific training). The target group of this policy is young people who are aged between 18 and 24 on needs-oriented subsidies (i.e., registered at the Austrian Public Employment Service), and who are unemployed despite participating in training and actively searching for jobs.

In Finland, we chose FI_P3 policy in Southwest Finland and FI_P4 policy in Kainuu. FI_P3 in Southwest Finland targets all students who are undertaking on-the-job training, with a special emphasis on those that present special support needs (e.g., mental health). It assigns each student a work life coach who supports them from a holistic perspective. Although the focus is on getting suitable and relevant learning experience in a business and ensuring completion and/or continuation into formal education or employment, this holistic approach also allows for individual coaches to provide support in other life domains (e.g., financial support). In contrast, FI_P4 in Kainuu targets unemployed young adults who are having difficulties in finding employment or a suitable study place. The main intention is to improve young adults' employability through WBL courses that will certify their skills, as well as improve their self-confidence and job-searching skills.

In Scotland we picked the "Developing the Young Workforce" (DYW) policy in both regions (UK_P3 in Aberdeen and UK_P4 in Glasgow). This is a Scottish flagship education, training, and employment policy (2014–2021), nationally promoted by the Scottish government but implemented (and enacted) at the regional level by local and regional stakeholders (e.g., chambers of commerce, city councils) working in partnership. This national-regional-local approach aims at allowing national priorities to be flexibly implemented across regions to meet local demands and needs. As its title indicates, the principal objective is to better prepare young people in Scotland (i.e., 16–24 years old) for the world of work, highlighting the vocational and technical elements of education. It mainly does so by providing career guidance and facilitating access to apprenticeships in regional businesses.

Table 6.1 Number of interviews by region and interviewee profile

REGION/ COUNTRY	Street-level practitioners related to the policy	Regional experts and relevant stakeholders or policymakers	TOTAL
Upper Austria (Austria)	2	5	7
Vienna (Austria)	3	5	8
Southwest Finland (Finland)	2	3	5
Kainuu (Finland)	2	3	5
Aberdeen (Scotland)	2	4	6
Glasgow (Scotland)	3	5	8
TOTAL	14	25	39

Source: Author's own

We based our analysis on data collected by three coordinated research teams in the corresponding countries. Table 6.1 above displays the number of interviews and interviewees' profile by region. The interviews were conducted face-to-face between January and July 2017. Some of them were conducted by telephone or Skype call due to the remoteness of the area or the availability of the interviewees. Preliminary analyses drafted in national reports (Capsada-Munsech & Valiente, 2017; Doyle, 2017; Pot et al., 2017a, 2017b; Rinne et al., 2017; Tikkanen et al., 2017) and systematic policy profiles of the selected policies served as a basis for writing this chapter. However, we went back to the original interviews transcriptions when required.

6.4 The Influence of Skills Formation Regimes on LLL Policy Objectives

We first address the research question, "To what extent are the **objectives** of LLL policies influenced by the **national** skills formation regime?". One common feature across the selected policies and countries is that they all try to engage with employers, but the extent to and the ways in which they intend to reach them clearly differ. In the following sections,

we discuss the extent to which these different degrees and forms of employers' engagement are influenced by their national skills formation regimes.

Starting with the Austrian case, we can clearly identify a connection between the skills formation regime and the main policy objectives. Austria displays a collective skills formation system where both employers and the state jointly organize and govern the initial VET system. It is characterized by a high degree of involvement of firms and high commitment of the state, leading into a logically articulated system. This established institutionalization of the cooperation among actors clearly sets up the rules of the game. While this is obviously an advantage for those whose educational and employment pathways fit into this linear trajectory (i.e., VET course, on-the-job training, apprenticeship certification, employment), it is more challenging for those that have diverted from it for different reasons (e.g., family commitments, school dropout) or have been incorporated into the system later on (e.g., immigrants, refugees).

We argue that this is the main reason why Austrian policies have redirecting young adults into the main education and training system as a key objective. For instance, in Upper Austria we see that the main objective of the AT_P1 policy is certifying skills that young people most likely already possess, but that need to be formally recognized to be considered by employers in this highly institutionalized system. This is mostly done via short WBL courses focused on employability skills. Some of the participants are immigrants whose educational attainment has not yet been officially recognized by the Austrian system. Similarly, in Vienna, the AT_P2 policy aims at activating young adults who have no employment and depend on basic subsidies. Employability training and coaching are part of the activation package, as well as transitional employment.

From another perspective, the statist skills formation regime system in Finland also presents a clear influence on the policy objectives. In comparative terms, Finland shows a high degree of public commitment to the VET system in combination with a lower degree of involvement from firms. Although employers' demands are considered in the VET system, the state plays a more relevant role in the articulation of what is to be taught and for what reasons. Even if the policy objectives might look like those in Austria and Scotland (i.e., promoting and facilitating

employability courses among young adults), the Finnish approach is more holistic. Both policies in Southwest Finland (FI_P3) and in Kainuu (FI_P4) consider a wide range of life dimensions. Even though the entry point differs—coaching young adults while transitioning into employment in Southwest Finland, and the need to find employment for unemployed young people in Kainuu—in both regions the policy goals go beyond the education and labour market sphere. They both focus on other relevant life dimensions (e.g., mental health) that might be preventing access to education, training, and employment. Moreover, both policies have a broad target group—on-the-job-training students in one of the largest municipal VET institutions in Southwest Finland and unemployed young people in Kainuu—allowing people with different circumstances and profiles to benefit from the policy and get personalized support. Therefore, this statist-driven approach provides some evidence of resistance towards fully marketing social inclusion in a capitalist society via education and employment.

In Scotland we can also identify some areas where the institutional liberal skills formation regime influences policy objectives at the national and regional levels. In comparative terms, the liberal skills formation regime is characterized by a low degree of involvement and commitment by businesses and public institutions in the initial VET system. One of the results of this limited coordination in the initial VET system is that the predominant and normative pathway tends to be academic, as it is socially recognized as more prestigious.

However, challenges arise for those that do not want—or that are not allowed—to follow the traditional academic pathway due to insufficient educational achievement.

This is almost explicit in the national documents of DYW, as the main objective of the policy is to prepare young people for the world of work providing VET alternatives to those that are not following the academic path. However, the problematized group—and the one targeted by the policy—is young people who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment. People in this target group are assumed to be in unemployment partly because of the 2008 post-recession scenario, but also because of their individual lack of employability skills. While those that follow the academic path are more commonly successful in securing employment,

those that do not are regarded as lacking skills, and VET is proposed by DYW as an appropriate way to “fix” their problem. Therefore, the main objective of DYW is partly influenced by the existent limitations of the initial VET system in Scotland.

It is important to highlight that due to this initial low degree of firm involvement and state commitment in initial VET in Scotland, ad-hoc policies are designed and promoted across the country to coordinate different relevant actors in the initial VET system. Although the general objective of DYW is to promote this further involvement of both public (i.e., schools, colleges, city councils) and private (i.e., businesses) stakeholders into the VET system, it does so by transferring the responsibility to regional and local actors. This can be envisioned by some as an advantage that allows regional and local actors to tackle specific problems, whereas others might see it as a disadvantage, as it relies on regional and local actors’ initiative and capacity, which might reinforce already existing regional inequalities.

6.5 The Influence of the Regional Supply and Demand of Skills on LLL Policy Objectives

We now move to the second research question: “To what extent are the **objectives** of LLL policies based on the **regional** demand for skills (i.e., employer engagement)?”. Thus, in this section we discuss the extent to which the objectives of the selected LLL policies are aligned with the socioeconomic reality of the region, paying special attention to the (mis) match between the supply and demand of skills.

Starting with Austria, we can see that in Upper Austria the regional educational and labour market context is characterized by a high presence of industry requiring VET skills and a good number of available apprenticeship positions. While the youth employment rate is comparably high, the main challenge is making sure that those young people who have basic skills levels attain a formal certification of their technical skills. In most cases, these young people come from a disadvantaged social background. According to one of the interviewees

the central question is how to reduce this target group [young people with poor skills and certificates] and become a less selective system. It is a problem that these young people we are talking about are really, they are children from lower or less educated classes. (AT_Ex1)

As noted by another interviewee, in some sectors (e.g., IT) this might even translate into a skills shortage:

we have branches, divisions and areas where our companies are desperately looking for staff and, of course, for apprentices. (AT_Ex2)

Therefore, it seems that the intention of the AT_P1 policy, which is to certify informally acquired skills via short WBL courses, is a good match with the actual demand for skills in the region.

Conversely, in Vienna, the lower presence of available apprenticeship positions challenges the youth employment situation, especially for those with no formal certifications. The main goal of the AT_P2 policy is to reinforce employability skills, as well as providing coaching and mentoring opportunities for those that are seen as lacking formal qualifications. However, the limited availability of apprenticeships and adequate jobs for VET skills challenges the effectiveness of this policy. According to one of the interviewees

the biggest challenges are people with insufficient qualifications versus a lack of budget. (AT_Ex3)

This is also combined with a relevant share of young people who do have valid and relevant educational qualifications, but who find themselves unemployed due to the scarcity of apprenticeship positions and jobs. Thus, this mismatch situation between the supply and demand of skills brings the objectives of the Viennese policy into question.

In Southwest Finland, a region characterized by a diversified economy and a comparatively low youth unemployment rate, the main challenges the FI_P3 policy is trying to address are dropout and late completion of VET courses. This is considered a critical stage in young people's educational and employment trajectories that must be supported to avoid later

challenges. As argued above, the policy takes a holistic approach, providing support and coaching to facilitate completion and certification of studies and skills. Therefore, we could argue that this is a “preventive” approach, aiming to reduce the number of young people that disengage from formal education and/or employment. This seems to be particularly important for promoting employment among young people in some sectors such as the growing marine and metal construction industries, which display a shortage of workers with VET skills. While most young people have found these sectors unattractive, the mentoring and career guidance provided by the FI_P3 policy might partly address this issue, increasing the number of young adults who complete VET courses and gain employment. Moreover, as suggested by one of the interviewees (FI_Ex1), this policy also supports employers in taking young people with on-the-job training, as this makes them more confident that students will finish their VET courses. Taking on new learners involves a substantial investment of time and commitment from the employer’s side, which might not be always productive to them if the student does not formally complete the course.

In the contrasting region of Kainuu, where youth unemployment is comparably high, there are more limited educational opportunities (e.g., no university level education) and apprenticeship positions. This usually means that those who leave the region seeking educational and employment opportunities rarely come back. The selected FI_P4 policy targets unemployed youth and provides them with opportunities to improve their employability skills. The effectiveness of this approach might be questioned in a region where education and employment opportunities are already very limited, as improving youth employability skills might not lead to employment due to the scarcity of jobs. Nevertheless, the main contribution of this policy is that it first addresses social inclusion issues (e.g., poverty, health conditions) that are preventing youth from engaging in formal education and employment. The policy target includes young people with severe functional physical and/or mental challenges, for which employment is not a realistic option in the near future but will be once the main barriers preventing it are addressed.

In both regions in Scotland, the DYW policy (UK_P3 in Aberdeen and UK_P4 in Glasgow) aims at promoting VET education and skills

among youth by reinforcing employers' engagement and involvement in VET. However, the (mis)match between the supply and demand of skills is very different in both regions. In Aberdeen, most young people are comparatively well-qualified and there is a substantial number of available apprenticeship positions, whereas in Glasgow there are larger number of young people with low qualifications and a lower presence of available apprenticeship positions. Unsurprisingly, the challenges these two regions face differ. As stated by all regional experts interviewed in Aberdeen, the main challenge is that a significant number of young people are not willing to look for alternative career paths beyond the oil and gas industry, while in Glasgow it mainly relates to overcoming poverty barriers to access VET and a limited demand for apprentices in the regional economy. Since the DYW allows for flexibility to adapt to the regional challenges, policymakers and practitioners can adjust their actions and priorities to the regional needs. Decisions about regional priorities are based on labour market intelligence information. For instance, in Aberdeen the strategy proposed by the experts interviewed is the promotion of new sectors among the youth, as well as engagement with employers from different sectors (e.g., construction, food and drink industry). Even if the oil and gas industry is still (in)directly employing a lot of people in the region, the diversification of risk across economic sectors and industries is considered as an important strategy, especially in the aftermath of the 2014 oil crisis. Despite this, the challenge remains in making young people and their families confident in investing in these new sectors.

As expressed by all regional experts interviewed in Glasgow, the policy priorities are improving links between industry and educational institutions and getting more young people into apprenticeships and employment. However, the cross-cutting element is ensuring equality, meaning that the policy objectives in the region also support young people in overcoming other barriers (e.g., poverty, mental health) that are preventing them from engaging with formal education and employment. Yet, one of the interviewees also clearly stated that

the employers will only engage if they have a need. They won't create a position for somebody. It has to fit in with what their needs are, (UK_Ex1)

highlighting the relevance of the regional demand. While there are still some young people leaving the education system without a formal qualification, there are some fields that experience skills shortages (e.g., ICT and digital skills) and young people who are employed in overqualified positions. Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon situation in many European urban regions, which clearly shows the relevance of the regional (mis)match between the supply and demand of skills for youth education and employment trajectories.

6.6 The Influence of Regional Policy Orientations on Youth Educational and Employment Trajectories

In this third section of findings, we move into exploring the question: “To what extent are the **orientations** of LLL policies influencing **youth** educational and employment trajectories?”. We discuss how the meaning and understanding attributed to LLL policies by relevant stakeholders (e.g., policy practitioners, policy experts) might influence youth educational and early labour market trajectories.

Starting with the region of Upper Austria, interviewees suggested that the way the policy is enacted not only serves to certify young people’s skills, but also as a way of raising their self-esteem. Identifying and validating skills they already gained shows young people that they were “on the right path”, although they had to formally certify it. Moreover, it shows that there are alternative (and shorter) routes to the traditional formal educational pathways that can also lead into employment. Thus, in terms of the governance of youth trajectories, the selected policy seems to provide valid and feasible alternatives to the formal skills formation system, successfully leading into (sustained) employment. According to one of the interviewees (AT_Ex1), the low threshold accessibility and the practice-based approach of the AT_P1 policy are the keys to its success in influencing youth trajectories. According to the same interviewee, one of the positive effects observed for young people participating in the policy is a rise in their sense of self-worth and self-esteem, as they see what they can accomplish, regardless of negative experiences they might have faced

before. In some cases, this has even provided young people with enough confidence and motivation to continue into further education and, as noted by one of the interviewees (AT_Ex5), it can be understood as a second chance programme. The same interviewee argues that part of the success of this policy is because of its personalized approach, identifying the skills each youth already possesses but which need certification, as well as those that need development. This individualized approach reduces the time of retraining, while increasing the usefulness and relevance participants see in it. Furthermore, employers also benefit from this shorter and targeted training, as these were some of their original demands.

By contrast, in Vienna the enactment of the selected policy is more complex. As stated by one of the interviewees (AT_Ex3), the actual target group of the policy is rather diverse. While the provision of WBL to improve young people's employability skills might be useful and adequate for those with low skills and unfamiliar with the Viennese educational and employment landscape, it might be irrelevant to those that already possess a wide range of skills and qualifications but are negatively affected by the shortage of jobs and apprenticeships. As pointed out by one of the interviewees (AT_Ex6), policy managers were surprised when they first realized that a non-negligible proportion of those that qualified to be beneficiaries of the policy (i.e., young people receiving minimum income subsidies) were in possession of high-level qualifications. However, even more complex situations are faced by those that have an immigrant and/or refugee background, as additional barriers prevent them from engagement in education and employment. As discussed by one of the interviewees (AT_Ex3), these young people do want to work, but most of them have unrealistic and outdated professional goals, aspirations, and expectations. This unrealistic approach to the current labour market opportunities is partly addressed by this policy. As argued by one of the interviewees (AT_Ex4), the AT_P2 policy can be viewed as providing an opportunity for quasi-employment to young adults for about ten months. During this time, young adults can train and reflect on their employment opportunities without experiencing the immediate pressure of finding work.

In Finland, the policy orientations also have a clear influence on the governance of youth trajectories. In Southwest Finland, most interviewees think the “success” of the FI_P3 policy can be attributed to, first, its holistic approach to young adults’ circumstances and, second, the easily accessible and universal support provided to students in this critical stage of their lives. Beyond the formal objective of providing mentoring to support VET completion and gain employment, interviewees stated that one of the positive aspects of the policy is that it allows professionals to know more about young people’s personal issues and circumstances, and better personalize the support they receive. The logic behind the policy is that young adults must reach a certain level of functional abilities, skills, and well-being before the main goal of the policy can be reached (i.e., successfully completing VET and entering the labour market). As stressed by one of the interviewees (FI_Ex3), this personalized approach supports young people in order to better “market” themselves to potential employers. Another good example of this personalized approach is that mentors encourage young people to share with their employers the personal challenges and circumstances that might be preventing them from fully engaging with education and work at certain times. Mentors are also in touch with vocational subject teachers and on-the-job learning tutors during the WBL period. This support deliberately intends to influence the relationship between young adults and employers, as according to one of the interviewees (FI_Ex1), when young people do not want to disclose their issues with employers, it makes it difficult for employers to understand the challenges they are coping with, usually leading to disagreements and conflicts.

In Kainuu, where a relevant proportion of the youth face several barriers to engaging with education and employment, the enactment of the selected policy seems to be particularly relevant to those who are most discouraged from education and employment. As argued by one of the interviewees (FI_Ex2), this is likely to be due to the influence the policy has on their self-esteem. Even if there are limited and sometimes unattractive job opportunities in the region for youth, the interviewee suggested that the selected policy raises young people’s self-esteem by providing them with a purpose, improving their job searching skills (e.g., showing them “hidden” jobs) and encouraging them to continue looking

for jobs even after a few rejections. However, another interviewee (FI_Ex3) pointed out that the positive effects of the policy are more difficult to observe among those with poorer health conditions, experiencing a cumulative generational disadvantage in their families, or previous work-related burnouts.

Finally, in Scotland we can see that the enactment of the regional policies also has some consequences for youth trajectories, although these seem to be more general and less personalized than in the previous cases. Since the intention of the policy is to promote VET as a valid alternative to gain education and skills and avoid/reduce youth unemployment, the main form of enactment in both regions is providing information about the existing educational and career paths in the region, and the current labour market situation affecting those sectors. The aim of supplying information is to provide young people with the adequate tools to make “informed choices”. One of the interviewees in Aberdeen clearly stated that

what I am trying to do is enable young people to get access to employers to make the right choice. (UK_Ex2)

Still, the final choice resides in the individuals themselves, as do the responsibility and “consequences” of their choices. In both regions, the provision of adequate information to make these “informed choices” and promoting VET as an alternative involves matching schools with regional businesses. Business representatives usually deliver a few information sessions in the matched school, providing students with a general idea of what a career in that local business and sector looks like. As expressed by the same interviewee in Aberdeen,

all I think that we do as part of that is, we ask the head teachers what they need in their schools. We understand what the region needs in terms of skills for the future, and we join it up making sure that the employers and schools are getting what they need. (UK_Ex2)

This is understood by some interviewees (UK_Ex3) as an advance in career guidance, because in addition to information about specific field of study choices, employers’ views are also integrated in the equation.

Within this logic, it improves young people's chances to make "informed choices" and potentially gain employment.

In Aberdeen, this is focused on diversifying information about alternative economic sectors and fields of study beyond the oil and gas industry. The same interviewee mentioned that

what they did hear was an oil and gas person coming in and speaking about engineering. So, they have missed something. So, what we need to do is make sure that each of these young people get touched by all kinds of those key sectors across their school life. At least then they can make an informed choice rather than a choice based on the sector that has got the most money or the most people. (UK_Ex2)

One important point is that the policy intends to match the current employers' needs to young people's decisions, influencing the governance of their educational and employment pathways. As suggested by one of the interviewees in Aberdeen,

the local authority in conjunction with the school run the work experience model. How we get involved is, we might find employers who are willing to offer work experience, and we make referrals. [...] we would encourage the company to offer work experience as part of the ongoing relationship and experience they can offer to young people. (UK_Ex3)

As noted by the interviewees in Glasgow, the connection between schools and regional companies is very much reliant on the policy steering group and their connections, indirectly influencing the "options" and information that youth will have at their school as part of this policy. Part of the employers' engagement activities also consists of making employers aware of available funding for having apprentices in their businesses. While this might benefit many local businesses and young people, this information might not reach them all. As noticed by one of the interviewees (UK_Ex4), the policy steering group in Glasgow is known as "the Glasgow Employer Board", clearly stating the profile of its members and their interests. The same interviewee expressed that they were trying to provide "the right opportunity at the right time" to young people, and another one similarly stated that their main responsibility is

to bring on board as many new and small to medium businesses in the city who are willing to engage with education and young people to improve their employability skills. (UK_Ex1)

However, this is obviously from an employer and policy perspective, leaving young people to finally make their “informed choices” based on what was available, definitely influencing their educational and employment trajectory.

6.7 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have analysed the influence of institutional, economic-material, and discursive opportunity structures on the objectives and orientation of LLL policies supporting young people in their transition from education to the labour market. We have focused on the influence of these opportunity structures at the regional level, where the analysed policies are ultimately enacted. Based on the analyses of the interviews with relevant national and regional stakeholders, our findings provide evidence that three types of opportunity structures influence LLL policy objectives and orientations and, subsequently, the educational and early labour market trajectories of the beneficiaries of these policies.

First, we discussed how a variety of national skills formation regimes influence policy objectives at the regional level. In Austria, the policy focus is on certification of apprenticeships and making sure that young people are ready to “fit into” the existent (collective skills formation) VET system. In Finland, a state-led skills formation model, policies present a more holistic approach, prioritizing young people’s needs from a comprehensive perspective rather than simply looking at employers’ needs. By contrast, Scottish policies focus on increasing the involvement and commitment of private and public actors in the VET system, to compensate for the limitations of previous educational stages and the general academic orientation of the formal education system in this liberal skills formation regime.

Second, we analysed how the (mis)match between the regional supply and demand for skills might bring the effectiveness of LLL policies

objectives into question. One policy approach can be successful and aligned with the regional socioeconomic situation affecting a region (e.g., Upper Austria), but a similar one might not be as effective if the regional employment opportunities differ (e.g., Vienna).

While no simple solution exists, allowing for regional flexibility to adapt LLL policies' priorities seems to be the best option to "match" the regional economic-material conditions to the policy objectives (e.g., Aberdeen and Glasgow). Another alternative is using LLL policies to address other barriers beyond the educational and employment deficits, even if the socioeconomic context is not favourable (e.g., Kainuu).

Third, we discussed how the orientations of LLL policies (in)directly influence young people's educational and employment trajectories. In most cases, interviewees noted the positive effects of the policies on young people's self-esteem and employability skills, especially when their effectiveness and usefulness in securing employment very much depends on the regional economic context. Yet, in regions where educational and employment opportunities are limited, LLL policies might be a good strategy to engage the youth and address other barriers (e.g., health, financial) preventing them from participation in education and employment.

In sum, our findings suggest that LLL policies targeting young adults and intending to support them in their transition from education to employment must consider the influence of these three dimensions (i.e., institutional, economic-material, discursive) at the regional level. Although LLL policies might be nationally designed and promoted, they need to consider cross-regional differences to ensure their effectiveness and suitability.

Note

1. 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

only exception is constituted by Developing the Youth Workforce (DYW) as it represents a national policy with different applications at local level, which constitute the core of the case studies located in Scotland.

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).

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