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Negotiating “employability” in Europe: Insights from Spain, Croatia and Portugal

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8.1 Introduction

The notion of employability resonates in the education, training and labour market policies of the European Union. It is present in the Education and Training 2010 and 2020 programmes (Nóvoa, 2010, 2013), and it informs the dominant discourses about unemployment

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circulating at European level, intertwining with the notions of activation and flexicurity. The “push” towards individualisation prompted by the discourse on employability ascribes to individuals the responsibility for the problem of the lack of employment (Crespo & Serrano, 2013). In other words, it transfers to individuals the responsibility of tackling the social state crisis (Nóvoa, 2010) and affects the rhetoric about its “proper” solution. Consistently, the European Union’s interventions in the fields of labour market and social policies are moving away from the provision of social security, to promote individual deficit-oriented actions, which resonate with the idea of a “deserved citizenship” achievable through work as a “civil duty”. In pursuing work integration as a duty, personal adaptation or self-assurance is thus required from individuals in the light of changing labour markets (Crespo & Serrano, 2013).

However, the notion of employability has not remained static along its history. Despite employability having been defined from “relational” or “interactive” perspectives and addressing aspects related to the individual, his/her personal circumstances and supply- and demand-side factors, many European and national policy documents and measures draw from an individual-focused and supply-side understanding of employability (Brown et al., 2003; Llinares et al., 2016; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). The European Union’s labour market policies have increasingly articulated employability around the idea of “competences” and related to the individual, defining it in a triple sense deal with the problem of unemployment. Employability was firstly understood as “matching” the individuals’ competences with the needs of the labour market; secondly, as “prevention”: labour insertion problems were framed as consequences of wrong job-seeking strategies or a lack of information about their own potentialities or the opportunities available in their environments; thirdly, as “activation”: labour insertion problems were ascribed to inappropriate attitudes and motivations towards work (see Crespo & Serrano, 2013).

Employability, therefore, informs the construction of labour market, education and social policies on problems and the solutions to be provided (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). This notion has influenced the orientation of several lifelong learning policies (LLL) across Europe (Kotthoff et al., 2017). From a governance perspective, LLL is one of the policy areas where the balance of responsibilities among international, national,

regional and local levels is needed. To be useful to young adults, the governance patterns should enable collaboration that includes joint and coordinated actions from a broad range of partners, including educational programme providers, trade unions and local and regional authorities, as well as youth representatives. It means that vertical and horizontal coordination needs to adopt flexible, systemic, open and user-centred modes of interaction with diverse participants, based on local or regional specificities and needs (Parreira do Amaral & Dale, 2015).

Based on Bartlett and Vavrus’ (2017) proposal about comparative case studies, the purpose of this chapter is to elaborate on how different patterns of governance contribute to the contextualisation of three LLL policies oriented towards employability in three different local systems. Specifically, the governance perspective can help us to be more sensitive to: (a) both supply- and/or demand-side aspects involved in the idea of employability present in those policies; and (b) the interaction among the actor constellations involved in their processes of policy contextualisation.

We will follow three axes (transversal, vertical and horizontal) to explore and compare our cases. The transversal axis will help us to historically situate our cases and to explore how they have evolved across time, including their governance patterns or the history of LLL policies. The vertical axis will serve to analyse the role of different actors on different scales that shape policy practices. Finally, following the horizontal axis of comparison, we will explore how those policies are socially produced and how they unfold in different contexts and result in similar or different practices and expected impacts.

Furthermore, the opportunity structure perspective will contribute to enhancing the analysis of our cases. In school-to-work transition studies, opportunity structures have been employed to explore the ways in which different interrelated structuring agents, such as labour market processes, family background or education, frame young people’s choices and accomplishments (Roberts, 2009). The notion of Opportunity structures has also been used to shed light on the complex governance of the educational trajectories of young people, which are shaped not only by young people’s agency, but also by wider socio-economic, institutional and

cultural influences, as well as by other actors' actions (Parreira do Amaral & Dale, 2015).

The employability discourse can be understood as a central element of the discursive opportunity structure in many European countries, constructing and fostering solutions for the problem of the lack of employment. Policy regulations and actors' decisions contribute to framing the institutional responses, influencing young adults' access, progression and completion in LLL policies such as the ones at the core of our case studies. Therefore, the opportunity structure perspective provides us with a theory and an analytical tool to improve our understanding of the structural opportunities and constraints that influence the decisions and behaviours of the actors involved in our cases, as well as their results in specific contexts.

8.2 Main Directions of Analysis

The main goal of our chapter is to explore how different governance patterns and dynamics contribute to contextualising different LLL policies in the contexts in which they are embedded. In order to do so, we will explore different approaches of the actors involved in their provision to meet different expected impacts and interact with against the background of a common exposure to the wider discursive and institutional opportunity structures and governance landscapes.

Information from policy documents, semi-structured interviews and policy roundtables with different actors (i.e., policymakers, managers and street professionals) allocated on different governance scales will serve to trace the transversal, vertical and horizontal axes of comparison among the three analysed case studies: one in Spain (functional region of Malaga), one in Croatia (functional region of Istria) and one in Portugal (functional region of Vale do Ave). These are three homologous cases (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) that share a set of characteristics: the LLL policies analysed find employability within their orientations (Kotthoff et al., 2017; Valiente et al., 2020); are located on the supply side of the skills formation system, that is, in the provision of training and skills; and seek to foster their participants' labour insertion as their main impact. However,

following different typologies (e.g., Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012; Hodgson & Spours, 2012), our cases show differential governance patterns and landscapes that will enrich our comparison (Capsada-Munsech et al., 2018).

At the core of case study in Spain, the SP_P3¹ LLL policy is implemented by actors (e.g., local city chambers) who prepare specific projects based on the pre-established national or regional frameworks. It is targeted at unemployed young adults who have usually experienced school dropout or early school leaving. The normative regulation of SP_P3 and the interviewed manager and street professional involved in its implementation converge, in that SP_P3 contributes to improving young adults' labour insertion chances by increasing their skills and labour experience through training and apprenticeship periods. However, former reforms introduced other expected impacts of SP_P3, such as the increasing of young adults' opportunities to re-enter the education system.

The LLL policy at the core of the case study in Croatia, HR_P1, was founded in 1995. It is implemented by a local institution that offers different types of programmes aimed at professional training or retraining and acquisition of vocational qualification. HR_P1 works outside the formal education system and deals with different types of users, such as people who have not completed education, unemployed people wishing to retrain or employed people who want another level of education. HR_P1 is one of the main stakeholders in the field of transition of young adults from education to the labour market at the local level. Its goal is compatible with the goals of other stakeholders in the field, which is to raise young adults' employability. HR_P1 pursues this goal by developing young adults' skills and enabling them to find a satisfying job.

The case study in Portugal is built around a policy, PT_P1, aimed at over 15 people that have completed the 9th grade. The policy consists of high-school level courses that allow students to access higher education. The nature of this policy grants a special connection to labour contexts and a special relationship with regional institutions and companies. Also, it encompasses a pedagogical model that is easily adapted to the young adults' educational paths, thus helping to combat dropout and failure rates.

In the following, the three cases will be analysed and compared according to the three main research questions:

- How have patterns of governance evolved across time and how do they contribute to the contextualisation of LLL policies in a specific local context (transversal axis)?
- What are the patterns of collaboration among actors while producing, implementing, resisting, and appropriating policies to achieve a particular goal (vertical axis)?
- Which patterns of governance foster or limit perspectives on young adults' labour market insertion?

8.3 Actors' Approaches to Governance and Expected Impacts

This section summarises the main results of our analysis. Tracing the transversal and vertical axes of comparative case studies, we first build up our cases by paying attention to the discursive and institutional opportunity structures in which they are embedded. The transversal and vertical axes are combined with the horizontal in Sect. 8.4, where we explicitly compare our cases.

8.3.1 The Case Study in Spain: Managers and Streets Professionals Broadening Employability

The SP_P3 LLL policy belongs to the vocational training subsystem in Spain, which has experienced a progressive process of decentralisation (e.g., Andalusian Government, 2003). Therefore, the policy was firstly regulated by the national government (1988–2003) and later by the regional one (2004–onwards).

According to its governance pattern, the implementing institutions of SP_P3, such as local city chambers, are in charge of preparing and managing specific projects on the basis of the national or regional regulations (Andalusian Government, 2016b; Spanish Government, 1988). Among

other activities, these projects combine training with paid apprenticeships where young adults hired by the implementing institution work in activities with a social interest for the community. As mentioned by some of interviewed managers and the street professionals, young adults enrolled in SP_P3 have usually been trained in traditional crafts and construction professions because of the high relevance of these sectors in the area:

This region has been a construction, services, hospitality, gardening... area. Therefore, we knew that maybe not 100% but 90% were going to be able to find a job (...). Then, it was not even necessary to do studies [skills demand prospections] (SP_Ex1)

SP_P3 is implemented in the functional region of Malaga, which is a set of 13 municipalities that give form to a residential and labour market, with the city of Malaga acting as the nucleus of reference. Malaga airport and the railway services play a key role in the articulation of the territory and in opening the region towards the outside. In 2017, the region included a total of 891,366 inhabitants (MADECA Foundation, 2019). Its economy is predominantly based on the service sector, especially since the Great Recession, where the construction sector and its related activities collapsed: the service sector represented the 75.23% of the GDP of Malaga province in 2008 and increased to the 83.66% in 2015, while the construction sector decreased from 15.27% to 7.38% during the same period (IECA, 2019).

Prior to the 2007–2008 Great Recession, young adults’ transitions into employment were fluent because of the high number of vacancies in construction and related activities. Companies even contacted young adults while they were still enrolled in SP_P3, but paid apprenticeship periods contributed to maintaining young adults in the policy. Implementing actors mention that the SP_P3 policy was well known in the local area due to its long-standing presence and its high labour insertion rates, so young adults and local companies trusted its work.

However, the aftermath of the Great Recession entailed the need for significant changes on the policy’s regulation. As the labour market provided young adults with less opportunities, especially because of the

collapse of construction work (Herrera, 2017), the regional government informed the SP_P3's staff that new projects were not allowed to train young adults in professions belonging to that sector anymore:

they said, in one of the last public calls, that we could not ask to teach traditional crafts (SP_Ex4).

In addition, the regional government reforms on the regulatory framework of the policy (e.g., Andalusian Government, 2016a, 2016b) involved: (a) less activities, economic resources and duration of the projects, following economic rationality; (b) a competitive tenure procedure between providers to receive funding, justified as a more transparent process; (c) a higher relevance of the regional government in the selection of skills, classifying the professional certificates to be taught in the projects as priority; and (d) the offer of skills now being organised around professional certificates, so implementing entities need to pass accreditation processes to teach them. Some of these reforms (e.g., competition and certificates) were in line with other national regulations (Spanish Government, 2008, 2015).

Regional decision makers defended these reforms in the policy round-table: since the projects are much cheaper now, more entities could benefit from them. They also showed mistrust in local implementing entities, mentioning that they sometimes prioritised their own needs in the social projects of the apprenticeship periods over young adults' real training needs. At the same time, the manager and the street professional showed their resistance to these reforms:

Our idea is to maintain the concept of the policy, despite the fact that the new regulation.... does not benefit it (SP_Ex3).

These professionals point out that the SP_P3 activities, duration and resources have been severely reduced, which sets limits on the wider impacts they sought for young adults. Beyond employability, they believe that SP_P3 might contribute to social justice:

to create opportunities for people who, because of their social situation, have not found them (...) it is a policy that reduces social injustice a little bit (SP_Ex2).

But, in their opinion, the different kinds of opportunities provided by the policy have been narrowed by reforms: personal development opportunities were reduced because of the lack of time to establish a personal relationship with young adults and to promote their personal development (e.g., responsibility); training and labour chances became narrower because training has been reduced to its professional-technical version (suppressing other activities), and the apprenticeships periods were shortened; the educational opportunities were reduced because activities aimed at supporting young adults in re-entering the education system have been withdrawn. They even mention that

this is not SP_P3 anymore (SP_Ex 4).

On the other hand, the managers and the street professionals claim that local entities have lesser resources because of the Great Recession; therefore they are not always able to invest in accomplishing the criteria required to teach the certificates that best meet the demand for skills in the surrounding area or the interests of the young adults involved in the policy. In 2017, 6 of 16 of projects of this policy in the area taught specialities in the field of administrative work (Andalusian Government, 2017a), which, in their opinion, is far from the learning styles of their addresses, and this can limit the impacts of the policy. Moreover, the access criteria have changed (Andalusian Government, 2017b): some dimensions of young adults’ employability (e.g., teamwork skills) are now measured prior to entering SP_P3, and not only aimed as an outcome.

The managers and the street professionals make attempts to “resist” these reforms. They consider that the regional government did not listen their suggestions, which were channelled through an association of professionals. In addition, while they recognise the relevance of the professional certificates, agreeing with the regional decision maker, they call for other solutions to foster the capacity of local institutions to achieve the

labour insertion goals of the policy. For instance, one manager suggests creating intermunicipal centres able to gather more resources to teach more specialities. Further, he suggests including apprenticeship periods in companies and developing local prospects of skills among those companies. On the contrary, a street professional seems to distrust those companies more, as she thinks that they took advantage of young adults during the crisis, offering them precarious positions:

When the crisis started, some of them [companies] came to SP_P3, but only a few; many of them because they wanted to pay low wages [to the young adults] (SP_Ex6).

She considers that the policy needs to train them again in the construction field as it is demanding workers again, and that the policy would benefit from being regulated again in a way similar to what it was several years ago.

Lack of vertical (e.g., scales) and horizontal (e.g., public-private) coordination, a less receptive labour market, reduced resources and increased pressure for the local entities seem to be reducing the labour insertion chances of young adults who experienced early school leaving and who took part in the SP_P3 policy.

8.3.2 The Case Study in Croatia: Focusing on Young Adults' Employability to Meet Labour Market Demands

The HR_P1 LLL policy was founded in 1995, when it carried out training focused on workplace safety. Nowadays, this local institution, called an open university, offers different types of programmes aimed at professional training or retraining and acquisition of vocational qualifications. Some of the courses, but not all, include training periods in local companies. HR_P1 works outside the formal system of education and deals with different types of users, such as people without any completed education, unemployed people wishing to get retraining or employed people who want to attain another level of education.

The policy is implemented in the functional region of Istria. This region is situated on the north-west coast of the Adriatic Sea and includes a large part of the Istrian peninsula. The county is surrounded by the sea, except for its northern borders that are close to two big cities, Trieste in Italy and Rijeka in Croatia. Administratively, the region consists of 41 territorial units of local self-government: 10 towns and 31 municipalities. Within the county of Istria, the rapid growth of some urban areas has caused further disruption and differences between the towns and the countryside. This is especially emphasised in the relationship between coastal towns and inland Istria. Such cases are evident in the richer and more developed coastal area, compared with the less developed and poorer rural inland. The county of Istria is one of the most entrepreneurial and economically best developed regions in Croatia. With 214 thousand inhabitants, amounting to 4.8% of the population of Croatia, and almost 7200 registered business entities, this region accounts for 9.16% of the total number of Croatian entrepreneurs. Its economy is diverse: the leading activities are manufacturing industry, tourism, and trade, but other important economic sectors are construction, real estate and business services.

The Croatian labour market is characterised by a low activity rate, a pronounced problem with long-term unemployment and a high structural disproportion between labour supply and demand. HR_P1 is one of the main stakeholders in the field of transition of young adults from education to the labour market at the local level. Its goal is compatible with the goals of other stakeholders in the field, which is to raise young adults' employability. The policy provides facilities and trained professionals to other stakeholders in order to create and deliver support to unemployed young people or to those that want to change to a different career or to continue with their education, supporting them in an individualised manner (e.g., small working groups and inclusive methods). The purpose is to achieve a joint goal: enhancing user competences in order to increase competitiveness and restore the balance of labour supply and demand.

In Croatia, all programmes of secondary education are financed by the Ministry of Science and Education, with the possibility of including the county or other founders in co-financing. Higher education programmes

are also financed with public funds, but there are study programmes that students can finance with their own resources. However, programmes provided by open universities, enrolling mostly young adults without qualifications, are financed by the students themselves. The programmes carried out within some EU-funded projects designated for the implementation of active youth employment policy measures are exceptions to this.

The regional staffs of the policy and some local authorities are responsible for the implementation of national legislation and policies at the local and regional level. The relative abundance of educational possibilities in the county of Istria (and in the skills training) does not automatically ensure their relevance for the labour market (the skills use markets). There are a number of obstacles to the effective delivery of HR_P1 to support young people through their career. Some of them are the high level of centralisation of the system, the lack of a system of information which would permit the availability of information and its exchange and, finally, underdeveloped protocols of cooperation between institutions from different sectors, more precisely, from the education sector and the labour market.

An additional difficulty for the system of mutual coordination is the fact that institutions are focused on the implementation of programmes and policies which stem from the interests of their founders, whereas the horizontal and vertical coordination among providers of educational services occurs sporadically, mainly in the course of the preparation and realisation of short-term and unrelated projects and programmes. The repercussions of the lack of cooperation in the system result in young adults who are unprepared and often without any support in their transition from education to the labour market system. They are unaware of possibilities in their local community and in their region, they are not familiar with programmes that different institutions are offering, and they are focused on developing practical skills which will help them get a job or leave the country with any qualification.

The employability approach embedded in the regulation of the policy and in its expected impacts is strongly related to the notion of “matching”

labour market demands. From the perspective of the actors involved in its implementation, the contribution of the policy to their participants’ employability is, again, affected by the coordination dynamics with other actors and by funding issues. Moreover, despite the fact that HR_P1 cooperates with different stakeholders, like the Croatian Employment Service and some secondary schools, mainly in identifying deficit or surplus in the supply of some professions, there is also lack of cooperation between different open public universities, which also contributes to the presence of skills mismatches. The competition arises between them instead of cooperation because they offer similar programmes:

we talk to young people about retraining, and in the end all open public universities offer the same programmes. We all have commercialists, transport technicians... when they come to the school, I ask them: Did you maybe hear about any other programmes out there? (HR_Ex3).

Programmes provided by open public universities, enrolling mostly young people with no qualifications, are financed by the students themselves. This circumstance significantly affects the institutional opportunity structures they encounter and hampers the access of the most disadvantaged, such as those in a NEET condition, as they do not possess the resources to finance those programmes. One exception is the programmes carried out within EU-funded projects or programmes designated for the implementation of active youth employment policy measures.

From the perspective of HR_P1’ staff, its users have different types of motivation for enrolling in training and retraining programmes. Users’ motivations vary from getting employed, achieving a better job to obtaining another level of education in order to enrol in higher education. However, participation in the programmes does not ensure the acquisition of competences needed in the labour market, because the education supply and education programmes do not adjust to the changing needs of the market fast enough; and the lack of vertical and horizontal coordination between different actors does not contribute to this end. The content of most existing curricula and teaching programmes offers little opportunity for the students to acquire contemporary competences,

because their modernisation does not keep pace with the development of new knowledge and technologies.

8.3.3 The Case Study in Portugal: Local Cooperation and Coordination to Address Young Adults' Employability and Regional Skills Mismatches

PT_P1, the policy at the core of the case study in Portugal, is a LLL policy aimed at over 15 young people that have completed the 9th grade. The policy consists of high-school-level courses that allow students to have access to higher education. PT_P1 introduced this innovation in 1989, contributing to overcome the monolithic model of the public school, and enabling the existence of a new, more dynamic, practice—and labour-market—oriented educational offer. In 2014, and as a response to the economic crises, the offer was widened, both geographically and in terms of the professional areas covered. The nature of this policy grants a special connection to labour contexts and a special relationship with regional institutions and companies. Also, it encompasses a pedagogical model that is easily adapted to the young adults' educational paths, thus helping to combat dropout and failure rates, the latter being one of the main challenges identified as being faced by schools in the region, according to the experts interviewed. In this vein, unlike regular education, these courses are very much labour market and job oriented, concerning both their offer and their curricular approach.

The policy is implemented in the Vale do Ave functional region, in north-west Portugal. It comprises eight municipalities located alongside the river Ave: Cabeceiras de Basto, Fafe, Guimarães, Mondim de Basto, Póvoa de Lanhoso, Vieira do Minho, Vila Nova de Famalicão and Vizela. These municipalities are organised in an institutional association called the Intermunicipal Community of Vale do Ave, which is a regional public entity aimed at promoting intermunicipal projects. This region covers an area of 1541 km² and has 419,119 inhabitants (PORDATA, 2015), corresponding to a density of about 275 people per km², one of the highest in the country. The region is very close to the Porto Metropolitan Area (the second largest in the country) and has very good access to its

international harbour and airport; it is also served by railways and highways. This is one of the largest and oldest industrial regions in the country. It has its roots in ancient flax processing traditions, which evolved into textile production. Vale do Ave currently has strong industry, specialised mainly in textiles, agro-food and metallurgy and metalworking. Yet the region is rather heterogeneous. There is a quite rural area in Vale do Ave, with lower population density and an older population, there is the transition Vale do Ave, between the rural and the industrialised and there is a deeply industrialised Vale do Ave, with a higher population density and a younger population.

The socio-economic context of the Vale do Ave region encompasses some real challenges for young adults. This is a rather young and industrialised region and, in spite of this, young people from Vale do Ave face similar challenges to those from the rest of the country, such as unemployment, due to the lack of specific training that meets the real needs of the region, and precarious work.

PT_P1 is a national policy, but locally implemented according to the specific needs of each context. In Vale do Ave, this policy plays a significant role in fighting the lack of skilled young adults in the region, lowering unemployment rates and increasing its participants' personal and professional fulfilment. The policy appears to be a consensual measure in Vale do Ave. Its main objective is employability, that is, to qualify young adults to make them capable of being integrated in the labour market. This objective resonates in the discourses of the managers interviewed, where employability is again linked to its “matching” meaning: synchronising young adults' training to the needs of the regional labour markets and addressing skills mismatches. The policy has been identified as contributing to addressing such mismatches and to the improvement of employability in the region, mainly thanks to the cooperation and coordination with other local actors of the areas where it is implemented. This cooperation transcends the selection of skills to be taught and in improving the policy resources, both human and funding ones.

Regarding the selection of skills, departing from the results of the Qualifications Needs Assessment System report, the institution responsible of displaying PT_P1 (e.g., schools and educational agents), in partnership with schools and companies, make an exhaustive mapping of the

education and training needs, and how they match with the labour market needs. Many companies are also called for this prospection, as their needs for skills will indicate which courses' areas are more likely to be planned. Moreover, these same companies provide professional training and jobs for the young adults who attend those courses. These companies also contribute to the private funding of the courses whenever public funding from the ESF or the Portuguese government is not enough to respond to the regional needs of qualification.

This cooperation and synergies in the region between all municipalities and between actors and institutions promote the engagement of young people in vocational training courses in the entire intermunicipal area, and not only in their municipality, although there are some municipalities that are more rural and isolated, which makes mobility more difficult for young adults. In any case, proximity relationships are significant in the region:

this proximity enables us to be near the institutions and to have the human resources. (...) This means that our technical professors have the possibility of being part of the training groups of the companies. Also, they give training to companies and there is sharing of knowledge here, which is very valid, because then they bring the knowledge and contents to the curriculum we have developed, to make it as close together as possible (PT_Ex5).

The fact that some schools positively respond to a policy implemented in the core of the Vale do Ave industry creating partnerships with the companies gives a sense of immediacy that not only allows the institutions to be nearby, but also to have the human resources necessary for the jobs, translating this into socio-economic development for the region. In sum, the success of this policy in Vale do Ave may rely on various factors: first, the synergies and the close work between the actors and institutions involved in this measure; second, the large potential that the region has, as it is highly industrialised and provides many employment opportunities; and, last, the private funding from companies, which complements the public funding. This policy allows young adults to have early contact with

the labour market, which may be highly motivating, and have high rates of employability in the region, and lower rates of early school leaving.

8.4 Comparison of the Case Studies

The three explored case studies have LLL policies at their core with more than 20 years of existence. Their governance patterns have, however, evolved differently regarding their degrees of decentralisation and the dynamics of collaboration or competition with other actors. Spain has experienced a progressive process of decentralisation in the vocational training sphere towards regional governments, which is also reflected in the SP_P3 policy. Prior to the last reforms (2016), the local public implementers of the policy collaborated with other public actors, which worked to shape wider development projects for the surrounding regions, but that were suppressed. Collaboration with companies does not seem to be fluent nor relevant in the governance pattern of SP_P3. Indeed, the last regional regulation of the policy includes the possibility of collaborating with enterprises, but it is not taken into consideration in the competition to receive funding. Increased competition reduced economic resources of local entities and harder criteria to teach certificates seem to make it more difficult for SP_P3 to meet the demands of the labour market.

In contrast, the HR_P1 policy has remained strongly framed at the national level, with strict regulations (e.g., contents and characteristics of the programmes), despite local implementers having room to choose the teaching methods that are most suitable for their users’ interests. Like SP_P3, cooperation with other actors in HR_P1 does not seem to be portrayed by the interviewed actors as highly relevant in reaching its objectives. In this case, cooperation with national authorities is mainly related to administrative issues and the matching of the skill supply with the labour market seems to be made more difficult by the unavailability of data about the needs of the labour market and by the competition with other versions of HR_P1 with a similar training offer. Differently, the transformation of PT_P1 across time came along with a higher collaboration with local companies in order to produce a strong labour-market-oriented educational offer. Therefore, this national policy implemented

Table 8.1 Youth unemployment rates (15–24) by NUT2 level and EU28

	2007	2013	2018
European Union 28	15.8	23.8	15.2
Andalusia	23.2	66	46.7
Adriatic Croatia	21.5	45.2	24.6
Norte	16.8	35.4	19

Source: Eurostat ([2020](#))

at the regional level by paying attention to the specific skills demands of each context, which is related to its high success in reaching its objectives (address skills mismatches, increase employability) and in creating a consensus among actors.

During the Great Recession of 2007–2008, youth unemployment, the main problem that the analysed policies try to tackle, rose in the three regions where the policies are based (Table 8.1.)

The consequences of the Recession and the new reforms in policy design increased mistrust in the governance landscape of the case in Spain: (a) between some actors from SP_P3 and local companies; (b) between these local actors, who encouraged the staff of the new versions of SP_P3 to resist 2016 reforms, which they deem narrowed its impacts, and regional decision makers, defending their changes and criticising the previous selection of the skill provision from the SP_P3's implementers. Competition and bureaucratic collaboration in the case study in Croatia seem to make addressing youth unemployment more difficult too. Conversely, the long-standing strong collaboration with local companies is at the core of the appropriation of a national policy for the case study in Portugal and the PT_P1 policy is characterised as a consensus measure. Fluent and significant participation in the policy design and implementation seem to foster a stronger accomplishment of the expected impacts of the cases and to reduce possible resistance during their appropriation.

The solution to tackle the problem of youth unemployment in the three cases is mainly framed around the notion of employability. In all cases, employability seems to be developed mainly in terms of “matching” young adults’ skills with labour market demands (Table 8.2). Despite this common “supply side” understanding of employability, which

Table 8.2 Expected impacts and their relationship with regional governance landscapes

	SP_P3	HR_P1	PT_P1
Aspect	Malaga, Andalusia	Istria, Adriatic Croatia	Vale do Ave, Norte
Main expected impact	Promote participants' labour insertion		
Other expected impacts	Creation of education and labour opportunities, restoration and wider personal development	Training contributes to personal development and to increased personal capabilities of adaptation	Increasing personal and professional fulfilment
Main understanding of employability	Matching + more interactive, comprehensive approach	Matching	Matching + more interactive, comprehensive approach
Regional governance landscapes affecting expected impacts	Increasing employability and wider impacts are hampered by the effects of the 2008 Recession, the new policy regulatory design and competition between providers	Increasing employability is hampered by competition between providers and limited public funding	Increasing employability is fostered by strong local collaboration with companies and the regional industrial sector

Source: Own elaboration

focuses mainly on individual-related aspects (i.e., skills deficits), actors in Spanish and Portuguese cases seem to work with a more interactive and comprehensive perspective on employability, referring to other aspects beyond young adults' skills. Concerning the SP_P3 policy, they refer to limitations or advantages to young adults' labour insertion due to the situation of the labour market or to young adults' personal circumstances; in the case study in Portugal, they highly value the direct offers of vacancies by the companies involved in the policy implementation.

Actors involved in the three cases indicate collaboration rather than competition in the provision and funding of VET as the most effective dynamics for addressing skills mismatches. Competition dynamics seem to be related to the cases in Spain and Croatia with survival strategies by providers, which could prompt to teach skills that are not related to the interests or learning styles of young adults (e.g., administrative work for early school leavers involved in the SP_P3 policy) or that are already widely offered by other providers (as in the Croatian case). In the case study analysed in Spain, these competition dynamics are intersected with the effects of the Recession on the economic resources of the implementing institutions and with higher standards required to teach professional certificates. In the case study analysed in Croatia, providers compete to obtain young adults' economic resources, which are the only source of funding of those courses not funded by the ESF. In contrast, strong collaboration with local companies in Portugal (which even contribute financially to the courses) seems to be at the core of the high success of the analysed policy. This type of strong collaboration is also sought by actors in Croatia and Spain to address such skills mismatches, although with some discrepancies in Spain.

Finally, young adults seem to face other difficulties when accessing the policies and, therefore, in increasing their skills. In the Portuguese case study, they seem to be related to issues of mobility from remote villages. In the Spanish case study, there is possible increased pressure among the implementing institutions to enrol the most prepared young adults because of the new competition procedures. There is also the need to justify young adults' labour insertion a few months after the participation in the SP_P3 policy, and there has been an inclusion of new individual factors of employability among the access criteria to the policy. Higher levels of some of these individual employability factors, such as teamwork skills, were previously conceived in terms of impacts to be achieved through the participation of young adults in SP_P3 and not in terms of prerequisites. This can also reduce less prepared young adults' opportunities for enrolling in the policy and improving their skills. In Croatia, they are related to the fact that young adults' need to fund their participation in the HR_P1 policy, which can limit the access of the most disadvantaged, such as those in a NEET condition.

8.5 Concluding Remarks

The goal of our analysis was to elaborate on how different patterns of governance contribute to the contextualisation of lifelong learning policies in a specific social and structural context. In order to do so, we followed the three axes of comparison (transversal, vertical and horizontal) to undertake comparative case studies (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). The exploration of our cases shows how a governance perspective analysis, enhanced through the opportunity structures perspective, can provide useful insights to better understand the multiple ways in which different actors at different scales produce, implement, resist and appropriate policies in specific contexts.

In this vein, our analysis portrays how different governance patterns support the contextualisation of three LLL policies based on employability in three different European regions. The notion of employability that resonates in our cases, framing a discursive opportunity structure is, however, differently contextualised. Progressive decentralisation does not always mean increased collaboration, participation and trust between actors in different scales or spheres (public-private). This is the case observed in Spain, where the reinforcement of the idea of employability in the policy design has limited the wider impacts that the actors involved in the policy expected from their work, narrowing them towards supply-side factors. Moreover, project- or initiative-based coordination (Capsada-Munsech et al., 2018) does not always lead to close relationships with other local actors that are effective in addressing skills mismatches of regional labour markets or including demand-side aspects (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005) when addressing young adults’ employability which is reflected in the case analysed in Croatia. On the contrary, in the case in Portugal, where collaboration and coordination with local companies is characterised as framed by consensus, the policy seems to be more effective in addressing youth unemployment and in contextualising employability in a more comprehensive and interactive way, including those demand-side aspects through relations of proximity between actors in the local context. Trust between actors on different scales and in different spheres and coordination rather than competition seem to foster the

perspectives on labour market insertion. This collaboration is demanded by some of the actors even where it is not currently developed (e.g., the case in Spain).

The work of the actors involved in the implementation of the cases is also influenced by the institutional opportunity structures they are inserted in, so they can shape different levels of opportunities for young adults. In the Spanish case study, the activities and duration of the policy have directly been reduced through the reforms in policy design, which are strongly linked to the discursive opportunity structure framed by the notion of employability, but these actors claim that they will try to resist to these changes and create other opportunities for young adults. In the Croatian case, they find difficulties in accessing wider information and there is a lack of cooperation protocols. In the Portuguese case study, on the contrary, they deal with funding issues through the support of local companies and their close relationship with them.

Young adults' participation in our cases and, therefore, some of their opportunities to increase their employability, can be also hindered by the institutional opportunity structures they face regarding their access to the explored policies. For instance, it can be limited through the introduction of more demanding access criteria to the LLL policies, competition, limited resources and survival strategies between providers, limitations in young adults' mobility to the training centres or their need to fund their own training. Attention should, moreover, be paid to other demand-side aspects of the regions where our cases are embedded, such as the different opportunities that young adults find in regional labour markets, which also influence their employability (Cefalo et al., [2020](#)).

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 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) and the sequence number attributed by the different research teams while collecting the interviews.

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