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# Lifelong Learning, Young Adults and the Challenges of Disadvantage in Europe

*Edited by*  
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*In memory of Professor Robert (Bob) John, whose enlightened learning and enlivening comradeship showed social scientists that computer science can be humane too.*

# Foreword

Adult learning and related efforts to arrange and organise opportunities for adults to continue learning throughout life are deeply embedded in our societies. They can be linked to a diverse range of stakeholders in different contexts, each with different views and objectives, and hence to diverse opportunities for different purposes. If approached from a systemic view and coordinated—with sustained and collective effort among stakeholders to achieve goals of inclusion and quality on the one hand, and to continually define and redefine their purpose, functioning and effectiveness, on the other—these organised adult learning opportunities have the potential to act as a powerful corridor of communication in the face of complexity. They also allow for coping with systematic communicative distortions arising from the unequal social distribution of power and resources.

Individual success aside, at collective levels, the ability to govern and to adapt effectively to change depends, to a large extent, on learning and the opportunity structures for learning. Change is a defining feature of modern life, particularly in dynamic market democracies, and efforts to arrange and organise adult learning opportunities effectively for *all* are worthwhile. They have an important role to play, contributing to advanced and democratic forms of communication and governance and involving the daily renewal of political, social, and cultural negotiations.

Despite such potential for adult learning, and despite paying lip-service to wider aims, the strategic rationality of steering mechanisms of power and money—as manifested through commodification, markets and the administrative apparatus of the state—over-emphasise the economic dimension of adult learning in policy and practice. Scholarly empirical-analytic and hermeneutic efforts which attempt to move us beyond these narrow forms of interests—such as collected in this book—are of immense value to help policymakers and other stakeholders reach a more synthetic view and understanding of adult learning as being a core element of a vibrant civil society. This includes the capacity of civil society to hold power to account *vis-à-vis* both stated goals and aspirations associated with freedom and justice.

This more synthetic view and understanding implies the need to encompass and emphasise adult learning's role in enabling the interpretation of meanings that define practical reason. In so doing, it helps guide action and moral deliberation in social and cultural life—and not least in working life in both public and private sectors. Further, it implies the need to embrace the critical-emancipatory purpose of adult learning: to engage with knowledge about power and the associated normative issues of freedom and justice, which are so central to liberal democratic governance and human rights (e.g. as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). Of course, these are not mutually exclusive and together may be indicative of quality in terms of what counts as effective organised learning, including for working life.

This book engages thoroughly with a synthetic view of adult learning and its potential role in market democracies. At the same time, it provides a rich source of empirical-analytic knowledge about conditions and circumstances surrounding adult learning in various contexts and at different levels of analysis. In so doing, for example, by enriching the concept of bounded agency, it reveals the complex role of policy and institutions in structurally enabling and/or constraining individuals to learn. It raises key questions and issues, as well as alternatives to consider,

in manoeuvring the complexity vis-à-vis stated goals from policy and practice perspectives. Foremost, it elucidates the messy processes involved and, most importantly, the necessity of treating citizens as human beings with fundamental rights and as the key agents of social change in democratic societies.

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# Preface

Not so long ago, Europe was ‘the future’: in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the European Union offered not only a new home for emerging democratic market economies, but a new kind of international organisation combining democratic governance, social welfare, tolerance and the rule of law. Thirty years on, the European project faces multiple challenges. The employment problem remains. Economies may have recovered—just about—from the post-2008 crash, but technological change gathers still more pace, and the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic remains unclear. Migration continues—within the EU and from beyond its borders. Artificial intelligence threatens even the most skilled workers. Labour markets, welfare systems and political institutions seem ill-prepared for the challenges. Inequality grows. One of the European Union’s largest member states (the UK) has turned its back on the project. Forms of authoritarian, nationalist ‘populism’—unparalleled since 1945—are on the rise: several EU member states are now governed by such politics.

This book focuses on the role of lifelong learning in Europe’s present and future. From the early 1990s, the European Commission has woven a new thread into the EU’s fabric: lifelong learning. First deployed for its potential contribution to competitiveness and solving the ‘employment problem’, by the turn of the millennium, it was being officially

promulgated as ‘essential’ to ‘the development of citizenship, social cohesion and employment’.

Plainly European lifelong learning has not achieved what its advocates hoped for two or three decades ago. Few thought lifelong learning was a panacea, but even the tempered optimism of the 1990s now seems exaggerated. This book asks why. Its empirical base is findings from the Enliven project.<sup>1</sup> It poses such questions as: What has European lifelong learning in fact achieved? In what ways has it fallen short? How effective are current policies? How should they change?

Of course, the EU has achieved a lot. Expanding to east and south, its population grew from 350 million to over 500 million, though it has fallen back since the UK’s departure. Shepherding 28 or 27 countries—with very different histories, cultures, populations and wealth—in roughly the same direction has proved far more complex than governing 12 relatively wealthy western European countries. Since 2000, it has developed a remarkable suite of multinational coordination mechanisms—applied to lifelong learning as well as other policy areas.

Yet the problems remain. Lifelong learning is not solving them. In fact, Europe’s weaknesses in lifelong learning in many ways reflect the Union’s social and political challenges. The dominant response to lifelong learning’s apparent inability to deliver the hoped-for economic and social returns has not been to ask fundamental questions about aims, but rather to look for improved methods of policy implementation or ‘delivery’. The challenges involved in maintaining some intelligent overview of policy across so many diverse countries are intense.

The increasing availability of ‘data’ has encouraged a belief that many answers lie in information technology and artificial intelligence. This view is subject to several profound critiques. Attempts to govern by the quantification of outcomes inevitably over-simplify the complexity of social reality. When targets or measures are set, social actors prioritise what can be measured. And although technological sophistication has greatly expanded the range of quantitative data available about social

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<sup>1</sup> Enliven: ‘Encouraging Lifelong Learning for an Inclusive and Vibrant Europe’. The project and the open access publication of this book were supported by the European Commission under its Horizon 2020 research programme (Grant No. 693989).

behaviour, they remain skewed. In particular, there are much larger (and probably more reliable and comparable) datasets about economic activity than about other aspects of social life. Nevertheless, the quest for technological solutions continues.

The main focus of this book is young adults—especially those relatively less-advantaged young adults who, on leaving school, do not enter full-time higher education. This group has been a central EU policy concern in recent years—not least because, in the wake of the 2008 crash, one in every four Europeans under 25 was unemployed (in some countries, one in two). Unemployment among the young is known to generate long-term ‘scarring’, not to mention social exclusion and disaffection. These threaten economic competitiveness, social cohesion, and the European project as a whole.

However, we approach the education of young adults from the perspective of adult education. This means it takes a particular normative position. We do not see education and training for young adults as ‘preparation’ for adulthood: we view education as integral throughout the life course. Education is taken to relate to the full breadth of human life and experience—‘life-wide’ as well as ‘lifelong’—and so the contributors are sceptical of a narrow policy focus on ‘employability’ and workplace skills. Education throughout life is seen as fundamental to democratic societies. And the education of free citizens is seen as a process to which citizens must contribute freely: they should not be the passive recipients of education designed by their ‘superiors’ but must be able to participate actively and democratically, on a basis of equality, in shaping what and how they study and learn.

From this perspective, ‘making policy’ for lifelong learning presents particularly intractable challenges. Social policy is inevitably the product of contributions at multiple levels, and by diverse ‘actors’, even within a single country. This is still more true in a complex multinational polity such as the EU. At many of these levels, policy is subject to formal shaping by ‘democratic’ institutions of various kinds: these establish principles and objectives, modes of operation and regulation, and organisations and institutions, for education. Yet adults participate in education not merely as the *objects* of policy, but as citizens who are—and perhaps more importantly, often feel—entitled to be active *subjects* in shaping how they learn

and are to be educated. There are, of course, also actors who think their expertise, professionalism, or bureaucratic role make their contribution to policy particularly important or more legitimate.

This book therefore examines lifelong learning in Europe from a critical perspective. It argues, on the basis of a major multinational research project, for the strengthening of informed debate about how lifelong learning should be organised and what Europe's aims in it should be.

Around the turn of the millennium, a critical perspective emerged *within* the European Commission about its own governance. The very term 'governance' was used to refer to an attempt to reshape EU institutions to address problems of growing distance between the European project—as represented in institutions such as the Commission and the European Parliament—and its citizens. The Commission's then president spoke of the EU needing 'a new, more democratic form of partnership ... between civil society and the other actors involved in governance, ... consulting one another on a whole range of issues; shaping, implementing and monitoring policy *together*'. Democracy should be 'much *more direct, more participatory*'. This was necessary 'to make a success of [EU] enlargement', and so that 'democracy and respect for human rights as well as sound economic policies become the norm' (Prodi, 2000, emphasis in original; see also European Commission, 2001). However, in the same speech, he warned that there was 'no established method of preventing the European agenda from being hijacked by the strongest and most vocal lobbyists'. So it proved: rather than Europe being 'built by the citizens for the citizens', corporate advocates of neoliberal markets took control of the Lisbon strategy.

European adult education traditions and experience show that lifelong learning cannot be restricted to delivering a workforce with requisite skills—even if leavened with aims of equity and social inclusion. Rather, learning in adulthood is an essential part of enabling citizens to play a full and active role in shaping Europe as an educated democracy. We believe our contributors' positioning as adult educators enriches the book. Adult education is seen not simply as the product of policy development by governments but as the outcome of initiative by emancipatory social movements, including educational social movements, many associated with labour and the working class. The contributors take the view that

one of the weaknesses of the EU's approach to lifelong learning has been its conscious distancing from the critical, emancipatory, and often anti-capitalist heritage of adult education.

In the book, we also apply an innovative theoretical perspective: 'bounded agency'. This provides a theoretical basis for marrying analyses of the behaviour and preferences of individuals with the institutional structures which comprise the societies in which they live. This is particularly important if we are to explore the viability of Artificial Intelligence-(AI-) based policy modelling in lifelong learning. Behavioural approaches (e.g. from economics and psychology) are often seen as providing a sufficient basis for modelling and accurately predicting human behaviour—particularly when combined with computer-based technologies. Many computational social scientists recognise that the use of AI in addressing social problems is at an embryonic stage, while 'real world' events, such as the financial crash, not to mention the recent pandemic, periodically expose the limitations of behaviourally based models (MacKenzie, 2011, MacKenzie & Spears 2014). The present book is informed by an attempt to apply AI in lifelong learning policy, but to do so on the basis of interdisciplinarity, informed by social structural as well as behavioural perspectives. Lifelong learning research has shown that institutional and social structures across the nations of Europe are both persistent, pervasive and diverse, and also structure how participation in learning and motivation to learn differ within and between social groups.

Bounded agency enables us to locate behavioural data within an institutional-structural framework, making policy debate and decision-making more realistic, grounded and relevant to the diverse stakeholders in European societies. Agency is seen as socially situated, influenced but not determined by social structures and environments (Evans, 2002, 2007; Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). The concept sees actions in the contingencies of the present moment as influenced by past habits, by what people believe to be possible for them in the future, but also by subjective perceptions of the structures they have to negotiate, the social landscapes which affect how they act (Evans, Schoon, & Weale, 2013). Bounded agency is used in various ways across the research: for instance, in analysing policy, we have applied it through the method of policy

trails, which allows us to see both the agency of actors and the structures within which they act.

The book is organised in four parts. The first, ‘Lifelong Learning for an Inclusive and Vibrant Europe’, comprises two chapters, sets the scene and outlines the main concepts and approaches used. The second, ‘Policies, Programmes and Participation’, is made up of seven chapters. They explore how European policies have conceptualised young people (especially those regarded as ‘vulnerable’), and why and to what extent different groups participate in lifelong learning in Europe. They also include chapters on adult education and empowerment from the perspective of the capability approach, on how media use of PIAAC data has shaped debate about lifelong learning, and about some of the challenges faced in using artificial intelligence to inform policy in this area. The six chapters in Part III, ‘Young Adults’ Learning in the Workplace and Beyond’, explore how workplaces contribute to lifelong learning, especially for young adults: they show that how employing organisations shape the workplace plays a vital part in who has an opportunity to learn, and what they have an opportunity to learn. They also show that what people learn in the workplace is important not only for what they do at work: it also affects the character of social and political life. The fourth part, ‘Conclusion’, consists of a single chapter: ‘Adult Education, Learning Citizens, and the Lessons of Enliven’.

The research on which this book draws, and the costs of open access publication of this book, were supported by the European Commission; we acknowledge this with warm thanks. The project was conducted by teams from ten institutions. Most of these were in Europe, but colleagues from the University of Melbourne, Australia, were also invaluable. The research also received rich contributions from three Danish scholars. Our work was also enriched and challenged by an advisory board comprising experts from the scientific and policy communities. The members of the Enliven team and advisory board are listed in Appendix 3. Without their professionalism, expertise and general enthusiasm, neither the project nor this book would have been completed: our gratitude cannot be sufficiently expressed.

Though it seems invidious to single out individual members of such a strong team, we conclude by mentioning two. Ruth Elmer proved an

exceptionally able project administrator, guiding our work throughout, ensuring that we fell into none of the legion pitfalls that European funding regimes present; and she did it all with good cheer.

One of the challenges the Enliven project faced was that of combining the talents of two very different scientific tribes. Social scientists and computer scientists seldom talk: we were to discover that when they do, they often fail to understand one another. Fortunately, our team included Professor Bob John, not only a leading computer scientist but a gifted communicator. Sadly, this charming, committed and congenial man—who grasped what matters in adult educational research and enriched our work—was to die shortly after attending the project’s final conference. We dedicate this book to his memory.

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# **Part I**

**Lifelong Learning for an Inclusive  
and Vibrant Europe**



# 1

## Lifelong Learning, the European Union, and the Social Inclusion of Young Adults: Rethinking Policy

John Holford

It was in the early 1990s that the European Union endorsed ‘lifelong learning’ as an instrument of policy. Several international organisations embraced the idea at around this time; an emerging global consensus saw lifelong learning as an essential element in responding to technological advances, globalised production and trade, and labour market flexibility. The EU’s position was, however, unusual, even unique, among them in that it has a strong, institutionalised, and in some respects direct, role in shaping the policies of the states which comprise it. In relation to education, this had been given a legal basis by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which for the first time specified that the EU activities should include ‘a contribution to education and training of quality and to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States’, and this was given an organisational

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basis when, in the early 1990s, the European Commission established a directorate-general with responsibility for education.<sup>1</sup>

Although lifelong learning has never become a principal objective of EU policy,<sup>2</sup> it soon became a key mechanism for achieving other aims. These other aims have changed over time and have often also been in tension. Lifelong learning was first embraced as an element of competition policy. When EU expansion became a major feature in the 1990s, with it came a concern to cement democracy in member states formerly ‘behind the iron curtain’; associated with this—though also with a concern to create some European identity and to overcome problems of EU institutions being seen as distant, unresponsive and ‘bureaucratic’—was the idea that lifelong learning might foster a more engaged European citizen. Under Romano Prodi’s presidency of the European Commission (1999–2003), it was briefly enrolled in pursuit of a more democratic, complex multinational polity, engaging the EU with its citizens with a stronger role for ‘active citizenship’. (His predecessor’s Commission, beset by allegations of fraud, had ‘imploded in ignominy and mass resignation’ (Tomkins, 1999, p. 744).)

The Lisbon Strategy, adopted in 2000, however, became essentially a matter of centralising policy objectives and bolstering them with top-down implementation mechanisms (notably, such ‘soft-power’ features as indicators and benchmarks). These were operationalised through the Open Method of Co-ordination, whose prescription of discussion and consultation with social partners (or stakeholders) in shaping policy aims lent centralisation a democratic cloak. (It was seized on by some educationalists within the European Commission as a potential basis for a new and more democratic ‘European educational space’ (cf Hingel, 2001; Lawn, 2006; Nóvoa & Lawn, 2002).) Nevertheless, as it turned out, the Open Method of Co-ordination’s centralising and implementation elements proved much more salient—in education and lifelong learning, as elsewhere (cf Gold et al., 2007)—than any ‘space’ it allowed to citizens in the formulation of policy aims.

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<sup>1</sup> Formally, a directorate-general for education came into being only in 1995, though in practice this was the culmination of growth over the previous decade. See (Pépin, 2006)

<sup>2</sup> There was, however, a brief period in the early years of the Lisbon strategy when a small group of educators and educational policy-makers was optimistic that it might become so.

The chief reasons for this were twofold: on the one hand, the EU's enlargement; on the other, global economic competition (or at any rate a growing fear of it). Politically, the EU expanded from 12 member states in 1995 to 27 in 2007; its population grew from roughly 350 million to over 500 million. The countries were highly diverse. Four had over 60 million people each; 13 had populations smaller than London's (then the EU's largest city). Ten had a recent 40-year experience of state socialist government and lacked deeply embedded democratic institutions and cultures. This generated vast challenges of governance. In parallel, politics in several more long-standing member states—where political institutions had seemed quite strong—were threatened by the growth of far-right, authoritarian populism. (The decline of the political left, and social democracy in particular—associated with industrial restructuring and the post-1990 ideological crisis of socialism—was also significant.) From around the turn of the millennium, European right-wing populism donned 'Eurosceptic' clothes, and—from toppling the Constitutional Treaty in 2004 to Brexit in 2016—threw up a series of existential threats to the 'European project'.

At the same time, Europe was facing intensified economic challenges. With revolutions in information technology and capital accumulation, industrial production became increasingly mobile and markets increasingly global. Europe's economic and political leaders saw competition from North America and Asia as posing a twin threat: structural, long-term unemployment and social exclusion. One of the attractions of lifelong learning was that it addressed both economic and social policy aims: competitiveness and inclusion. In the 1990s, Western economies generally prospered; the threat seemed relatively distant. Many felt optimism that a transformation into a 'Europe of learning', a 'knowledge economy' and a 'learning society' could be achieved, and clearly in any of these lifelong learning would be central (Archibugi & Lundvall, 2002; Commission of the European Communities, 2000; Green, 2002; Lundvall & Borrás, 1997).

It was in this spirit that the Lisbon Strategy set the aim of making Europe 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' by 2010 (Council of the European Union, 2000). In the event, however, the globalised economy threw up unexpected—as well as

anticipated—problems. The late 1990s’ ‘dot com bubble’ burst in early 2000; economic advance faltered. In 2007 and 2008 came the financial crash; a massive and global recession followed; in Europe, it threw its shadow over the following decade. Many felt its ill-effects. Some countries suffered more intensely than others—Greece’s travails stand out—but in all countries, the young were particularly hard-hit. The narrative of the previous decade had been one of hard work and educational achievement, leading to good jobs and career opportunities; the reality all-too-frequently turned out to be unemployment, or insecure, lower-skilled, jobs for which they were educationally ‘over-qualified’. The allure of the ‘gig economy’ was strongest for those with no need to earn a living from it.

Economic competitiveness has been a key aim of the nation state under neoliberalism, and one warmly embraced by the EU on behalf of its members. When, therefore, the Lisbon Strategy’s achievements began—rather soon—to fall short of its ambitions, action was taken in short order. The Commission appointed a ‘High Level Group’ chaired by a former prime minister of The Netherlands, Wim Kok. This group acknowledged the problem, but recommended, essentially, more of the same. The Lisbon Strategy was ‘even more urgent’ because ‘the growth gap with North America and Asia has widened, while Europe must meet the combined challenges of low population growth and ageing. Time is running out and there can be no room for complacency’. Its recommendation: ‘Better implementation is needed now to make up for lost time’. There should be ‘a radical improvement’ in ‘delivery’, to be achieved by sharper focus on a reduced number indicators and benchmarks, with the Commission ‘praising good performance and castigating bad performance—naming, shaming and faming’ (Kok, 2004, pp. 6, 42–43).

All bureaucracies have an appetite for policy centralisation; in few is it sated; after the financial crash of 2007–2008, little else appeared on the EU menu. Yet the politics of national inequality also mattered. In 2010, Germany accounted for nearly 20% of EU GDP; 85% of EU GDP came from the 12 countries which had been EU members before 1995. Greece, though one of these, accounted for well under 2%. When the Greek economy ran into serious trouble, it became a sacrificial

lamb: the Euro was by then iconic. But the Europe 2020 strategy, inaugurated in 2010, was essentially Lisbon laced with Kok. In policy terms, the aims and top-down implementation were endorsed, but should be further intensified. Some indicators and benchmarks were promoted (to be key indicators); others were effectively demoted. Most important, however, the introduction of the European Semester enabled the Commission to oversee and intervene in national policies, particularly economic policy, on a regular basis—informed by the array of ‘data’ increasingly available, particularly through Eurostat. Of course, the Commission’s capacity to intervene is subject to the general—legal—commitment to ‘subsidiarity’, and in practice, the nature and degree of intervention has varied from country to country: it is easier for the Commission to intervene in Malta than in Germany, Estonia than in France. Nevertheless, the European Semester has become a profoundly important mechanism which, though strictly speaking focussed on economic policy, can in practice address ‘recommendations’ across a wide range of policy concerns—including lifelong learning, especially as linked to labour markets and training.

It was with this mindset and model that the EU grappled with the financial crisis and its aftermath. This book is, of course, concerned mainly with adult education, or lifelong learning, and particularly with how these shape the lives of young adults. The Lisbon objectives—and particularly the Kok readjustment—may have been driven by fear of international competition (the global or ‘neoliberal imaginary’ (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), but this was seen as key to ‘sustainable economic growth’, providing ‘more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’. With young adults particularly hard-hit—and experience from a century and more pointed to the social impact of unemployment (Beveridge, 1909; Jahoda et al., 1972; Rowntree & Lasker, 1911)—delivering outcomes for the Union’s youth became the focus for European social and economic policies. Lifelong learning policies were no exception: what emphasis there had been on learning throughout life—from cradle to grave—was elbowed aside by the pressing demands of a displaced generation.

## Origins of the Enliven Research

This was the background to the project on which this book is based. Some explanation of its nature and background is therefore in order. ‘Enliven’ is an acronym, the short title of a research project formally entitled ‘Encouraging Lifelong Learning for an Inclusive and Vibrant Europe’. The project was funded by the European Commission’s Directorate General for Research and Innovation’s Horizon 2020 programme; its main work was conducted over a three-year period beginning in October 2016.

Enliven responded to a ‘call’ for research proposals on ‘lifelong learning for young adults: better policies for growth and inclusion in Europe’. Inevitably, it reflected thinking in the Commission, and for that reason— if no other—merits some discussion. The call asserted that it was ‘obvious’ that investment in lifelong learning would ‘contribute to overcoming the economic and social crisis and meeting the Europe 2020 targets on employment, poverty reduction, education, sustainability, innovation’ and that the ‘need and markets for adult education (after initial education and training)’ were therefore ‘likely to rise in the coming years’. Yet ‘despite sustained attention over the years, adult education in Europe remain[ed] inadequate’. There were two particular concerns. First, ‘those who are more in need of adult education, such as young, unemployed, low skilled, disabled and vulnerable workers, actually benefit less ... than other more advantaged groups’. At the same time, there was an imbalance between public and private investment (the costs of adult education were borne largely by enterprises, individuals and families, rather than by the public). (European Commission, 2014, p. 25).

The research specification suggested potential areas for investigation. For instance, while addressing adult education in general, it should focus particularly ‘on young adults and vulnerable groups ... after entry into working life’. The relationship between public policies and the ‘dynamics of private markets’ was a concern. Programmes which improve learning outcomes, particularly for ‘young adults at risk of social exclusion and other vulnerable groups’, were to be identified, as was ‘the learning potential and innovation ability in workplaces’.

A particularly intriguing element was to ‘investigate the feasibility [of] and possibly develop an Intelligent Decision Support System (policy making modelling) for simplifying the access to information and support policy making in the different phases of the policy cycle’. This would facilitate ‘access to scientific evidence for policy making’, help correct ‘distortion of the adult education and continuing training market’, show how barriers to access could be reduced, and identify financial measures to support individuals and companies, ‘ensuring effective and fair distribution of resources, reduce[d] mismanagement and corruption’ (European Commission, 2014, pp. 25–26). Research specifications (‘calls’, in the Commission’s terminology) do not, of course, emerge from nothing. They reflect, albeit with distortions and misunderstandings, the priorities, preconceptions and prejudices of their authors—typically corporate authors—and of their time. It is, perhaps, in order to contextualise some of the emphases in this call. Many were very much responses to overriding concerns we have already mentioned, above all, the economic crisis that engulfed Europe (and much of the world) following 2007, its impact on young people in particular, and the political challenges of European enlargement. Some, however, reflect beliefs about the causes of political, economic and social problems and where solutions to them should be sought—in short, they are ideological. Thus problems of adult education were located in market ‘distortion’—more perfect markets would, presumably, deliver better lives for excluded youth, greater global competitiveness and the other aims of lifelong learning policy. Applying ‘various psychological and behavioural sciences outcomes’ was encouraged—many in policy communities were in thrall to the counter-intuitive scientificity of behavioural economics, popularised by authors such as Thaler and Sunstein (2008) and Pinker (2011), and Europe’s leaders were no exception (Troussard & van Bavel, 2018; van Bavel et al., 2013, 2015; Zuidhof, 2019).

Much of this thinking was transmitted in an important report commissioned (in 2012) by the Directorate General for Research and Innovation and based on analysis of ‘final reports, working papers and published articles from research projects funded by the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation under the sixth and seventh

framework programmes<sup>3</sup> (Federighi, 2013, p. 3). A Foreword by Robert-Jan Smits, Director-General for Research and Innovation at the Commission, explained the ‘link’ between his brief and ‘continuing adult education’. It was

because investment in continuing education increases the innovation capacity of companies. More generally, of course, continuing education helps workers keep their skills up-to-date and reduces the likelihood of labour market exclusion. It plays, therefore, a fundamental role to achieve the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy, as regards both growth and inclusion. (Federighi, 2013, p. 6)

That the Commission had ‘bought in’ to discourses of innovation as essential and beneficial hardly surprised us—they are more or less universal. Neither did its valuing of continuing adult education in terms of returns to productivity, efficiency and competitiveness: Commission common-sense had long framed even social exclusion as solved by employment and economic growth. What stood out rather more was a degree of bureaucratic vanity. ‘Policy makers’ needed to ‘understand which strategies will lead to more effective governance of adult and continuing education, to help them shape dynamic learning environments adapted to different sectors, education levels and enterprise size’. Governments (and consultancies) across the world worshipped at the mantra of ‘evidence-based policy making’; the European Commission was no exception. Yet, ironically, there was evidence in abundance. The Labour Force Survey, the Adult Education Survey, other work by Eurostat and outputs of friendly organisations (such as the OECD’s PIAAC—Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) meant the Commission was awash with information, much of it quantitative. Increasingly there was also ‘big data’: ‘large, diverse, and heterogeneous datasets, often by-products generated from business and Internet transactions, email, social media, health care facilities, and various sensors and instruments’ (Hofferth et al., 2017, p. 8).

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<sup>3</sup>The ‘sixth and seventh frameworks’ were the European Commission research programmes covering 2002–2006 and 2007–2013 respectively. ‘Horizon 2020’ (2014–2020) was, in effect, a rebranded eighth framework.

The problem was how to process the information to render it useable, an assistance in framing policy, rather than allowing it to swamp the corridors of power. This is no new difficulty: states' collection of new forms of information and development of scientific—not least statistical—techniques to manage and analyse it stretch back centuries, even millennia: the complex inter-relationships between governing citizens (or subjects), and the techniques for collecting, handling, and measuring data about them, have been extensively discussed by historians and sociologists of knowledge (e.g. Burke, 2012; Desrosières, 1998; Prévost & Beaud, 2016). Clearly, in the 'internet age', radical advances should be on the cards. If Amazon and Google know our shopping preferences before we do, surely governments could find ways to do likewise to the public good? As academic policy scientists argued:

Developments in information technology offer an unprecedented opportunity to collect diverse data at fine-grained spatial and temporal scales, and present a remarkable chance to change the way social science is conducted and to greatly expand the questions that can be addressed. ... This is an opportune time to rethink the primary ways in which data are collected, gathered, coded, curated, documented, archived, and disseminated .... [For instance,] spatially referenced administrative data, GPS-enabled cell phone data on the movements of individuals through their day, social media data, remotely sensed and observational data such as Google Street View, and survey data ... [might be linked] to administrative data or to other characteristics of communities in which individuals live [using] ... cutting edge approaches such as data trawling and web scraping [that] will produce detailed accounts of movement, social networks, and other forms of community building ... (Hofferth et al., 2017, pp. 8–13).

If such data could be mastered, the scope for 'behavioural insights' seemed well-nigh infinite. Behavioural economics provided, or appeared to provide, a theoretical underpinning for this renewed outbreak of bureaucratic self-regard. Rather than policy-makers assuming that 'people act 'rationally', making choices that lead to the best possible outcome for them', in behavioural science literature 'deviations from rationality in decision-making are well documented'. What was required was 'specific empirical observations' of behaviour in particular situations: 'proper

understanding of human behaviour requires reality checks'. This would ensure that 'policy-makers rely on evidence, not assumptions' (van Bavel et al., 2013, p. 8).

With this background, Federighi's report for the EU's Research and Innovation Directorate General was predictably bullish. 'Policy-making processes do not make use of all the resources available', he asserted, but their 'building intelligent decision-support systems devices' would simplify 'access to information through ... the policy-making process in its various phases'. (Federighi, 2013, p. 79)

Research carried out on a worldwide level has generated sufficient knowledge and know-how to foster policies of adult and continuing education which deliver the desired results. New devices, refined by research in the field of artificial intelligence, can give policy-makers easier access to available scientific knowledge and the possibility of foreseeing the impact of the policy measures that have been adopted.

Research should produce an *intelligent decision-support system* that facilitates the impact analysis ex-ante of the policy measures for adult and continuing education by gathering and analysing evidence, identifying and diagnosing problems, proposing possible courses of action and evaluating the proposed actions. (Federighi, 2013, p. 89; bold and italics in original)

Such was the background to the call to develop an Intelligent Decision Support System: a system which, in the policy imagination, would permit 'policy making modelling ... simplifying the access to information and support policy making in the different phases of the policy cycle'. (European Commission, 2014, p. 26)

## Rethinking the Problem

We responded to the 'call'—first of all—by reframing the problem. It was very true that adult education in Europe was 'inadequate'. Under the label 'lifelong learning', it has been a key element of EU policy for 25 years—initially adopted as a response to the employment problem. The EU's mechanisms for multinational policy co-ordination and

measurement were in many respects world-leading. Yet when we designed the research in 2014, one in every four Europeans under 25 was unemployed—in some countries, it was one in two. Many were not in employment, or education, or training. An important report of 2012 had found one in five 15-year-olds across the EU lacking the literacy skills to function successfully in a modern society and 73 million adults with low levels of education and literacy: ‘if Europe achieved its current benchmark of functional literacy for 85% of 15-year-olds, this could lead to an aggregate GDP gain of EUR 21 trillion over the lifetime of the generation born in 2010’ (High Level Group on Literacy, 2012, p. 26). Clearly, Europe’s ‘educational markets’ (to adopt the term favoured by the Commission) were failing to ensure its citizens—particularly its younger citizens, though not them alone—had the education and training they required for their own prosperity and welfare. That had implications for society as a whole. Social exclusion, disaffection and long-term ‘scarring’ presented risks for economic competitiveness, social cohesion and the ‘European project’.

But reframing the problem and stressing its gravity were only the starting-point for more thorough-going Enliven reconceptualisation. Of course, research needed to review lifelong learning policies and programmes across the EU. It must examine the nature of adult participation in learning, particularly among ‘disadvantaged’ groups in society. It must look at how learning is organised in workplaces, and how this contributes to efficiency and ‘competitiveness’. Analysis must be based on evidence. But the research also had a distinctive theoretical framing. The Enliven researchers come from two main backgrounds. Most are social scientists, but of a particular kind: adult educators, informed by a common body of theory. (The Enliven team, because we were asked to develop an IDSS, also included computer scientists.) Of course, no group of scholars is theoretically homogeneous, but ‘Enliveners’ could relate to and exchange views not only by reference to the common resources of sociology, political and economic science—theories in the traditions of Weber, Marx and so forth. They also shared familiarity with major traditions in adult education theory. The ideas of Dewey, Freire, Gelpi, Jarvis, Lindemann or Tawney differ in many ways, but all have a vision of

learners as active, powerful, engaged and ethically important subjects in learning processes and the social construction of knowledge.

Such premises prejudiced us to look at people not as the objects of policy but as subjects; not as subjects of the state but as intelligent, thinking citizens; not as consumers of learning products but as creative designers of learning processes; not as atomised, eternally excluded individuals but as self-governing and inventive adults entitled to contribute in educated democracies. This has, of course, a utopian dimension, but adult education has always been bound up with collective movements for human self-improvement. Self-improvement is very often against the odds: we are far from believing that people shape their own destinies untrammelled by their environment. To take a very specific case, Europe's Youth Guarantee both empowers and constrains its beneficiaries (Dingeldey et al., 2019; Milana et al., 2020). Social theorists have long argued, and social research has shown, that structures and institutions shape our lives; they shape how we think of ourselves, what we hope for and what we think realistic and expect. Of particular importance, structures and institutions reflect, reproduce, organise and transmit the social distribution of power.

## Bounded Agency

We were therefore attracted by attempts to use the notion of 'bounded agency' in the analysis of lifelong learning. Without engaging in a 'genealogy' of the idea, two important contributions stood out. Both developed the concept, deploying it with powerful explanatory effect. Evans' (2007) focus is on the lived experience of young people. She and her collaborators used the bounded agency concept to explore 'how young adults experience control and exercise personal agency' in the 'extended and multiple transitions' they experience in youth and early adulthood (p. 88). She wants to emphasise young people as 'having a past and imagined future possibilities, which guide and shape actions in the present, together with subjective perceptions of the structures they have to negotiate, the social landscapes that affect how they act' (pp. 92–93). Evans'

focus is on how individual young people navigate the complex and changing environments within which their lives are led.

Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) employ bounded agency a little differently. Their concern is why, in some 'welfare state regimes'—a notion they take from Esping-Andersen (1989, 1990)—participation in adult education is much higher than in others. In their view, 'although individuals have a degree of agency with regard to their learning behaviours, they are also bounded by structures and contexts and by features of the self that constrain choices' (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009, p. 192). Public policy, they suggest (which is represented for them by different types of welfare state regimes) not only 'directly affect[s] the contextual (structural) conditions that individuals face (on the job, in civil society, at home)' but also shapes, indirectly, 'individuals' subjective rationality and view (disposition) of their opportunity structure'. Drawing on Sen (2000), they see these subjective or 'dispositional barriers' as important constraints on 'a person's capability and hence freedom to participate' in adult education.

This perspective places policy at a premium. People's agency operates within particular institutional frameworks. The origins of these institutions are complex, but in some sense they can be regarded as the outcome of public policy—conscious and accidental, historic and current. Just as important, these institutions also play a part in shaping our subjectivity—our agency. This 'interplay between structure and individual' generates a 'conditioning of values and subjective rationality' (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009, p. 196). Such 'bounded agency' suggests, for our purposes, that the structure of social and educational institutions not only provides incentives or barriers to adults who do wish to participate in education but also affects whether and how they wish—develop a desire—to do so. Here the capability approach plays in. The decision to participate is a function not only of the adult education available (and related factors such as how difficult it is to take part) but also of the subjective processes by which a person formulates the desire and takes action—makes the decision.

Individuals' capabilities can play a part in 'defining structural conditions', notably 'situational ones such as job and family' but also institutional ones through forms of collective action (Rubenson & Desjardins,

2009, p. 196). This 'structure-agency interaction' means that public policy can influence adults' take-up of learning. For our purposes, it is important that adult education itself 'can be instrumental in fostering capabilities' (p. 196): adults who take part in education develop broader capabilities, including those which encourage and enable them to learn and study more. But more broadly, they argue that the 'Nordic welfare state' has a number of features that encourage adult participation in education. In short, these are: first, close integration of adult education and active labour market policies, based on 'the full employment concept'; second, highly developed corporatist industrial relations structures, allowing strong trade union voice and influence; third, civil society encompassing a strong 'publicly supported sector of adult popular education in the form of folk high schools and adult education associations'; and fourth, an 'emphasis on equity' that has 'a deep impact' on funding regimes (p. 198).

The 'major difference between Nordic and non-Nordic countries', according to Rubenson and Desjardins (2009), is 'not the existence of barriers to participation but the conditions that allow a person to overcome these'. They question how useful it is to try 'to understand barriers by focusing solely on how individuals interpret the world'; instead, we should analyse the interaction between structural factors and individual dispositions. A welfare state regime 'can affect a person's capability to participate through the way it constructs structural conditions and helps individuals overcome both structurally and individually based barriers' (p. 203). In short, the structure of a 'welfare state regime' is vital in generating (or not generating) capability; and in certain circumstances—such as the Nordic example—adult education itself seems to play a part in this.

The bounded agency concept throws explanatory light on a widespread finding of recent comparative research in lifelong learning: the persistence, pervasiveness and diversity of institutional and social structures across the nations of Europe, and their significance in structuring differences within and between social groups in participation in learning and motivation to learn (Blossfeld et al., 2014; Boeren et al., 2012; Saar et al., 2013). While others (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2011; Desjardins, 2017; Hall & Soskice, 2001) have used the language of 'political economy', in

Enliven, we have generally referred to ‘welfare state regimes’. Perhaps, we have tacitly associated welfare states with popular and social movement activity and with the historical legacy of adult education as associated with democratic social movements. The difference in language, however, is more normative than analytical: Nordic welfare states may have the features Rubenson and Desjardins enumerate, but several European ‘welfare state regimes’ in our typology do not—indeed, in some welfare can seem very much at a discount.

The Nordic example also shines light on why the concept of bounded agency is useful. From a ‘behavioural’ viewpoint, Nordic welfare states appear as relatively fixed structures; they are contexts which shape people’s decisions. In general, statistical models such as those advocated by behavioural economists and psychologists will be based on how people have behaved within the institutional frameworks they set. Yet these frameworks—labour markets, trade unions, industrial relations systems, adult education institutions and so forth—are not simply ‘given’. They are the outcomes of ‘agency’ by people and by the organisations and movements people create. Nordic welfare states reflect the social and political histories of Scandinavian countries; the welfare state regimes or political economies of other countries similarly reflect the historical interaction of various social forces. For our purposes, this illustrates that while institutions must for some purposes be taken as ‘given’ or ‘fixed’, they are themselves the product of agency—the activity, over generations, of people and their organisations.

This is not, of course, in itself a very original insight. ‘Men make their own history’, Marx famously wrote, ‘... but under circumstances ... given and transmitted from the past’ (1969/1852, p. 398). ‘Contingency theory’ in the sociology of organisations and management stems from the insight that structures influence, even determine, the behaviour of organisations and the people who work in them (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Child, 1972; Woodward, 1958). For neoliberal economics, markets bring efficiency, but almost more importantly, they shape morality (Bowles, 1998; Hayek, 1944; Rodrigues, 2013). Nevertheless, bounded agency is an important corrective to over-enthusiastic adoption of behavioural approaches (particularly in economics and psychology) for modelling and accurately predicting human behaviour—particularly when

combined with increasingly sophisticated computer-based technologies. ‘Real world’ events periodically provide cautionary tales of the limitations of behaviourally based models, however technologically sophisticated; the 2007 financial crash is a case in point (Mackenzie, 2011; MacKenzie & Spears, 2014)—as, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has proved.

## Making and Analysing Policy

Public policy has been a central concern of the Enliven research, as of its funders. Politicians and civil servants, of course, regard themselves—too often, themselves alone—as ‘policy-makers’. Enliven researchers had to work with, and deliver results to, civil servants for whom this self-image was sheer common sense. They looked to us for findings, insights and technologies so they could make better decisions. For us common sense cannot be taken for granted. Assumptions about how policy is formulated and implemented, and who plays a part, have now been explored, empirically and theoretically, over several decades (cf Ham & Hill, 1984; Lipsky, 1980; Sabatier, 1986). Our own normative theoretical roots told us we should think of citizens as active subjects in policy processes, not as mere objects of policy made by those appointed to govern them. Of course, some voices and interests have more traction than others in policy processes, and over the years, scholars have developed a range of concepts and models to explore this: policy communities, policy networks, policy cycles and so forth. A principal concern has been to map the myriad ‘policy actors’, the parts they play and their relative significance. For us, this was made more complex by the multinational and multi-level nature of governance in the European Union.

We approached this challenge from two directions. From one, we developed and tested an Intelligent Decision Support System (IDSS). From the other, we sought to investigate policy processes analytically, working with the concept of ‘policy trails’. These were very different approaches, and there was a continual—though generally productive—tension between them. The first involved a close collaboration between social scientists and computer scientists; the second was very much a matter of social scientific inquiry.

As we have seen above, we were asked to develop an IDSS ‘for simplifying the access to information and support policy making in the different phases of the policy cycle’ (European Commission, 2014, p. 26). Developing an IDSS is a matter of engineering design; in order to begin, our computer scientists needed answers to apparently straightforward questions. Who would use the IDSS? What policy problem did they want to address? What policy interventions had worked? It soon became clear that we required a clear and bounded area on which to focus: ‘lifelong learning’ was both too large and too vague. Discussion—much favoured among critical social scientists—about the complexities of what ‘policy’ comprises, who is involved in making it, how they interact, who defines what ‘works’ or ‘succeeds’ and so forth, muddied the waters. In effect, much social scientific research on policy was beside the point so far as IDSS design was concerned—though it took time to grasp this reality.

Our computer scientists needed to know who the ‘end-users’ of the IDSS would be; the answer, of course, was ‘policy-makers’; if this begged the question, it was also a basis for practical progress. For largely pragmatic reasons, we found a boundary for our IDSS by focussing on young people not in employment, education or training: that section of humanity to whom the label ‘NEET’ is now commonly attached. The team adopted this focus after some discussion but without great controversy. It seemed a relatively bounded issue. Being NEET had become a clear problem and policy priority, across Europe; researchers had worked on it; there had been many interventions of various kinds to address the problem. We anticipated that many of the interventions—having been funded by the EU—would have been subject to formal evaluations. Altogether, it was a matter of key public concern, and the sources of data about interventions seemed likely to be rich. In the event, while the former presumption proved valid, the latter was more problematical. While there had been many interventions and a good number of evaluations, we were to discover that the consistency and quality of the latter are very variable: of that, more in later chapters.

Nevertheless, we pressed forward to develop the IDSS. Consultations with a range of potential ‘end users’ helped our computer scientists identify the essential features needed and design the user interface. However, the poor documentation of cases—often spread inconsistently through

several databases and sparse even when in a single document—and the enormous variation in how interventions were described, made large-scale comparison virtually impossible. The team tried to overcome these problems by generating a common repository (after considerable labour, this contained 222 items) and a similarity measure to index and retrieve relevant policy and evaluation documents. Their strategy drew theoretically on Schardt et al. (2007)'s use of the PICO (Patient problem, Intervention, Comparison and Outcome) framework to perform meta-analyses of clinical evaluations. The IDSS incorporated a matching algorithm based on the similarity measure so that 'most similar' interventions could be retrieved from the knowledge base; it also used natural language processing techniques to semi-automate the task of maintaining the knowledge base.<sup>4</sup>

## Policy Trails

Policy trails, first developed for an earlier European research project on lifelong learning, seemed to us to provide a theoretical basis for fruitful empirical investigation of policy, particularly in the European setting. With contemporary society being highly 'globalised' and interconnected, the power of nation states has reduced in many, though by no means, all ways (Dickinson, 2016); policies often emerge through complex processes in 'transnational and globalized work spaces' (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 22), before being filtered through national contexts. Late twentieth and early twenty-first century globalisation has been closely associated with neo-liberal perspectives on economy and business, and with the organisation of public services through forms of 'new public management'. Public policies today are therefore often intimately bound up with the activities of private enterprises, which both 'deliver' many services and have an interest in shaping how this is done. The boundary between

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<sup>4</sup> Hosting and maintaining software such as an IDSS requires ongoing expenditure; as funding was available only for the lifetime of the project, and the Enliven IDSS having been delivered (and demonstrated) to representatives of the European Commission, it is no longer publicly accessible. For a summary of this work see Enliven Policy Brief 10; fuller explanation is provided in three reports (D 8.1, D 8.2 and D 9.1). Detailed references and links are given in Appendix 4.

private and public sector is therefore blurred and constantly in flux. As Wiesel and Model (2014, p. 201) argue, ‘longitudinal analyses of the manoeuvring of multiple actors in and around individual organizations’ is needed as a way of examining the ‘alignment of interests’ and ‘to fully grasp the complex interplay through which potential conflicts are muted or amplified’.

European multi-level governance blurs other boundaries: public policy is formulated and carried through in an interplay of EU, national and local governments. EU agencies (the Commission, executive agencies, parliament, courts and so forth) must work with the governments of countries varying in size from Germany (83 million) to Malta (440,000). All have constitutions, laws and structures of internal government—often complex in themselves. North Rhine-Westphalia, for instance, the most populous of Germany’s 16 states (Länder), is larger than 21 EU members—including Belgium and the Netherlands, which it borders. Bremen, Germany’s smallest state, is half as big again as Malta. ‘Policy’ is key to organising—governing—Europe; yet how policy is made, what policy consists of, who does what with a policy, and who and what are affected, remain complex and in some respects open questions.

The challenge was to find an approach which, in relation to EU policy and its role, provides a framework for providing ‘penetrating’ understanding of ‘messiness and complexity’, while delivering the simplicity and neatness which allow analysis to be applied in (and lessons to be generalised from) a range of differing contexts. A pointer was the concept of ‘governance’ (Holford & Van der Veen, 2006, pp. 27–29), which ‘gained ground in order to capture the changing relationship between actors in the policy process’ (Cort, 2014, p. 128). This highlights policy processes, increasingly transcending national boundaries, and the growing national and supra-national influence in education and lifelong learning of non-governmental actors (individuals and organisations) and private sector interests. The idea that policy can be ‘trailed’—or mapped and followed across a landscape—recognises ‘the complex nature and consequences for both political structures and agency of the prominent multi-scalar model of lifelong learning governance within the EU’ (Melo et al., 2015, p. 11). Policy trails acknowledge that policy is shaped, negotiated and contested, in formulation and in application, and that those

engaged in this shaping include not only ‘the state’ (itself far from simply unitary) but also individual, organisational and collective actors from teachers to trade unions, and from bureaucrats to businesses. From the perspective of lifelong learning in Europe, they allow for the importance of actors at different levels and from different sectors.

The idea of a policy trail incorporates a spatial metaphor: policy moves across terrain, a range of social, political and economic environments. The methodology of studying a policy trail entails adopting a position of seeking to map ‘the terrain the policy travels through rather than the policy itself, analysing how the policy is shaped through its journey’ (Holford & McKenzie, 2013, p. 1). Thus we know that policy in lifelong learning is strongly influenced by fields such as business and economic policies (hence the prominence of ‘competitiveness’) and social policy (hence social cohesion, social inclusion and the like). In each of these, a range of actors share (but also struggle over and through) language, ideas, modes of working, common sense. Further, a policy is enacted not only in a ‘policy’ field—by ‘policy makers’—but also in fields of practice. So ‘non-policy actors’ play a part in shaping policies, and particularly how they are carried into effect.

In practice, mapping policy trails involved developing contextualised policy case studies, covering the adoption, or non-adoption, of policy options, contributions by different actors in varying ways to shaping policies, and so forth. Trails can be mapped using various methods, including analysis of documents and interviews with actors (or those excluded *de facto* or *de jure* from being actors). They open, as it were, the messiness of policy to social scientific analysis, investigating the effects of policy when it connects locations and people at different levels. In the context of their work with enterprises, Melo et al. (2015, p. 13) found the policy trail approach valuable not only for gaining ‘insights on the enterprise governance environment from a broader perspective than that of the enterprise itself but also for pinpointing the moments when the enterprise plays an influential role as a governance actor in its public sphere’. Policy trailing is also particularly useful for investigating the interaction between policy agendas and how they actually play out ‘on the ground’.

In Enliven, the ‘point of entry’ to the trail was education and training programmes: we sought to uncover the flow of policy relating to the

organisations and to identify those aspects of public lifelong learning policy with which the organisation interacted. To achieve this, we interviewed informants in each country involved in forming and enacting policy related to two programmes: one funded under the EU's Youth Guarantee initiative (supporting disadvantaged young people into employment), the other funded under the EU's Upskilling Pathways programme (helping disadvantaged young people overcome barriers as part of the transition into education, employment or training). We treated these as focusing on 'employment' and 'empowerment', respectively, though accepting that these labels were rough-and-ready. Our interest was in young people (under 30) who do not continue into academic or general upper secondary or tertiary education: low qualification levels reduce opportunities to access secure employment but may also result from disadvantage.

We examined how policy in the relevant area (employment, empowerment) flows through to specific providers active in these areas, how this affects the programmes designed, how educators and support staff working on the programmes experience their involvement, and the opinions and experiences of the learners themselves. We combined insights from interviews, documents and contextual data and tried to be alive to interactions and mutual influences among different 'actors' in each policy trail. Informants included policy makers, regulators, funders at the policy level, managers of education and training programmes, facilitators, teachers and trainers working on the programmes, and the adult learners themselves.

The policy trails provided evidence for several aspects of our inquiry: for example, we used them to study the experiences of disadvantaged learners and how funding schemes work. Thus they showed—in relation to particular groups of young people, and programme and provider settings—the dispositional, situational (including financial) and institutional barriers adult learners had to overcome, the problems they encountered, and their successes; this helped us to understand the processes of active interpretation involved when policy is linked to practice.

## The Book

The results of a project as large and rich as Enliven cannot be confined to a single book, even quite a long one. Members of the research team have already written about many of our findings and used them to develop new ideas and theories.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, in this book, we attempt to give some overall sense of the purpose, shape, methods, findings and implications of the research.

Our book is divided into four parts. Part I introduces the work. It comprises the present chapter and one other. In Chap. 2, *Bounded Agency in Policy and Action: Empowerment, Agency and Belonging*, Sharon Clancy and I explore theories of bounded agency and what we think they offer the study of lifelong learning for young adults. We do this partly by theoretical discussion (enriched by the recent work of two Enliven colleagues (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2021)) but also through a qualitative case study of a personalised youth employability project which places the young people's personal experience centrally as 'experts' in their own lives. Theoretically, we discuss the relationships between such concepts as agency, empowerment and belonging. The case study illustrates how important belonging can be to adult learning, particularly among the most socially and politically excluded young adults, for whom social isolation and mental ill-health can compound pre-existing social and structural barriers.

Part II, comprising seven chapters, digs deeper into the nature and effect of lifelong learning policies, how they are made, and how this shapes what they contain and how they are implemented. Focussing especially on young adults, it addresses questions such as how the EU's lifelong learning policies have conceptualised 'vulnerability' and 'exclusion' over the last quarter century, how policies and financial systems are used to co-ordinate European adult education, and who participates in adult learning (and why they do or do not). It discusses limitations in the data currently available (and used) for policy-making in adult education,

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<sup>5</sup>The 'official' outputs from the project can be found at [www.h2020enliven.org](http://www.h2020enliven.org). Publications by members of the Enliven team are too numerous to be listed here but include Milana, Klatt & Vatrella (2020).

and what can be learned from an attempt to strengthen policy-making using Artificial Intelligence.

Chapter 3, *Vulnerability in European Lifelong Learning Policies 1992–2018: Seeing Young People as a Problem to be Fixed?*, takes a dynamic view of the nature of vulnerability. Through critical discourse analysis drawing on a corpus of 68 European lifelong learning documents over 25 years, Concepción Maiztegui-Oñate, Triin Roosalu, Alvaro Moro-Incaurtieta and Marti Taru explore the conceptual foundations and rationale of lifelong learning policies that treat young people as a vulnerable group and show how lifelong learning has tried to address the challenges of vulnerability among young people. The chapter shows how young people, especially in vulnerable situations, have been constructed primarily as a category that is, or should be, economically active—needing lifelong learning to equip them with the right skills for the labour market. This approach has overshadowed other visions—of citizenship and social participation—implicit in lifelong learning. The chapter also shows that human capital perspectives dominate European lifelong learning policies, underpinning a narrow view that misunderstands the causes of vulnerability and generates incomplete policy objectives for socially excluded youth.

In Chap. 4, *Participation in Adult Learning: System Characteristics and Individuals' Experiences*, Ellen Boeren, Sofie Cabus and Alan Mackie build on the body of research that compares the macro- and micro-level factors underlying participation and inequality in adult education and training. Several 'system characteristics'—the organisation of education and labour markets, modes of production within firms, the quality of child care, the level of economic development, the cost of courses—play a key role. In particular, they restrict young adults with low levels of education from access to lifelong learning. This chapter focuses on what advantages an inclusive policy on lifelong learning has for society as a whole. However, although structural barriers mean that the opportunity (or desire) to take part in lifelong learning is not equally spread, small percentages of low-educated adults do so; from them we can learn how barriers to access can be lowered. The chapter therefore analyses initiatives under the EU's Youth Guarantee and Upskilling Pathway programmes in nine countries. The countries represent different welfare

regimes and take significantly different approaches to adult education: their levels of provision vary, as do their active labour market policies and other system characteristics. Learners' experiences, however, and staff experiences, are broadly similar across programmes and countries. Participants' motivation and confidence levels are key to success; young adults with low levels of education need *individual* support.

Chapter 5, *Participation of Vulnerable Young Labour Market Groups in Job-Related Training: The Effect of Macro-Structural and Institutional Characteristics*, by Ellu Saar, Eve-Liis Roosmaa and Liisa Martma, focuses on why two groups of disadvantaged young adults (the low-educated and those working in low- or medium-skilled occupations) participate—or do not—in job-related, non-formal education and training. Their analysis suggests that, across occupational groups, job content is the core mechanism that keeps young adults away from training. They also find that institutional context is important: when unemployment rates are high, inequality in participation between occupational groups increases. The chapter shows that during the post-2008 recession, investment in active labour market policies and similar measures reduced the 'training gap' between high-skilled occupations on the one hand, and low- and medium-skilled occupations on the other. When labour market conditions are more favourable, strong employment protection legislation appears to reduce inequalities in job-related, non-formal education; during the economic crisis, however, it seems to have increased them.

In Chap. 6, *Gender Gaps in Participation in Adult Education in Europe: Examining Factors and Barriers*, Rumiana Stoilova, Ellen Boeren and Petya Ilieva-Trichkova investigate the barriers which prevent men and women from participating equally in adult education. More specifically, they ask what factors and barriers play out differently—in relation to lifelong learning—between (a) men and women, and (b) women from different class and ethnic backgrounds. Building on previous research and using data from the European Social Survey and the Adult Education Survey, they confirm that social origin presents a significant structural barrier, affecting how likely men and women are to participate in adult education. They also draw attention to the role of intersectionality: of multiple simultaneous disadvantages including gender (for women), social origin (for those whose parents have only basic or lower levels of

education), and having an ethnic minority or migrant background. There are also differences between the probability of men and women receiving financial support to participate from their employers—this tends to be lower for women. However, women are more likely to receive financial support from public institutions. The negative effects of ethnic minority status are stronger for women than men. They also conclude that Mediterranean and post-socialist welfare regimes are less able to reduce the effects of intersectionality than social-democratic regimes.

Chapter 7, *Adult Education as a Pathway to Empowerment: Challenges and Possibilities*, outlines a theoretical framework for conceptualising the role of adult education in individual empowerment from a capability approach perspective and provides empirical evidence on how adult education can contribute to individuals' empowerment. Pepka Boyadjieva and Petya Ilieva-Trichkova argue that adult education should be regarded as both a sphere of and a factor for empowerment. They see empowerment through adult education as embedded in the institutional structures and socio-cultural contexts available and as having both intrinsic and instrumental value. They also argue that the process of empowerment through adult education is not linear or unproblematic, so that only in some cases do the benefits of adult education lead to empowered agency. Adult education's empowerment role is revealed in expanded agency; this enables individuals and social groups to gain power over their environment as they strive towards individual and societal well-being. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, the chapter shows that participation in non-formal adult education can be a means of empowering individuals through increasing their self-confidence and their capacity to find employment and control their daily lives.

The media actively contribute to the production of knowledge, and the knowledge produced and circulated in the media contributes to governing adult education and learning. This is the focus of Chap. 8, *Governing Adult Learning through Influencing Public Debate: How the Media use PIAAC Data in Denmark, Italy and the United Kingdom*. The authors, Marcella Milana, Sandra Vatrella, Gosia Klatt, Palle Rasmussen and Anne Larson, examine how visible the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) is in widely read newspapers in Denmark, Italy and the United Kingdom, and how

those papers use PIAAC data. Their findings are based on analysis of 83 articles, editorials and opinion pieces, following a common protocol. They show that the information about PIAAC conveyed in the newspapers tends to confirm general standards for adult learning. Data generated through PIAAC, and its 'implicit' benchmarking of Level 3 in adults' performances, support European standard setting in adult learning; and when national governments ask international organisations to do 'objective' evaluations, the latter enhance their power. The media contribute to knowledge production, and this is one way they may exert influence. How PIAAC data are used by different newspapers varies not only between countries but also according to the role each newspaper plays within national debates.

In Chap. 9, *Policy, Practice and Praxis: Computer-Aided Decision Support to Enable Policy Making in Lifelong Learning*, Sharon Clancy and Claire Palmer explore some of the issues that arise in applying Artificial Intelligence to policy-making in lifelong learning. As we have seen, the Enliven project was asked to develop a prototype Intelligent Decision Support System (IDSS) to this end. This focused on young people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEETs). To support new developments (particularly those aiming to benefit groups disadvantaged in terms of gender, ethnicity, culture and other factors), the IDSS provides a repository of information about existing projects. This means that new initiatives can be based on knowledge of what measures been used and which have worked, and that they can be evaluated against suitable criteria. The chapter reflects on issues involved in the collaborative, cross-disciplinary and inter-sectoral work required, describes how the Enliven IDSS developed, and provides insights into what was learned in the development process. It also discusses the limited nature of the information available and the ways in which computer-based responses to complex social problems are constrained.

Part III is devoted to the pivotal role of workplace learning in organisational life and in learning during what has been called 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2014). In this period of life (roughly from late teens to early thirties), young people need access to gainful work not only for income but for learning and development. Some workplaces provide rich opportunities to learn; others restrict it. Organisations shape workplace

learning potential, and how they allocate work signals how their agency is used to develop learning potential. The chapters also explore the interaction of individual and organisational bounded agency in workplace learning, and the role of early career workers' agency in youth-led social movement organisations.

In Chap. 10, *The Interplay of Organisational and Individual Bounded Agency in Workplace Learning: A Framework Approach*, Günter Heffler and Ivana Studená set out the framework that Enliven researchers used to investigate the interplay of 'organisational' and individual agency in workplace learning. The framework guided the research on 17 organisational case studies across three economic sectors and nine countries, and it underpins all the chapters in Part III. Agency lies at its centre, enabling us to understand why individuals take up learning opportunities in different dimensions of their lives over the life course. The concept is, of course, often deployed in the study of individuals' behaviour, but Heffler and Studená argue for treating agency as relational: actors' choices are bound—enabled and restricted—by their environments. They also explain how the framework goes beyond individual agency, treating the organisation as a specific type of actor with its own agency: whether workplace learning actually occurs is the outcome of interaction between individual and 'organisational' agency. Some of those who find that their workplace offers limited opportunities will no doubt seek a more learning-conducive job; others will look to learn outside work—policies should promote meaningful learning across society. But poor workplace organisation is a key barrier to making lifelong learning a reality for all.

Chapter 11, *Working and Learning in the Retail Sector: A Cross-Country Comparative View*, by Ulrik Brandi, Jolien De Norre, Triin Roosalu, Maaris Raudsepp and Alesia Khadatovich, compares workplace learning opportunities in the retail sector in Belgium, Denmark and Estonia, analysing conditions for workplace learning as experienced by early career workers. Across Europe, the retail sector provides early career workers with a first entry into gainful employment, yet also employs a large proportion of young adults on a part-time and/or temporary basis. Using in-depth case studies, the chapter shows that workplace design can limit early career workers' opportunities for day-to-day workplace learning. However, there are important variations within and across the cases

studied. Early career workers respond in different ways when retail organisations limit their meaningful learning and career development. Their responses are shaped by their evolving life structures and organisational settings. They may find working in retail ‘right’ for the time being even though, overall, it creates only restrictive workplace learning opportunities. Given the size and dominant role of the retail sector, employers enjoy considerable leeway and can often deviate from the labour standards generally expected in a given country—an important consideration when we seek to understand the role of organisational agency.

Chapter 12 examines *Organisational and Individual Agency in Workplace Learning in the European Metal Sector*. Vassil Kirov, Ana Isabel Estevez-Gutierrez, Iciar Elexpuru-Albizuri, Fernando Díez, Lourdes Villardón-Gallego and Maite Aurrekoetxea-Casau compare the evolution of day-to-day, informal, workplace learning and work-based training arrangements in Bulgaria and Spain’s Basque region. Although Bulgaria and Spain are respectively located in the post-communist and Mediterranean welfare groups, the Basque region’s advanced, industrialised economic model, requiring efficient skills provision, makes it rather different from other Spanish regions. In the Basque country, institutions successfully link vocational education with labour market needs, but Bulgaria’s state educational system is poor at delivering skills. The co-operative sector is important in the Basque region, and the chapter studies two co-operatives in depth. Having developed in a global value chain, Bulgarian companies (both domestic and subsidiaries of multinationals) have recently introduced some in-house training to cope with a deficit of qualified labour. Using qualitative methods and working on under-researched countries, the authors go beyond what relatively static macro-data show about lifelong learning in the sector, revealing how organisational and individual agency provide space for informal workplace learning and what outcomes this has for early career workers.

The adult learning sector is particularly diverse, and evidence on how employees in adult learning organisations access workplace learning is very limited. In Chap. 13, *Work and Learning in the Adult Education Sector: A Cross Country Comparative View*, Sharon Clancy, Günter Hefler, Francesca Rapanà, Eva Steinheimer and Ivana Studená, therefore fill an

important gap. The chapter focuses on learning by early career teaching staff, using evidence from eight case studies across four countries (Austria, Italy, Slovakia and the UK) and covering different sub-fields of adult education—from organisations providing basic skills training to those specialising in management courses in the corporate sector. The research reveals that despite employees' high levels of skill, conditions for young or early career teaching staff vary significantly across and within sub-fields. In general, adult learning teachers' jobs have a strong emphasis on self-directed learning and professionalism. Novice teachers' career pathways are characterised by poorly structured career opportunities. However, how conducive the work available is to learning varies significantly. This cannot be attributed to the type of services provided alone: it reflects organisational agency. How work and HR practices are organised makes a real difference to teachers' learning experiences in adult education, not only early in their careers but beyond.

Despite the undeniable legacy of labour movements for adult learning worldwide, the interplay of industrial relations with lifelong learning remains outside mainstream lifelong learning research. Learning from activism is, moreover, usually informal and therefore rarely recognised. In Chap. 14, Maite Aurrekoetxea-Casaus, Edurne Bartolomé Peral, Günter Hefler, Ivana Studená and Janine Wulz focus on activism, not only as an important component of the industrial relations system but also as a major learning source for individuals, organisations and society. Young workers who feel they lack support from existing employee interest organisations may try to create their own. Based on case vignettes of social movement organisations in three different countries with highly diverse industrial relations systems (Austria, Spain's Basque Region and Slovakia), the chapter presents a framework for analysing and comparing the position of novel social movement organisations within countries' specific industrial relation systems. Each social movement organisation was founded because of particular challenges that the national system did not adequately address. Learning from activism enables young people employed in workplaces unfavourable to learning—or unemployed—to compensate for what a better workplace might have offered. Youth-led social movement organisations are thus laboratories producing important

knowledge and practical skills; they challenge established organisations, including trade unions; and they renew and enliven industrial relations structures for representing interests and developing strategy.

Workplace learning is the dominant source of learning for adults, but opportunities are closely linked to the type of job an individual has. In addition, while some people make good use of the opportunities at hand, others do not. Learning opportunities do not, therefore, translate automatically into learning: individuals also need to apply themselves, to take advantage of them. In Chap. 15, Günter Heffler, Denisa Fedáková, Eva Steinheimer, Ivana Studená and Janine Wulz present a novel approach to investigating the role of individual agency in workplace learning. They study the individual agency of early career employees in three sectors (Retail, Metals and Adult Education) across nine countries. They develop accounts of 71 workers' learning, constructing between three and eight individual learning biographies across 17 organisations. Their approach means they can investigate workplace learning as embedded both in the organisational context of the job and in an individual's wider life structure. The chapter shows that when an individual's agency in workplace learning is considered in isolation from its context, agency in workplace learning cannot be properly explained. Other areas of life add to and/or limit individuals' learning opportunities and agency in learning: gainful work is an integral part of an individual's life structure, and always interacts with what happens in other parts of life.

Part IV comprises a single, concluding, chapter. In it, Chap. 16, Pepka Boyadjieva, Sharon Clancy, Günter Heffler, Ivana Studená and I—the five editors of the book—reflect on *Adult Education, Learning Citizens, and the Lessons of Enliven*. We begin by emphasising the importance of a rich adult education and how this resonates with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the body of international law developed in the wake of the Second World War. This envisaged adults as citizens, playing an active part in society and government, and saw this is one reason why adult education matters. We discuss how viewing adults as agentic citizens—while also objects of state policy—relates to the notion of bounded agency. We summarise important lessons of the Enliven project and discuss their implications. These include the need for a rich and broad education throughout the lives of adults and the limiting effect (especially for

the ‘socially excluded’) of framing the education for adults through the language of ‘markets’—we advocate listening to the voices of those most excluded. They also include the importance of work, workplaces and labour markets to adult learning, and how organisationally stunted workplaces impoverish their workers’ learning.

## The Message

A project as wide-ranging as Enliven can be reduced neither to a single nor to a simple message. At one level, our conclusion is that adult learning is complicated; as in other areas of social life, many of its problems are intractable; easy solutions seldom work. More profoundly, yet also oversimply, we argue the profound value of adult learning to civil society and democracy, to community and organisational life, to fulfilled and healthy lives. Our findings reflect central traditions of adult education and—for which we should be thankful—a succession of important policy statements from UNESCO (e.g. Delors et al., 1996; Faure et al., 1972; UNESCO, 1947). They will surprise no-one who has been an educator of adults.

Yet they contrast sharply with the approaches that have dominated over the past three decades. Policies from most international organisations have implied that adult learning can be stripped of its richness and complexity, and ‘targeted’ at key economic and social problems (OECD, 1996, 2019). Foremost among these problems have been training and retraining for an ever-changing world of work, particularly—and ironically, given that it is typically labelled ‘lifelong’ learning—for young adults seen to have ‘failed’ in school, to have been born into a deprived neighbourhood or social group, or grown to ‘working age’ during an economic ‘downturn’.

The Enliven perspective is informed by wider visions. Our advisory board often reminded us of the breadth and depth inherent in the idea of *Bildung*; one way of framing our message is to argue that European adult learning should reappropriate this and similar concepts. Many countries have their own traditions, which could inform and enrich what the EU does. Few Britons, for instance, know the meaning of *Bildung*, but the British Ministry of Reconstruction argued a century ago that adult education ‘is an inseparable aspect of citizenship, ... should be both universal

and lifelong’, and ‘spread uniformly and systematically over the whole community’ (1919, p. 5). Yet:

One of the oddities of international lifelong learning over the past couple of decades has been the European Union’s enthusiastic distancing of itself from what Europe has contributed – through education – to western civilisation. That this has coincided with the EU’s coming of age as an educational agent makes it all the odder. (Holford, 2017, p. 176)

We propose reimagining—reappropriating—adult learning as central to democratic society, rather than as servant of business competitiveness or a tool to address social exclusion. Adult education enables communication and knowledge development among citizens entitled equally to voice their views, to influence public policies and to enjoy full, rich and healthy lives. It is a vital way in which communities—local, national, European, global—can collectively think through and generate creative responses to the problems facing the human race today; it builds social capital, civil society, tolerance and community resilience. Europe’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic has shown the fragility of societies robbed of embedded educational institutions for adults. Yet at the same time, it has shown how adults, allowed the freedom—and given the resources—to do so, can invent new collective ways of learning and use them to shape their own worlds.

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# 2

## Bounded Agency in Policy and Action: Empowerment, Agency and Belonging

Sharon Clancy and John Holford

### Introduction

Since the inception of the European Employment Strategy (the Luxembourg Strategy) in 1997, if not earlier (Field, 2006), policies developed in Europe have re-configured adult education in favour of lifelong learning for the economy – responding to fears of unemployment, social exclusion, marginalisation of the unemployed and under-employed, and anxieties about an emerging two-tier society. A critical feature has been a blurring of boundaries between conventionally separate policy fields: youth education, adult education, the labour market. Adult education has been increasingly conceived as compensating for failures in the school system – evidenced by high drop-out rates, poor learning outcomes, lack of employment opportunities, and skills mismatches. A key element in justifying this has been a discourse of ‘learning to be productive’ (Biesta,

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2006, p. 171), reiterated continuously since the 90s by national, European, and international organisations.

Seeing lifelong learning as developing human capital lay at the heart of this. One participates in learning in order constantly to update one's skills for the changing global economy (OECD, 1996). The Luxembourg Strategy shifted the discourse of 'disadvantage' to the individual ... from the aim of employment to a new one of employability: the ability to become employed, rather than, necessarily, the state of employment itself. Thus, individualisation became linked with the concept of employability: a state of constant becoming, of readiness for employment. (Brine, 2006, p. 649)

This emphasis on employability marked a significant shift in discussion of vocational learning. The concept of employability now conferred the responsibility for *becoming employed* to the individual, rather than focusing on the *state of employment*. Constant readiness for the labour market was required: this was to be achieved through repeated training and retraining, and to develop the new economic identity – even when labour market conditions made finding employment virtually impossible. Employability became the 'private trouble of constant retraining' (Coffield, 2007, p. 8).

Broader definitions of adult learning were available: for example, UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning emphasises 'learning and education across the life-course' and the variety of ways – formal, non-formal, informal – in which learning can be acquired. It also stresses the need to focus on disadvantaged people: 'adults and young people who are marginalized and disadvantaged' (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2016, p. 28). Yet the policy mainstream has focused resolutely on skills and employability, taking a 'human capital' approach which

postulates that the bigger the investments in education, the greater the income people receive, and economic growth will follow suit. Within this theory, the main responsibility for (non) participation in any form of education as well as its benefits is placed on the individual. (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021, p. 47)

Such an approach avoids examining power dynamics and conceptions of knowledge, and their impact on inequality, and has the net effect of blaming the individual for failure to flourish within this system:

The theory of human capital, like the rest of neoclassical economics, ultimately locates the sources of human happiness and misery in an interaction of human nature (preferences and ‘abilities’) with nature itself (technologies and resources). This framework provides an elegant apology for almost any pattern of oppression or inequality ... for it ultimately attributes social or personal ills either to the shortcomings of individuals or the unavoidable technical requisites of production. (Bowles & Gintis, 1975, p. 82)

Within Enliven, we have argued that improving policy implementation has become the default response among European ‘policy makers’, enabling them to ignore deeper consideration of the aims of lifelong learning. It also avoids asking whether the structures we use to manage the crisis in educational markets are the right ones, and how far we have individualised the problem.

## From Bounded Agency to Empowerment and Belonging

Bounded agency can be seen as an application of the long sociological debate over structure and agency: individual, group or organisational agency is exercised within particular institutional and societal frameworks, and within national and international policy contexts. As a theoretical paradigm, it allows for multilevel approaches to understanding participation in education. As Evans expressed it, “agency is a socially situated process, shaped by the experiences of the past, the chances present in the current moment and the perceptions of possible futures” (Evans, 2002, p. 262). Bounded agency points to the complex interplay between personal, or individual, motivation and the social and territorial structures in which individual adults are located when they decide to engage in forms of learning: ‘structural factors are centrally involved in individual motivation, since a person’s sense of their ability to actively

construct their life is shaped by the economic, social and cultural resources they are able to mobilize' (Róbert, 2012, p. 88). The theory argues that the broader structural and cultural conditions in which individuals are raised – specifically the institutional and labour market settings and the social support available – are as important in shaping their responses to work, to education, and to future life chances and opportunities as dispositional factors, internalized conceptual frameworks or personal agency. In other words, as Evans has expressed it, bounded agency requires a 're-conceptualisation of agency as a process in which past habits and routines are contextualised and future possibilities envisaged within the contingencies of the present moment' (Evans, 2007, p. 86).

Rubenson and Desjardins focus on how structural and individual factors shape adult participation in learning, drawing on data about *welfare state regimes*. Their bounded agency model

is premised on the assumption that the nature of welfare state regimes can affect a person's capability to participate. In particular, the state can foster broad structural conditions relevant to participation and construct targeted policy measures that are aimed at overcoming both structurally and individually based barriers. (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009, p. 188)

Despite this, policies remain dominated by mantras of economic productivity and human capital. In EU and national policies, employability is emphasised as the single most important outcome for education. This is part of a wider discourse that work-related measures and outcomes are the only relevant objectives of skills-oriented interventions, and the only way to evaluate impact (Bowles & Gintis, 1975). This circularity discounts any other means of judging human value. Yet 'good jobs' may be beyond the reach of young learners in vulnerable positions.

'Every society,' Narayan (2005, p. 3) remarks, 'has local terms for autonomy, self-direction, self-confidence, self-worth.' The literature of adult education, as Koulaouzides (2017) points out, often refers to 'empowerment'; Enliven researchers see this notion as a basis for new thinking about adult education. Empowerment, Narayan argues, 'refers broadly to the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life. It implies control over resources and decisions.' This freedom is

‘severely curtailed’ for disadvantaged people ‘by their powerlessness in relation to a range of institutions, both formal and informal’, continuing with this definition:

Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives. (Narayan, 2005, pp. 4–5)

Empowerment is thus about the ability to take action and to work towards change, not necessarily only for oneself, but also for the wider community.

Marmot started with concerns about health but came to see education as a critical means of taking some control over one’s life. Health outcomes, he has found, are significantly more influenced by social than by clinical determinants (Marmot et al., 2020, 2010); he has highlighted the social gradient of health inequalities and the damaging impact of lower social and economic status on individuals’ overall health (Marmot, 2015). Health inequalities, he argues, arise from a complex interaction of factors – housing, income, education, social isolation, disability – all of which are strongly affected by an individual’s economic and social status. To address them, empowering individuals – and communities – is essential. And ‘education,’ he writes, ‘is not a bad proxy for empowerment’ (Marmot, 2015, p. 153).

Marmot draws strongly on Sen’s model of human capability, which challenges mainstream *human capital* theories. The latter, Sen writes, focus on ‘the agency of human beings – through skill and knowledge as well as effort – in augmenting production possibilities’. Capability, however, emphasises the ‘ability of human beings to lead lives they have reason to value and to enhance the substantive choices they have’. For example, when education makes someone more productive, it enhances human capital; but

even with the same level of income, a person may benefit from education, in reading, communicating, arguing, in being able to choose in a more informed way, in being taken more seriously by others, and so on. The benefits of education, thus, exceed its role as human capital in commodity production. (Sen, 1997, p. 1959)

For Sen, human capability is about creativity and agency, but he also describes how individuals in deprived circumstances form ‘adaptive preferences’ in response to their restricted power and limited options. Agency is interlinked with power structures: ‘what citizens can or cannot do, or feel allowed to do’; people act in contexts ‘marked by a constant interplay of autonomy and domination, of liberating forces and structures of control, of possibility and limitation’ (Schugurensky, 2006, p. 72). For Evans, this echoes Sen’s capability approach: ‘an individual’s capabilities feed back into defining structural conditions, especially situational ones such as job and family’. As with Sen’s notion of ‘positive freedom’, this is a dynamic relationship, combining ‘the idea that people are free to define, choose, and control what is good for them’ with awareness that ‘they can only be really free if they have the basic level of capability needed to define, choose, and control what is good for them’ (Evans, 2002, p. 197).

A bounded agency model allows us to examine how far people are constrained and defined by their economic and social circumstances, and by the agents of control and surveillance – at local, domestic and supra-national levels – as well as by their self-concepts, their levels of confidence and their internalised ‘habitus’. Habitus is Bourdieu’s concept of the socialised norms or tendencies, the lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities that guide our behaviour and thinking. Bourdieu argued that habitus is created through social, rather than individual, processes, leading to patterns that are enduring and transferrable from one context to another; but it also shifts in relation to specific contexts and opportunities, and over time (Bourdieu, 1984). As Rubenson and Desjardins suggest, this is consonant with Sen’s notion of human capability, which not only considers what internal and external resources are available to an individual, but provides a normative theoretical framework: individuals must know about ‘the range of possibilities of how these resources can be used to realize things that matter to them’ and ‘how to do so’. In relation to adult education, therefore, a person’s dispositions may restrict their ‘capability and hence freedom’ to participate (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009, p. 196). As Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova (2021, p. 51) point out, from Sen’s perspective, we should be ‘evaluating justice, not in terms of what people achieve or what they are,

but in terms of the freedom which they actually have to lead their life in the way they value.'

Deficit models, however, rather than focusing on issues of social and structural justice, tend to locate attention on the individual and rarely acknowledge structural barriers such as social class, race, gender, or physical or mental health. As Beck expressed it, in 'the individualized society', the individual must learn, 'on pain of permanent disadvantage, to conceive of himself or herself as the center of action, as the planning office with respect to his/her own biography' (Beck, 1992, p. 135). This relates closely to Nussbaum's concept of practical reason: our capacity to use our reason to decide how to act. Social isolation can disorientate us and occlude this capacity, especially when our very structural vulnerability, our exclusion from a functioning society can become 'obscured by a universalized belief in competence and this is most advanced in market-oriented environments [where] questions of "competence, will and moral resolve" permeated and often dominated the discourse' (Evans, 2002, p. 264).

Nussbaum went on to develop Sen's capability approach, determining the key factors, or capabilities, necessary for human beings in a healthy, functioning democracy. Among these, education is central. Critical thinking is the means by which we move beyond a focus on ourselves as defective, unreasoning, and incompetent, and become aware of our conditions – not only those that surround us structurally and socially, but also what we have internalised. One crucial way of achieving this is through affiliation or belonging, the connection to like-minded individuals or communities with whom we associate and share values and experiences – 'above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings' (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021, p. 51).

Belonging is, of course, distinct from empowerment. Empowerment is often used in two senses: first, that of an authority conferring the capacity on us to do something; second, the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights. Belonging relates most closely to the latter, which is why it has crucial agentic value. In contrast to the dehumanising and individualising aspects of human capital theory, belonging is associated with collective ways of interpreting and transforming our reality.

## Vulnerability and 'NEETs'

Following the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, while youth unemployment rates were reaching their all-time highest levels within the Union, the long-established way of depicting labour market conditions (employed vs unemployed) was shown to be inadequate in capturing essential nuances associated with youth unemployment. At a political level, the need emerged for a better understanding of young people's vulnerability. Thus the acronym NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) entered the European policy lexicon: primarily, as a response to the need to know the many facets of a phenomenon taking on alarming dimensions. It soon became the key feature of discussion about youth policies (Vatrella & Milana, 2020). In 2014, 7.1 million young people aged 15–24 across the EU were estimated to be NEET (a rate of 12.5%) (Hadjivassiliou, 2016, p. 1). Such figures elevated policymakers' and researchers' concerns about how the crisis was affecting young people's training opportunities and employability, and led to a common measurement strategy for both EU policy makers and scholars.

Though taken up in EU policy following the financial crisis, the concept itself first emerged in the 1990s to identify unemployed young people perceived as not investing in their human capital. These have been called the 'working dead' (Rosina, 2015): people wandering aimlessly, disenchanted and disillusioned. They are vulnerable 'because of the transitional life periods they are going through, their lack of professional experience, their sometimes inadequate education or training, their often limited social protection coverage, restricted access to financial resources, and precarious work conditions' (Council of the European Union, 2013). They face additional barriers in terms of visibility (social and economic), opportunities, and the outcomes they achieve in the labour and employment markets. They contend with physical, emotional, and psychological problems (sickness, disability, poor mental health, dependence, and so forth), challenging material circumstances (poverty, homelessness, inadequate or uncertain access to health care or education). Their social environment is also often difficult: lack of support from family or peer group,

or of advice on how to confront difficult situations; immediate risks from the physical environment.

A substantial body of research has also shown that ‘post-industrial’ economic restructuring – flexibility, the so-called ‘gig economy’ – is generating a ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2011) for whom insecure jobs, work with little embedded formal or informal training, no annual or sick leave, and no superannuation benefits, are the norm. People working in such precarious conditions are likely to be more vulnerable to, and less resilient against, deteriorations in their economic and personal circumstances. They are also likely to focus on what Maslow described as ‘deficit needs’ (1954), the requirements for adequate food, housing, clothing – physiological and social security – which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights defines as ‘fundamental human rights’ (United Nations, 1948, Art. 25). As Marmot pointed out in relation to the British labour market:

Patterns of employment both reflect and reinforce the social gradient and there is inequality of access to labour market opportunities. Rates of unemployment are highest among those with no or few qualifications and skills, people with disabilities and mental ill health, those with caring responsibilities, lone parents, those from some ethnic minority groups, older workers and, in particular, young people. When in work, these same groups are more likely to be in low-paid, poor quality jobs with few opportunities for advancement, often working in conditions that are harmful to health. Many are trapped in a cycle of low-paid, poor-quality work and unemployment. (Marmot et al., 2010, p. 68)

In this light, Enliven researchers took a dynamic view of vulnerability, looking on it as a transition space between social inclusion and exclusion, reflecting a person’s level of participation in economic, political and cultural life (Castel, 2000; Silver, 2015; Verlage et al., 2019). We reject the notion of vulnerability as characteristic of individuals or social groups – an idea with normative implications, likely to stigmatise the individual. In contemporary societies, the risk of being vulnerable is relational and structural. As Karen Evans argues: ‘Social biographies of individuals are linked to social structures and institutions and changing conditions. They

are also linked to cultural norms and expectations and how these intersect with institutional structures' (Evans, 2002, p. 251).

The social, political and policy environments in which learning takes place are critical. The desire to reduce public spending (or restrict its growth), and to take advantage of the efficiencies inherent in market-based allocation systems, constrain the policy tools available to governments and state agencies. This is particularly salient in countries where welfare state regimes emphasise markets, minimal income protection, and general skills and competences, and where relationships between trade unions and employers' associations are weak.

## Belonging and Agency

We have suggested that 'belonging', connection to those with whom we associate or share common values, can be an important source of empowerment. In this section we provide an example of how this can happen. It is organised around a brief case study of the search for belonging 'in action', based on interviews conducted in England. (These are reported in more detail in Boeren et al. (2019).) Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) argue that welfare regimes not only shape societal systems and structures but also seep into people's consciousness. England has an 'Anglo-Saxon' welfare regime, dominated by highly individualised welfare to work policies, and an emphasis on modest, often highly stigmatised, means-tested assistance. Two decades ago, Evans argued that in the United Kingdom young people felt 'forced' into unemployment schemes and therefore not 'in control', while at the same time feeling individually responsible for their predicament. They believed it was down to them to get out of their situation, despite the negative environment' (Evans, 2002, p. 261). Whilst they clearly held agentic beliefs, they had completely bought into the idea that 'opportunities are open to all', that they needed to be more proactive, and that success or failure was attributable to themselves alone – though in fact, as Evans put it, 'their progress depends on how well they are equipped, the help they can call on when they need it, whether they go alone or together and who their fellow travellers are' (2002, p. 265).

At its best, adult education provides not only improved professional skills and training for employability, nor just better cultural habits, but intellectual growth, transformation, and change. Its benefits typically include personal development, increased confidence and self-efficacy, better health, and progress in the labour market. These, in turn, are associated with increased social capital and ‘belonging’ – a renewed emphasis on the networks, communities and ties that locate and bind us, and which constitute ‘a positional asset that people can use to pursue their own advantage and consolidate their own position’ (Field, 2005, p. 28). Social capital is also associated with better health. Learning as a form of empowerment and belonging, therefore, creates a virtuous circle.

Despite this, 9 million people across the United Kingdom lacked essential literacy or numeracy skills in 2017, and a further 13.5 million lacked basic digital skills. Those with poor literacy or numeracy tend to be more socially isolated or excluded; half were out of work. Those with these skills, by contrast, are more likely to vote and to be active citizens (Learning & Work Institute, 2019). Learning confers a sense of belonging – to a learning group, a community of interest, place, space or area.

Post-compulsory education should offer pathways for all, including ‘second chance’ education for people with low skills, whom school has failed, and those from culturally diverse or disadvantaged backgrounds – flexible learning for part-time or mature learners to suit their wider life demands. Marmot emphasised the importance of a broad range of post-compulsory education provision. Though a strong focus on work may help individuals in work,

it may perversely increase the disparities between those in work and those out of work. Given that the latter include the most socially disadvantaged, non-work-based lifelong learning policies need to be available to the unemployed and economically inactive to have any effect on tackling health inequalities. A comprehensive policy is required that would encourage people not in work to participate in learning activities in greater numbers. (Marmot et al., 2010, p. 109)

This report called, in effect, for increased, more generous, and more broadly-conceived adult learning provision, supporting confidence-building and

self-efficacy. Ten years on, however, Marmot found that ‘austerity’ had made matters worse. Social protection and education spending declined by 1.5% of GDP over the decade to 2019. Education for those aged over 16 had been ‘particularly hard hit’; even within this, funding for further education had declined most: ‘in 1990–91, spending per student in further education was 50% higher than spending per student in secondary schools, but was about eight percent lower in 2018’ (Marmot et al., 2020, pp. 9, 56).

Participation rates mirrored spending. In 2019 the Learning and Work Institute’s Adult Participation in Learning survey recorded (for the third year in a row) ‘the lowest participation rate in the 23-year history of the survey’, and a 10 percentage point fall (from 43% to 33%) between 2010 and 2019. Adult participation in learning is profoundly unequal between different social groups; those most in need participate least. While 40% of those who left full-time education at the age of 21 or later reported in 2019 that they had participated, only 18% of those who left school at 16 or earlier said they did so; 41% of those in the highest social classes reported learning, twice the figure for the lowest social classes (21%) (Smith et al., 2019). Based on government figures for participation for the total number of learners taking various educational qualifications, the Institute for Fiscal Studies recorded similar trends, and a similarly disproportionate impact on those most in need:

The total number of learners has fallen substantially over time, from a high point of 4.7 million in 2004 to 3.2 million by 2010, and to 2.2 million in 2016 at the latest count. A large part of this 2.4 million fall can be accounted for by a reduction in the numbers taking low-level qualifications (Skills for Life, English and maths; below Level 2; and no level), which fell by 1.9 million from around 3.6 million in 2004 to 2.2 million in 2010 and 1.7 million in 2016. (Belfield et al., 2018, p. 43)

The Social Mobility Commission also reported nearly half of people (49%) from the lowest social classes doing no learning after leaving school (2019, p. 26). In short, the number of adults participating in education and learning plummeted over 15 years: beginning before the 2008 financial crash, the collapse continued through the recession and austerity years.

Although all groups participate less, the well-educated, and the financially secure, remain the main beneficiaries of adult educational opportunities.

It may not be coincidental that the focus of adult education policy on work and employability – in the United Kingdom as in Europe – has dramatically intensified over the last two decades. The United Kingdom government's primary welfare-to-work programme under the Coalition government (the Work Programme, introduced in 2011) was persistently criticised for failing to address exclusion, and access for the most disadvantaged (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2014; TUC, 2017). Following its closure in 2017, the Conservative government launched a new Work and Health programme, initially in North West England and Wales. This aimed to provide specialised employment support for people with health problems or disabilities, and for the long-term unemployed: 'we want to see one million more disabled people in work over the next ten years' (Department for Work & Pensions and Department of Health, 2017, p. 8).

Unfortunately, such programmes offer little for those furthest from the labour market. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Youth Unemployment (2018, p. 40) concluded: 'A one-size-fits-all approach does not work. Education, employment and welfare services must begin to recognise the unique potential of each young person and that what works for one does not necessarily work for all.' This is no new insight. Between 2006 and 2011, for instance, 'Activity Agreements', piloted in eight areas of England, showed that localised, personalised programmes were best for the most vulnerable young people – they incorporated a financial incentive, to secure young peoples' engagement and participation and give them some degree of autonomy, impartial personal support, and tailored learning over a specified period of time (Maguire & Newton, 2011).

## 'It Felt Like Family'

A more recent programme, Talent Match, adopted a similar tailored approach in regional partnerships across the United Kingdom from 2014 to 2019 (Damm et al., 2020). A major £108 million investment by the Big Lottery Fund, it involved a 'test and learn' approach to understanding what interventions are most effective in supporting young people's

employability. Its target was young people aged 18–24 who were long-term unemployed and furthest from the labour market, in geographical areas with pockets of significant deprivation. In contrast to government-funded programmes, participation was voluntary. Each regional partnership was autonomous, developing solutions in response to local needs. The young people had multiple barriers to employment, including low self-confidence, mental ill-health, caring responsibilities, and poor educational experiences. Their sense of self-worth and ability to shape their own lives had often been damaged and undermined, and the support provided tried to respond to their needs as individuals.

This meant involving young people in co-designing and co-delivering the programmes. This ‘crucial component ... strengthened the design and delivery of the programme’. ‘It needs to be an integral part of programmes and not an add-on element’ (Damm et al., 2020, p. 13). Talent Match took an ‘asset-based approach’, offering one-to-one mentoring, taking time to establish trust and rapport, helping young people recognise their own skills, address barriers, and make progress towards the labour market. The duration and focus of mentoring were not standardised, reflecting a person-centred approach. Mentors worked from community-based ‘micro hubs’ within agencies known locally, and had local knowledge.

We undertook research on one local Talent Match project: ‘Young and Successful’ in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, an area with significant deprivation but pockets of wealth. Employment is concentrated in and around the area’s two largest cities (Nottingham and Derby) which together account for 26% of the population but 36% of employment (D2N2 LEP, 2014, p. 22). Several of its towns and cities have ‘relatively large proportions of neighbourhoods in the 10% most deprived’ nationally (D2N2 LEP, 2021, p. 53). Some rural areas are marked by poor local transport infrastructure, precarity of employment and inter-generational worklessness. Around 30% of those *in work* in the D2N2 area in 2014 earned less than the official ‘Living Wage’ (the national average was 25%) (Black et al., 2017). Our interviews took place in some of the most deprived areas.

Most of the young people we interviewed (all ‘furthest from the labour market’) described feelings of impotence and futility about seeking work.

They were often incapacitated by poor skills and fear of a seemingly hostile and punitive employment system. They also showed lack of awareness about their options, and uncertainty about shaping their own future, particularly in relation to employability and – what they often saw as an unattainable goal – securing employment. Recurrent unsuccessful job applications and unmet needs threatened to leave them trapped in a cycle of declining confidence and poor mental health.

It was here that a supportive mentor was so crucial. Testimony from mentors, young participants and programme managers showed the value of real understanding and trust-building in one-to-one relationships:

We are interested in trying to find out what the young person has a talent for – what job they really want to do. We are not pushing them to take any job ... in fact, I sometimes advise them not to take a job – knowing full well they'd last a day, a week, but it would be devastating to them longer-term (Mentor, Derby area).

A Programme Co-ordinator thought offering each young person a detailed initial assessment – listening to them, building rapport, understanding their skills and their dreams – was critical to fostering a sense of ‘belonging’ and ‘being listened to’:

you need to know those things about that individual ... don't presume what they need, what skills they have – because then you're creating an inappropriate action plan – well, you may as well do it blindfold (Programme Co-ordinator, Derby area).

Staff emphasised how the person-centred approach supported vulnerable young people with anxiety and low self-confidence, and the young people themselves valued their relationships with mentors and practitioners:

Normally I'm really nervous when I'm meeting someone but if it's someone who's going to help you, you're more talkative, you're more bubbly ... if you were to meet them at a stranger's house, you'd be really quiet, you wouldn't want to tell them anything about yourself ... Talent Match was a life changer ... someone being honest with me helped me to trust them. This is the best place for a young person to be (Participant).

It was the fact that I could talk to her, she was always there when I needed her. And it was more along the lines of the trust and everything else, like she was always there. If I needed anything, I could ask her, if I needed anything to fall back on, she was there (Participant).

Social learning, collectivism, and sense of belonging comes from ‘lived experience of participation in specific communities’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 151). The Young and Successful programme was described by several young people as ‘feeling like a family’. The group came together to develop the programme, generating a sense of respect, dignity and belief in their own skills. They received training in areas such as the media and interviews; they were encouraged to contribute as interviewers on interview panels for staff; all engaged directly with our research by participating in an Enliven Youth Panel.

Four of the young people also agreed to be filmed about barriers and enablers to participation, and spoke generously – and with heartfelt conviction – about the support they gained not only from Young and Successful staff, but from each other. Camaraderie, empowerment and authority came from belonging to a group of people experiencing the same issues; weekly meetings, group work, and shared social activities, enabled them to recognise their own shared capacity to act as agents in their own lives.

## Conclusion

‘Policies’, Evans argues, must ‘ensure that the greatest demands to ‘take control of their lives’ do not fall on those who are the least powerfully placed in the ‘landscape’ (Evans, 2002, p. 265). Brokerage, mentoring and advocacy are crucial for young people who have been made to feel defective. Welfare systems have a profound impact on the external pressures young people furthest from the labour market face, and are often profoundly internalised. Some welfare states, particularly in the Nordic countries, ‘promote adult learning, foster favourable structural conditions, target various barriers to participation, and ensure that disadvantaged groups have equal opportunity to take up adult learning’ (Rubenson

& Desjardins, 2009, p. 203). They recognise that adults who do not engage must overcome barriers to participate: what distinguishes Nordic and non-Nordic countries is ‘not the existence of barriers to participation but the conditions that allow a person to overcome these’ (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009, p. 203). Belonging and group identity are crucial in this process.

Our own research findings show the value of approaches that emphasise personal and group belonging as a way to overcome individual barriers to participation. The most successful adult educational strategies across Europe provide safe environments and establish relationships of trust among participants and practitioners. Yet across countries and welfare systems, programmes aimed at young people considered vulnerable incorporate objectives and pedagogical strategies that reflect what Littler (2017, p. 89) calls ‘a psychologising discourse which vest[s] not only power but also moral virtue in the very act of hope, in the mental and emotional capacity to believe and aspire’.

So while regional and national contexts differ, there is something universal in how young adults in vulnerable positions should be approached. National histories and cultures make a considerable difference in the access (disadvantaged) individuals have to learning opportunities. But within programmes, the learning experience must empower through drawing on and developing the sense of belonging. This is especially important when, as in the European Union, employability is stressed as the most important outcome. As Evans (2002) concluded, we need to explore learners’ life course perspectives, recognise the skills they have (rather than emphasising what they lack), and the importance of their participation in dimensions beyond the purely economic – in communities of belonging, across social, political and cultural domains.

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# **Part II**

## **Policies, Programmes and Participation**



# 3

## Vulnerability in European Lifelong Learning Policies 1992–2018: Seeing Young People as a Problem to Be Fixed?

Concepción Maiztegui-Oñate, Triin Roosalu,  
Alvaro Moro-Inchaurtieta, and Marti Taru

### Introduction

The concept of vulnerability has become something of a new paradigm in understanding policy and the role of governments (Carney, 2018). In the Enliven project, we explored issues of vulnerability in the context of lifelong learning for adults, particularly young adults. Young people as a social category started to receive European-level policy attention only relatively recently: the European Commission's white paper on young people was published in 2001; the first EU Strategy for Youth was enacted in 2010 (European Commission, 2009). However, analysis of European lifelong learning policy discourse on vulnerability identifies young people

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as one of the main target groups (Maiztegui-Oñate et al., 2019). Using the lens of vulnerability, this chapter analyses the portrayal of young people in European lifelong learning policies between 1992 and 2018.

In the social construction of target groups, the recognition—and attribution to them—of certain characteristics, values and images contribute to how the groups are viewed by the public (Brunila, 2012; Brunila & Rossi, 2018; Levitas, 2004; Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Williams, 2011). To contribute to this discussion, the current chapter focuses on changes over the years, looking in more detail at one specific, rather new, target group for European lifelong learning policies (young people), using vulnerability as the analytical framework. The chapter explores how vulnerable young people are portrayed—or, using social scientific language, *constructed*—in European lifelong learning policy documents. The main focus is on analysing the extent to which the *vulnerabilities* experienced by young people are seen as *individualised*, rather than in terms of their *structural context*. In the light of this, we report on, and discuss, the goals proposed in the documents for young people's lifelong learning.

Through a corpus-based critical discourse analysis of 68 European lifelong learning documents, we consider those documents as social practices (Fairclough, 1989) that express the political goals and values of the European Union. Over the period from 1992 to 2018, strategic and policy documents issued by various EU central institutions have shaped policy discussions within member states, between countries and within the European Commission. At the same time, they reflect the outcomes of those exchanges, as discussions of policy borrowing in adult education and lifelong learning point out (e.g. Saar et al., 2013). With the increased number of EU member countries, the goals and actions of lifelong learning policies changed. The documents can thus be seen as reflecting the outcomes of the negotiations over membership (for examples of how it shaped policy discussion during membership negotiations, see Saar et al., 2013). The significance of European-level policy discourses, in general, and lifelong learning policies, in particular, has in fact increased over the period, with the post-2008 recession supporting interest in lifelong learning as an instrument to address social exclusion and support vulnerable groups. It may be that a renewed emphasis on the social dimension of education and training, and recognition that adult learning is offered in a

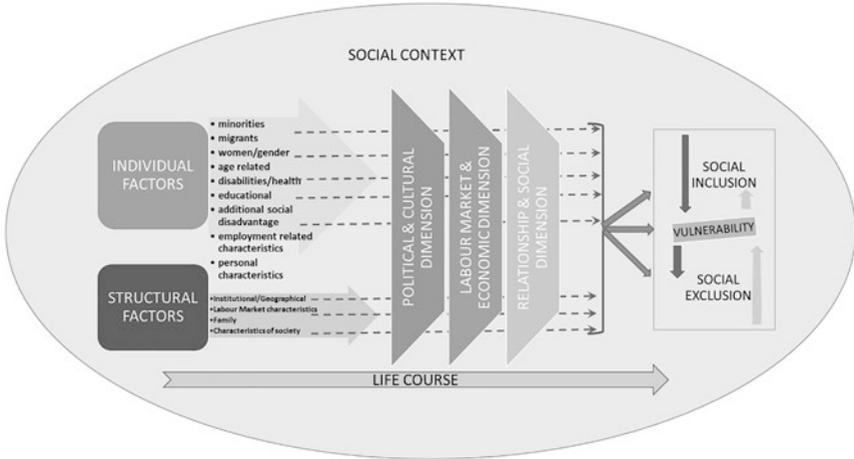
variety of settings such as educational institutions, local communities and NGOs—and not concern about learning for personal civic, social and work development alone—imply a humanist agenda (Rubenson, 2018).

This chapter explores the conceptual pillars and underpinnings of lifelong learning policies that see *young* people as a vulnerable group. It proceeds by, first, providing an overview of our concept of vulnerability and the approach we have used in identifying young people as a lifelong learning target group, then explaining our methodological position and presenting the results of the corpus-based discourse analysis. It concludes with a critical discussion of the findings.

## Analytical Framework

The term *vulnerability* represents a step forward in the landscape of conceptual frameworks, addressing social inclusion and exclusion, disadvantage, poverty and factors that influence inequality. It also provides a lens for analysing policies and has been seen as a potentially transformative idea for rethinking the role of governments (Carney, 2018). Previous research shows European policies' concern for vulnerable groups, and especially for the protection and promotion of human rights (Abrisketa et al., 2015; Kersh & Toiviainen, 2017); the notion of vulnerability has been increasingly applied by European courts to determine the legal status of vulnerable groups (Ippolito & Sánchez, 2015).

The concept of vulnerability refers to the potential for being harmed by certain social risks (e.g. unemployment, sickness, disability, age, ethnicity and citizenship) and the ability—or inability—to recover from the damage (Zimmerman, 2017). Portraying vulnerability in collective terms underlines the assumption that vulnerable groups need to be provided with special protection. Though viewing vulnerability as intrinsic to individuals can have inclusionary effects (because it suggests protection of vulnerable individuals is justified and necessary), critics see it as potentially leading to people being stigmatised and belittled (Ippolito & Sánchez, 2015). Building on Enliven's understanding of vulnerability (Holford et al., 2018), this chapter draws on a model of vulnerability through the life cycle (Fig. 3.1), which considers individual and



**Fig. 3.1** A dynamic model of vulnerability (Source: Maiztegui-Oñate et al., 2019, p. 22)

structural factors to be interrelated in a dynamic system that affects the way individuals traverse different educational, social and political structures throughout their lives.

Poverty and social exclusion may be temporary situations rather than permanent, unchangeable conditions. During their lives, people face various stressors. Some are relatively stable, such as poverty and family conditions, others more transient, such as the events of daily life (e.g. a deadline at work) or particular moments and transitions in life (Oris et al., 2018). In facing such situations, people use available resources to cope. The traditional welfare systems developed to protect citizens are often poorly adapted to protect from risks of financial instability and the consequences of globalisation (Ranci, 2010). Family and social networks are important: to a large extent social inclusion occurs through them (Castel, 2014, 2016). Following Castel (2014), we identify three levels, or zones, for our analysis: social integration, social exclusion and vulnerability. The first presupposes successful connections in the world of work as well as outside (family, friends, voluntary organisations and other connections). Exclusion is the opposite situation where people lack employment and experience precarious or non-existent social ties. The zone of

vulnerability is typically distinguished by precarious work and fragile relational ties, as well as instability.

In a framework that considers vulnerability as a process (Castel, 2016), degrees of vulnerability are not inherent in specific groups. Instead, vulnerability varies across groups and individuals in accordance with their dynamics of social risk. Hence, this framework sees individuals as well as groups as placed in a continuous state of *exclusion-integration*—at some point in time, a particular individual may experience social exclusion, but at other point, the same person may enjoy full social integration. In the zone of vulnerability, various structural factors may interact and reinforce one another: employment, education, income and so on (Vandekinderen et al., 2018). Although being excluded on one dimension may increase the risk of exclusion along other dimensions, the relationship between the dimensions is not deterministic.

## Young People as Lifelong Learning Target Group

Young people are often considered one of the groups most at risk of social exclusion and therefore most vulnerable. The main reason is that they are highly affected by ‘new social risks’, chiefly associated with the challenge of combining job stability with caring responsibilities, especially in the construction phase of the family (Zimmerman, 2017). They may, of course, also face additional risk factors such as disability, homelessness, or coming from an ethnic minority background, a care institution, or a disadvantaged area.

For today’s young people, the risk of exclusion has a different quality from other age groups and previous generations (Beck, 2006). Problems of job insecurity and difficulties in leaving the family home for higher education (less public funding, fewer scholarships, etc.) mark their transitions to adulthood and generate a climate of insecurity and uncertainty. Studies of the situation young people in Europe face identified certain groups, and those living in certain regions, as more vulnerable than others (European Commission, 2018). Young people born outside the country they live in, or who have parents born outside that country, have

significantly higher chances of being at risk of poverty or social exclusion than their native-born peers (Eurofound., 2015). Most poverty indicators also show that higher proportions of women are at risk. In the countries most affected by the economic crisis, particularly Greece and to a lesser extent Spain, young people's risk of poverty or social exclusion has increased considerably (European Commission, 2018). The weakened economic position of sectors where young people were formerly employed results in deterioration of their economic and social position and of their civic status (Benedicto, 2016).

Policy measures aiming to support the social inclusion of young people have been high on the EU social policy agenda over the past two decades, especially since the recession (2008–2009) (Eurofound., 2015). Two important EU policy mechanisms for social inclusion have been the Europe 2020 strategy (from 2010) and its predecessor, the Lisbon Strategy (from 2000). Both acknowledge the importance of social inclusion and set reducing social exclusion as a main method.

The Enliven approach called for a life course perspective (Holford et al., 2018). As mentioned above, many European young people experience a climate of insecurity and uncertainty about the future in their transitions to adulthood (Beck, 2006). Lifelong learning has been proposed as a means of overcoming this disadvantage. Despite good intentions, however, being recognised as vulnerable puts people at risk of being held personally responsible for their situation and of stigmatisation. Scholars in education (Brunila, 2012; Brunila & Rossi, 2018; Ecclestone, 2017) argue for a response to this discourse of vulnerability. In this chapter, we explore how young people are portrayed when, though economic developments are the main reason for their exclusion from the labour market and from centres of power in society, they are (or feel) left to their own devices.

## Studying Policy Discourse: Methodology

This chapter examines the discursive construction of young people in European lifelong learning policies during the period 1992–2018. The year 1992 was chosen as a starting point because it was only with the

Treaty of Maastricht (1992) that education became a question of EU competence (Rasmussen, 2014). Lifelong learning is, of course, mentioned in the other fields of EU policy making; our focus here is on how lifelong learning policies have referred to young adults. In pursuit of this task, we use corpus-based *critical discourse analysis*. After a systematic review of previous research, we decided to focus upon a corpus of 68 documents<sup>1</sup> issued by EU institutions<sup>2</sup> and stakeholders working in the field of lifelong learning (see Maiztegui-Oñate et al., 2019). The corpus is divided into three periods (see also Tuparevska et al., 2020):

- 1992–1999: Entrance of lifelong learning as a theme in policy debate; seven documents were included in the text corpus from this period.
- 2000–2009: Strengthening the position of lifelong learning in the EU and member states' agendas—the start of the implementation of the *Open Method of Coordination* and adoption of European Quality Framework in 2008; 35 documents were included in the corpus from this period.
- 2010–2018: Further elaboration of tools supporting lifelong learning, developing policy measures, focusing on particular target groups; from this period, we included 26 documents.

Using critical discourse analysis implies understanding documents as social practices. We therefore assume a relationship between how vulnerable groups are constructed and the social reality that frames them (Fairclough, 1989). The analysis combines quantitative analysis with aspects of critical discourse analysis. This allows for an investigation of patterns of change over a significant period. The critical discourse analysis framework is based on the Enliven approach to vulnerability and previous studies of target groups and lifelong learning policies (Brunila, 2012; Brunila & Rossi, 2018; Levitas, 2004; and Williams, 2011). Two methodological strands of critical discourse analysis process are drawn on.

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<sup>1</sup>The following types of official documents were analysed: White Papers, Conclusions, Communications, Reports, Resolutions, Staff Working Papers, Work Programmes, Decisions, Joint Interim Reports, Joint Progress Reports, Key Messages, and Proposals.

<sup>2</sup>European Commission, Council of the European Union, Commission of the European Communities, European Parliament.

The first used computer software (Atlas-ti) to investigate patterns in the data. It included identifying the frequency of words in different periods as well as searching patterns of co-assignment of information: words that define groups and frequently co-occur (for the purpose of this chapter, with specific age-based target groups relating to young people). The second strand of analysis follows the method of co-occurrences, referring to when two or more words are used in a specific span. This method can provide the most frequent ideas associated with a word or phrase (e.g. *young people*), in that the co-occurrence indicates the stance adopted in their representation. In Enliven, the span was set at a paragraph for each word under investigation. The linkages were examined by hand in order to determine wider themes to elaborate the categories related to three wider vulnerability themes<sup>3</sup> (individual factors, structural factors and education aims). The examination of co-occurrence also contributed to the diachronic characteristic of the study: co-occurrences were calculated for each period.

## Associating Young People with Risk: Personal and Structural Factors at Play

### Vulnerability: Personal or Structural Characteristic?

In a recent article from the Enliven project, Tuparevska et al. (2020) analysed the concept of *social exclusion* in EU lifelong learning policies (1992–2017), finding the concept to be defined narrowly in terms of specific groups at risk of being socially excluded and in terms of employability. They saw this as suggesting an individualisation of the problem of exclusion, which is abstracted from structural factors. This chapter—also based on lifelong learning policy documents—extends their analysis to the notion of *vulnerability*. It also shows that risk is individualised: young people’s vulnerability is more likely to be associated with individual characteristics than structural factors (or the role of social structures in shaping vulnerabilities).

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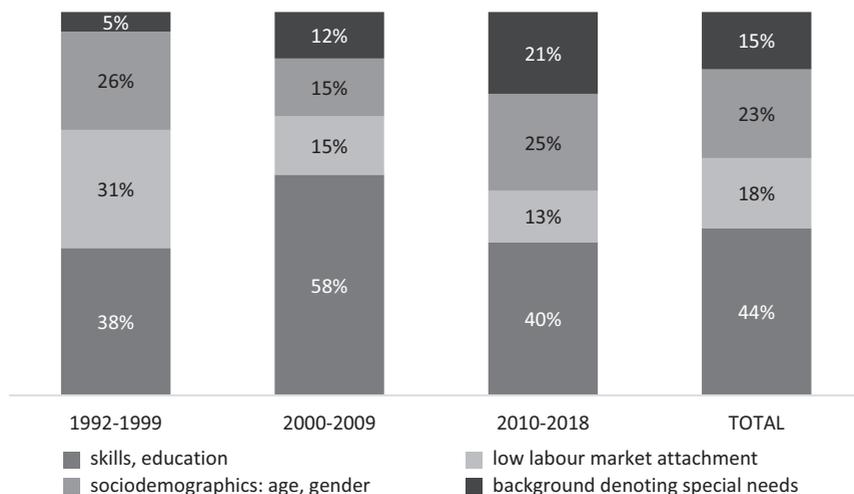
<sup>3</sup>The codes and categories developed for the Enliven Intelligence Decision Support System (IDSS) were a source of contrast for the results found in the corpus.

## Individual-Level Factors

Altogether, the category *young* appears 147 times in the Enliven corpus, and 19 different individual-level factors appear collocated with it. Divided these into four groups: those related to skills and education; those related to labour market attachment; those pointing to individual background factors that might imply special needs in the lifelong learning context; and those related to socio-demographic categories, such as age group or gender (see Fig. 3.2).

Over the three periods, the most prominent groups of factors are related to skills and education, including *low skilled*, *low qualified*, *early school leavers*, *with learning disabilities*, *feeling a failure and low self-esteem*, *lacking trust in the education system* and *digital skills*. Over time, such factors have a high degree of prominence, accounting for 38% of collocations of individual factors in the first period, 58% in the second and 40% in the third.

Background factors suggesting the need for a special needs approach in lifelong learning included *migration background*, *belonging to an ethnic minority*, *experiencing homelessness*, *coming from a lone-parent family* and



**Fig. 3.2** Distribution of individual factor sub-dimensions (%) in the Enliven corpus (1992–2018) for young people

*having a disability*. Accompanying *young*, these factors were mentioned 22 times in the policy documents, or about 15% of all the occasions that individual-level factors occurred. Their relevance clearly increased over time: from just two mentions before 2000, to four in the years 2000–2009, to 16 in the period 2010–2018, or 21% of all the mentions in those years. Relatively (and in absolute values), more attention to educational level as a kind of precondition for young people to be targeted, alongside more attention to special needs, clearly positions lifelong learning as a growing feature of second chance education. As previous research shows (Abrisketa et al., 2015), the grounds implicitly connected to vulnerable groups seem to be socio-demographic categorisations of gender, age, and ethnic or migrant background.

At the same time, low engagement with the labour market has had sustained prominence in lifelong learning policies. Accounting for 18% of all occurrences, this category includes *unemployed*, *long-term unemployed* and *people re-entering the labour market*. Its relevance has changed over time, decreasing from 31% of mentions relating to individual-level characteristics with the *young* category before 2000, to just 15% in the second period and 13% in the third. However, in absolute terms mention of this category shifts from 12 to 5 and back to 10. The special attention paid to young people not well integrated into the labour market gave way to general themes of low skill and negative educational experiences during the years 2000–2009, and these aspects became more frequent during 2010–2018, probably owing to the recession. It seems that lifelong learning policy attention is returning to young people outside the labour market, seen as a special target group, whilst maintaining a focus on providing skills.

Socio-demographic factors (age, gender) together account for about a quarter of all the mentions of individual-level characteristics (34 altogether: 10, 5, and 19, respectively in each period). No clear pattern emerges, and it is possible this reflects the lifelong learning policy documents' life course perspective, in the context for instance of investing in lifelong learning for young people, or making up for lack of initial education.

In summary, regarding individual factors, we see that terms related to employability (*low skilled/qualified*), education (*early school leavers*) and

labour market (*unemployed*) are the most commonly used to characterise vulnerable young people. Although this can be considered protective, it risks stigmatising them and may also overlook how far vulnerability is anchored in socio-historical contexts (Oris et al., 2018).

## Structural Factors

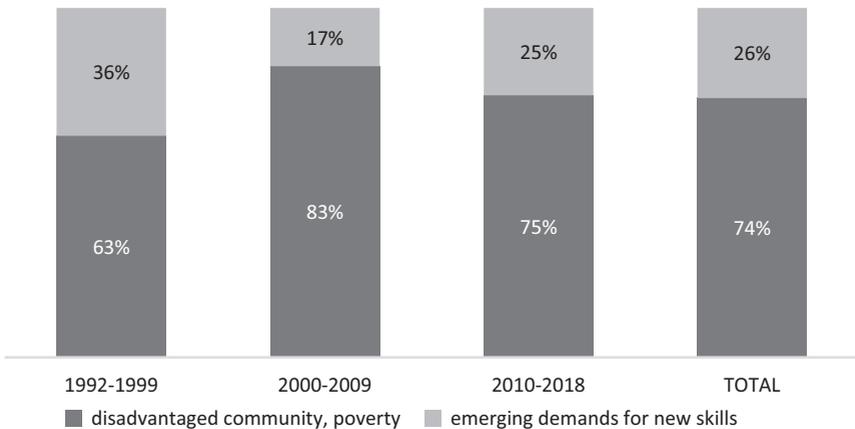
We now turn to structural factors. Socio-demographic categorisations, which usually label specific groups, are underpinned by the assumption that these groups need to be afforded special protections (Holford et al., 2018). In the text corpus, vulnerability appeared not only at the level of the individual but also at the societal level, enabling us to take a more socio-structural approach. This link between socio-economic factors and structural changes has significant implications for entry into the labour market. These factors affect young people's transition processes, making them less secure and smooth than when portrayed as a linear transition from school to work. Comments related to transitions are identified most frequently in the second period (2000–2010), which began with the adoption of the Lisbon strategy and saw the implementation of benchmarking and the *open method of coordination* in lifelong learning. Supporting these transition processes appears as a general objective in the documents analysed. Several documents mention structural factors that complicate transitions and point to lower socio-economic backgrounds, poverty and living in a disadvantaged area as factors weighing down on young people's lives.

Taking the types of structural factors associated with the category *young* together, we distinguished two kinds of structural-level factors: (a) those that refer to a disadvantaged background that may harm a young person's chances to access education or employment; and (b) those that refer to an emerging demand for new skills, which might mean everyone needs to upskill for the sake of a competitive economy. The first includes lower socio-economic background and poverty, disadvantaged areas or communities, lack of jobs locally and related high unemployment, and general levels of inequality. The second includes pressures from a learning society, the demands of technological markets, global competitive

societies and coping in urban settings. This second category does not presuppose that young people in vulnerable positions have especially disadvantaged backgrounds compared to other groups.

As we show below, the overall level of co-occurrences of structural factors with the category *young* was much lower than that of individual factors. Comparing the prevalence of the two types of structural factors, a growing need for new skills in the labour market is referred to much more seldom than disadvantaged backgrounds. Altogether, economic needs account for 36%, or 4 of the 11 total mentions in the first period, 17%, or just 2 of the 12 mentions in the period 2000–2009, and 25%, or 2, of the 8 mentions in the third period (Fig. 3.3). (With increasing numbers of EU policy documents in lifelong learning, this represents an average of 0.3 mentions per policy document in the third period.)

Giving attention to marginalised community contexts has merit in that it points to their special needs and could lead to more tailored provision of learning opportunities. However, seeing the origin of a person's vulnerability in their background also makes it more likely that these will be accepted as special circumstances. The findings show that background and family are frequently alluded to as hindering young people's participation in lifelong learning. For instance, *Efficiency and equity in European*



**Fig. 3.3** Distribution of structural factor sub-dimensions (%) in the Enliven corpus (1992–2018) for young people

*education and training systems* (European Commission, 2006) emphasised the risk involved in not having learned to value study—something that Levitas (2004) regards as the construction of social exclusion as a low level of aspiration.

Considering that the changing economy and the need for new skills have been high on political and public agendas over recent years, it is perhaps surprising that they have had relatively low prominence in lifelong learning policies targeting vulnerable youth. Lifelong learning seems still to be regarded, for vulnerable people from disadvantaged backgrounds, chiefly in terms of second chance education. However, this fails to see that—if we focus on economic growth and innovation—lifelong learning may be part of the solution for young people, solving the problems of marginalised communities rather than reproducing their marginalisation.

This low attention to structural factors, and the high importance given to individual-level factors associated with vulnerability, seems likely to have consequences as to what kinds of lifelong learning opportunities are provided for young people and how these are delivered. We look at this more closely below, analysing the lifelong learning goals policy documents foresee the young having.

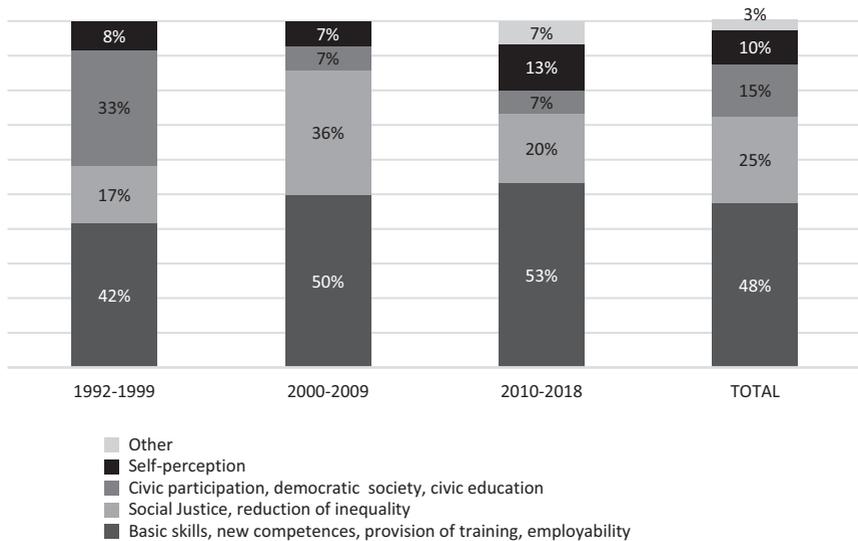
## **Educational Goals for Policies on Vulnerable Young People**

In addition to showing how young people are portrayed in lifelong learning policies, exploring the discourse on young people considered vulnerable in greater depth helps us understand the objectives underlying the policies. To describe and analyse educational goals and how they changed, we grouped them into four sub-dimensions associated with the young:

- Goals related to basic skills, new competences, provision of training and employability;
- Goals related to social justice and reduction of inequality;
- Goals related to civic participation, democratic society and civic education; and

- Goals related to self-perceptions (motivations, self-esteem and awareness).

Our analysis shows that the most important and current discourse in European policies is economic competitiveness: notions such as basic skills, new competencies and employability. The dimension of social cohesion, inclusion and citizenship, including social justice and civic participation, is less important. Over the three periods, the relative number of co-occurrences has changed most in the category of civic participation, civic education and democratic society (see Fig. 3.4). Co-occurrences in this group dropped from 33% of all co-occurrences before 2000 to 7% in the period 2010–2018: a six-fold decrease. Co-occurrences about basic skills, new competences, provision of training and employability increased from 42% to 53%—also a notable change, giving it the highest overall share of co-occurrences, and pointing to its importance in European policy. This idea is reiterated in a number of documents, such as the European



**Fig. 3.4** Distribution of educational goals sub-dimensions (%) in the Enliven corpus (1992–2018) for young people

Council's (2016) 'Conclusions on developing media literacy and critical thinking through education'.

Co-occurrences about social justice—certain general objectives related to the type of society desired, and in particular social cohesion—having increased from 8% to 21% in the second period, remained at this level. Co-occurrences of self-perception (motivation, self-esteem and awareness: personal and attitudinal characteristics considered essential for individuals to overcome vulnerability and integrate into the labour market (Brunila, 2012; Levitas, 2006)) increased from 8% in the first period to 13% in the third.

Supporting the development of basic skills is one of the main methods mentioned for achieving employment and social inclusion—a finding still in line with Brine's (2006). The first documents in our corpus, such as the white paper on growth and competitiveness (European Commission, 1993), emphasised the need to improve skills related to new technologies in order to improve human capital and competitiveness. Over 20 years later, with new technologies ubiquitous, *New Skills Agenda for Europe* still recommended the development of 'basic digital skills, to access good jobs and participate fully in society' (European Commission, 2016, p. 4). These are perceived as essential for integration into the world of work and consequently essential not only for high-skilled jobs but, as Brine (2006) also points out, for all citizens, not least those considered more vulnerable.

Concerns about skills needed for work have been articulated in European youth strategies and policy interventions. The white paper *Towards a learning society* (European Commission, 1995) noted how feelings of personal failure can emerge among those leaving education without recognised skills. In the youth work sector, the eight key competences for lifelong learning are part of the conceptual frameworks for planning and assessing youth work activities, for participants, youth workers and trainers. A youth focus emerged in European Commission policies at much the same time as both mounting evidence that young people had been key losers in globalisation processes in the last quarter of the twentieth century and the growing popularity of the idea of social investment, which implies the need to pay more attention to young people as future citizens. Support for young people, particularly measures addressing the acquisition of competences for work, increased markedly.

Providing a suitable environment for acquiring competences relevant to citizenship and participation have more seldom been addressed. The current youth strategy uses the term *engage* as one of its three essential terms. The Erasmus+ programme supports the development of youth activism. The terminology relating to citizenship and participation in the European policy documents suggests that young people are seen as falling into two groups: those from disadvantaged groups and the rest. Providing citizenship experiences for vulnerable groups is mentioned, as is providing experience of volunteering for young people from urban settings. In the latter case, however, volunteering is seen not only as a form of social participation but as a mechanism for developing valuable employability skills.

In 2006, a European Parliament & European Council Recommendation defined key competences as ‘those which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment’ (2006, L 394/13). It recommended providing all young people with the means to attain key competences necessary for adult life, proposing a holistic view of lifelong learning—especially for young people who need support in achieving their educational potential due to personal, social, cultural or economic circumstances.

## Conclusion

This chapter has presented results from an analysis of 68 documents related to lifelong learning policy issued by European Union institutions during 1992–2018, focusing on how lifelong learning addresses challenges of vulnerability among young people. Although there is no definition of vulnerability in the corpus, we have identified a number of factors related to the Enliven vulnerability model (Fig. 3.1). This contributes to discussion about lifelong learning in Europe, showing how young people, especially those in vulnerable positions, have mainly been constructed as a category that is, or should become, part of the economically active population—with the function of lifelong learning presented as equipping them with skills necessary for the labour market.

In the lifelong learning policy documents we reviewed, being young is less and less seen as a period of life during which civic maturation takes place. Williams (2011) refers to socially excluded people being portrayed (in UK policy) as ‘dependent’, as ‘needing help, through education, to “grow up” and attain full independence’ (p. 457). The patterns and examples found in our EU corpus are not dissimilar: vulnerable young people are seen as having more difficulties in maturing, due to their background or personal characteristics, making lifelong learning valuable as a support for their growth. We seem to see the unfolding, over time, of an underlying European official youth discourse focused on individual characteristics, in which structural factors are at a discount. This individualises the perceived vulnerabilities rather than seeking explanations (and solutions) in the social context. For vulnerable groups, lifelong learning risks becoming a requirement or imperative, rather than an opportunity for personal, civic, social and professional growth (cf Rizvi, 2007; Rubenson, 2018). So far as vulnerable youth are concerned, priority is given to transition into the labour market rather than to their personal and civic development: emancipatory dimensions of lifelong learning are disregarded.

Some additional comments are called for when describing the young and their vulnerable situations. Individual-level factors occurred much more often than structural-level factors: it is individual characteristics, rather than system-level faults, that are seen as unsuitable and needed to be fixed. The few mentions of structural issues across the lifelong learning policy documents were themselves more likely to point to the specifics of a given disadvantaged community or a person’s location in it, rather than to the need for innovations at the societal level.

At the level of public policy and administration, this may point to a role for sectoral policy. Youth is rather a new category in lifelong learning policy, compared with the non-traditional adult learner. Support for the development of individual qualities deemed necessary for effective participation in society is also important in integrated youth policy, where paying special attention to young people in disadvantaged situations—those living in remote areas, from poor socio-economic as well as socio-cultural backgrounds—is also one of the foci. In youth work, a range of non-formal learning methods has been adopted and adapted and are widely used. This can be seen as a special sphere for lifelong learning.

Youth policy could integrate these individual-level lifelong learning efforts within social institutions (see, e.g. Nico, 2018; Taru, 2018; Taru et al., 2020).

The need to consider contextual background factors fits well with our finding that low labour market engagement has become increasingly prominent when young people are presented as a target group for lifelong learning. Another important type of individual-level explanation for young people's vulnerability focuses on low level of skills and education: these were the most prominent individual-level characteristics in defining the young as the target group for lifelong learning. However, attention to special needs and diverse groups has also emerged over time. In this framework, lifelong learning should develop motivation and self-esteem to overcome previous experiences of school failure, encouraging young people to enrol again in education and learning.

This chapter has shown that human capital perspectives dominate European lifelong learning policies, and these underpin a limited view of vulnerability that misunderstands its causes and generates inappropriate policy objectives for socially excluded young people. Given that structural factors make achieving labour market access extremely difficult, there may be a logic to increasing the prominence of other educational objectives in lifelong learning—particularly those related to social justice and reducing inequalities. However, the objective of providing more and better work-related skills remains dominant: individuals' low skill levels are seen as the main cause of their disadvantage. In the context of pervasive and competitive global markets, gaining employment is of great importance, especially for young adults who lack work experience and people with low levels of educational attainment. But labour markets are complex, and the social and cultural dimensions of vulnerability require much deeper study.

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# 4

## Participation in Adult Learning: System Characteristics and Individuals' Experiences

Ellen Boeren, Sofie Cabus, and Alan Mackie

### Introduction

This chapter starts from macro- and micro-level research on participation and inequality in adult education and training. Several system characteristics play a key role in lifelong learning participation: for example, the organization of education; the organization of the labour market and established production modes within firms; quality of child care; the

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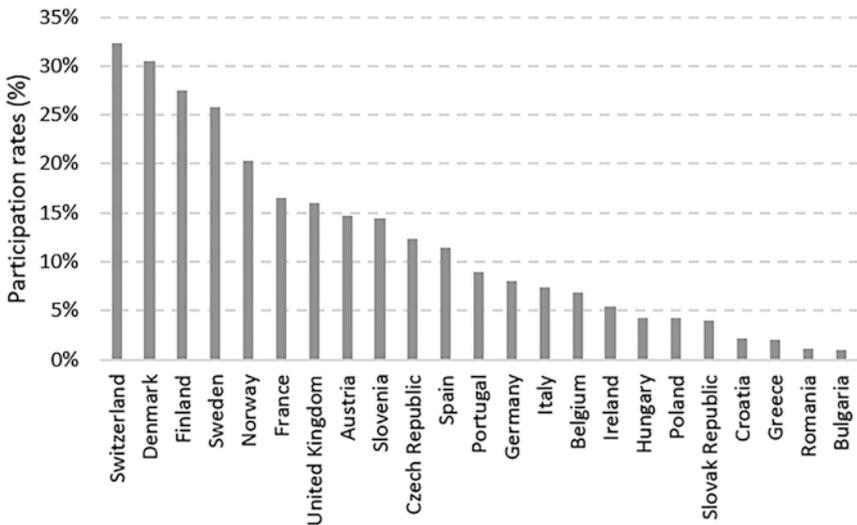
J. Holford et al. (eds.), *Lifelong Learning, Young Adults and the Challenges of Disadvantage in Europe*, Palgrave Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14109-6\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14109-6_4)

(perceived) costs of lifelong learning; and the indicators of economic development (Desjardins, 2017; Cabus et al., 2018). Overall, it is argued that these system characteristics particularly restrict low-qualified individuals from accessing lifelong learning (Berman et al., 1998; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2017). These barriers to participation of low-educated individuals may offset the (productivity) advantages of other (often, higher educated) employees' investments in human capital. It is argued by Desjardins (2017) that unequal access to adult education and training (E & T) (in the workplace) is often a reflection of unequal power relations within societies. These unequal power relations promote polarization in the workplace and routinized work, particularly for the low-educated. When low-educated employees engage in routinized work, then this impedes the take-up of novel methods of production, which leads to a decrease in employees' value added in the production process. It therefore seems likely that unequal access to adult E & T in a *polarized world* (Autor et al., 2003; Goos & Manning, 2007; Goos et al., 2009) has a negative impact on society. In line with these arguments, we focus in the first part of this chapter on the (possible) advantages of an inclusive policy on lifelong learning for society as a whole.

Despite observed (and unobserved) structural barriers, small percentages of low-educated adults do participate in education and training (Rubenson, 2018). It is important to learn from them how provision can be strengthened to lower barriers to access. Therefore, we analyse initiatives that aim at raising the participation rate of disadvantaged adults in nine different countries in Europe in the second part of this chapter. These initiatives relate to the European Youth Guarantee and Upskilling Pathway programme. The nine countries under study are very different with regard to their welfare regimes (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009), and, it seems, significantly different in their approaches to adult E & T. The differences include uneven levels of provision and varying participation rates. However, despite the countries' different labour market institutions and other dissimilar system characteristics, learners and staff demonstrate broad *similarities* in participation experiences. It appears that motivation to learn and confidence levels of participants are key to success, in whatever context these individuals engage in adult E & T. This supports arguments for individual support and customization of provision for (young) adults.

## System-Level Determinants of Participation in Adult Learning

In this first part of the chapter, we start from the observation that participation rates in E & T vary between countries, and we explain this situation. Employed individuals comprise most of the adult learners in the European Union, Norway and Switzerland (Eurostat, *trng\_lfse\_01*). Upon looking at the percentage share of employed individuals aged 20–64 in education or training, we observe a striking dispersion in the participation rates across countries (Fig. 4.1). One likely explanation is that some countries offer a significant amount of adult E & T to employees, while others lag behind in this. Supply is indeed an important determinant of participation in adult E & T. However, this explanation could lead to the false conclusion that offering more adult E & T to employees increases participation rates, regardless of the context in which it is offered or the features of the adult E & T supply system. For example, who would offer courses or training to these employees? Who would pay?



**Fig. 4.1** Participation rates in adult education and training among the employed across countries of the European Union, Norway & Switzerland (Source: Own calculations based on EU LFS (Edition 2017))

Would all employees participate in courses or training regardless of the price? If not, what is *the cure* for those who would or could not pay? Is adult E & T a uniform product, or is it rather adapted to the needs of the job or person (i.e. to the specific goal or field of learning activity)?

In fact, while many barriers to participation in adult E & T can be observed, there are even more *unobserved*. With regards to easily observed determinants of participation, one may think about gender (men are less likely to participate than women) and age (older people are less likely to engage than young people) (Eurostat, *trng\_lfse\_01*). But nuance is crucial. Women have higher learning intentions than men (Sanders et al., 2011) because they are at an increased risk of losing their job compared to men (Elman & Angela, 2002). This suggests that it is employers' actions towards certain socio-demographic groups that increases, or decreases, participation in adult learning. However, many dispositional barriers, like motivation and attitude towards adult learning, are far more difficult to observe (Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2017). Previous studies have tried to reveal these barriers, often from the perspective of individuals. Literature argues that participation rates may be low because of time constraints, family reasons or job-related time allocation (situational barriers); the (lack of) provision of adult E & T and who pays for it (institutional barriers); and the psychological needs of the adults to engage—or not—in learning (dispositional barriers) (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009).

In the Enliven project, we recognize that institutions, and education and labour market policies, may impose structural barriers to individuals (see, among others, Cross, 1981; Chapman et al., 2006; Laal & Salamati 2012; Boeren, 2016). It is the environment where we live and raise our children that fosters or limits how barriers play a role in our lives. The interplay between individual determinants and system-level characteristics is difficult to grasp in an empirical model (Boeren, 2017). However, in an attempt to do so, the Enliven project adopted a supra-individual comparative framework covering the multiple layers of this complex problem to reveal the system-level barriers that bind individuals in their decisions to participate in adult E & T (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). We therefore applied generalized structural equation modelling (GSEM) estimation techniques to control for (observed) individual-level (often situational) determinants of participation (Cabus et al., 2018). We aimed

to make participants and non-participants comparable on (observed) background characteristics and then attribute the variation in participation rates between societies to system characteristics.

Our data on adult E & T and system-level characteristics come originally from the European Union Labour Force Surveys (EU LFS edition 2017). These data were collected for the 27 European Union countries (which then included the UK) and Norway. The constructed dataset for the whole of the Enliven project with regard to system-level characteristics covers the years 2011–2016. The empirical framework is applied to European societies at regional level rather than, as is usual, country level (European Commission, 2015; CEDEFOP, 2015; Desjardins, 2017). The European Union Labour Force Survey provides information about NUTS 2<sup>1</sup>-regions. This means we are able to examine the administrative level where regional policies are applied. We argue that system characteristics that play key roles in the organization of education and training can differ between jurisdictions (Eurostat, *reg\_educ\_11*), and this is best captured in a regional-level empirical framework. Moreover, regions have more homogeneous populations than countries. The final dataset comprises more than 200 regions, covering 28 European countries. In addition to the European Union Labour Force Surveys data, we have collected variables from Eurostat, the World Bank, UNESCO and other reliable sources, in one large database with over 80 variables.

Results from GSEM models indicate that observed and, even more significantly, unobserved system characteristics play a key role in explaining the difference in participation rates across societies. Examples of significant system characteristics are: the entrance age into lower secondary education; the age at which compulsory education ends; the (perceived) costs of lifelong learning; and the indicators of economic development (per capita regional gross domestic product and the number of patent applications). However, for some variables, it remains difficult to disentangle individual-level barriers from those at institutional (or system) level. For example, should we consider educational attainment as a

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<sup>1</sup> NUTS (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) 2 is the level of regions for the application of EU regional policies; NUTS 2 level regions are also eligible for support from cohesion policy, etc.

personal feature or as a product of society? The way we organize compulsory education, who can access higher education and whether a course or training an adult takes leads to a recognized diploma are all structural features of the education system underlying individuals' educational attainment and their likelihood of further participating in adult E & T.

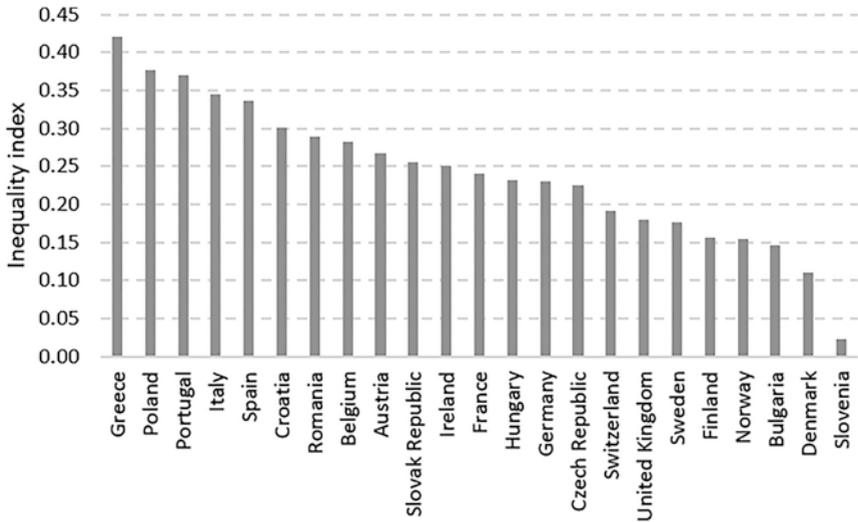
## Inequality in Opportunities and Its Consequences

While previous educational attainment matters for participation in adult E & T, we observe that the highest diploma attained in the initial phase of life also introduces inequality in opportunities over the adult life course. In line with this argument, the Enliven project found that system characteristics restrict low-educated (young) individuals in particular from access to adult E & T. Low-educated (young) adults, who face income pressure, do not choose formal learning pathways as a means to increase their earnings from work, in contrast to the general (middle- or high-educated) workforce. Consequently, there is a discrepancy in the adult participation rates in E & T between the low- and high-educated (Pont, 2004). This calls for more inclusive policies and government actions (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2017).

As Enliven research shows, inclusive policies on lifelong learning (in general, and adult E & T, in particular) have several advantages for society. Lifelong learning has become a recognized EU-28 priority in response to fast-paced technological transformations (Cabus & Stefanik, 2019). However, not everyone is equally able or willing to participate in lifelong learning. In particular, we show that disadvantaged groups are more likely to be excluded from participation, a core concern of the Enliven project. This may have implications for society as a whole. In order to further investigate this claim, we estimate how accessible adult E & T is across different socioeconomic groups and what impact this has on economic growth. In particular, we look at unequal access to lifelong learning between rich and poor, and between low-educated and high-educated. We focus on two disadvantaged groups—the poor and the low-educated—who are at risk of exclusion from the advantages of

*skills-biased* innovation, and increasingly of job loss, obsolete skills, dismissal, long-term unemployment and social exclusion. Whereas in the previous section we focused on the hindrances, or barriers, to participation of disadvantaged adults, this section focuses on the consequences of these impediments for society. While we acknowledge that several indicators of societies' well-being could be of interest to the reader, we particularly look at economic growth. We have already argued from the introduction that unequal access to adult E & T in a polarized world plays a particularly important role for the way production is organized in the workplace. Social imbalances impede the take-up of novel methods of production, as for example, when low-educated individuals cannot access new technologies or digital tools in the workplace and find it more difficult to become productive in fast-changing labour markets. As a consequence of these impediments, individuals (particularly young people) are at risk of long-term unemployment and poverty. If E & T are important determinants of the wealth of nations, then one can reasonably argue that limited and unequal access to E & T affects the channels that have an impact on economic growth. This is discussed below. Lifelong learning is thus not only a matter for the disadvantaged individual, or group, but also for society as a whole; this requires policy action to enhance individuals' prospects and—as a result—societies' wealth. (In the third section of the chapter, we look more closely at the individual level.)

The empirical analysis uses the regional-level dataset obtained from the EU LFS surveys (2011–2016). We retained 23 European countries in the data, or 211 regions. In relation to empirical methods, we applied dynamic panel data estimation techniques and country fixed effects. Panel data estimation techniques are frequently applied in case of threads of reversed causality. Reversed causality implies that economic growth may drive the level and change in adult learning, and not vice versa. Dynamic panel data estimation techniques overcome reversed causality by looking at differences and lags in the levels of adult learning between two consecutive time periods (including recent periods). It is then argued that the economic growth rate we observe today is driven by past movements in adult learning. Additionally, country fixed effects models account for invariant features at the country level over time: for example, the structure of the labour market or the education system.



**Fig. 4.2** Accessibility of adult education and training across countries of the European Union, Norway & Switzerland (Source: Based on figures calculated in Cabus et al. (2019). The Y-axis presents an index that reflects the difference in access to adult E & T between the low-educated and the high-educated. The higher the index, the larger the disadvantage for the low-educated in terms of access to adult E & T. The maximum value is 1)

This makes findings from cross-country (or cross-region) comparisons more likely to be attributed to (changes in) adult learning and not to structural features.

Figure 4.2 presents a measure of inequality in opportunities between socio-economic groups. In this case, the figure plots the inequality of access to adult learning between low- and high-educated employees aged 20–64. We observe that Southern European countries (Greece, Portugal, Italy, Spain) face the largest inequalities, while Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland, Norway), Bulgaria and Slovenia the least. (The results for Bulgaria should be interpreted with caution: its overall participation rate is very low (see Fig. 4.1), compared to Slovenia and the Nordic countries; Bulgaria shows a more equal access to adult E & T because everyone in Bulgaria, whether high- or low-educated, participates very little.)

We now return to the question of whether unequal access to adult E & T impacts growth. The main results indicate that the growth rate is

significantly reduced (by  $-0.4$  percentage points) when inequality in access to adult E & T between low- and high-educated increases. Societies facing larger dissimilarities in adult learning opportunities across educational levels fare worse than societies with more equal opportunities. This finding is intuitive. Take, for example, innovatory methods of production in firms: high-educated people know how to handle them, but low-educated people cannot acquaint themselves with how to do so—yet these workers remain necessary to the production process. If low-educated people are excluded from on-the-job learning of skills in these new methods of production, process innovations will be counterproductive and not yield the planned results. We also see that inequality in access to adult E & T between low- and high-educated people is worse in societies with high shares of routinized jobs that are at risk from product and process innovations (i.e. automation). It seems that skill-biased technological changes, which mean that technological progress favours the high-educated, are not good for economic growth as a whole.

## Occupational Change

In the previous sections, we examined the differences in participation rates among the employed and inequalities in opportunities and its consequences. In both of these, we explored the role of the workplace in participation in and unequal access to adult E & T. Low educational attainment is found to be an important barrier to participation. The way adult E & T are organized across job typologies or sectors, who can access job-related courses and training (where they are available), and who pays for it, are all structural features of the labour market underlying the likelihood to participate across different levels of educational attainment. The consequences of restricted access to adult E & T are largest for disadvantaged adults if technical change leads to innovations in the production process for which adult learning is required and in which disadvantaged adults cannot engage. The previous section indicated that this has negative consequences for the economy as a whole.

This section explores the underlying linkages between participation in adult E & T and occupational change due to technical progress and digitization (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2017). We further explore the effects of technological transformations, leading to occupational change, on participation across different job typologies. In particular, technological transformations lead to automation of jobs with a high level of routine tasks (Autor et al., 2003; Goos et al., 2003). These are typically executed by low- and middle-skilled workers. At the same time, technological transformation boosts the demand for workers in non-routine complex jobs (Autor et al., 2003; Goos et al., 2003). These workers are expected to invent ways to automate (routine) tasks, often in order to increase productive efficiency. From the data, we argue that professionals who produce and invent new information and communication technologies increase their share in the labour force relative to other professions (CEDEFOP, 2013). In addition, evidence suggests that jobs with high levels of non-routine non-complex tasks are largely unaffected by the introduction of more automation.

Non-routine non-complex jobs, typically carried out by low- and medium-qualified adults, seem hard to automate due to their “human component” which robots still cannot take over. Workers in personal service and personal care are a good example. Tasks they do include caring for patients and elderly people, supervision and assistance for children while parents are at work, and working as a cleaner hairdresser or barber. The demand for personal service and personal care workers, when we control for the business cycle, depends more on demographic ageing and welfare in the region than on technical change (Goos & Manning, 2007; Goos et al., 2014), so that fast-paced technological transformations have little or no impact, at least directly, on the demand for labour (Cabus et al., 2019). Moreover, there is substantial evidence that in many countries, demand for personal service and personal care workers is larger than supply. Looking at the period 2005–2016, employment in this sector grew by about 15% (CEDEFOP, 2016).

Occupational change due to technological progress underlies these employment dynamics in regional labour markets. However, it is not entirely clear what occupational change means for participation in adult

E & T. If the relative share for information and communication technologies professionals increases in a regional labour market, we would expect a rise in adult E & T participation to meet local labour needs. Adult E & T then serves as a tool to educate and train workers with the skills necessary to perform as an information and communication technologies professional. Adult E & T can also be used by information and communication technologies professionals for continuous professional development. If the relative share of personal service and personal care workers increases in a region, we would expect adult E & T to be used to develop skills needed to enter the profession, though it is less clear that adult E & T would be used for continuous professional development. As indicated above, the likelihood of participating in adult E & T is lower for the low-educated than for the high-educated. Personal service and personal care workers typically have low- to medium-level qualifications and sit far below the tertiary educational attainment level of information and communication technologies professionals. Low-educated generally have more negative feelings towards education than high-educated because of poor past experiences in compulsory education (De Witte et al., 2013; Boeren, 2016; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2017). Furthermore, low-educated people receive fewer opportunities in terms of paid educational leave or support from their close environment (Kyndt & Baert, 2013).

In this light, we expected that the goal and field of learning activity to differ substantially across sectors of employment and job typologies for two reasons: (1) different job typologies are differently influenced by external forces that play a significant role in changing job contents and tasks; and (2) different job typologies attract different types of workers (and Cabus et al. (2018) show that worker characteristics matter for participation in adult learning across varying institutional contexts).

In the Enliven project, we explored the extent to which job typologies matter from the perspective of employment dynamics observed in a digital era. In so doing, we tried as far as possible to find causal effects of occupational change on participation in adult E & T by using carefully selected empirical strategies (as explained in Cabus et al., 2019). This demonstrates that variations in participation rates do not only

depend on differences between countries and regions but also on sectors of employment or job typologies. Results that link the observed employment dynamics in the respective information and communication technologies and personal service and personal care sectors to participation in adult E & T indicate that a 100% increase in the level of employment of information and communication technologies professionals is associated with 7.2% greater uptake of job-related courses. An increase in the level of employment of personal service and personal care workers of 100% is associated with 4.5% increase in on-the-job E & T. Further evidence suggests that, while there is no universal increase in participation in adult E & T, regions with more technologically advanced occupational structures show increased intensity of adult learning.

Second, we show that observed employment dynamics influence adult E & T (particularly in workplace learning) through changes in skills demand across the regional labour market. Workplace learning follows demand for labour rather than the reverse, underlining the critique that the European focus on benchmarks and indicators often focuses too much on the supply of skills, neglecting the demand side (Boeren et al., 2019). The results from this mediation analysis indicate that participation in job-related courses is indeed significantly mediated by firms' effective skills demand, particularly among information and communication technologies professionals, and to a lesser extent among personal service and personal care workers. In line with the differing goals and fields of learning activity across job typologies, we argue that job-related courses are offered to personal service and personal care workers as they start working in the job (e.g. as a result of active labour market policies), while information and communication technologies professionals engage in adult learning as a way of raising their skills as required (i.e. as continuous professional development). Given the extent to which the jobs are characterized by differences in educational attainment, this also explains the variation in E & T between low- and high-educated adults and the overall differences in participation observed earlier in this chapter.

## From System-Level Determinants to Individual-Level Experiences

While previous sections have shown *differences* between countries in overall participation rates and access to adult E & T, we are most interestingly also able to show important *similarities* in learning experiences across countries. The second part of this chapter zooms in on the individual experiences of young adult learners in nine different European countries. As argued above, participation rates, and the extent to which countries, regions and workplaces facilitate access to education and training, vary significantly between them. This is true for people in employment, but as mentioned above, those without a job (along with low-qualified adults) tend to be most under-represented in E & T. This is especially problematic for young adults belonging to these groups, given the expectation they will contribute to the economy and society throughout their lives. A young adult aged 25 is expected to work for at least another 40 years before retirement. As such, parts of the Enliven project focused on young low-qualified adults, typically defined as those who do not have an upper secondary education qualification (Boeren et al., 2019).

In what follows, we demonstrate that while adult education systems and participation rates differ significantly between countries, pedagogical practices and the extent to which adults are satisfied with their participation are broadly similar (Boeren et al., 2019). Our central aim was to conduct comparative and international research with younger low-qualified adults and to capture their experiences through qualitative research methods. Based on these learners' insights, combined with data received from staff members working with these young people, we delved deeper into the meaning of participants' experiences, the pedagogical practices applied by educators, and what future actions we might recommend to further optimize their involvement in E & T.

The nine countries involved in this study were Scotland, England, Spain, Italy, Flanders (Belgium), Austria, Estonia, Slovakia and Bulgaria. This part of the project strongly focused on younger vulnerable adults who had left school with no or low qualifications. As explained above, educational attainment remains a major determinant both of

participation in post-compulsory education and of other social, cultural and economic aspects of adults' lives, such as quality of employment (Boeren, 2016). Low-educated adults are, for instance, known to engage less in civic life—for example, they are under-represented among voters in elections (Janmaat, 2017).

The current European lifelong learning landscape is strongly tailored towards increasing economic competitiveness in the neo-liberal marketplace (Holford & Mohorcic Spolar, 2012). Given the poor involvement of adults with no or low qualifications (see above), as a result of the strong focus on learning in the workplace, a first analysis was undertaken to identify what lifelong learning provision is accessible to them. Such provision can be seen as measures to compensate for low-educated adults' having left initial E & T early. This resulted in a typology of seven categories of provision: (1) basic skills and basic education, (2) second chance education at upper secondary levels, (3) post-secondary VET, (4) apprenticeships, (5) training that forms part of Active Labour Market Policies, (6) workplace or job-related learning, and (7) personal or social learning (Boeren & Whittaker, 2018). Some of these types, such as second chance education, lead explicitly to officially recognized qualifications, while others are geared towards enhancing positive learning experiences and increased levels of skills in various areas, including employability (e.g. apprenticeships) and empowerment (e.g. personal or social learning). Given the focus on low-qualified adults, participation in tertiary education was excluded from this exercise. The first two types of provision focus on the need for adults to possess basic skills in numeracy, literacy and problem-solving to cope with the demands of the fast-changing society. Other types concentrate more on the application of these skills to specific work contexts. In line with the structural differences discussed in the first two sections of this book chapter, we found considerable variation in available provision between countries (Boeren & Whittaker, 2018). For example, provision of second chance and basic skills education in Bulgaria is very limited, while core providers for adult basic education operate within the Flemish formal adult education system. In line with previous research evidence on system characteristics in education, the Dutch- and German-speaking countries (Flanders (Belgium) and Austria) scored more strongly than other countries in the provision of

vocationally orientated training. The UK has a wide range of provision in place, but there is also a stronger involvement of private for-profit providers. Southern Mediterranean countries are still developing more robust training initiatives in relation to, for example, apprenticeships. These observations reiterate the points made above: provision of E & T varies significantly across different European countries.

We now move our attention from the structural barriers preventing participation at the societal level to those who—against all odds—succeed in entering E & T of some kind. In following this approach, we can learn from the experiences of learners from within the system.

We approached this research by selecting education and training schemes with commonalities in specific countries that, as demonstrated above, are significantly different from each other in relation to their social, economic, educational and political contexts (Bray et al., 2014). The decision to focus on both (1) ‘empowerment’ for those who lack basic skills and (2) ‘employability’ for those who need help for their future integration into the labour market (i.e. potential outcomes of participation) led us to select two European-wide schemes: (1) Upskilling Pathways and (2) the European Youth Guarantee. Although the provision of E & T varies, these initiatives are coordinated at the European level. Upskilling Pathways, established by the European Commission, starts from the observation that too many adults still lack adequate levels of basic skills such as numeracy and literacy (European Commission, 2016). This prevents them from adequate participation in the labour market and other domains of life. Upskilling Pathways initiatives assess adults’ skills and then refer them to a specific E & T initiative. A final assessment of their skills after training should then lead to an official qualification or proof of these skills.

First introduced in the Nordic countries in the 1980s, the Youth Guarantee aims to make young adults a suitable offer for employment or further education and training within four months (ILO, 2017). This is done through young adults’ involvement in tailored E & T interventions. Following the economic and financial crisis of 2008, with high levels of youth unemployment, especially in countries like Spain and Greece, policy-makers rolled out the Youth Guarantee scheme across Europe. In most countries, adults are eligible up to the age of 25, though in some

this has been extended to 30 because of the high proportion of young people Not in Employment Education or Training (NEETs) in this age group. In 2017, the European Commission claimed to have helped 9 million young people into a job, apprenticeship or traineeship.

The focus on employability and empowerment was chosen as a consistent core concept throughout the Enliven project. In straightforward terms, employability refers to the ability to gain and maintain employment. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) argued that employability results not only from individual factors but also needs to be understood as an interaction with external factors. From an individual perspective, people can increase their employability through a range of attributes such as social skills, reliability, assertiveness, time management skills, gaining formal and vocational qualifications and building work experience. Nevertheless, someone's employability might be affected by characteristics like their age and health. Furthermore, lack of flexibility to move to another area or to shift working hours can constrain employability, especially among personal service and personal care workers. This is strongly linked with personal circumstances such as combining work with family responsibilities and access to resources such as social capital and informal networks. Nevertheless, demand factors need to be taken into account as well. Adults may have strong individual attributes but may be limited by the lack of opportunities in the labour market. As demonstrated in the first section of this chapter, not all countries or regions are equally successful in providing support for employment. Benefit systems and Active Labour Market policies have been developed to varying extents, and adult learning significantly differs across job typologies. Given these stark contrasts, we sought to explore whether participants in a similar scheme across Europe experience their participation differently.

The term empowerment, our second focus, has been defined in different ways by various scholars (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007). Narayan (2005, p. 3) points out that it is often used as a synonym for concepts like 'autonomy, self-direction, self-determination, liberation, participation, mobilization and self-confidence'. In relation to education, empowerment is important in people's striving towards situations where they can make their own decisions and deal with the barriers that come their way. Within this debate, possessing good levels of knowledge and basic skills

have been mentioned by various authors (Agudo & Albornà, 2011; Hennink et al., 2012; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Özmete, 2011). The link between empowerment and literacy levels has received particular attention (for example, from Duckworth & Brzeski, 2015).

We therefore focused on basic skills like literacy and numeracy to investigate E & T in relation to empowerment. It is core to the European Commission Upskilling Pathways scheme. Results from the Survey of Adult Skills (part of the OECD's Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies) suggested 35 million adults in Europe lack basic skills required to cope with the demands of the knowledge-based economy (OECD, 2016). The European Commission, keen to address this, has been active in implementing Upskilling Pathways across the Member States.

Because each has relatively uniform aims across Europe, the Youth Guarantee and Upskilling Pathways schemes were chosen for detailed case study work which were labelled as policy trails (Boeren et al., 2019).

## The Policy Trail Method

The policy trail methodology, developed by colleagues in the “LLLight in Europe” project (Melo & Holford, 2015), is used to explore elements of adult learning in companies. In a globalized world, education and other social policies are constructed through complex processes and involve a range of actors. We wanted to explore how policies for increasing adults' employability and empowerment ‘travel’—how they are adopted, adapted and implemented by different actors, and whether this varied in different contexts with varying levels of access to E & T. Our qualitative fieldwork was modelled accordingly, adopting a multilevel angle throughout, and involving local policy makers, staff working in and managing education and training institutions, and the young adult learners themselves.

As already pointed out above, in each country the Enliven team selected two training programmes, one to represent the Youth Guarantee and the other, Upskilling Pathways. As details of the latter scheme were announced only a couple of months before the start of our fieldwork, partners were allowed to select programmes that represented similar aims,

such as basic skills courses: a list of potential programmes incorporating Upskilling Pathways aims was distributed among consortium members. Within these, adult learners were selected for semi-structured in-depth interviews. In accordance with the scope of this part of the Enliven project, the focus was on low-educated adults, acknowledging the increased chance of their having accumulated disadvantages such as being on a low income, living in a deprived area, coming from a minority ethnic background group, being in care or having adverse health conditions (Boeren & Whittaker, 2018). Staff members working with these adults, and a local policy maker, were also interviewed.

Semi-structured interview guidelines were developed for all partners to semi-standardize data collection, as the nine countries were known to have dissimilar system-level characteristics. Adult learners were asked to talk about the barriers they had to overcome before enrolment, their experiences of being an adult learner and whether they expected some beneficial outcomes as a result of their participation. Practitioners were asked to provide detailed information about the wider social, economic and institutional contexts in which the programmes took place, the difficulties they had dealt with in making programmes successful, the ways in which they measured the effectiveness and success of the training interventions, and what suggestions they had for the future. The local policy maker was interviewed to provide further contextual information.

Guidelines for data analysis and a common reporting template were distributed among partners. The coordinating team responsible for this element of the project undertook comparative analysis of results, looking for similarities and differences between countries.

## **Different Systems, Broadly Similar Experiences**

As extensively discussed above, different countries have varying levels of participation in adult E & T. Exploring the details of the selected employability programmes across the nine countries revealed many similarities in types of training provided and pedagogical methodologies. Often, individual activities such as counselling, career guidance and work placements are combined with group activities for basic, social and job-specific

(including technical or job searching) skills training. Interestingly, programmes studied as part of the policy trails on empowerment demonstrated strong parallels not only between countries but also with those analysed in relation to employability. While we were explicit in being interested in the empowerment aspect of the selected programmes under (or having aims similar to) the Upskilling Pathways initiative, selected initiatives seemed to emphasize the need for young adults to find employment. This was found regardless of country. Programmes studied as part of the empowerment trail tended to focus primarily on basic skills but often applied to work-related contexts. This strongly underlines the vocational and economic orientation of Europe's education and training policies as discussed elsewhere in this book.

The characteristics of the young adults taking part in both employability and empowerment initiatives were also very similar, across both the countries and the two schemes. Participants tended to be unemployed, to belong to the NEET category, and to live with multiple disadvantages such as poor mental health and poverty. Project partners interviewed young adult learners from different backgrounds, including refugees and, in Bulgaria, from Roma communities. Many of the interviewees, across countries and schemes, bullied at school, had become disengaged with education. For some, this led to alcohol and drug addictions and had a negative effect on their self-esteem and confidence. The idea of young low-educated adults suffering from accumulated disadvantages was strongly confirmed within the group of learners selected. An overview of their cumulative disadvantages as analysed through a WordCloud activity can be found in Fig. 4.3. The figure on the left represents learners' background characteristics from the Youth Guarantee; that on the right, from Upskilling Pathways. Despite differences in participation rates between countries, learners with these characteristics of disadvantage were present across the different country samples, indicating that each country does attract them to a *certain* extent, though absolutely not to a *similar* extent.

In terms of outcomes, while the programmes in all the countries had a very strong work-related focus, most young adults reported that increasing self-worth and confidence in their own abilities was the most important outcome of their participation. This was again a consistent finding across the various countries. While we were at first surprised that most



**Fig. 4.3** Cumulative disadvantages of participants in Youth Guarantee (left) and Upskilling Pathways (right) (Source: WordCloud based on Enliven data)

empowerment policy trails had a vocational orientation, the training provided did seem to have an empowering effect. This also held true for participants interviewed within the policy trails on employability and again this was fairly consistent across the nine countries.

Delving deeper into the experiences of staff members working with these young adults, it became clear that there was a trend among practitioners to complain about the lack of funding they received. Given the clients' cumulative disadvantages, many need more individualized and tailored support. Youth workers and training staff, again across Europe, tended to perceive themselves as underpaid, and the feeling of financial pressure appeared as a common theme throughout the interviews. Several interviewees mentioned the high levels of courage and motivation needed to survive in their jobs as social workers and youth educators.

In order to run initiatives under the Youth Guarantee or Upskilling Pathways, most of the coordinating E & T agencies require external funding. Across Europe, in many countries, governments have not made adequate investments in E & T, which has led to some countries—for example, those in Eastern Europe—becoming over-dependent on funding streams such as the European Social Fund. This generates a number of problems, and E & T initiatives tend to be short-term and not backed up by structural changes in the countries' long-term policy planning.

Longer term follow-up of participants is hardly ever undertaken for programmes that run as one-off funded initiatives, leaving us in the dark on how young people fare in the medium term after leaving the organization. This makes it hard to judge the effectiveness of the interventions and their longer term impact on these young adults' lives. Valid and reliable evaluation and outcome data for these and related programmes were very difficult to find. As such, the claim that the Youth Guarantee has helped 14 million young adults in Europe to escape youth unemployment for an extensive period of time is hard to confirm (European Commission, 2019a). Regardless of the Youth Guarantee, a period of economic growth after the financial crisis might have resulted in higher levels of employment in any case. These initiatives underline strongly the complexity of the situation and the need for a focus on the supply side.

Another problem with the over-reliance on external funding is that often these schemes require evidence of previous success. During our data analyses, and in wider discussions within the consortium, we discovered the prevalence of 'parking and creaming' approaches, with practitioners telling us they selected young adults for their programmes only when they were confident they would do well. Such 'cherry-picking' boosts a provider's statistics and reputation, enabling it to attract more funding in future. However, it is especially problematic given the already low participation rates among low-educated adults with cumulative disadvantages and because countries with the lowest overall participation rates are also those most dependent on external funding. Confronting such people with further difficulties means that those furthest from the labour market and full participation in society will remain under-represented in lifelong learning.

## Conclusions

This chapter has explored participation in E & T from both system- and individual-level perspectives. It is clear that participation rates significantly vary according to countries and between adults from distinct socio-economic groups. In relation to unequal participation, we have demonstrated that structural-level features are strongly embedded in

individual-level outcomes. Adults' engagement with E & T is the result not only of individuals' willingness or ability to participate but also of macro-structural system characteristics. Our approach was in line with Rubenson and Desjardins (2009), who used the notion of Bounded Agency, and indicated the need for multilevel approaches in understanding of participation. We explored this issue specifically for low-educated adults, a group strongly underrepresented in adult education (Rubenson, 2018).

The European Commission stimulates participation in education and training through soft governance measures, notably benchmarks and indicators. Country-level statistics reveal low levels of participation in many Eastern and Southern European countries. Levels of inequalities in access are also strongest in these countries. The European Commission's attempt to counterbalance these statistics has been the implementation of Europe-wide schemes, such as the Youth Guarantee and Upskilling Pathways. These draw on European funding, mainly through the Youth Employment Initiative and the European Social Fund. While these initiatives have undoubtedly helped a significant group of young adults to access education and training, it remains unclear how far they have helped to build stronger levels of adult education provision in low-performing countries. Enliven analyses (Boeren & Whittaker, 2018) revealed that countries with poor participation rates have weak levels of provision in basic skills and second-chance education, as well as vocational provision such as apprenticeships. From our qualitative work, we know that the experiences of learners in these European schemes are similar, and that they use broadly similar pedagogical methods. We agree with Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) and Boeren (2016) that breaking down barriers to participation needs action at different levels. While adults need to understand the benefits of lifelong learning, they have difficulties accessing systems that are underfunded and provide a limited range of training options. The European Agenda for Adult Learning encourages a better-balanced landscape in relation to supply and take-up of E & T, but a recent stocktaking report strongly underlines the need to invest more directly in basic skills education (European Commission, 2019b). Our research supports this conclusion: it is necessary to help the most disadvantaged adults in society. We also endorse the stocktaking report's

conclusion that building stronger lifelong learning systems in Member States requires a valid and reliable evidence base: this implies stronger evaluation mechanisms for European initiatives such as Upskilling Pathways.

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# 5

## Participation of Vulnerable Young Labour Market Groups in Job-Related Training: The Effect of Macro-structural and Institutional Characteristics

Ellu Saar, Eve-Liis Roosmaa, and Liisa Martma

### Introduction

Global economic changes have altered labour market demand in favour of high-skilled workers. The number of jobs requiring low levels of skill has significantly declined, which has led to poorer labour market opportunities for people with low-skill levels (OECD, 2013). These changes have also created a vicious circle in that increasing the skill-set required in low-skilled jobs has meant that not only do workers in those positions lose their jobs but also they cannot meet the skill-sets required for other low-skilled jobs (Maxwell, 2006). Increased competition—stemming from the changing balance of supply and demand in the market—is likely to mostly affect the least competitive individuals. Education and

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training policies, meanwhile, are often directed at increasing labour productivity rather than integrating vulnerable groups into the labour market (Acemoglu & Pischke, 2000).

The transition to knowledge-based economies requires ever more effort to provide continuous skill updating in order to maintain economic growth and competitiveness as well as social cohesion and equal opportunities in life chances. Young people comprise a group that is listed as at risk of social exclusion in European and national official documents. The analysis presented in Chap. 3 above indicates that the terms *low-skilled* or *low-qualified* are those most commonly used to characterise vulnerable young people in European official literature on lifelong learning. However, this characterisation of vulnerable young people focuses on individual factors in lifelong learning policies. Cort et al. (2018) argue the primary emphasis on the attainment of skills makes the individual responsible for acquiring the ‘right skills’. Research has shown a strong positive relationship between participation in adult education and skills proficiency (the so-called Matthew effect) (OECD, 2013). Yet recent research has challenged the individualised interpretation of inequalities in participation by showing that participation in training is even more strongly determined by characteristics of workplaces and occupations and less by individual resources<sup>1</sup> (Schindler et al., 2011; Mohr et al., 2015; Saar & Räis, 2017). This demand side has so far attracted little research or discussion. At the same time, employees working in occupations for which only elementary skills are required are on the margins of the labour market. They face a high threat of unemployment and have restricted possibilities for personal and professional development. The current chapter concentrates on job-related non-formal education and training (NFE) participation of two vulnerable groups of young people: the low-skilled and those working in low-skilled occupations. We consider as low-skilled those whose highest qualification is at lower secondary level. These two groups overlap because people

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<sup>1</sup> There is a very clear distinction between people with low skill or educational levels and employees working in elementary occupations. If the levels of skills and education account for the supply side, occupation and labour market status are variables accounting for the demand side of the labour market. The demand side seems to have an even stronger association with participation in adult training (see Desjardins, 2014).

with low education are often working in low-skilled occupations (i.e. face an accumulation of disadvantages). However, because there is a considerable percentage of over-educated workers in Europe (McGuinness, 2006; McGuinness et al., 2017), some people with medium-level skills work in low-skilled occupations or are unemployed.

To better understand policy influence on inequality in the training participation of young people, we explore whether the influence of education and occupational position on job-related NFE participation differs systematically across countries. Research shows there are systematic differences between countries in respect of both the level and the inequality of training (Saar et al., 2013; Bills & van de Werfhorst, 2018). Less attention has been paid to the impact of economic recession on training (Felstead et al., 2012). In order to implement an equal opportunity strategy, it is necessary to understand how economic context, international and national policies and institutional structures at the macro-level create learning opportunities for young people across Europe, and to what degree these processes are country-specific. In addition, institutional structures, such as the education system, the labour market and the welfare state, tend to mitigate the effect of individual (i.e. micro-level) factors (e.g. Roosmaa & Saar, 2010). This raises the issue of whether there are policy measures that lead to more equality in training participation between young adult groups. Thus, in the current study, we relate the participation of low-skilled young people and those working in low-skilled occupations to the institutional and macro-structural features that are most likely to influence their participation: the unemployment rate, occupational and educational structure, industrial relations and active labour market policies. However, due to sample size restrictions, we are unable to focus merely on young adults working in elementary occupations (i.e. occupations with the lowest skill requirements), and we therefore analyse a wider occupational group including those working in medium-skilled occupations. In addition, because we are interested in whether patterns of job-related NFE participation have changed for the groups mentioned—and if so, how—we analyse the EU Adult Education Survey 2011 and 2016 data, which enable us to estimate the possible effect of the economic recession that started in 2008.

## Data and Methods

The analysis is based on data from the EU Adult Education Surveys 2011 (AES 2011) and 2016 (AES 2016), co-ordinated by Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union. The AES data analysed cover 28 European countries: 26 EU Member States<sup>2</sup> plus Norway and Switzerland. The survey is representative of the working age population (aged 25–64 years) living in private households; we concentrated on young adults (25–34 years). The focus is on job-related non-formal adult education and training (NFE), which is mostly employer-sponsored and constitutes the majority of total non-formal learning activities (Cedefop, 2015a). Participation in job-related NFE refers to participation in the 12 months prior to the questionnaire-based interview. The AES collects a list of up to ten NFE learning activities followed by a random selection of up to three activities<sup>3</sup> for which respondents are asked to provide more detailed information, including whether the purpose was mainly job-related or mainly not job-related.

More precisely, we concentrate on the participation of two vulnerable groups of young adults: those with low educational attainment (ISCED 0–2)<sup>4</sup> and those working in low- or medium-skilled occupations (ISCO 5–9).<sup>5</sup> We were unable to restrict the analysis to elementary occupations—the least skill-intensive—alone, because of small sample sizes

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<sup>2</sup>Croatia did not participate in AES 2011 and Croatian AES 2016 data is not included in the analysis due to the lack of comparable data. Ireland is not included in the analysis because in 2011, detailed information on training and on job-related purpose of training was collected only by considering one training activity among those mentioned by the respondent (instead of at least two activities as instructed by Eurostat). This can influence respective results and comparisons (for more detail see Cedefop, 2015a, p. 20). Moreover, in AES 2016, the Irish sample excluded people in continuous full-time education. The UK was a member state at these times.

<sup>3</sup>The Eurostat regulation asked for at least two NFE activities.

<sup>4</sup>According to the International Standard Classification of Education, ISCED 2011, the respective educational groups are pre-primary, primary and basic education. The AES does not measure specific skill levels of the respondents.

<sup>5</sup>According to the International Standard Classification of Occupations, ISCO-08, the respective occupational groups are service and sales workers, skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers, craft and related trades workers, plant and machine operators, and assemblers and elementary occupations. According to the ISCO-08 description, ISCO 9 occupations correspond to skill level 1 (respectively primary education) and ISCO 4–8 occupations correspond to skill level 2 (up to post-secondary non-tertiary education) (ILO, 2012, p. 14).

among the age group of 25–34 years. The ISCO 4 group (clerical support workers) is not included amongst the low- and medium-skilled occupations here, because their educational background is significantly higher (more have obtained tertiary level education compared to ISCO 5–9), and they have considerably higher NFE participation rates. In the analysis, the reference groups are young people with upper secondary education or higher (ISCED 3–5)<sup>6</sup> and people working in high-skilled occupations (ISCO 1–3).<sup>7</sup>

Although our main interest is the impact of institutional characteristics on the probability of participation, the logistic regression models control for some individual level characteristics. Thus, all include gender as a control variable. In the case of the subgroup of young people with low educational level, the models control for labour market position (employed, unemployed, inactive). For the subgroup of young people working in medium- or low-skilled occupations, the models control for the economic sector of activity (four sectors, based on a slightly modified version of the Singelmann scheme (1978, pp. 1227–1234)). The analysis of the macro-structural context and institutional settings of the countries includes various indicators from the Eurostat dissemination dataset (the percentages of low-educated population and elementary occupations; investment in active labour market measures) and the OECD database (employment protection legislation (EPL) index) (see Table 5.1).

The first step in the analysis was to calculate at country level the participation rates in job-related NFE for the two vulnerable groups of young adults. For the pooled analysis (which includes 26 country cases in 2011<sup>8</sup> and 28 country cases in 2016), we start with a comparison between economic sectors (including interaction effects). The second step involved a multi-level, mixed-effect logistic regression in order to test the impact

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<sup>6</sup>The respective educational groups are upper secondary, post-secondary non-tertiary and tertiary education.

<sup>7</sup>These ISCO codes correspond to managers, professionals and technicians and associate professionals.

<sup>8</sup>In Belgium, AES 2011 was integrated into the Labour Force Survey (LFS). As LFS has its own specificities this aspect has been assessed as a factor likely to influence cross-country comparability by under reporting of participation (for more detail see Cedefop, 2015a, p. 20). In addition, in the 2011 regression models, the UK is not included because there is no information on the economic sector in AES 2011.

**Table 5.1** The description of macro-level variables, 2011 AES dataset

Country	EPL (2011)	ALMP active labour market policies expenditure, % of GDP (2011)	Unemployment % (2011)	Low educated (ISCED 0–2) % (2011)	Elementary occupation (ISCO 9) % (2011)
AT	2.37	0.55	4.60	23.10	8.55
BG	NA	0.12	11.30	24.00	9.65
CH	1.60	NA	NA	21.40	4.46
CY	NA	0.30	7.90	28.30	17.68
CZ	3.05	0.17	6.70	13.90	5.41
DE	2.68	0.43	5.80	18.10	8.40
DK	2.20	1.42	7.60	30.70	10.62
EE	1.81	0.14	12.30	17.70	9.04
EL	2.17	0.22 <sup>a</sup>	17.90	37.10	7.26
ES	2.21	0.69	21.40	47.00	13.03
FI	2.17	0.82	7.80	22.90	6.24
FR	2.38	0.68	9.20	31.20	10.05
HU	2.00	0.35	11.00	24.30	8.81
IT	2.76	0.31	8.40	45.50	10.09
LT	NA	0.18	15.40	15.90	7.79
LU	2.25	0.46	4.80	29.10	7.43
LV	2.69 <sup>b</sup>	0.33	16.20	19.50	14.28
MT	NA	0.08	6.40	58.90	10.02
NL	2.82	0.68	5.00	31.80	7.92
NO	2.33	NA	3.40	25.40	4.19
PL	2.23	0.33	9.70	17.50	6.97
PT	4.13	0.45	12.90	64.20	11.86
RO	NA	0.03	7.20	30.00	10.56
SE	2.61	0.91	7.80	24.40	5.14
SI	2.60	0.25	8.20	19.70	8.33
SK	2.22	0.22	13.70	16.30	8.81
UK	1.26	0.08 <sup>a</sup>	8.10	23.80	8.84

Source: Eurostat dissemination database; ICTWSS (Database on Institutional Characteristics of Trade Unions, Wage Setting, State Intervention and Social Pacts)

Notes: *NA* not available; *AT* Austria; *BG* Bulgaria; *CH* Switzerland; *CY* Cyprus; *CZ* Czech Republic; *DE* Germany; *DK* Denmark; *EE* Estonia; *EL* Greece; *ES* Spain; *FI* Finland; *FR* France; *HU* Hungary; *IT* Italy; *LT* Lithuania; *LU* Luxembourg; *LV* Latvia; *MT* Malta; *NL* The Netherlands; *NO* Norway; *PL* Poland; *PT* Portugal; *RO* Romania; *SE* Sweden; *SI* Slovenia; *SK* Slovakia; *UK* United Kingdom

<sup>a</sup>Data from 2010

<sup>b</sup>Data from 2012

of various macro-level contextual factors on the individual probability of being in job-related NFE among the subgroups of low-skilled people and those working in medium or low-skilled occupations. The third step used a stepwise inclusion of variables measuring various macro-economic and institutional features to test the impact of macro-level predictors. The latter is important in order to avoid the problem of multicollinearity as various institutional features may be correlated. Moreover, logistic regression models control for interaction effects between two groups of young people and respective macro-economic and institutional variables.

## Inequality in Participation

### Young Adults with Low Educational Levels

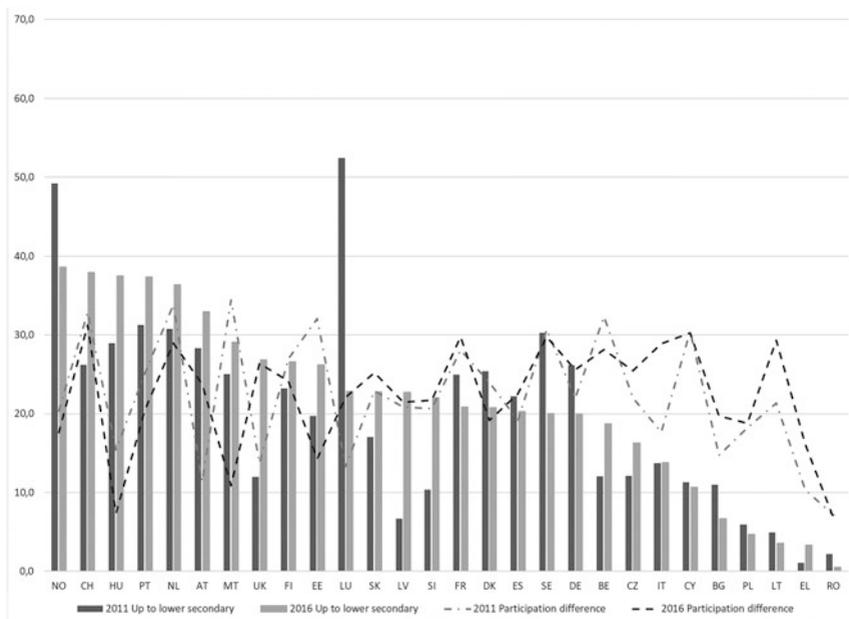
Figure 5.1 illustrates participation in job-related NFE in 2011 and 2016 among young people who have up to a lower secondary qualification as their highest completed education. On average in the countries observed, about one-fifth of the 25–34-year-old age group with low skills participated in job-related training in both 2011 and 2016. However, it appears that by 2016, in 10 of the 28 countries the job-related NFE rate of low-skilled youth had considerably increased<sup>9</sup> (especially in Latvia and the UK),<sup>10</sup> while in four countries the respective rate has decreased (most drastically in Luxembourg).<sup>11</sup> We might therefore assume that after the economic recession, NFE participation opportunities improved. Overall, there are large country differences in the participation rates of low-skilled young adults. Thus, in 2016 in Norway, Switzerland, Hungary, Portugal

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<sup>9</sup> The difference between 2011 and 2016 low-skilled job-related NFE participation rates is more than 5 percentage points.

<sup>10</sup> The AES 2011 and AES 2016 are based on respondents from England only and therefore did not include respondents in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Further, the UK AES Quality Report explains that there are a number of key differences between the two survey waves and therefore comparisons should be made with a certain degree of caution.

<sup>11</sup> In Luxembourg, AES 2011 was carried out as an online survey with a pre-existing web panel. The 2016 survey was based on a randomly drawn sample from the national population register. This fundamental methodological change might have had a serious impact on the results and therefore comparisons between 2011 and 2016 should be made with caution.



**Fig. 5.1** Participation in job-related non-formal education and training (%) among low-skilled young adults (25–34) in 28 selected European countries for 2011 and 2016. (Source: AES 2011, AES 2016; Authors' own calculation. Notes: Countries are ranked by 2016 participation rates from highest to lowest. The difference in job-related NFE rates = upper secondary or higher education (ISCED 3–5)—up to lower secondary education (ISCED 0–2))

and the Netherlands about 40% of low-skilled youth took part in job-related training, whereas in Poland, Lithuania, Greece and Romania fewer than 5% participated. It appears that low-skilled people have better training opportunities in countries with high overall lifelong learning participation rates but also in countries where the adult education system is specifically orientated towards the low-skilled (e.g. Portugal, see UNESCO, 2016).

Comparison with those who have attained upper secondary education or higher is indicated in Fig. 5.1 by the difference in participation calculated by subtracting job-related NFE participation rates of those who have up to lower secondary education from those with upper secondary or higher education. Hence, the difference is expressed in percentage

points. As expected, in all countries young adults with upper secondary or higher education participate more often in job-related training, yet country differences between high- and low-skilled participation rates are considerable. High-skilled youth participate in training twice as much as low-skilled youth. In 2016, the smallest difference (about 7 percentage points) is observable in Hungary and Romania, countries lying at two extremes of the figure—the former with one of the highest and the latter with the lowest training participation rate among young adults who have up to lower secondary education. The widest participation gaps (about 30 percentage points) appear in Switzerland and the Netherlands, countries with high low-skilled job-related NFE participation rates, but mostly wider differences are present in countries with either medium participation rates (France, Sweden<sup>12</sup> and Belgium) or low ones (Italy, Cyprus and Lithuania) for those with low educational attainment. In both years, the number of countries with wide participation gaps between low- and high-skilled young people has remained the same (8 out of 28), and the countries themselves are largely the same.

A comparison of the job-related NFE participation differences between low- and high-skilled people in 2011 and 2016 reveals that these changes occurred for various reasons. On the one hand, by 2016, the difference between the two educational groups had notably *increased*<sup>13</sup> in Austria and the UK, because job-related NFE has increased for both groups but especially for those with higher educational attainment. In Greece, Italy and Lithuania, the participation difference had increased due to higher NFE participation rates among high-skilled young people while remaining about the same for low-skilled people. On the other hand, in Hungary, the participation difference *decreased* because participation had increased among low-skilled people and remained the same for the high-skilled, whereas Estonia and Malta also witnessed a participation increase for the low-skilled, but simultaneously a considerable decrease among the

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<sup>12</sup>According to the Swedish AES Quality Report, the data collection mode between 2011 and 2016 changes from CAPI/CATI to just CATI; therefore, there are data comparability issues. Moreover, it is emphasised that there is no reason to assume that participation in NFE has decreased from 2011 to 2016.

<sup>13</sup>Here we consider 6 percentage points and larger changes between 2011 and 2016 job-related NFE participation differences.

high-skilled. In Luxembourg, both educational groups had lower job-related NFE participation rates in 2016, but the decrease is larger for the low-skilled.<sup>14</sup> The differences in tendencies between countries may be explained by variations in the demand for skills in the labour market (structure of occupations, percentage of innovation-driven enterprises, etc.) (see also Desjardins, 2014), or by variances in enterprise training culture (Markowitsch & Hefler, 2007). In addition, participation in job-related NFE could reflect a difference in the impact of the economic crisis that started in 2008 (EAEA, 2014).

## Young Adults Working in Low- and Medium-Skilled Occupations

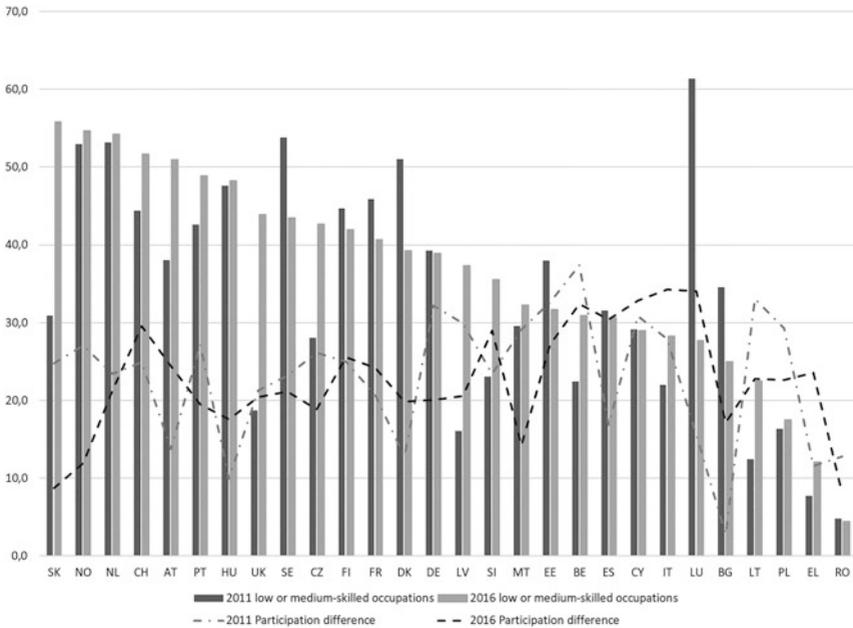
Figure 5.2 shows participation in job-related NFE in 2011 and 2016 among young people working in low- or medium-skilled occupations. The results indicate that on average more than one third of this group participated in job-related training. Participation rates by occupational position are higher than those for educational attainment because, in the context of occupations, a relatively wide group due to sample size restrictions is observed (ISCO 5–9).

For low- or medium-skilled occupations, job-related NFE rates considerably increased<sup>15</sup> from 2011 to 2016 in 11 out of the 28 countries (particularly in Latvia, the UK and Slovakia) but decreased in five countries (by the greatest proportion in Luxembourg). As with low-skilled young adults, there are also notable country differences for young people in low- or medium-skilled occupations. The highest participation rates in 2016 appear in Slovakia, Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Austria, where more than half of the respective group attended job-related NFE. At the other extreme are Poland with a participation rate of 18%, Greece with 12% and Romania with 5%. Thus, the pattern is rather similar to that (shown in Fig. 5.1) for low-skilled young adults.

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<sup>14</sup> As mentioned earlier, in Luxembourg's case, comparability between AES 2011 and AES 2016 is highly problematic.

<sup>15</sup> The difference between 2011 and 2016 low or medium occupation job-related NFE participation rates is more than 5 percentage points.



**Fig. 5.2** Participation in job-related non-formal education and training (%) among young adults (25–34) in low- or medium-skilled occupations in 28 selected European countries for 2011 and 2016. (Source: AES 2011, AES 2016; Authors' own calculation. Notes: Countries are ordered by 2016 participation rates from highest to lowest. Difference in job-related NFE rates = high-skilled occupations (ISCO 1–3)—low- or medium-skilled occupations (ISCO 5–9))

In all countries, 25–34-year-olds working in low- or medium-skilled occupations participate less often in the job-related NFE than their counterparts in high-skilled occupations. However, because those working in medium-skilled occupations are included, participation differences are narrower than those observed between the two educational groups. In 2016, the smallest participation rate differences (on average 10 percentage points) between occupational groups appeared again at the two extremes: first, in Slovakia and Norway, countries with the highest job-related NFE rates among the low- or medium-skilled; and second, in Romania, which had the lowest rate. Participation rate difference for the two occupational groups is mostly widest (about 30 percentage points) in countries characterised by a lower than average NFE

participation rate among young adults: Belgium, Spain, Cyprus, Italy and Luxembourg. Still, the participation gap is wide also in Slovenia and Switzerland, where young people working in low- or medium-skilled occupations have average or high job-related training participation. In 2011 and 2016, the number of countries with a wide participation gap between low- or medium- and high-skilled occupations has remained about the same (respectively 8 and 7 out of 28) but countries vary more between the two years than in the case of educational groups.

Comparing the job-related NFE participation differences of low- or medium-skilled with high-skilled occupational groups in 2011 and 2016 shows that the differences between these groups *increased* markedly<sup>16</sup> in Austria because of the higher participation rates for both occupational groups, but more so for the high-skilled. In Greece and Spain, the participation difference widened due to higher NFE participation among the high-skilled, while for the low- or medium-skilled the participation rate remained about the same. In Bulgaria, the occupational group difference increased because of an increase among the high-skilled and a decrease among the low- or medium-skilled. In Slovakia and Latvia, the job-related NFE participation difference *decreased* significantly: the training incidence in 2016 was higher for both occupational groups, but particularly for the low- or medium-skilled. In Lithuania, training participation has increased for the less advantaged occupational group, yet the participation rate remained about the same for the high-skilled. Finally, the job-related NFE participation difference decreased in Germany, Norway and Malta, as a result of stable participation rates for the low- or medium-skilled occupations and decreased rates for high-skilled occupations.

## The Impact of Economic Sector

The impact of the economic sector on training incidence is well documented (OECD, 2003; Cedefop, 2015a, b). Firms operating in training-intensive or innovation-driven sectors (e.g. professional, scientific and technological activities, finance, insurance and real estate, information

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<sup>16</sup> Here we consider 9 percentage point and larger changes between 2011 and 2016 job-related NFE participation differences.

and communication) and areas of the public sector with a higher proportion of high-skilled employees (e.g. education, health and public administration) are more likely to provide job-related training. Moreover, parts of the public sector may be obliged to train by national legislation (Cedefop, 2015a).

Our results largely confirm previous findings. Young adults working in manufacturing industry, construction or transport, and in wholesale, retail, accommodation or food service sectors, have a lower probability of participating in job-related NFE compared to those working in professional, scientific, technical, administrative or support services, public administration, education, health and social work sector. This holds for both years of observation (see Table 5.2). However, we find no significant differences in the probabilities of participating in job-related training for those working in agriculture, forestry and fishing compared to those in training-intensive sectors (probably because of the small sample size for the former group).

Additionally, in 2011 (i.e. towards the end of the post-2008 economic recession), interaction effects show that working in industry, or in the construction or transport sectors, decreased the probability of NFE participation for low- and medium-skilled occupations even more than for high-skilled occupations. Analysis for 2016 does not show economic sector differences by occupational group.

## The Impact of Macro Context

The impact of economic downturns and levels of unemployment on participation in job-related training is ambiguous (Dieckhoff, 2014). On the one hand, training costs are lower during a recession because there is less demand. Cost-benefit calculations during a recession might lead employers to invest more in the training of low-skilled workers and those in elementary occupations. In addition, the state may influence the supply of training programmes by providing various subsidy schemes for wages and training (Bosch, 2010). On the other hand, businesses experience financial constraints, which make them reluctant to invest in training and especially in training low-skilled workers. In a deep and prolonged

**Table 5.2** The description of macro-level variables, 2016 AES dataset

Country	EPL (2013)	ALMP (active labour market policies) expenditure, % of GDP (2015)	Unemployment % (2016)	Low educated (ISCED 0–2) % (2016)	Elementary occupation (ISCO 9) % (2016)
AT	2.37	0.58	6.00	19.60	8.14
BE	1.89	0.53	7.80	28.20	10.64
BG	NA	0.14	7.60	21.90	10.33
CH	1.60	NA	NA	18.20	4.04
CY	NA	0.12	13.00	24.00	14.78
CZ	2.92	0.31	4.00	12.40	5.45
DE	2.68	0.27	4.10	19.80	7.76
DK	2.20	1.46	6.00	27.00	11.36
EE	1.81	0.10 <sup>a</sup>	6.80	16.70	7.59
EL	2.12	0.24	23.60	30.00	7.02
ES	2.05	0.45 <sup>a</sup>	19.60	42.60	13.03
FI	2.17	0.86	8.80	18.60	6.11
FR	2.38	0.76	10.10	25.50	10.11
HU	1.59	0.81	5.10	21.80	10.69
IT	2.68	0.42	11.70	41.60	11.36
LT	NA	0.25	7.90	12.40	9.14
LU	2.25	0.51	6.30	28.20	8.29
LV	2.69	0.10	9.60	14.90	12.32
MT	NA	0.10 <sup>a</sup>	4.70	47.90	8.65
NL	2.82	0.53	6.00	27.90	8.69
NO	2.33	NA	4.80	24.90	3.80
PL	2.23	0.40	6.20	14.60	6.43
PT	3.18	0.48	11.20	52.90	10.80
RO	NA	0.02	5.90	28.00	9.43
SE	2.61	1.02	6.90	21.10	4.85
SI	2.60	0.16	8.00	17.20	6.57
SK	1.84	0.16	9.70	14.30	8.73
UK	1.10	0.08 <sup>b</sup>	4.80	20.40	8.57

Source: Eurostat dissemination database; ICTWSS (Database on Institutional Characteristics of Trade Unions, Wage Setting, State Intervention and Social Pacts) Notes: *NA* not available, *AT* Austria; *BE* Belgium; *BG* Bulgaria; *CH* Switzerland; *CY* Cyprus; *CZ* Czech Republic; *DE* Germany; *DK* Denmark; *EE* Estonia; *EL* Greece; *ES* Spain; *FI* Finland; *FR* France; *HU* Hungary; *IT* Italy; *LT* Lithuania; *LU* Luxembourg; *LV* Latvia; *MT* Malta; *NL* The Netherlands; *NO* Norway; *PL* Poland; *PT* Portugal; *RO* Romania; *SE* Sweden; *SI* Slovenia; *SK* Slovakia; *UK* United Kingdom

<sup>a</sup>Data from 2014

<sup>b</sup>Data from 2010

downturn, the costs of training may increasingly outweigh the benefits, especially for low-skilled workers (Felstead et al., 2012). Although theoretical explanations differ, ‘there is a broad perception that the provision of training is negatively affected by recession’ (Brunello, 2009, p. 10).

Our analysis based on AES 2011 data indicates that Brunello’s proposition is valid: a higher unemployment rate decreased the probability of participating in job-related NFE for young adults—but only during the crisis (see Tables 5.3 and 5.4). In 2016, this effect was not significant. Thus, during the crisis the increased unemployment rate worsened the opportunities for participation in training. The effect is not differentiated by educational groups. This means that in countries where the unemployment rate is higher, the degree of inequality in participation by different educational groups is on the same level as in countries where the unemployment rate is lower.

**Table 5.3** Effect of economic sector on participation in job-related non-formal training among young adults according to occupational position, regression coefficients

	2011	2016
Low- and medium-skilled occupation ( <i>ref high-skilled occupation</i> )	-0.842***	-0.933***
Sector ( <i>ref professional, scientific, technical, administrative and support service, public administration, education, health, social work</i> )		
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	-0.187	-0.226
Industry, construction, transport	-0.105**	-0.160***
Wholesale, retail, accommodation, food service	-0.397***	-0.314***
Low- and medium-skilled occupation × agriculture, forestry and fishing	-0.387	-0.204
Low- and medium-skilled occupation × industry, construction, transport	-0.187**	0.041
Low- and medium-skilled occupation × wholesale, retail, accommodation, food service	0.037	0.033
N of observations	22,944	21,899
N of groups	26	28
Log-likelihood	-13,750	-13,319

Source: AES 2011, AES 2016; Authors’ own calculation

Notes: Dependent variable: participating in job-related training during last 12 months. Method: multilevel mixed effects logistic regression

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table 5.4** Effect of institutional characteristics on participation in job-related non-formal training among young adults according to educational level, regression coefficients

2011	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Low-skilled ( <i>ref. high-skilled</i> )	-0.914***	-0.831***	-0.875***	-0.688***	-938***
Unemployment rate	-0.074*				
Unemployment rate × low educated	0.001				
Population with low level of education, %		0.008			
Population with low level of education, % × low educated		-0.002			
Population in elementary occupations, %			-0.057		
Population in elementary occupations, % × low educated			-0.004		
EPL index				0.198	
EPL index × low educated				-0.082	
ALMP					1.389***
ALMP × low educated					0.071
N of observations	36,452	38,396	38,396	33,208	35,911
N of groups	26	27	27	22	25
Log-likelihood	-20,179	-21,426	-21,426	-19,193	-19,844
2016					
Low-skilled ( <i>ref. high-skilled</i> )	-0.812***	-0.941***	-0.927***	-0.725***	-0.963***
Unemployment rate	-0.027				
Unemployment rate × low educated	-0.008				
Population with low level of education, %		0.004			
Population with low level of education, % × low educated		0.001			

(continued)

Table 5.4 (continued)

2011	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Population in elementary occupations, %			-0.037		
Population in elementary occupations, % × low educated			0.002		
EPL index				0.079	
EPL index × low educated				-0.071	
ALMP					0.773*
ALMP × low educated					0.133
N of observations	34,596	36,180	36,180	31,460	33,969
N of groups	27	28	28	23	26
Log-likelihood	-20,152	-21,112	-21,108	-19,269	-19,745

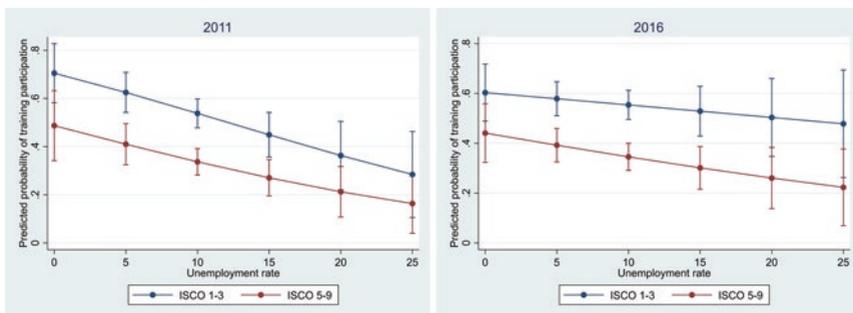
Source: AES2011, AES2016; Authors' own calculation

Notes: Dependent variable: participating in job-related training during last 12 months. Method: multilevel mixed effects logistic regression

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

However, there are some differences in this impact by occupational groups (see Fig. 5.3). Overall, for both years in those countries where the unemployment rate is higher, young adults working in low- or medium-skilled occupations are more disadvantaged in terms of having significantly lower participation rates in job-related NFE. Nevertheless, for that mixed occupational group, a higher unemployment rate reduces the probability of participation for both years to a similar degree. An interesting finding is that the recession had a stronger negative effect on training probabilities for individuals working in high-skilled positions. The provision of training subsidy schemes during the crisis did not lead to a decrease in inequality in participation between different occupational and educational groups. Rather it appears that during the recession, employers invested less in the training of workers in high-skilled occupations, which reduced the differences of participation between the two occupational groups.

It can be argued that there is less demand at lower occupational positions for skill upgrading, and NFE participation is therefore lower.



**Fig. 5.3** Predicted probabilities of training participation at different levels of unemployment and two broad occupational groups. (Source: AES 2011, AES 2016; Authors' own calculation)

Employers are more interested in training workers holding high occupational positions: thus participation in training should be lower and the training gap higher in countries with a high proportion of adults working in low occupational positions. An opposite argument stems from economic literature, which has found evidence that stigmatisation by employers is inversely related to the size of a certain at-risk or disadvantaged group (Omori, 1997; Biewen & Steffes, 2010). Previous studies have shown that NFE participation among low-skilled employees rises with an increase in the percentage of total jobs at the firm level held by low-skilled employees (Mohr et al., 2015).

Our analysis does not support these arguments. Neither the percentage of the population working in elementary occupations nor the percentage of low educated in the population has any impact on participation of young adults in job-related NFE (see Tables 5.4 and 5.5).

## Institutional Influences

Researchers have indicated that high employment protection makes it difficult to dismiss workers, providing an incentive for employers to invest in workers' specific skills and distribute training opportunities more equitably (Dieckhoff et al., 2007). Acemoglu and Pischke (2000)

**Table 5.5** Effect of institutional characteristics on participation in job-related non-formal training among young adults according to occupational position, regression coefficients

2011	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Medium- and low-skilled occupation ( <i>ref high-skilled</i> )	-1.012***	-1.005***	-1.051***	-0.520***	-1.107***
Unemployment rate	-0.079**				
Unemployment rate × medium and low-skilled occupation	0.010				
Population with low level of education, %		-0.002			
Population with low level of education, % × medium- and low-skilled occupation		0.003			
Population in elementary occupations, %			-0.063		
Population in elementary occupations, % × medium- and low-skilled occupation			0.015		
EPL index				0.120	
EPL index × medium- and low-skilled occupation				-0.169***	
ALMP					1.067**
ALMP × medium- and low-skilled occupation					0.448***
N of observations	21,704	22,944	22,944	19,627	21,301
N of groups	25	26	26	21	24
Log-likelihood	-12,957	-13,754	-13,754	-12,116	-12,707

(continued)

Table 5.5 (continued)

2011	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<i>2016</i>					
Medium- and low-skilled occupation ( <i>ref high-skilled</i> )	-0.717***	-0.840***	-0.810***	-1.309***	-0.934***
Unemployment rate	-0.022				
Unemployment rate × medium- and low-skilled occupation	-0.022***				
Population with low level of education, %		-0.003			
Population with low level of education, % × medium- and low-skilled occupation		-0.003			
Population in elementary occupations, %			-0.033		
Population in elementary occupations, % × medium- and low-skilled occupation			-0.011		
EPL index				-0.084	
EPL index × medium- and low-skilled occupation				0.168*	
ALMP					0.671
ALMP × medium- and low-skilled occupation					0.054
N of observations	20,901	21,899	21,899	18,694	20,506
N of groups	27	28	28	23	26
Log-likelihood	-12,763	-13,319	-13,319	-11,899	-12,505

Source: AES2011, AES2016; Authors' own calculation

Notes: Dependent variable: participating in job-related training during last 12 months. Method: multi-level mixed effects logistic regression

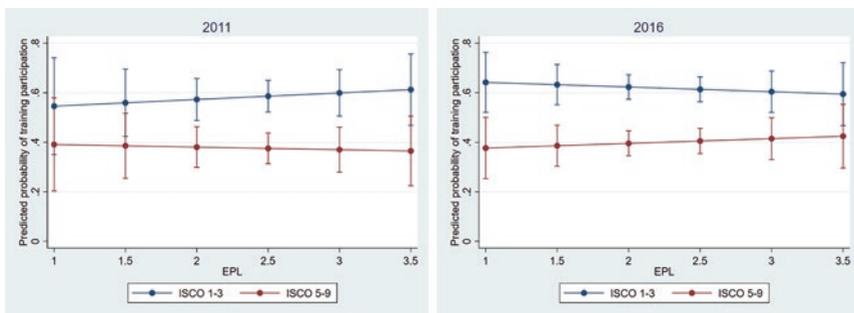
\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

also argue that a reduction in dismissal costs, combined with greater employment flexibility, may reduce the incentives to train everyone, and especially low-skilled workers. However, deregulation may increase job mobility, which is associated with individual skills, implying that individuals may be willing to pay for their own training. Hence, high participation rates can be expected, but as high-skilled employees find investment in training more affordable, inequalities in adult learning could rise. High employment protection may lead to polarisation in labour market opportunities between ‘core’ workers and those in ‘peripheral’ jobs, as well as between insiders and outsiders in the labour market (DiPrete et al., 2001). Moreover, access to training in countries with polarisation could be expected to be highly stratified. The effect of employment protection on training is therefore mixed.

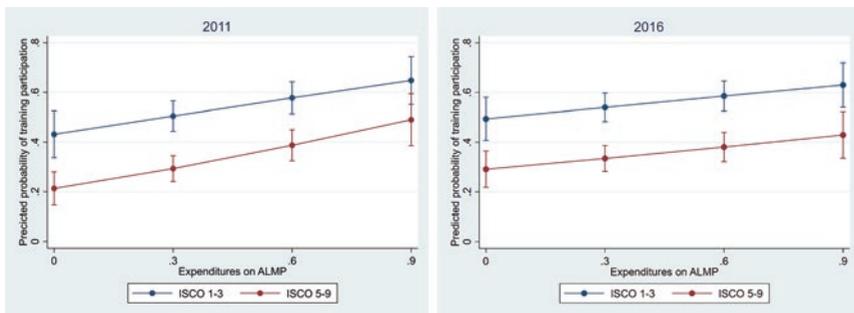
Our analysis shows that the employment protection legislation (EPL) index does not have any impact on the participation of young adults in NFE. This effect is not differentiated by educational group (see Table 5.4). However, during the crisis, employment protection legislation had a negative effect on participation by lower occupational groups, although in 2016, the effect was in the opposite direction (see Fig. 5.4). Thus, in 2011, employment protection legislation increased the inequality in training participation between high-skilled and lower skilled occupational groups, but in 2016, it reduced this inequality. It is an interesting result suggesting that, in a tightening labour market, stronger employment protection legislation may disadvantage young adults working in low- and medium-skilled occupations. This supports Acemoglu and Pischke’s (2000) argument about the negative impact of lower dismissal costs on participation in training for disadvantaged groups. Our analyses suggest that employers invested less in the training of low- and medium-skilled workers during the crisis when employment protection legislation was strong; but the effect became positive when labour market conditions improved.

Welfare state measures, such as investment in active labour market policies, may also influence inequality in training leading to increased—and more equal—participation in non-formal learning by both low- and high-skilled workers. Governments may also focus on training low-skilled workers to reduce inequality in participation.

Results indicate that in 2011, higher investments in active labour market policies did indeed increase job-related NFE participation for young adults. However, in 2016—after the crisis—active labour market policies showed a weaker effect (see Tables 5.4 and 5.5). Regarding educational groups, we find a comparable effect for both low- and high-skilled young people. However, in 2011, the effect of the active labour market policies was differentiated, as higher investments increased job-related NFE participation more for low- and medium-skilled occupations than for high-skilled occupations (see Fig. 5.5 and Table 5.5). In 2016, this effect was practically the same for both occupational groups.



**Fig. 5.4** Predicted probabilities of training participation at different levels of unemployment and two broad occupational groups. (Source: AES 2011, AES 2016; Authors’ own calculation)



**Fig. 5.5** Predicted probabilities of training participation at different levels of investments in active labour market policies and two broad occupational groups. (Source: AES 2011, AES 2016; Authors’ own calculation)

## Conclusions

We have presented in this chapter cross-country comparative evidence about the chances of participating in job-related non-formal education and training for two disadvantaged groups of young adults—the low-skilled, and those working in low- or medium-skilled occupations. Previous research on participation in NFE has paid attention to the low-skilled, but hardly looked at people working in low-skilled occupations—although both are typically characterised by low participation rates in job-related training. Our study also confirmed low participation rates. Another contribution is our focus—in addition to the usual individual level characteristics—on the effect institutional- and macro-level factors have on participation in adult learning by groups of young adults who are disadvantaged in terms of their opportunities in the labour market.

In general, based on AES 2011 and AES 2016, about one-fifth of the 25–34-year-old age group with low educational attainment participate in job-related NFE within the previous 12 months. Yet there are large country variations, ranging in 2016 from about 40% participation in Norway, Switzerland, Hungary, Portugal and the Netherlands to less than 5% in Poland, Lithuania, Greece and Romania. As expected, low-skilled young adults take part in training less than their high-skilled counterparts—whose participation rates are about twofold greater. Mostly, the difference in training participation between low- and high-skilled is widest in countries characterised by low or medium rates of job-related NFE participation among low-skilled young adults. Thus, the low-skilled receive more training in countries with a high overall lifelong learning participation rate (such as Norway, Switzerland, the Netherlands) and in countries specifically focusing on the training of this group (such as Portugal).

Among young people working in low- or medium-skilled occupations, roughly one third participated in job-related NFE in both observation periods. Again, there are notable country differences. In 2016 in Slovakia, Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Austria more than half of low- or medium-skilled young people attended job-related training, while in Greece and Romania the respective rates were 12% and 5%. The differences in their training participation—as compared to young people in

high-skilled occupations—are higher mainly in countries with below average incidence of job-related training. Yet, on average, gaps in participation between the two occupational groups are smaller than between the two educational groups.

There is some evidence that, in 2016 (i.e. after the depths of the recession), opportunities to participate in job-related training had somewhat improved for both less-advantaged groups of young adults: there were more countries in which the participation rates increased than decreased. However, country comparisons should be treated with caution: as mentioned above, in several countries there are methodological differences between AES 2011 and AES 2016.

Results regarding the effect of economic sector confirm previous findings. Thus young adults working in manufacturing industry, construction or transport, or in the wholesale, retail, accommodation or food service sectors, are less likely to participate in job-related training than those working in more training-intensive sectors (such as professional, scientific, technical, administrative or support services, public administration, education, health and social work).

The cross-national analyses reveal that not only do individual characteristics shape young adults' participation in job-related training, but so too does the economic and institutional context of the country. However, the context differentiates inequalities in participation for occupational groups but not for educational groups. The higher the unemployment in a country, the lower the participation rate of young people working in low- or medium-skilled occupations. A higher unemployment rate seems to increase inequality in participation between occupational groups.

Further analysis showed that the training gap could be efficiently reduced by institutional measures such as labour market policies. As job-related NFE often forms the main part of activation policies for disadvantaged groups in the labour market, we expected policies encouraging higher investment in active labour market policies to result in higher participation levels among young adults in low- and medium-skilled occupations, even when the country's macro-economic context (such as a high unemployment rate) discourages their participation. Higher investments in active labour market policies decreased inequalities during the crisis, although this effect was no longer significant afterwards.

Research has provided little discussion or demonstration of the significant negative effect of employment protection legislation in countries with lower participation rates in training for medium- and low-skilled occupational groups. Literature has presented two contradictory hypotheses about the impact of this legislation. Our results seem to support both arguments: during tightening labour market conditions, strong employment protection increases the polarisation of labour market opportunities, but in more favourable conditions it decreases inequalities. It is possible that strong employment protection legislation may generate stronger labour market inequalities in times of rapid technological change.

Job content seems to be the core mechanism which keeps young adults in an occupational group away from training. However, institutional context may modify the impact of the occupational group on participation. The results suggest that high employment protection and higher investments in active labour market policies slightly reduced inequalities in participation in job-related NFE for young adults working in low- and medium-skilled occupations during the economic crisis. Nevertheless, the probability that these two vulnerable groups of young people will be involved in training remains lower even under the most favourable conditions. Thus, the more disadvantaged labour market groups of young adults—those in general most affected by technological change—still have less access to lifelong learning.

Most policy documents, however, continue to characterise groups of young people as vulnerable based on their individual characteristics, and especially on their low skill levels. For example, *A New Skills Agenda for Europe* highlights ‘the role of skills as a pathway to employability and prosperity’ (EC, 2016, p. 3): a human capital approach, and an individualising rather than an inclusive discourse. Low-skilled young people are represented as a problem, whereas the demand side—the labour market and employers—is established as an exogenous force with needs that must be fulfilled (see also Cort et al., 2018).

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# 6

## Gender Gaps in Participation in Adult Education in Europe: Examining Factors and Barriers

Rumiana Stoilova, Ellen Boeren,  
and Petya Ilieva-Trichkova

### Introduction

Participation rates in adult education tend to be unequal. Educational attainment, having a job or not, and age have been repeatedly found to be major determinants of participation (Boeren, 2016; Desjardins, 2017). Those with the highest qualifications, with knowledge-intensive jobs, and those who are younger are more likely to take part. While girls are known broadly to have caught up with boys in initial education systems in recent decades, as adults, women in many countries tend to receive less support for participation in work-related training (EIGE, 2019).

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Recent research by Boeren (2019) has also demonstrated that adult migrants living in Europe tend to participate less in education. While separate variables such as gender, ethnicity and social class are known to correlate with participation in adult education, this chapter aims to extend knowledge on participation issues using the lens of intersectionality. Current knowledge on adult education and intersectionality is based mainly on small-scale studies. Instead, in this chapter, we draw on large-scale representative data from the European Social Survey (ESS) and Adult Education Survey (AES) to further understand the role of gender and intersectional dimensions in adult education. This also allows us to move away from studying gender and intersectionality in one specific setting and to take into account the structural differences in the economy, labour markets and education systems that exist between the diverse countries of Europe. As previous studies show, adult learning systems are indeed ‘embedded in specific economic and social arrangements’ (Ioannidou & Jenner, 2021, p. 321) and ‘lie at the intersection of a variety of other systems including a nation’s education and training system, labour market and employment system and other welfare state and social policy measures’ (Desjardins, 2017, p. 21).

In this chapter, we first focus on theoretical explanations of gender inequalities, intersectionality and participation in adult education. We highlight variations between European countries and link these to the theory of Bounded Agency (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009), as used throughout this book. We discuss European policies on gender equality and lifelong learning before turning to the methodological underpinnings of our analyses. The analysis of the impact of intersectionality on participation in adult education, including the simultaneous negative effects of gender, social origin (parents with basic or lower education) and ethnicity, enables us to contribute further to the research on vulnerable groups undertaken within Enliven (Maiztegui-Oñate et al., 2019). Discussion of our results leads to a conclusion with recommendations for policy, practice and research.

## Gender Segregation: Theoretical Explanations

Lindsey (2005) argued that segregated gender roles peak once children enter a family. Men feel strongly responsible for being the breadwinner while women move into being the primary carer, looking after the children and undertaking household duties. Because of their stronger involvement in the labour market, men are more likely to participate in vocational non-formal education and training which nowadays is very dependent on job-related characteristics. This mechanism can also be explained through human capital theory (Becker, 1985; Livingston & Guile, 2012; Aleandri & Refrigeri, 2013; Knipprath & De Rick, 2015). As fathers feel very responsible for maintaining their family financially, they are more likely to invest in their skills through education and training (Dieckhoff & Steiber, 2011). This will then further strengthen their position in the labour market.

Yet focusing on the biological differences between men and women as part of the reproductive process, and how this carries over in their diverging roles once a new-born child has arrived, is not enough. The role of discrimination against women has been well-documented in the literature. Neilson and Ying (2016) wrote about 'taste discrimination'. This concept refers to people's preferences to work with others who are most similar to themselves. Because of the higher proportion of men among senior managers, there is also a higher likelihood of appointing men to these roles. This leads to what Schuller (2017) has labelled the Paula Principle, a situation in which many women work below their levels of competence because of sustained gender stereotypical thinking among managers. In relation to education and training, those in managerial positions receive more chances to participate, and this is strongly age-dependent (Tennant, 2007; Boeren, 2016). As women tend to reproduce early on in their careers, or at least in the first half of their working lives, the advantage they have when younger is also disrupted.

Leathwood (2006) describes participation patterns in lifelong learning as strongly classed, raced and gendered due to a combination of

reinforcing factors known in the academic literature as ‘intersectionality’.<sup>1</sup> For example, the costs for lifelong learning—underpinned by an *economic rationale*—are higher and rewards are lower for low-educated women from ethnic minority backgrounds, especially when they keep on facing discrimination afterwards and remain in low-paid jobs. The *social justice rationale* is expressed in the concept of inclusion, which goes beyond being employed or mastering basic skills. Inclusion means widening access to social, cultural and material capitals that can lead to increased levels of self-confidence (Bartky, 1990).

In her article ‘The Complexity of Intersectionality’, McCall (2005) insists on the multi-layered complexities of intersectional analysis. She introduces three basic levels of complexity: (1) ‘intra-categorical’—‘focusing on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection’; (2) ‘anti-categorical’—deconstructing the very categories of analysis as they ‘do not readily allow for the diversity and heterogeneity of experience to be represented’; and (3) ‘inter-categorical’ (or categorical)—seeking to ‘document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality among multiple and conflicting dimensions’ (McCall, 2005, p. 1773). In our analysis, we implement the first of these levels of the analysis of intersectionality, applying the intra-categorical approach to intersectionality by identifying internal inequalities among women based on social background (measured by parental level of education), and their own education and ethnicity.

The role of women in society is perceived differently across Europe. Esping-Andersen (1990) extensively researched differences between European welfare states, for example, focusing on the social-democratic nature of the Nordic countries and their lower levels of discrimination (Veggeland, 2016). These contrast with policies in the Southern Mediterranean countries where women are expected to concentrate on family duties. This translates into lower demand among women to participate in education and training. As Schroder (2016) pointed out, these differences are strongly embedded in countries’ cultures and are therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Intersectionality is a concept developed in feminist scholarship dealing with multiple and complex inequalities (Walby, 2007; Verloo, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2006; McCall, 2005; Oprea, 2005; Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1994).

difficult to change, and mean that women's agency to participate in education and training is bounded by the wider structural contexts in which they live. The European post-socialist countries represent a separate welfare regime, characterised by a longer tradition of combining full-time employment and family, of high public sector employment, and of a well-established infrastructure of childcare and extended paid parental leave. Given the importance of differences between countries, different welfare regimes will be included in our statistical models presented below: social-democratic, conservative, Mediterranean, liberal, and post-socialist regimes.

## European Policies on Lifelong Learning and Gender Equality

Europe's core policies on education and training in the last 20 years have centred on the use of benchmarks and indicators (Boeren, 2016). By 2020, member states were expected to have 15% of their population between the ages of 25 and 64 participating in at least one formal and/or non-formal learning activity. This was measured on a four weeks basis using data from the Labour Force Survey.

Gender equality is an important focus point of the European Pillar of Social Rights, introduced in 2017 (European Commission, 2017a). Twenty pillars are distributed among three strands: (1) equal opportunities and access to the labour market, (2) fair work conditions, and (3) social protection and inclusion. A New Start Initiative further underlined the need to restore imbalances in pay and careers, which often favour men (European Commission, 2017b). Interestingly, the Initiative focused on paternity leave, parental leave, care leave, and flexible working arrangements but does not mention lifelong learning, education, or training. The cultural norms that lead men to see themselves as the major breadwinners may be difficult to break and take considerable time to change.

Lombardo and Agustin (2011) evaluated European policies and their effects on vulnerable individuals and groups through an intersectional lens. Their work suggests that reducing inequalities through policies

needs to be related to class, gender, and ethnicity. Inequalities are not only an accumulation of different individual dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, and class but also need to be understood in the light of broader societal levels of deprivation. Lombardo and Agustin (2011) focus on three policy topics: (1) gender-based violence; (2) intimate citizenship—policies regulating the intimate or private sphere—divorces, marriages, reproductive rights; and (3) non employment policies such as taxes, work-life balance, gender pay gap, and equal treatment. They suggest that these policies need to be dealt with in an explicit and visible way, through the articulation of intersectionality and inclusiveness. Policy suggestions need to take a transformative approach that takes structural power hierarchies into account and challenges the main privileges in society. In doing this, they argue, it is important to avoid stigmatising particular groups and to consult civil society organizations.

The *good intersectionality* approach should be evaluated against public investments in education, underpinned by the concept of equality of opportunities (Cefalo & Kazepov, 2018). Social investments through public expenditure aimed at achieving inclusion and equity are also worth evaluating from the intersectional perspective. For the European Union (EU), social investment ‘means policies designed to strengthen people’s skills and capacities and support them to participate fully in employment and social life. Key policy areas include education, quality childcare, healthcare, training, job search assistance and rehabilitation’.<sup>2</sup>

Taking into account differences in policy approaches between countries, this chapter applies the theoretical concept of *bounded agency* (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009) from a gender-sensitive perspective. We work with the distinction made by Cross (1981) that defines situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers to participation in adult learning. Roosmaa and Saar (2016) observed, in quantitative comparative research, that women tend to experience more situational and institutional barriers to participation in adult learning than men, but fewer dispositional barriers. According to Saar et al. (2014), perceived barriers can be removed by institutional and structural solutions: this is a core underpinning of

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<sup>2</sup> EU website on Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion: Social Investment: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1044&langId=en> (accessed 25 June 2021).

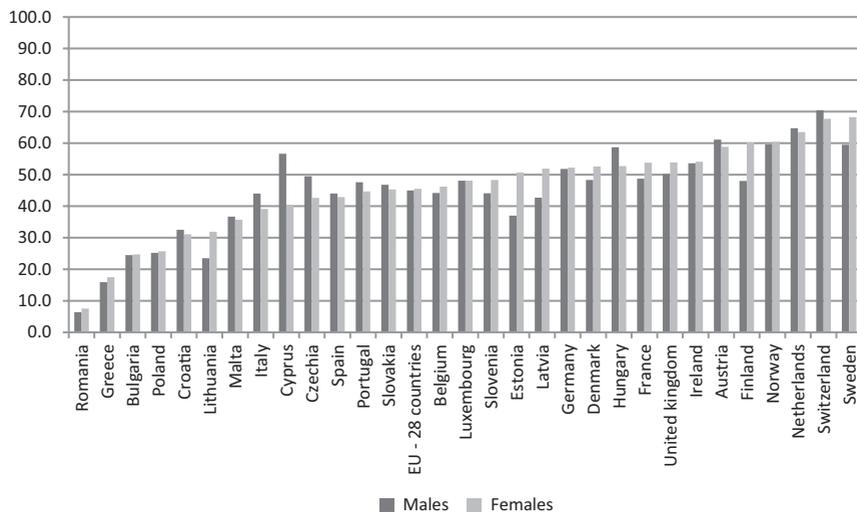
the bounded agency concept, which argues that adults are ‘bounded’ by structural elements, effecting the opportunities of their individual actions. Boeren (2011) investigated the gender gap related to barriers preventing participation. She found several disadvantages for women, such as financial difficulties in paying course fees and the experience of time pressure due to difficulties in combining family responsibilities with other life tasks. In this chapter, we analyse mainly quantitative data on the differences within the category of *women*, based on the view that intersectional research should reject a singular category of gender and avoid applying generalizations valid for some women to all women (Verloo et al., 2009).

Although the analyses in this chapter draw theoretically primarily on perspectives of intersectionality and bounded agency, discussions of vulnerability also throw light on societal inequalities. Maiztegui-Oñate et al. (2019) discuss the individual level characteristics that lead to vulnerability; these are included in our models as control factors: sex, low educational attainment, ethnic minority status, and unemployment. As structural factors, we also add family background, specifically low-educated parents as a proxy for low income and lower socio-economic background, leading to poverty, which tends to be intergenerational. In this chapter, we aim to explain in more depth the negative effects of intersectionality on participation in adult education.

Gökşen et al. (2016) mapped vulnerability by gender across class and ethnic differences. They also used regime type typology for studying vulnerability in school-to-work transitions—universalistic (Denmark and the Netherlands), liberal (United Kingdom), employment-centred (France and Belgium), and sub-protective (Spain, Greece and Turkey). Our research takes this further by focusing on intersectionality in adult education as a critical factor—among women from ethnic minority backgrounds and from families with a low educational background—in increasing the risk of poverty and becoming vulnerable. By including family background, we can account for the complex family situations of ethnic minority women, including culture, traditions, and material poverty. We also include the post-socialist, central, and eastern European countries, with the aim of focusing on the institutional level, the policy measures taken, and their effects on women’s participation in adult

education. The authors in the STYLE project<sup>3</sup> discovered strong intersectionality effects between gender and youth and linked them to migrant status. Central and East European countries relate in different ways to ethnic minorities, especially to the Roma population. There are estimated to be around 10–12 million Roma, half living in the EU (Martinidis et al., 2015); they form very vulnerable groups in several European post-socialist countries where they are part of the native population and cannot be treated as migrants. Kóczé (2009) argued that there was no significant intersectional understanding of Roma women's social position in policy-making.

For the EU, there are on average no gender differences in participation in adult education (Fig. 6.1). Bigger gender differences can be observed in Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Sweden. However, these data do not give us a clear picture and the data do not answer the question of whether there are significant gender differences in adult education



**Fig. 6.1** Gender differences in participation in adult education (Source: Eurostat, AES 2016, data code: [trng\_aes\_100])

<sup>3</sup> Strategic Transitions for Youth Labour in Europe: for further information, see <https://www.style-research.eu/>

when we consider other important factors such as education, class (own and parents' educational background), or ethnicity.

Our main research questions are: Which individual factors cause differences (1) between men and women, and (2) between women with different socio-economic characteristics and social background? and (3) How efficient is the role of institutions and policies in different European countries in overcoming the barriers caused by intersectionality for access to lifelong learning?

## Data and Methodology

In this chapter, we use data from the European Social Survey 2016 and the Adult Education Survey 2016. The European Social Survey is a biannual cross-national survey, representative for the population aged 15 and over. We have selected data from the eighth round, carried out in 2016 (European Social Survey Round 8 Data, 2016). This is because we wanted to analyse data from two different datasets with the same reference year (2016). We have limited the analysis to 21 countries.

The Adult Education Survey<sup>4</sup> 2016 provides information on adults' participation in education and training and is one of the main data sources for EU lifelong learning statistics. The reference period for participation in education and training is the 12 months immediately preceding the Adult Education Survey interview. It also covers themes such as access to information on, and obstacles to participation in, education and training. The Adult Education Survey covers the resident population aged 25–64. The 2016 Adult Education Survey scientific use file which we received from Eurostat includes micro data from 32 countries. We have limited the analysis to 29 of them: 27 EU countries,<sup>5</sup> Norway, and Switzerland.

We use *four dependent variables*. *The first* is a yes/no variable indicating whether a person had improved their knowledge or skills by attending a

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<sup>4</sup>This chapter uses data from Eurostat, AES, 2016, obtained for the needs of Research Project Proposal 124/2016-LFS-AES-CVTS-CSIS. The responsibility for all conclusions drawn from the data lies entirely with the authors.

<sup>5</sup>All 28 EU countries at that time, except Ireland (for which there were no data).

course, lecture, or conference in the last 12 months or not. *The second* is a yes/no variable indicating whether an adult had mentioned family responsibilities as an obstacle to participation in education and training. *The third* is a yes/no variable indicating whether an adult had received 'partial or full payment' for the first non-formal education (NFE) activity they had attended from 'public employment services' or 'other public institution'. *The fourth* is a yes/no variable indicating whether an adult had received partial or full payment for the first NFE activity they attended from an 'employer or prospective employer'.

As *independent variables*, we have included variables at individual and country level. *At the individual level*, we have included in the analysis of the first dependent variable gender as a main independent variable (female (1) or male (0)). We have controlled for respondents' level of education (low = ISCED 0–2, medium = ISCED 3–4, and high = ISCED 5–8); social background measured against parents' educational background (0—of low educational background: people neither of whose parents have upper secondary, post-secondary or higher education) or (1—of a high educational background: those with at least one parent who has upper secondary or higher education); whether the respondents have children living at home (1) or not (0); whether they were living with a husband, wife, or partner (1) or not (0); whether respondents belong to a minority ethnic group (1) or not (0); their main activity at the time of the survey (0—paid work, 2—education, 3—unemployment, 4—inactivity); and their age (as a continuous variable).

Regarding the analysis of the other three dependent variables, we included the same independent variables at individual level except for belonging to a minority ethnic group (the Adult Education Survey does not collect data on this). However, some of the categories differ slightly. Thus, in the case of the current labour market status the Adult Education Survey allows for four categories: 0—full-time employed, 1—part-time employed, 2—unemployed, 3—inactive. In the case of cohabitation, there is a variable which distinguishes whether a person is living in a consensual union (1) or not (0).

*At country level*, we have included a variable which distinguishes the welfare regime to which a country belongs. For our analyses, the

countries in the European Social Survey are classified in the following way. Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden are coded as social-democratic regimes. The liberal regime type encompasses Ireland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom. Italy, Portugal, and Spain are classified as Mediterranean regimes. Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, and Switzerland constitute the conservative type. We classify the following countries as post-socialist: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovenia. For the Adult Education Survey, we have also classified Norway as a social-democratic regime. In the Adult Education Survey, there is only one country belonging to the liberal regime (the United Kingdom); Cyprus, Greece, and Malta are classified as Mediterranean regimes; Luxembourg as conservative; and Bulgaria, Croatia, Latvia, Romania, and Slovakia as post-socialist.

We implement a multi-group analysis, investigating the existence of a gender gap related to the barriers preventing men and women from equal participation in adult education and the role of different factors in gender deprivation. We estimate the effects of education, social origin measured by parents' education, ethnicity and family situation, labour market participation, and age on access to adult education, both for the entire sample and for men and women separately. This approach makes it possible to test whether estimates are equivalent across gender groups.

We employ multilevel regression models (see Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2012). Multilevel models are useful, especially in handling nested data as individuals are 'nested' into countries. The assumption is that the attitudes or behaviour of people may be influenced not only at the individual level (level 1)—characteristics such as educational level, sex, age, social background—but also by group characteristics (level 2) such as the welfare regime of the country where people live, labour market policies, education, family, and social assistance. In order to analyse the factors which prevent men and women from participating equally in adult education and to consider family responsibility as an obstacle to participation, we estimate three models for each dependent variable: a model which includes all respondents and two separate multilevel models for women and men.

## Factors for Gender Differences in Participation in Adult Education

We will now discuss the factors that prevent women from equal adult education participation with men. Table 6.1 demonstrates that there are significant gender differences in participation in lifelong learning. Being a woman is associated with a higher probability of participation than being a man, when control variables are kept constant. However, when looking into the control variables, we can observe additional negative effects strongly related to gender. Thus, the results show that inactivity in the labour market decreases the probability of participation in adult learning. Women taking care of newborn children are over-represented in this category. Chances of getting back into employment are unevenly distributed among women and depend on opportunities for participation in additional training. Living with a partner is also associated with a lower probability of participation in adult learning. This underlines the importance of studying adults' family situation separately for men and women.

Having a parent with a high or medium level of education increases the probability of participating in adult learning compared to a person with low-educated parent. Belonging to an ethnic minority group is associated with a lower probability of participating in adult learning compared to other adults. That raises the importance of investigating intersectionality further and evaluating the impact of European policies on vulnerable individuals and groups affected by multiple dimensions of inequality. The estimates also provide evidence that a country's welfare regime matters for participation in adult learning. More specifically, they show that adults who live in the countries that belong to the conservative, Mediterranean, and, especially, post-socialist regimes are less likely to participate in adult learning than those in social-democratic countries.

The differentiated models estimated for women and men show that the effect of higher and secondary education on adult learning participation is greater for women than men. Our analyses also show some gender differences relating to family situations. Having a child is associated with a higher probability of adult learning for men but has no association for women. Living with a partner has a negative effect on the probability of participating in adult learning for women, but no effect for men. We see

**Table 6.1** Participation in adult education (Results of two-level random intercept logistic regression models on whether a person has improved his/her knowledge/skills: course/lecture/conference, in the last 12 months)

	Model 1 (all)	Model 2 (women)	Model 3 (men)
<i>Fixed parameters</i>	dy/dx	dy/dx	dy/dx
<i>Sex: Ref. Male</i>			
Female	0.0181**		
<i>Educational level: Ref. Low</i>			
Medium	0.1382**	0.1700**	0.1152**
High	0.3212**	0.3610**	0.2863**
<i>Belongs to a minority, ethnic group: Ref. No</i>			
Yes	-0.0491**	-0.0673**	-0.0315+
<i>Having a child: Ref. No</i>			
Yes	0.0304**	0.0103	0.0516**
<i>Living with husband/wife/partner: Ref. No</i>			
Yes	-0.0173**	-0.0248**	-0.0052
<i>Main activity: Ref. Paid work</i>			
Education	0.0689**	0.0955**	0.0443
Unemployed	-0.1241**	-0.1252**	-0.1118**
Inactive	-0.2917**	-0.2793**	-0.2947**
<i>Social background: Ref. Low</i>			
High	0.0332**	0.0237**	0.0462**
<i>Age</i>	-0.0021**	-0.0015**	-0.0030**
<i>Country-level features</i>			
<i>Regimes, Ref. Social-democratic</i>			
Liberal	-0.1272	-0.0976	-0.1613*
Conservative	-0.1184+	-0.1033	-0.1334+
Mediterranean	-0.1889*	-0.2042**	-0.1709*
Post-socialist	-0.2814**	-0.2485**	-0.3205**
<i>Random parameters</i>			
Intercept	0.5406	0.5559	0.5409
Country-level variance	0.2923	0.3090	0.2925
Explained variance at level 2	50.23%	48.17%	52.80%
Intraclass correlation	0.082	0.086	0.082
Log likelihood	-11865.5	-5988.9	-5855.7
N (individual level)	22,400	11,560	10,840

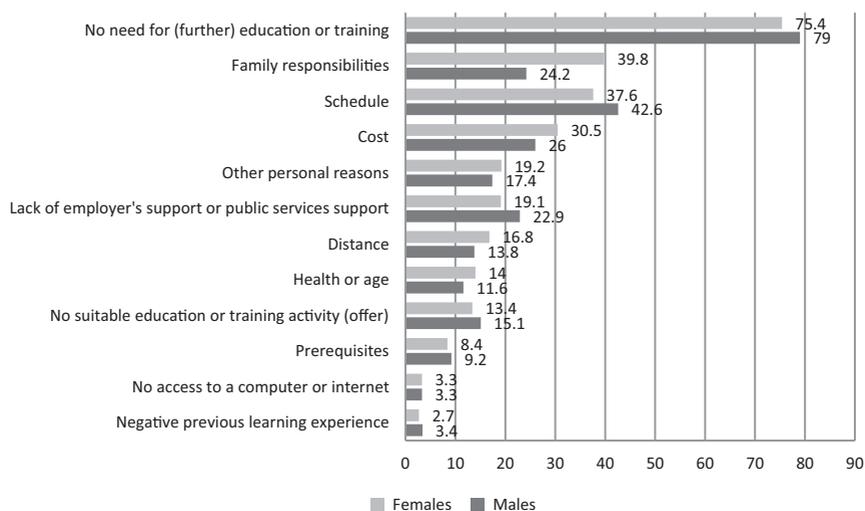
Source: ESS 2016, own calculations

Notes: dy/dx (average marginal effects); N (country level) = 21. Significance: + $p < 0.10$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

similarities in the effects, which are important for the phenomenon of intersectionality. Belonging to an ethnic minority group has a stronger negative effect for women than for men. The statistical effect of parents' educational background is stronger for men than for women. Last but not least, we observe that men who live in countries with liberal and conservative regimes have a lower probability of participating in adult learning when compared to men living in social-democratic countries. For women, there are no such differences. Finally, welfare regimes typology can explain the slightly higher proportion of the country-level variance in the case of men (but not women).

## Obstacles Preventing Participation in Adult Education from a Gender Perspective

Figure 6.2 demonstrates that the strongest barrier preventing participation in adult education in the EU 28 relates to not seeing any need for (further) education and training (75.4% of women and 79% of men).



**Fig. 6.2** Obstacles to participation in education and training for adults in the EU 28 countries, aged 25–64, by sex. (Source: Eurostat, AES 2016, data code: [trng\_aes\_176])

'Family responsibilities', a situational barrier, are mentioned by 39.8% of women but only 24.2% of men, indicating a large gender difference. Not being able to meet the 'costs' was mentioned by 30.5% of women and 26% of men.

Information in Table 6.2 demonstrates that gender is an important factor in adults' chances of improving their education and qualifications. More specifically, the probability of women perceiving family responsibilities as an obstacle to undertaking learning is higher than for men, if control variables are kept constant. Two variables at individual level influence men and women differently: part-time vs full-time employment and higher education vs lower education. Part-time employment has an insignificant effect for men but is significant for women, increasing the negative effect of the 'family situation' as an obstacle for their participation in adult learning. Higher education decreases the importance of the family situation as an obstacle for women and increases its importance as an obstacle for men. Higher age decreases the importance of family responsibilities as an obstacle. We also observe some gender differences at the country level. While women in countries other than the social-democratic welfare states see family responsibilities as an obstacle, for men this is true only in the Mediterranean regime. Welfare regime explains a higher proportion of country-level variance in the case of women than it does for men (respectively 42.77% vs 33.48%).

## Gender Gaps Related to Cost

Gender differences also occur in relation to the institutional barrier represented by the 'costs' (who pays for additional qualification or training). We found significant effects of gender, education, and social origin measured by the educational level of parents (see Table 6.3). Adults with parents educated at upper secondary or higher education level have a lower probability of receiving additional training paid by a public institution. The probability of receiving financial support from a public institution is higher for women than for men. Compared to countries from a social-democratic regime, only respondents living in Mediterranean countries are more likely to receive payment from public institutions for their training.

**Table 6.2** Family responsibility as an obstacle for participation in adult education (Results for two-level random intercept logistic regression models on whether an adult has mentioned family responsibilities as an obstacle to participation in education and training)

	Model 1 (all)	Model 2 (women)	Model 3 (men)
<i>Fixed parameters</i>	dy/dx	dy/dx	dy/dx
<i>Sex: Ref. Male</i>			
Female	0.1442**		
<i>Educational level: Ref. Low</i>			
Medium	0.0029	0.0060	-0.0002
High	-0.0040	-0.0155*	0.0166*
<i>Living in a consensual union: Ref. No</i>			
Yes	0.1846**	0.1826**	0.1694**
<i>Labour market status: Ref. Full-time employed</i>			
Part-time employed	0.0489**	0.0848**	0.0094
Unemployed	-0.0591**	-0.0313**	-0.0893**
Inactive	0.0302**	0.0833**	-0.0888**
<i>Social background: Ref. Low</i>			
High	-0.0010	0.0040	-0.0076
<i>Age</i>	-0.0047**	-0.0059**	-0.0028**
<i>Country-level features</i>			
<i>Regimes: Ref. Social-democratic</i>			
Liberal	0.1614+	0.1957*	0.1142
Conservative	0.0819+	0.1207*	0.0272
Mediterranean	0.2409**	0.3065**	0.1570**
Post-socialist	0.0688+	0.1167*	0.0164
<i>Random parameters</i>			
Intercept	0.4376	0.4645	0.4205
Country-level variance	0.1915	0.2158	0.1768
Explained variance at level 2	35.44%	42.77%	33.48%
Intraclass correlation	0.055	0.062	0.051
Log likelihood	-47165.0	-28,944	-17943.1
N (individual level)	82,743	47,258	35,485

Source: AES 2016, own calculations

Notes: dy/dx (average marginal effects); N (country level) = 29. Significance: + $p < 0.10$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

In general, women with medium levels of education are less likely to receive payment from public institutions for their training than women with low education. This effect is not present for men. For women,

**Table 6.3** Results for two-level random intercept logistic regression models on whether an adult had received 'Partial or full payment for the 1st NFE activity: public employment services' or 'other public institution'

	Model 1 (all)	Model 2 (women)	Model 3 (men)
<i>Fixed parameters</i>	dy/dx	dy/dx	dy/dx
<i>Sex: Ref. Male</i>			
Female	0.0067*		
<i>Educational level: Ref. Low</i>			
Medium	-0.0054	-0.0164*	0.0467
High	-0.0034	-0.0071	-0.0099
<i>Living in a consensual union: Ref. No</i>			
Yes	-0.0050	0.0031	-0.0074
<i>Labour market status: Ref. Full-time employed</i>			
Part-time employed	0.0267**	0.0076	0.0713**
Unemployed	0.1986**	0.1989**	0.1943**
Inactive	0.1508**	0.1552**	0.1406**
<i>Social background: Ref. Low</i>			
High	-0.0178**	-0.0132**	-0.0212**
<i>Age</i>	0.0005**	0.0009**	0.0001
<i>Country-level features</i>			
<i>Regimes: Ref. Social-democratic</i>	-0.0361		
Liberal	0.0432	-0.0384	-0.0319
Conservative	0.0660+	0.0508+	0.0376
Mediterranean	0.0125	0.0524+	0.0675+
Post-Socialist		0.0229	-0.0040
<i>Random parameters</i>			
Intercept	0.6949	0.6180	0.7822
Country-level variance	0.4829	0.3819	0.6118
Explained variance at level 2	23.81%	27.63%	23.57%
Intraclass correlation	0.128	0.104	0.157
Log likelihood	-10868.4	-5739	-5020.7
N (individual level)	40,256	19,908	20,348

Source: AES 2016, own calculations

Notes: dy/dx (average marginal effects); N (country level) = 29, significance + $p < 0.10$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

increased age has a positive effect on the probability of receiving financial support from a public institution; this effect is not present in the case of men.

Women are less likely to receive payment from their employer for training compared to men (see Table 6.4). People with secondary and higher education also tend to receive more payments from their employers than those with low education. Differences between countries

**Table 6.4** Results for two-level random intercept logistic regression models on whether an adult had received 'Partial or full payment for the 1st NFE activity: employer or prospective employer'

	Model 1 (all)	Model 2 (women)	Model 3 (men)
<i>Fixed parameters</i>	dy/dx	dy/dx	dy/dx
<i>Sex: Ref. Male</i>			
Female	-0.0118**		
<i>Educational level: Ref. Low</i>			
Medium	0.0164**	0.0299**	0.0046
High	0.0121*	0.0201*	0.0055
<i>Living in a consensual union: Ref. No</i>			
Yes	0.0211	0.0152**	0.0228**
<i>Labour market status: Ref. Full-time employed</i>			
Part-time employed	-0.0470**	-0.0316**	-0.0916**
Unemployed	-0.2871**	-0.3056**	-0.2609**
Inactive	-0.2783**	-0.2927**	-0.2526**
<i>Social background: Ref. Low</i>			
High	0.0044	-0.0029	0.0106+
Age	0.0001	-0.0001	0.0002
<i>Country-level features</i>			
<i>Regimes: Ref. Social-democratic</i>			
Liberal	0.0401	0.0409	0.0351
Conservative	-0.0198	-0.0321	-0.0099
Mediterranean	-0.0846*	-0.0812*	-0.0716
Post-Socialist	0.0075	-0.0070	0.0274
<i>Random parameters</i>			
Intercept	0.6127	0.5307	0.7017
Country-level variance	0.3754	0.2817	0.4923
Explained variance at level 2	21.17%	27.23%	17.63%
Intraclass correlation	0.102	0.079	0.130
Log likelihood	-12174.3	-6531	-5577.5
N (individual level)	40,256	19,908	20,348

Source: AES 2016, own calculations

Notes: dy/dx (average marginal effects); N (country level) = 29, significance + $p < 0.10$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

(grouped into different welfare regimes) in the probability of receiving partial- or full-payment from an employer or prospective employer are not significant. The only exception is for those living in Mediterranean countries, who are less likely to receive training paid by employers compared to those living in social-democratic countries.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter has investigated the individual factors and barriers (situational and institutional) preventing men and women from participating equally in adult education. The results allow us to respond to our three research questions.

Based on our analyses, ‘family responsibilities’ presented the largest gender difference. It represents a situational barrier, which has been discussed in previous research. The issue of family responsibilities is also strengthened for women through part-time employment or inactivity; this is not the case for men. The assignment of primary care roles to mothers (O’Reilly, 2010; Siddle, 2011) explains the first element of the gender differences observed in participation. It can, however, also be explained through human capital theory (Becker, 1985). The idea of family responsibilities preventing women from participating in adult education decreases for highly educated women. In fact, when both partners are highly educated, we can see a positive effect on transforming the traditional gender division of the care role between men and women in the family (Stoilova et al., 2020).

We also see gender differences in the probability of men and women receiving financial support for participation from their employer, which tends to be lower for women. Women receive less employer-funded training than men. There is, however, a higher probability of women receiving subsidies from public institutions to support their participation in adult education. In that respect, we see a positive effect of social investments as part of active policies, aiming at minimizing the negative effects of gender and social origin (Cefalo & Kazepov, 2018).

In discussing our results, we return to the concept of vulnerability, investigated by Maiztegui-Oñate et al. (2019) and applied in the Enliven project. Women form a deprived social group because family responsibilities are assigned to them. They are discriminated against by employers in offers of additional work-based training, especially in Mediterranean welfare regime countries. This supports the initial statistical data, showing that men participate more than women in Cyprus, Italy, and Malta. In addition, ethnic minority women tend to have limited support within the family, and their parents are also often low educated. Taken together with their low educational levels, family obligations may lower self-confidence (a dispositional barrier). For such multiple deprivations, a different set of policy measures is needed.

Implementing policies and practices such as affordable childcare and pay while participating in lifelong learning seems to be a pre-condition for low-educated women to be involved. This is especially important for women from minority ethnic backgrounds and those with low-educated parents. They need more opportunities to escape part-time jobs and inactivity. But that is not enough. Establishing a positive attitude to inclusion in adult education is an important policy task. Combating discrimination is a pre-condition for ethnic minorities and migrants to be motivated for additional and long lasting investments—particularly of time and scarce resources—in improving their qualifications.

In this chapter, we have added a fourth barrier—namely, structural inequality in societies—to the three identified by Cross (1981): institutional, dispositional, and situational. A critical message from our research is the need to look at individual level characteristics and at different categories of intersection such as gender, ethnicity, and social background as generating multiple risks of vulnerability.

In our analysis, social origin has been defined through the educational level of parents as an indicator for class. Intersectionality has been observed in the multiple disadvantages in participation in adult education that include the simultaneous negative effects of gender, class, ethnicity, and age for women compared to men, applying an inter-categorical approach and—among women—an intra-categorical approach to intersectionality (McCall, 2005). We found the negative effect of ethnicity on women to be stronger than on men. The negative effects of

intersectionality for participation in adult education could not be effectively reduced under the Mediterranean and post-socialist welfare regimes when compared to the social-democratic type.

The present research also contributes to the concept of *bounded agency* as it relates to the account of factors and barriers at individual, group, and national level (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). An important finding of our analyses is that country-level welfare regimes help explain a higher proportion of the variance in the case of women than men. This holds true for all our analyses of our dependent variables. We suggest this indicates that family policies are mainly targeted at women and explains why women's participation in lifelong learning differs considerably according to the welfare regime of the country in which they live.

Our contribution to the idea of intersectional policy evaluation, as discussed by Lombardo and Agustin (2011), lies in its extension to the policy field of adult education. We have focused on the impact of gender, ethnicity, and social origin (as an indicator of class) as barriers to participation in adult education, treating men and women as complex categories. The explicit analysis of disparities among men and women is significant not only for policy makers but also for society more widely. To increase women's motivation and ability to participate in adult education, policy makers should adapt measures and programmes to people's individual situations.

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# 7

## Adult Education as a Pathway to Empowerment: Challenges and Possibilities

Pepka Boyadjieva and Petya Ilieva-Trichkova

### Introduction

There has recently been growing research interest in going beyond the instrumental and economised understanding of adult and lifelong education and learning and focusing on its empowerment potential (Baily, 2011; Fleming & Finnegan, 2014; Fleming, 2016; Tett, 2018). Attempts have also been made to provide a more comprehensive view of the mission and roles adult education serves by revealing its substantial transformative power at both the individual and societal levels (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021). In addition, policy documents have been published which not only acknowledge the complexity of adult educational goals and the contributions made to individual and societal development, but also explicitly emphasise the emancipatory role that lifelong learning can play. Thus, according to UNESCO's Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education of 2015 (UNESCO, 2016), the objectives of adult learning and

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education are: 'to equip people with the necessary capabilities to exercise and realise their rights and *take control of their destinies...* to develop the capacity of individuals to *think critically and to act with autonomy* and a sense of responsibility', and to reinforce their capacity not only to adapt and deal with but also to *'shape the developments* taking place in the economy and the world of work' (art. 8 and 9, italics added). However, more research is needed in order to better conceptualise and empirically demonstrate the complexity of the empowerment potential and implementation of adult education in different socio-cultural contexts.

Against the above background, this chapter contributes to the discussion of the relationship between adult education and empowerment, thus further developing one of the main arguments of the present book: that there are multiple benefits to lifelong learning and adult education for individuals and societies, and they should not be restricted to delivering requisite skills to the workforce. It also enriches the understanding of the concept of bounded agency (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009) by demonstrating, firstly, that the process of empowerment through adult education is not a linear or unproblematic one and, secondly, that only in some cases can the benefits from adult education lead to empowered agency. More concretely, the objective of this chapter is twofold. On the one hand, it seeks to outline a theoretical framework for conceptualising the role of adult education in individual empowerment from a capability approach perspective. On the other, it aims to provide some empirical evidence about how adult education can contribute to individuals' empowerment. To that end, we argue that adult education is a distinct sphere of empowerment. At the individual level and from a capability approach perspective, empowerment in and through adult education is a process of expanding both agency and capabilities, enabling individuals to gain power over their environment as they strive for their own well-being and a just social order. As a process, empowerment is embedded in the available opportunity structures.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, we present our conceptual framework by briefly reviewing different approaches towards the understanding of empowerment and highlighting ideas which are relevant to discussions on (adult) education. Then, we outline an empowerment perspective towards adult education within the theoretical framework of the capability approach. A description of the data (both quantitative and

qualitative) and methods as well as a presentation of the results follow. Finally, these results are discussed in light of previous research, and some directions for future research and policy implications are outlined in the conclusion.

## Theoretical Considerations

### Empowerment as a Contested Concept

Many studies—and Chap. 2 of this volume, as well—have emphasised that the notion of empowerment<sup>1</sup> is inherently complex and open to many interpretations, that there are internal contradictions in this concept, and that it remains under-theorised and contested (Samman & Santos, 2009; Monkman, 2011; Pruijt & Yerkes, 2014; Unterhalter, 2019). Some of the problems and confusion which prevent our understanding of empowerment arise from the fact that its ‘root-concept – power – is itself disputed’ (Rowlands, 1995, p. 101).

Unterhalter (2019, p. 86) traces the history of the use of the word *empowerment* back to the mid-seventeenth century, outlining that this historical detour highlights ‘that empowerment as a concept can be deployed in multiple ways’. The concept was later firmly established by radical social movements, especially women’s movements, and feminist theorists starting in the 1970s. It has mainly been used to delineate personal and collective actions for justice and the processes of participatory social change which challenge both existing power hierarchies and the relationship between inequality and exclusion (Batliwala, 1994, 2010; Unterhalter, 2019). It has been argued that, over the last 30 years, the concept of empowerment has undergone some distortion, becoming ‘a trendy and widely used buzzword’ (Batliwala, 2010, p. 111). Batliwala (2010, pp. 114, 119) claims that the dominance of neo-liberal ideology has led to ‘the transition of empowerment out of the realm of societal and

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<sup>1</sup> “To “empower” as a neologism was first used in the mid-seventeenth century in England in the context of the Civil War... the first uses of the term in 1641, 1643, and 1655 all refer generally to men being “empowered” by the law or a supreme authority to do certain things’ (Unterhalter, 2019, p. 80).

systemic change into the individual domain—from a noun signifying shifts in social power to a verb signalling individual power, achievement, status’. Some authors argue that empowerment in itself is ‘a disguised control device’, one ‘fraught with contradictions’ stemming from its essence as an asymmetrical relationship (e.g. Pruijt & Yerkes, 2014, pp. 49–50). Empowerment is also viewed as a power relationship which remains, even when the will to empower is well-intentioned, ‘a strategy for constituting and regulating the political subjectivities of the “empowered”’; and furthermore, “the object of empowerment is to act upon another’s interests and desires in order to conduct their actions toward an appropriate end”’ (Cruikshank, 1999, p. 69). In a similar vein, Pruijt and Yerkes (2014) identify three challenges associated with empowerment as an asymmetrical relationship: level of control, programmed failure, and risk of stigmatisation. Thus, for example, they argue that ‘an empowerment frame can entice people to start on an impossible mission that can end with them blaming themselves for problems beyond their control’ and that often ‘those to be empowered are deemed to be lacking in autonomy or self-sufficiency’, which entails a risk of stigmatisation (Prujt & Yerkes, 2014, p. 51).

In a comprehensive review of works on empowerment, Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) systematise 29 understandings of the concept used in the period from 1991 to 2006. These definitions of empowerment differ in terms of the theoretical frameworks they have been elaborated in, the levels they refer to (individual and/or collective), and their scope (processes but also activities and outcomes). All of the above clearly demonstrates that empowerment—both as a concept and a practice—needs to be very carefully studied and re-thought based on fresh theoretical ideas, taking into account its specificity in different social spheres as well as socio-cultural and political contexts. It is very important to emphasise that ‘although different kinds of empowerment may be interconnected, empowerment is domain specific’ (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007, p. 383). This means that in order to be thoroughly understood, empowerment should be analysed in respect to different domains of life whilst acknowledging their specificity. Thus, for example, empowerment in education is not only related to empowerment at work or in public life but may also differ

from them. Revealing this difference is a sine qua non for grasping its meaning and path towards accomplishment.

## Theorising the Relationship Between Empowerment and Education

As Unterhalter (2019, p. 75) acknowledges, ‘the relationship between empowerment and education is neither simple nor clear’. She concludes that education ‘can be positioned as an outcome of empowerment or as a process associated with its articulation’ (Unterhalter, 2019, p. 80).

The diversity of theoretical approaches which could be applied towards an understanding of the relationship between empowerment and education is clearly evident in the special ‘Gender, education and empowerment’ issue of the journal *Research in Comparative and International Education*, published in 2011. Various authors there use Stromquist’s (1995) model of empowerment, which consists of four necessary components: cognitive, psychological, political, and economic. Still others try to reveal the three dimensions upon which Rowlands’s (1995) empowerment operates—the personal, where empowerment is about developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity; that of close relationships, where empowerment is about developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of those relationships and the decisions made within them; and the collective, where individuals work together to achieve more extensive impact than they could alone. The issue features articles based on Cattaneo and Chapman’s (2010) Empowerment Process Model, articulating empowerment as an iterative process whose components include personally meaningful and power-oriented goals, self-efficacy, knowledge, competence, and action, as well as Rocha’s model (1997), which presents the empowerment process as a ladder moving from individual to community. Furthermore, several authors have used the capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). It is important to note that there are some crucial points regarding the relationship between empowerment and education which the studies in this issue agree upon: ‘education does not automatically or simplistically result in empowerment;

empowerment is a process; it is not a linear process, direct or automatic; context matters; decontextualized numerical data, although useful in revealing patterns and trends, are inadequate for revealing the deeper and nuanced nature of empowerment processes; individual empowerment is not enough; collective engagement is also necessary; empowerment of girls and women is not just about them, but perforce involves boys and men in social change processes that implicate whole communities; it is important to consider education beyond formal schooling; informal interactional processes and multi-layered policy are also implicated' (Monkman, 2011, p. 10). Taking into account these outlined characteristics of the relationship between empowerment and education, we will try to delve further and present a more sophisticated understanding of this relationship within the framework of the capability approach.

## **The Capability Approach Towards the Relationship Between Empowerment and (Adult) Education**

The capability approach is a social justice normative theoretical framework for conceptualising and evaluating phenomena such as inequalities, well-being, and human development. According to the capability approach, it is not so much the achieved outcomes (functionings) that matter; rather, one's real opportunities (capabilities) determine whether those outcomes can be achieved. For Sen, capabilities are freedoms conceived as real opportunities (Sen, 1985, 2009). More specifically, 'capabilities as freedoms' refer to the presence of valuable options—in the sense that opportunities do not exist only formally or legally but are also effectively available to the agent (Robeyns, 2013).

There are three strands of research relevant to any attempt at understanding the relationship between empowerment and (adult) education from a capability approach perspective. The first one discusses the meanings of empowerment by drawing on different concepts associated with the capability approach, but it does not reflect upon any possible connections between education and empowerment (e.g. Alsop et al., 2006; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Samman & Santos, 2009). The second strand

includes literature on education and empowerment, also often referring to the debate over capabilities and empowerment (e.g. Loots & Walker, 2015; Monkman, 2011). The third strand comprises studies which aim to reveal the heuristic potential of the capability notion in understanding the relationship between empowerment and education (e.g. DeJaeghere & Lee, 2011; Seeberg, 2011; Unterhalter, 2019).

Based on this literature, we define empowerment in and through (adult) education from a capability approach perspective as an expansion of both agency (process freedom) and capabilities (opportunity freedom). Empowerment and adult education have one characteristic in common: neither is a single act, but they are rather lifelong processes embedded in the available institutional structures and socio-cultural context. The empowerment role of (adult) education is purposeful and matters both intrinsically and instrumentally. Empowerment in and through (adult) education is closely related, but not identical, to agency enhancement. It is not only an expanded agency but one which has a clear goal—gaining control over an individual's environment with the aim of improving their own well-being and that of society. The empowerment role of (adult) education has two sides: a subjective one, referring to an individual's capability to gain control over the environment, and an objective one, reflecting the available opportunity structures.

## Adult Education as a Sphere of Empowerment

Alsop et al. (2006, p. 19) identify three domains, divided into different subdomains, in which empowerment can take place—the state (justice, politics, and public service delivery); the market (labour, goods, and private services); and society (intra-household and intra-community). We argue that (adult) education can be defined as a specific, complex subdomain of empowerment which functions at the intersection of all three domains: the state, the market, and society. (Adult) education can be a public service, but it is also a good—both private and public—which is firmly embedded in the dominant social hierarchies, institutional and cultural norms, community, and societal milieu.

In conceptualising (adult) education as a sphere of empowerment, we have drawn upon the heuristic potential of Sen's concept of conversion factors and the crucial significance of context for agency within the capability approach (Sen, 1985, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). Conversion factors are defined as a range of factors influencing how a person can convert the characteristics of his/her available resources (initial conditions) into freedom or achievement. The empowering role of (adult) education depends on and is realised through the very way it is established and organised in a given society. That is why revealing and evaluating the empowerment role of adult education requires 'understanding the contexts of learning, teaching, and education governance, considering whether the content of education encourages an individualistic or an inclusive and solidaristic sense of agency', and looking 'both at organisations and the norms that govern them' (Unterhalter, 2019, p. 93).

At first glance, it seems that the role of adult education (viewed as a sphere and an outcome) for the subjectivity and agency of individuals would be less pronounced in adult students than teenagers. However, this statement does not take into account essential changes in systemic-structural characteristics of contemporary societies or the individual's role in shaping them. The societies of late modernity feature changes, turning from sporadic occurrences into a permanent fixture, in both their existence and the lives of individuals (Bauman, 1997). Changes in the main characteristics of these societies will inevitably generate significant changes in the way individuals relate to their own lives, models of personal realisation, and long-term plans. Such life plans and goals are becoming increasingly hard to pursue, and the paths taken by individuals do not often follow single projects but rather increasingly become a matter of self-building—wherein the goals at one stage of a person's development may not necessarily accrue upon the goals of preceding stages, quite possibly taking a very different turn (Bauman, 2002, pp. 433–434). Thus, throughout their lives, people are confronted with the need to (re) build their identity and subjectivity.

## Adult Education as a Factor for Empowerment

Adult education can function as a factor for empowerment at three levels—individual, collective/group, and societal.

At an individual level, empowerment through adult education relates to its role in further developing individual capability sets, thus increasing their potential to make high-quality choices and allowing them the freedom to act. As already outlined, empowerment is not about expanding agency for any purposes or developing any capabilities—it is about developing capabilities that enable engagement in social change processes. Unterhalter (2019, p. 80) argues that ‘the capability approach provides some important additional conceptual connections that help link empowerment more closely to ideas about social justice and an understanding of the institutional space in which this is to be achieved’. She also emphasises, ‘for Sen, agency (and by implication empowerment) is not mere self-interest, but an expression of a sense of fairness for oneself and due process for oneself and others’ (Unterhalter, 2019, p. 91).

At a collective/group level, adult education can empower different social groups, especially vulnerable ones, by helping them to organise and express their interests and to achieve upward mobility.

At a societal level, empowerment through adult education reflects the role of education towards achieving important public goods—such as social equity, trust, and environmental conservation—and thus making the world a better place to live in. According to Sen (2009, p. 249), development is ‘fundamentally an empowering process’, and one of its important aims is to preserve and enrich the environment. Education plays a crucial role in this empowering process, as ‘the spread of school education and improvements in its quality can make us more environmentally conscious’ (Ibid).

## Intrinsic and Instrumental Value of the Empowerment Role of Adult Education

The capability approach requires looking beyond achievements and relating the real freedoms or opportunities an individual has to the ‘goals or values he or she regards as important’ (Sen, 1985, p. 203). As far as adult

education can have both intrinsic and instrumental value, its empowerment role also matters both intrinsically and instrumentally. Empowerment through adult education has intrinsic value: similarly to agency (Sen, 1985), it is the result of a ‘genuine choice’ made by a ‘responsible agent’, and as such, this is an important end in and of itself. Instrumentally, empowerment through adult education matters because it can serve as a means to develop other capabilities and achieve different outcomes.

## **The Role of Non-formal Adult Education for Increasing Individuals’ Agency Capacity: An Empirical Study**

The next part of the chapter is empirically based and focuses only on two aspects of the very complex relationship between empowerment and adult education, outlined in the theoretical discussion. More concretely, we will analyse the influence of participation in non-formal adult education on the subjective side of the empowerment role of adult education, that is, on individuals’ capacity to act through increasing their self-confidence and capacity to control their daily life.

### **Data and Empirical Strategy**

The empirical basis of our study is the Adult Education Survey<sup>2</sup> (AES) and some interviews. The Adult Education Survey, conducted via random sampling procedure, targets people aged 25 to 64 who live in private households. So far, this survey has been conducted three times: in 2007, 2011, and 2016. However, 2007 was the only year in which questions about attitudes towards learning were included. The number of countries participating in the 2007 Adult Education Survey was 29. However, data on attitudes are available for just 13 of those (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria,

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<sup>2</sup>This chapter uses data from Eurostat, AES, 2007, obtained for the needs of Research Project Proposal 124/2016-LFS-AES-CVTS-CSIS. The responsibility for all conclusions drawn from the data lies entirely with the authors.

Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia). Depending on the variable of interest, this data could also be found for 14 (+Poland) or 15 countries (+Poland and the United Kingdom). For that reason, the following analysis is based on data for the above-listed countries. In terms of the overall quality of data, it is worth mentioning that the Synthesis Quality Report (Eurostat, 2010) evaluated the Adult Education Survey positively. Classification regarding education follows the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) revision of 1997.

In addition, some qualitative data from interviews with young adults involved in adult education programmes will also be presented. As there are only a limited number of interviews that were carried out within the Enliven project, we have used quotations from these interviews mainly to illustrate the results obtained based on qualitative data. The fieldwork was conducted on 28 May 2018 in a small city in Bulgaria. Seven in-depth interviews, based on a preliminary scenario, were conducted: five with participants from low-income households in the Roma ethnic community lacking education and work experience; one with a staff member running the programme (the school principal); and one with a representative at the level of the learning setting (a teacher).

We measured self-confidence via two indicators: *'Learning gives you more self-confidence'* and *'If you want to be successful at work, you need to keep improving your knowledge and skills'*. One indicator was used to measure the capacity to control one's daily life: *'Education and training can help you manage your daily life'*. These indicators represent respondents' subjective perceptions and make up our dependent variables, which we measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Fully agree) to 5 (Totally disagree). However, for the needs of our analysis, the scale for each dependent variable was dichotomized into two values: 1, which includes the answers 'Agree' and 'Fully agree', and 0, which includes the remaining three answer options.

We used multi-level modelling to analyse the three dependent variables. Given that our dependent variables are binary, we used two-level random intercept logistic models. We also used the xtlogit command in Stata 14. More specifically, we estimated three model specifications for each dependent variable. This was done in order to see whether the effects

of the different variables changed when additional variables were included. Model 0 is our (unconditional) baseline model containing the intercept (constant) only. Model 1 includes our main independent variable—participation in non-formal education or training (NFET) in the previous 12 months (dummy ref.: no = 0, yes = 1). We also included the highest educational level (three categories, ref.: ISCED 0–2 = low, ISCED 3–4 = medium, and ISCED 5–6 = higher) because previous research has clearly shown that participation in adult education strongly depends on the level of educational attainment (Roosmaa & Saar, 2012; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021). In Model 2, we included an interaction term between the highest educational level and participation in NFET in order to determine whether the effect of NFET on the three dependent variables differed according to adults' educational levels. To account for differences in the composition of different groups of adults, all our specifications were made to control for: educational background (dummy ref.: 0 = no parents had higher education [low]; 1 = at least one parent had higher education [high]); gender (dummy ref.: 0 = male; 1 = female); and main activity (ref. employed; 1 = unemployed, or 2 = inactive).

Following Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal (2012), we interpreted the odds ratios conditionally on the random intercepts of the models. The odds ratio is the number by which we multiplied the odds of agreeing with our three indicators for measuring self-confidence and control over everyday life for every single-unit increase in an independent variable, for example, participation in non-formal adult education. We interpreted an odds ratio greater than 1 as the increased odds of agreement with a certain statement along with the independent variable, whereas an odds ratio of less than 1 indicated decreased odds when the independent variable increased. Given that most of our independent variables are dummy and categorical, we compared the odds of each statement category with one which we chose as a reference.

## How Learning Matters to Adults' Agency Capacity

We begin with a look at the distribution of dependent variables in 13–15 European countries. Figure 7.1 shows the proportions of those agreeing with the three statements of interest. Overall, the majority of adults have

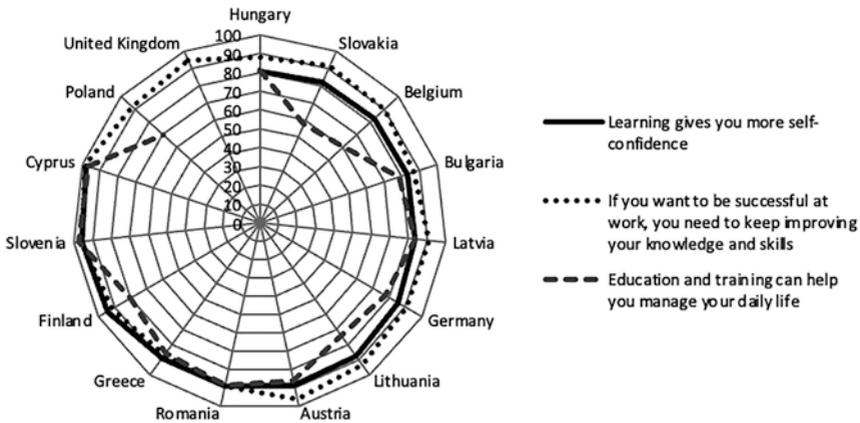


Fig. 7.1 Attitudes towards the benefits of learning of adults aged 25–64 (Percentages of those who agreed with the three statements of interest). (Source: AES 2007, own calculations, weighted data)

a very positive attitude towards learning and they think that it gives them more confidence, regardless of their country of residence. The same is also true for the attitude that people who want to be successful need to keep improving their knowledge and skills—even to a slightly higher extent in almost all countries apart from Finland, Greece, Romania, and Slovenia. The majority of adults in all countries agreed that education and training could help them manage their daily life, although to a lesser extent compared to the previous two statements.

We now proceed to a more detailed discussion, based on multivariate analyses, of the three benefits of participation in non-formal adult education. Model 1 in Table 7.1 indicates that participation in NFET was positively associated with adults' perceptions that *learning provides more confidence*. More specifically, the odds of agreeing with this statement are about 1.7 times greater for adults who had participated in NFET in the previous 12 months than for those who had not taken part in such an activity. There are also clear differences between adults according to educational level. The higher their attainment of education, the higher the conditional odds were of agreeing that learning gives you more self-confidence. The estimates in Model 2 are consistent with those from Model 1, and we could still observe the positive link between higher educational attainment and participation in NFET in the last 12 months

**Table 7.1** Learning provides more self-confidence (Results of two-level random intercept logistic regression models concerning whether adults aged 25–64 agreed with this statement)

	Model 0 e(b)	Model 1 e(b)	Model 2 e(b)
<i>Gender, Ref. Male</i>			
Female		1.522** (0.036)	1.527** (0.037)
<i>Educational background, Ref. Low</i>			
High		1.160** (0.061)	1.159** (0.061)
Age		1.009** (0.001)	1.009** (0.001)
<i>Main activity, Ref. Employed</i>			
Unemployed		0.706** (0.029)	0.708** (0.030)
Inactive		0.900** (0.027)	0.904** (0.027)
<i>Educational level, Ref. Low</i>			
Medium		1.678** (0.047)	1.688** (0.049)
Higher		3.188** (0.137)	3.695** (0.191)
<i>Participation in NFET, Ref. No</i>			
Yes		1.703** (0.057)	2.145** (0.188)
Participation in NFET*Medium			0.843+ (0.080)
Participation in NFET*Higher			0.580** (0.064)
Constant	8.306** (1.681)	2.523** (0.538)	2.461** (0.526)
Country-level variance	0.529	0.546	0.547
Intraclass correlation	0.139	0.142	0.143
Observations	71,339	71,339	71,339

Source: AES 2007, own calculations

Notes: e(b) – exponentiated coefficients, standard errors in parentheses.  
*N* (countries) = 13

Significance: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

and adults' attitudes that learning provides more confidence. It is important to emphasise that the influence of NFET on this attitude differed among adults with varying levels of education. Namely, this influence was less pronounced among those with medium and higher education levels than those with lower levels of education. More specifically, having participated in NFET is significantly associated with relatively lower conditional odds of agreeing that learning provides more confidence among adults with medium and higher educational levels.

We carried out interviews with young adults who were illiterate or had completed only primary education. Those who had passed literacy programmes felt more satisfied, independent and confident:

Interviewer: ‘How do you feel now? Do you have a higher level of self-confidence?’

Respondent: ‘Yes, I feel good about it. Even when they evaluated me, I felt really happy.’ [BG2\_P5\_108]

Respondent: ‘It was really pleasant. I actually liked it. I’m satisfied.’ [BG2\_P1\_147–148]

The interviews with other young adults with lower literacy rates also confirmed that their decisions to be involved in adult education had been informed by a desire for their capabilities as human beings to be recognised and to develop their own abilities in order to improve self-identity and contribute to the flourishing of others.

Participation in NFET also demonstrated a positive link with adults’ likelihood to agree that *in order to be successful at work, you need to keep improving your knowledge and skills*. More specifically, Model 1 in Table 7.2 indicates that the conditional odds of agreeing with this statement were about 2 times greater for adults who had participated in NFET in the previous 12 months than for those who had not taken part in such an activity. It also shows that there are clear differences between adults, depending on their educational levels, in terms of attitudes about whether the constant improvement of knowledge and skills is important for success at work. The higher the educational level, the higher the odds were of agreeing that people’s improvement of knowledge and skills was a prerequisite for success at work, given the other covariates. The estimates in Model 2 are fairly consistent with those in Model 1—an interaction term was added between the highest educational attainment and participation in NFET. Our analysis shows that having participated in NFET was significantly associated with relatively lower conditional odds of agreeing that ‘If you want to be successful at work, you need to keep improving your knowledge and skills’ among young adults with medium and higher levels of education.

The positive association between participation in NFET and the importance given to improving knowledge and skills as a prerequisite for success at work is furthermore clearly visible in the following quotations from our interviews with young adults:

**Table 7.2** If you want to be successful at work, you need to keep improving your knowledge and skills (Results of two-level random intercept logistic regression models concerning whether adults aged 25–64 agreed with this statement)

	Model 0 e(b)	Model 1 e(b)	Model 2 e(b)
<i>Gender, Ref. Male</i>			
Female		1.369** (0.033)	1.371** (0.033)
<i>Educational background, Ref. Low</i>			
High		1.321** (0.081)	1.323** (0.081)
Age		1.007** (0.001)	1.007** (0.001)
<i>Main activity, Ref. Employed</i>			
Unemployed		0.801** (0.033)	0.802** (0.033)
Inactive		0.978 (0.029)	0.981 (0.029)
<i>Educational level, Ref. Low</i>			
Medium		1.759** (0.048)	1.777** (0.050)
Higher		3.717** (0.172)	3.969** (0.212)
<i>Participation in NFET, Ref. No</i>			
Yes		2.045** (0.078)	2.479** (0.232)
Participation in NFET*Medium			0.829+ (0.085)
Participation in NFET*Higher			0.700** (0.086)
Constant	12.644** (2.079)	4.011** (0.681)	3.951** (0.671)
Country-level variance	0.402*	0.378**	0.378**
Intraclass correlation	0.109	0.103	0.103
Observations	95,949	95,949	95,949

Source: AES 2007, own calculations

Notes: e(b) – exponentiated coefficients, standard errors in parentheses.  
N (countries) = 15

Significance: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

Interviewer: ‘How has participating in the programme changed your life?’

Respondent: ‘What’s changed, really, is that now I know more and things are clearer to me... And I want to continue studying... I’d really like to get a license for a car – a driver’s licence. I’d feel a little better at least having my diploma. Everyone thinks they can go out and find a job, no problem. It’s not such a big deal after all, completing 7th grade, but every place wants a diploma now.’ [BG2\_P1\_129–139]

Respondent: ‘Nothing happens without an education.’ [BG2\_P2\_42]

Participation in NFET also had a positive influence on the likelihood adults to agree that *education and training can help you manage your daily life* holding all other variables constant. More specifically, Model 1 in Table 7.3 shows that the odds of agreeing with this statement were about 1.4 times greater for adults who had participated in NFET in the previous 12 months than for those who had not taken part in such an activity. There are also clear differences among adults, depending on their educational levels, in terms of their degree of agreement that education and training help them to manage their daily lives. The higher the educational attainment, the higher the odds were of agreeing that education and training could help one to manage their daily life. The estimates in Model 2 are consistent with those from Model 1, and we can still observe

**Table 7.3** Education and training can help you manage your daily life (Results of two-level random intercept logistic regression models concerning whether adults aged 25–64 agreed with this statement)

	Model 0 e(b)	Model 1 e(b)	Model 2 e(b)
<i>Gender, Ref. Male</i>			
Female		1.180** (0.020)	1.184** (0.020)
<i>Educational background, Ref. Low</i>			
High		1.038 (0.036)	1.040 (0.036)
Age		1.009** (0.001)	1.010** (0.001)
<i>Main activity, Ref. Employed</i>			
Unemployed		0.840** (0.027)	0.843** (0.027)
Inactive		0.953* (0.021)	0.958+ (0.021)
<i>Educational level, Ref. Low education</i>			
Medium		1.370** (0.030)	1.382** (0.032)
Higher		1.856** (0.055)	2.133** (0.075)
<i>Participation NFET Ref. No</i>			
Yes		1.379** (0.031)	1.845** (0.129)
Participation NFET*Medium			0.805** (0.060)
Participation NFET*Higher			0.589** (0.047)
Constant	4.923** (1.235)	2.035** (0.531)	1.968** (0.515)
Country-level variance	0.879	0.926	0.929
Intraclass correlation	0.211	0.220	0.220
Observations	92,237	92,237	92,237

Source: AES 2007, own calculations

Notes: e(b) – exponentiated coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. N (countries) = 14

Significance: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

the positive association between formal education and participation in NFET in the last 12 months and the attitudes about the role of education and training in managing one's daily life—we added an interaction term between the highest educational level and participation in formal and NFET. In a similar way to the other two dependent variables, the results here show that the influence of NFET varies among adults with different levels of education. So, it follows that this influence was lower among those with medium and higher education levels than among those with low levels of education.

The positive association between participating in NFET and beliefs that education and training could help one to manage their daily life is further illustrated here:

Interviewer: 'Did you volunteer for the programme?'

Respondent: 'Yes, voluntarily, because they didn't want to hire me because I am illiterate. And also [because I want] to be literate, not to be cheated with the bills, to understand numbers, to understand what is written.' [BG2\_P5\_38–44]

Interviewer: 'What motivated you to participate in the programme?'

Respondent: 'I want to get my driver's license, since I have a small child who's starting kindergarten, then school. I think we'll have to travel a long way away because we're from the ghetto. I'd still like for my kid to learn in Bulgarian.' [BG2\_P3\_91–93]

## The Need to Rethink Adult Education Policies

The present chapter enriches the critical perspective adopted by this book and the Enliven project by outlining a theoretical framework for conceptualising the role of adult education for individuals' empowerment from a capability approach perspective. The study contains both theoretical and methodological contributions. At the theoretical level, it argues that adult education should be regarded as both a sphere of and a factor for empowerment. Empowerment through adult education is embedded in

the available institutional structures and socio-cultural context, and it matters both intrinsically and instrumentally. The empowerment role of adult education is revealed through agency expansion, which enables individuals and social groups to gain power over their environment in their striving towards individual and societal well-being. At the methodological level, to the best of our knowledge, this chapter offers the first attempt to investigate the importance of adult education in empowerment by using quantitative data from a large-scale international survey. Our analyses show that participation in non-formal adult education is viewed as a means for empowering individuals through increasing their self-confidence and their capacity to find a job and to control their daily life.

Despite wide-ranging criticism, adult education policies have recently been dominated by vocationalisation, instrumental epistemology (Bagnall & Hodge, 2018), and the prioritisation of 'learning as performance over the holistic educational formation of a person' (Seddon, 2018, p. 111). The empowerment perspective helps to reveal one very often overlooked part of these narrow, deficient aspects of contemporary adult education policies. We are referring to the often neglected role of adult education in the formation of individual agency, self-confidence, and capacity to control one's environment.

This chapter has shown that the relationship between empowerment and adult education policies and practices should be regarded as a complex field of study. There is a need for future in-depth inquiries into a number of theoretical and methodological issues, including: (i) how the empowerment role of adult education differs in various socio-economic contexts and how to explain transnational differences; (ii) which dominant cultural norms in different countries impede parity of participation in adult education and its empowerment role; (iii) how the empowerment role of adult education is manifested in formal and non-formal adult education; (iv) how to develop policies aimed at enhancing the role of adult education in the formation of individual agency, self-esteem, and self-confidence; (v) how to produce reliable data in order to study the relationship between empowerment and adult education; (vi) what kinds of methodological instruments may be needed to reveal different aspects of the relationship between empowerment and adult education; and vii)

what kinds of objective indicators could be used for measuring the empowerment role of adult education.

Tett (2018, p. 362) mentions that in the league tables produced by international organisations such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC), ‘attention is paid only to economic (or redistributive) aspects of inequality and both the cultural (or recognitive) aspects and also the participative (or representative) are ignored’. This conclusion can be extended to the Adult Education Survey, as well. In fact, the 2007 pilot Adult Education Survey survey included a special section on ‘Attitude towards learning’ that was comprised of eight questions.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, these and a number of other attitudinal questions were left out of the subsequent surveys conducted in 2011 and 2016.

Our analysis has demonstrated that the empowerment effect of adult education is greater among learners with low educational levels than it is among those with medium and higher educational levels. This means that in order to truly be sensitive towards vulnerable groups, adult education policies have to more seriously consider the varying roles adult education can play in the empowerment of people from different social backgrounds.

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<sup>3</sup>More specifically, adults were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: ‘People who continue to learn as adults are more likely to avoid unemployment’; ‘If you want to be successful at work, you need to keep improving your knowledge and skills’; ‘Employers should be responsible for the training of their employees’; ‘The skills you need to do a job can’t be learned in the classroom’; ‘Education and training can help you manage your daily life better’; ‘Learning new things is fun’; ‘Learning gives you more self-confidence’; & ‘Individuals should be prepared to pay something for their adult learning’.

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# 8

## Governing Adult Learning Through Influencing Public Debate: How the Media Use PIAAC Data in Denmark, Italy and the United Kingdom

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### Introduction

This chapter examines the visibility of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIACC), and the use of PIAAC data, in widely read newspapers in Denmark, Italy and the United Kingdom. Data generated through PIAAC, and its ‘implicit’ benchmarking of Level 3 in adults’ performances, support European standard setting in adult learning, and when national governments ask international

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organisations to do ‘objective’ evaluations, the latter enhance their power. The media contribute to knowledge production, and this is one way they might exert influence. How PIAAC data is used by different newspapers varies between countries but also according to the role each newspaper plays within national debates.

The role, meanings and place of adult learning are strongly connected to a number of global trends, such as the evolution of global political agendas, discourses and governance mechanisms that expand beyond or operate across national boundaries (e.g. the Sustainable Development Goals) and the development of regional political agendas (e.g. Europe 2020), and governance architectures (e.g. the European Semester). Research on the role of European governance in adult learning, carried out by the Enliven team, therefore examined how governance mechanisms employed by the institutions of the European Union (EU) influence policies to regulate lifelong learning and approaches to intervening in lifelong learning markets at both European and national levels (Milana & Klatt, 2019; Milana et al., 2020). These analyses have shown how (hard and soft) mechanisms, combined with wealth redistribution within the EU, can influence policies at both regional and national levels. In doing so, they pointed to standard setting as a core (soft) governance mechanism and to benchmarks and data generation as two key instruments that contribute to its working.

Against this backdrop, this chapter centres attention on the ‘implicit’ benchmarking in adults’ skills, endorsed through the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC), and the data it produces. It does so by examining the use of PIAAC data in the highest circulating national newspapers in three European countries: Denmark, Italy and the United Kingdom, and to what extent this contributes to the public debate informing national policy in these countries.

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Like all media, national newspapers actively contribute to the production of knowledge. They receive and collect information from many sources, synthesise and structure it, and communicate it to audiences. In this process, the media prioritise certain topics and approaches, drawing on ideological and commercial stances. Thus, the media produce and circulate knowledge in different policy fields and can be assumed to influence both the public and decision-makers.

In the Enliven project, we assumed that people's agency is not determined, but is nevertheless influenced by social structures and environments. (See Chap. 2 above for a discussion of *bounded agency*.) We further assumed that knowledge produced and circulated by media supports the formation of social structures and environments that may, at a national level, influence adults' attitudes towards, and possibilities for, learning.

For example, in examining what contributed to a growing political concern about adult literacy in Canada (1980s–2010s), Walker and Rubenson (2014) pointed at national newspapers as central in shaping both governmental and public perceptions. This led to the creation of the International Assessment of Literacy Skills, thereby reinforcing the links between the development of governmental policies and the measurement of adult skills. More recently, PIAAC and how its results are popularised through different media have attracted scholarly attention (Cort & Larson, 2015; Hamilton, 2017, 2018; Yasukawa et al., 2017). Albeit focusing on newspapers, this chapter contributes to this strand of research, encompassing a longer time span than previous studies on the influence of PIAAC.<sup>1</sup>

In the next section, we present the framework of this study, explaining our approach to governance, and our understanding of standard setting in European adult learning. This section also touches upon the use of social indicators and benchmarks for monitoring EU progress and clarifies our focus on PIAAC data. We argue that the data generated through PIAAC, and PIAAC's 'implicit' benchmarking of Level 3 in

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<sup>1</sup>This chapter draws on a larger study which also covered Estonia and Slovakia; see Milana and Vatrella (2019).

adults' performances, contribute to standard setting in adult learning within the EU.<sup>2</sup> In subsequent sections, we illustrate the design of our empirical study, and present and discuss the results.

## Governance, Standard Setting and Benchmarking in Adult Learning

Drawing on literature on governance (e.g. Ozga et al., 2011; Lawn, 2011; Martens & Jakobi, 2010; Dale, 1999; Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007; Woodward, 2009), we conceptualise a governance mechanism as a policy process aimed at reaching specific policy objective(s), which are then naturalised, and their effects achieved, by means of specific instruments. Standard setting is one such mechanism, engaging the EU institutions, together with member states, around common policy goals and targets to be pursued at a community level.

We understand standard setting as the process involved in the very establishment of common rules, which entails two corresponding phenomena: (1) a value-laden process that sanctions some actions as good, desirable, or permissible, the results of which are codified in the texts; and (2) a reconciling process that allows for reaching an agreement on common policy goals—which are then translated into benchmarks.

Benchmarks, and the process of benchmarking, are instrumental to standard setting, as they translate policy goals into accepted standards

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<sup>2</sup> Level 3 of proficiency in the three competence domains assessed through the PIAAC Survey is defined as follows:

- Literacy: 'Texts at this level are often dense or lengthy. Understanding text and rhetorical structures is often required, as is navigating complex digital texts.'
- Numeracy: 'Tasks at this level require the application of number sense and spatial sense; recognising and working with mathematical relationships, patterns, and proportions expressed in verbal or numerical form; and interpreting data and statistics in texts, tables and graphs.'
- Problem solving in technology-rich environments: 'At this level, tasks typically require the use of both generic and more specific technology applications. Some navigation across pages and applications is required to solve the problem. The task may involve multiple steps and operators. The goal of the problem may have to be defined by the respondent, and the criteria to be met may or may not be explicit. Integration and inferential reasoning may be needed to a large extent.' (OECD, n.d., pp. 3–4).

used to evaluate the approximation of a country's performance towards these goals. Likewise, data generation (and the generation of computable data particularly) is also instrumental in standard setting, as it helps in the design of indicators and their linking to policy and related benchmarks.

In the EU, indicators and benchmarks represent a cornerstone in education and training policy and are essential for national implementation of community policies (European Commission, 2004). Yet, by comparing the European benchmarks developed to monitor progress under the 2010 and 2020 Education and Training work programmes, we note that while several areas in which progress is monitored through dedicated benchmarks have changed over time, others have remained substantially unchanged, with only minor adjustments. That is the case for the only explicit benchmark on adult learning monitored under the Education and Training work programmes: namely, the percentage of adults engaged in lifelong learning. However, in 2018, the European Commission introduced a new framework for consolidating benchmarks and monitoring adult skills and learning policies across the EU under the European Semester.

All processes leading to the benchmarks mentioned have been *explicit* (i.e. deliberate and systematic). However, parallel to these processes, in relation to adult learning an *implicit* benchmarking has also occurred (i.e. as a by-product of data generation) (Jackson, 2001). We claim that an implicit benchmarking on adult skills has occurred since the late 1990s and the first launch of International Assessment of Literacy Skills, and has been reinforced through PIAAC and the increased interest of the OECD in data on adult learning.

Run under the auspices of the OECD and based on agreements with national governments, the PIAAC Survey has been carried out at the time of writing in three rounds (2011–2012; 2014–2015; 2017–2018) in a total of 38 countries around the world, including most EU countries, as well as countries from the Americas, Asia, Australasia, and the Russian Federation. The Survey builds on the experience the OECD gained in the late 1990s and early 2000s in cooperation with Statistics Canada, while carrying out International Assessment of Literacy Skills, and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL), and later the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) every three years.

International Assessment of Literacy Skills, an international taxonomy of adult literacy, identified five levels of proficiency. Its middle level (Level 3) has since come to be considered internationally the minimum desirable standard in adult literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving in technology-rich environments. Level 3 has thus become an *implicit* benchmark for assessing, in terms of policy outputs, performances in adults' skills (Hamilton et al., 2015). Similarly, it has become—through various forms of collaboration among the EU institutions, its member states and the OECD—an implicit benchmark for evaluating EU policy and member states' performance.

As Milana (2017) noted, when the European Commission recommended an explicit benchmark on adult learning under Education and Training 2010, there were several European surveys producing data on adults' *participation* in formal, non-formal and informal education, but none on adults' *performances*. After considering whether to develop a new EU survey or to use the one under preparation by the OECD (European Commission, 2007), the EU and OECD finally agreed 'to work closer together in three areas: skills strategies, country analyses and international surveys' (European Commission, 2013). Consequently, Eurostat entered into cooperation with the OECD, and member states and their national statistics agencies were given permission to use resources from the Structural Funds to join the PIAAC Survey and gather the required data at national level.

In this way, both the data generated through PIAAC and its 'implicit' benchmarking of Level 3 in adults' performances supported EU standard-setting in adult learning. Further, when national governments hand over the task of undertaking 'objective' evaluations, as with the PIAAC, to international organisations, these strengthen their power position (Grek, 2009; Martens & Niemann, 2010). Such calculative practices may affect the capacities and connections between different actors, and generate new ways for different actors to influence governmental action (Miller, 2001). Active contribution to knowledge production by the media is one way in which such influence may occur. It is for this reason that we examine the use of PIAAC data in the highest circulating national newspapers in three selected countries.

## Study Design and Methodology

Our study draws on the literature on qualitative approaches to media content analysis (e.g. Macnamara, 2005; Martins et al., 2013; Matthes & Kohring, 2008; Krippendorff, 2018), and particularly those employed to analyse newspaper content in multi-year studies (Lacy et al., 2001).

We selected Denmark, Italy and the United Kingdom as they represent Northern and Southern European countries, which score differently in the PIAAC Survey. The OECD average scores are 268 for literacy, 263 for numeracy and 31 for problem-solving by use of information and technology. Denmark is well above the OECD average in literacy (271), numeracy (278) and problem-solving skills (39). By contrast, Italy is below the OECD mean scores in both literacy (250) and numeracy (247). Finally, the United Kingdom (England and Northern Ireland) has a mean score similar to the OECD average in numeracy (262), but higher scores in literacy (273) and problem-solving skills (35).

## Dataset

In each country, our data consists of articles, editorials and opinion pieces, identified and collected by means of a shared protocol. First, in each country, we considered the highest circulating newspapers, as well as newspapers with different political, ideological and/or cultural orientations. Then, online archives were searched (Infomedia in Denmark; newspapers' internal databases in Italy; Infotrac newsstand, Gale group, ProQuest, Pressreader in the United Kingdom), for articles published from 2012 to 2019 (July). We used a number of search words that were common across countries (but translated into local languages): PIAAC, Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies; Survey of adult skills; and additional key words considered of country-relevance.

Overall, our searches yielded a total of 88 texts (articles, editorials and opinion pieces) of which 83 were considered for the analysis presented in this chapter (Table 8.1).

**Table 8.1** Number of texts analysed, by country, newspaper and political orientation

Country	Newspaper	Political orientation	No. of texts
<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Berlingske</i>	Liberal-conservative	5
	<i>Jyllands-Posten</i>	Liberal-conservative	10
	<i>Politiken</i>	Centre-left	7
	<i>Total</i>		<b>22</b>
<i>Italy</i>	<i>La Repubblica</i>	Centre-left	9
	<i>Il Sole 24 Ore</i>	Liberal	8
	<i>Il Giornale</i>	Right-wing	6
	<i>Total</i>		<b>33</b>
<i>United Kingdom</i>	<i>The Daily Mail</i>	Conservative	9
	<i>The Financial Times</i>	Liberal	6
	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	Conservative	6
	<i>The Guardian</i>	Centre-left	7
	<i>Total</i>		<b>28</b>
<i>Total number of articles</i>			<b>83</b>

Source: Our adaptation from ADS; Federal Agency for Civic Education ([www.eurotopics.net](http://www.eurotopics.net)); Financial Times (2018); Smith (2019); and Statista (2019)

## Data Analysis

In each country, the articles were synthesised in a grid composed of two sections: (1) descriptive information (e.g. the newspaper title and orientation, type of article, date of publication) and whether PIAAC was the main topic or scope of the article; and (2) analytical notes on graphical displays, reliability and credibility, as well as explicit or implicit references to politicians, policy priorities, reforms and the language used and meaning conveyed. In order to ensure accuracy, parsimony and flexibility (Miles & Huberman, 1985), for each country, both descriptive and analytical information were then synthesised through a matrix consisting of ‘cases’ (e.g. the articles), presented in the rows and ‘variables’ (i.e. information about each article) in columns. This enabled a clearer picture of the function each article assigned to PIAAC; the possible presence of implied information and causal relationships; how adult learning was represented, and through which rhetorical figures and/or line of argument this was done. On this basis, we looked for hints of the potential

function played within national debates by each newspaper in promoting specific views of education and learning through the use of PIAAC data.

Though there are different kinds of texts in the newspapers, all content is filtered in some way by the editors, so the content as a whole more or less conforms to the policy or 'platform' of the newspaper. In our analysis, we see texts mainly as representing the different newspapers' platforms, but, in some instances, we also take account of different sources or authors.

In the following section, we present the results of our analysis.

## The Use of PIAAC Data in the Highest Circulating National Newspapers

### Denmark

Our study of the Danish press included six national newspapers. Of the 27 articles found, 22 were published in three of these, and we restricted our attention to these: *Berlingske* (liberal-conservative, 5), *Jyllands-Posten* (liberal-conservative, 10) and *Politiken* (centre-left, 7).

The first Danish PIAAC results were published in October 2013, and all three newspapers published news on this. Most of the news coverage drew on the press release on the PIAAC results brought out by the government. The press release summarised that Danish adults had fairly good competencies in maths and medium-level competencies in information and technology, but scored below average in reading. This last fact, along with the statement in the brief report summarising the Danish results that 'one out of six Danes aged 16–65 years have bad reading skills' (SFI, 2013, p. 4), inspired most of the news coverage. Examples of headlines are:

- *One in six Danes is a bad reader* (*Berlingske*, 9 October, 2013)
- *Danish youngsters have become worse at reading* (*Jyllands-Posten*, 10 October, 2013)
- *Tuesday Analysis: Adults' reading skills get worse* (*Politiken*, 5 November, 2013)

The texts in *Berlingske* predominantly concentrated on policy related to school-level education and teaching standards in primary and lower secondary school. It emphasised the reading difficulties of many Danes, including older adults, unemployed people and immigrants, and quoted the Director of the Danish Association of Employers, who accused the government of having failed to establish an education system at top international level. The newspaper also suggested building a taskforce to improve participation in education and provided advice on changes to the quality control of teachers to ensure raising teaching standards. Further, *Berlingske* published an opinion piece by two researchers, with a careful discussion of the OECD dataset and its methodology, recognising the importance of the Danish social context and pointing to the existing national statistical data that might be more reliable (*Berlingske*, 22 December 2013).

In the early coverage following the publication of the Danish PIAAC results, *Jyllands-Posten* restricted attention to the literacy competences among young Danes and linked this question to the (then) on-going reform of primary and lower secondary schooling, which among other measures increased the number of teaching hours in Danish and maths. All in all, the article supported the idea that *Danish youngsters have become worse at reading*. However, the PIAAC results were reported in a relatively sophisticated way, using a variety of experts to analyse and comment and providing alternative explanations to the apparent decline in adult competences—as this quotation suggests:

It was much easier to be a good reader then, 15 years ago. Today you need not only to read a newspaper, but also to keep up to date with other kinds of texts, such as electronic media, and that means a much higher degree of complexity. (*Jyllands-Posten*, 10 Oct 2013, own translation)

In the early news coverage and discussion, both *Berlingske* and *Jyllands-Posten* may be seen as supporting the policy perspective signalled by PIAAC and its framing by the Danish Ministry of Education. Both papers confirmed that the skills (especially in reading) of Danish adults represented a problem, emphasised the business and competitiveness

aspects of the problem, and discussed the PIAAC results in relatively sophisticated ways, drawing on different stakeholders, experts and data.

After the initial coverage and discussion following the publication of PIAAC results in 2013, newspaper texts on the topic generally became sparse. However, in *Jyllands-Posten* PIAAC resurfaced some years later largely in connection with debates on the information and technology skill levels of Danes. During 2017, the newspaper published five texts drawing in one way or another on PIAAC results. The first was a feature article by a journalist, the rest were opinion pieces written by experts and stakeholders. Some of the headlines provide examples of how the discussion framed the problems of the Danish skill levels in a critical way, mainly from a business and competitiveness perspective:

- *The basic information and technology skills of the Danes are overrated* (20 June 2017)
- *We need an alliance for better information and technology, numeracy and literacy skills* (27 May 2017)
- *600,000 adults with weak reading skills is a burning issue* (27 August 2017)

*Jyllands-Posten* stands out for the way it used existing and new research and presented contributions from experts, such as the Director of the Danish Evaluation Institute, an authoritative public research and consultancy agency, who authored two of the texts whose headlines are quoted above.

Unlike *Berlingske*, or the early coverage in *Jyllands-Posten*, *Politiken* paid greater attention to adult education and workers' skills than to school-level policies. It took a kind of progressive role that, at the start of the reporting period under consideration, discussed education issues as a matter of social equality. Paying attention to the competencies of low-educated employees and migrant workers, it consolidated its progressive message. To support its approach, *Politiken* used references to the studies from the Danish metalworker's union, on employees' competences, social security schemes and wage levels, to defend workers and workplaces, and the need for an adult education support system.

In *Politiken*'s later coverage, the focus on workers' skills continued, but it was related to technological change in the workplace through artificial intelligence and high-technology robots. An article published on 20 May 2017 (*The public school must act as a bulwark in the struggle against the robots*), based on an interview with a representative of the Danish unskilled workers' trade union, argued that in order to 'make sure that employees in the Danish labour market will not drown in the wave of artificial intelligence and high technology robots', both the public school system and the system of adult and continuing education needed to cope with the situation. The following spring, *Politiken* published another article written by the Director of the Danish Evaluation Institute, entitled: 'Formulate objectives for digital competences' (11 May 2018). This coincided with the focus on digital skills in *Jyllands-Posten*.

In general, what needs to be emphasised is the role that experts and researchers played in the newspaper coverage of PIAAC in Denmark. Almost half of the articles under consideration (13) were written by stakeholders and experts from outside the media. The most prominent of these was the Danish Evaluation Institute. Moreover, apart from a single article written by two researchers, the Danish newspapers accepted the PIAAC results as authoritative, while not always mentioning OECD as the source.

## Italy

PIAAC acquired relevance in the Italian press in 2013 following the release of its first results (8 out of 18 articles found were published in 2013), and it became a national matter to which all newspapers under consideration paid some attention until 2019 (July).

However, the newspapers studied show considerable differences in the knowledge that they disseminated and produced over time. The year 2013 represents both the time when PIAAC data were published and the period when *La Repubblica* (centre-left), which dominated the communication scene at that time (with 5 articles out of 7 collected), started politicising PIAAC from a neoliberal perspective. This was a position

this newspaper consolidated over the following years through the idea that there is a need to reform the labour market system and its entry-rules on the basis of the productivity of human capital. This view was based on the assumption that a direct and linear causal relationship exists between individual learning outcomes and national economic advancement. It also had an impact on the political discourse and related policy solutions.

The relationship between education outcomes and economic factors was emphasised with specific rhetorical strategies, such as the use of metaphors. For example, *La Repubblica* (9 Oct 2013) compared the country to a laggard in order to emphasise the low scores in literacy and numeracy in Italy, which implied it was last in the 'race' and at risk of an irretrievable loss of human capital resources. While *La Repubblica* was the most active during 2013, it stopped reporting on PIAAC for the next two years, when *Il Sole 24 Ore* (liberal) became more active.

Although in 2014 *Il Sole 24 Ore* 'took over' the reporting on the PIAAC subject, its linking of educational attainment and market labour demand was not dissimilar from *La Repubblica*. Although the ideological assumptions did not change, *Il Sole 24 Ore* pushed them further towards a neo-managerialist framing. This was primarily by focusing on the deterioration of results in education and training that (it was reported) led to a lack of skills in the labour market, an increasing mismatch between skills/education and jobs, and a negative impact on Italian productivity.

What emerged was a subtle argumentative strategy, with this newspaper resorting to the key words of 'early school leaving' and 'poor basic skills' and linking them to systemic deficiencies in the Italian educational system, seen as stemming from lack of effective school-to-work transitions and private investment in education.

Literacy and numeracy levels in Italy improve (data from both PISA and PIAAC results). However, Italy remains on the back foot in relation to high school diploma and degrees [...] According to the OECD report, both public and private expenditure on education increased by 8% between 1995 and 2008 and then decreased by 12% between 2008 and 2011. (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 9 Sept 2014 own translation)

The newspaper thereby represented a complex reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) as simple, claiming there were easy ways to improve the national reform agenda in education. In other words, the neoliberal framing, used by *La Repubblica* in 2013, was deployed in 2014 by *Il Sole 24 Ore* in an epistemic way to promote a specific approach regarding the way in which the problem was understood, addressed and solved.

Another trend visible in the reporting on PIAAC in Italy can be seen in 2015, when *Il Giornale* (right-wing) started to use PIAAC data in articles focused on promoting specific conservative ideological discourses on patriotism, nationalism and patriotic nationalism. PIAAC data, for example, was mentioned in relation to an article discussing the relationship between the use of English language by Italians and their sense of national identity. It was suggested that: *We use English words since we do not love nor know Italian*. This article, published on February 2 2015, dealt with PIAAC data only to show the syllogism according to which *The more Illiterate you are, the more you use English and the lower is your sense of national identity*. In other words, *Il Giornale* seemed mainly interested in demonstrating the idea according to which resorting to an Anglicism (especially when it is not strictly necessary) became a clear indicator of a low sense of Italian national identity, rather than being concerned about the PIAAC results themselves.

Between 2016 and 2019, PIAAC data was again discussed in *La Repubblica* and *Il Sole 24 Ore*. In this period, both newspapers tended to diversify the issues that they addressed, how they were presented, the political priorities they pursued and the rhetorical strategies to which they resorted. From 2016, *La Repubblica* no longer dealt with the PIAAC results as a central issue but rather shifted to implicitly supporting the Reform of the national education and training system (Law no. 107/2015), hence sticking to its narrative about the link between educational attainment and labour market demands (and the school-work transition).

Regardless of the differences, since 2013, all three newspapers have used PIAAC data to strengthen their respective positions and, in doing so, they have reinforced the link between education and the economy.

## The United Kingdom

In the UK, most newspaper coverage of PIAAC was around 2013 (June–December), when the OECD released the first PIAAC results. Over a six-year period, half of the newspaper articles, editorials and opinion pieces (15) appeared within this short time frame (2013). At that time, *The Guardian* (centre-left) was the most active in reporting issues linked to PIAAC, publishing six articles between October and November 2013.

In general, almost half of the articles (13 out of 28) under consideration covered PIAAC as their main subject. Of those specifically addressing PIAAC over the six-year period, seven appeared in the *Daily Mail* (conservative), three in *The Guardian*, two in *The Financial Times* (liberal) and one in *The Daily Telegraph* (conservative). However, attention to PIAAC in public debate mostly responded to the first OECD press release in 2013.

*The Guardian* dominated around this time, publishing a total of six articles dealing with PIAAC that year. This positioned *The Guardian* strongly as a public ‘amplifier’ of the political debate. It seems that the newspaper amplified the political arguments between Conservative and Labour parties, entering debate over the economic consequences of ‘bad’ educational policy decisions. It positioned itself as non-partisan by providing a different perspective on the issue, including quotes from both Conservative and Labour Party representatives, OECD experts and business representatives. A number of letters to the *The Guardian*’s editor (11 Oct 2013) provided a further platform for the public to vent about political parties’ lack of progress in education. By providing a variety of perspectives that enabled political and public debate, *The Guardian* legitimised its reporting as independent and non-partisan. But while representing itself as an independent voice, *The Guardian* amplified messages from the government (repeated in most other newspapers)—for instance, by quoting Matthew Hancock, the Minister for Skills and Enterprise:

These are Labour’s children, educated under a Labour government and force-fed a diet of dumbing down and low expectations (*The Guardian*, 9 Oct 2013).

After 2013, *The Guardian* did not cover PIAAC for at least another four years. By contrast, the *Daily Mail* reported on the PIAAC findings only twice in 2013 but consistently returned to the subject over the following years. The *Daily Mail*, unlike *The Guardian*, positioned itself as a ‘moral judge’ on political and social issues. The PIAAC results became a sort of rhetorical strategy used as a means to emphasise the falling standards of English youth, presenting the results in a political light that predominantly made the previous Labour government responsible. Specific social issues, such as social mobility or inequality, were used as starting points, or *topoi*, to criticise past policies of the Labour Party and to support market-orientated solutions to educational and social issues. An article from 2013, ‘*Social mobility is among the worst in the developed world*’, reported on the relationship between literacy and numeracy levels and socio-economic background in England, but only one solution was presented: ‘the best way to overcome social disadvantages and improve education was to allow businesses to have a say in what is taught in schools’. From 2016, university degrees and students became the target. Interestingly, the OECD, which was described as a ‘think tank’, was used as a partner in the shaming:

- *The OECD, which published its report yesterday, also blamed the huge surge in numbers going to university* (29 Jan 2016)
- *The OECD said institutions must (...) stop admitting students who are substandard* (29 Jan 2016)

The economic value and the ‘value-for-money’ arguments were the only justification used in ‘judging’ university degrees by *The Daily Mail*. This newspaper also promoted industry placements as an alternative to university education. The moral blaming and judging were clearly visible in the language used in several articles:

- *Shame of 500,000 ‘NEETs’ who don’t even want to work* (27 May 2015)
- *Too many universities were getting bums on seats* (12 Sept 2018)
- *‘Worthless’ degrees* (12 Sept 2018)
- *Some ‘Mickey Mouse’ degree courses* (12 Sept 2018)

Unsurprisingly, *The Financial Times*' reporting was dominated by an economic framing. The PIAAC results undermined 'the UK's "self-image" of progressive and productive knowledge economy' (11 Oct 2013). The paper alerted readers that low literacy and numeracy skills threatened Britain's future prosperity and so 'skill development' was seen as the primary concern of school education. Education was portrayed as a commodity needed to support industry and economic development. *The Financial Times* emphasised the educational role of business and called for UK companies to start investing in developing their own talent (6 Nov 2013), almost delegitimising the role of schools and teachers.

Finally, *The Daily Telegraph*, which mentioned PIAAC in several articles between 2013 and 2015, used PIAAC instrumentally to support the specific political agenda of the day: to criticise Labour policies (9 Oct 2013), welfare policy (6 Dec 2013), economic policy (29 Jan 2014) and immigration policy (26 Feb 2015).

It is worth mentioning that all newspapers considered consistently referred to the expertise of the OECD representative, Andreas Schleicher, who was extensively quoted in ten articles. He was introduced as 'OECD's own education chief' (*The Daily Telegraph*, 2 Dec 2013) and 'OECD's special advisor on education' (*The Guardian*, 9 Oct 2013). *The Financial Times* (4 June 2013) published an article by Schleicher, which focused on the importance of skills for competitive economies, and provided advice on what skills should be taught at schools and how to motivate disengaged youth. *The Guardian* (26 Nov 2013) published a profile of Schleicher, presenting him as a 'human face' of the OECD, the 'world's schoolmaster' and a man who 'invented and still runs the [PISA] Programme'. While a variety of experts was consulted and quoted by education editors, Schleicher was positioned as an international guru on skills and schooling in all newspapers under consideration.

Finally, in reporting on England's PIAAC performance, the British press accepted the OECD results as authoritative, using both the data and the expertise of the OECD representative as unquestionable truths. At the peak of reporting, the main information was provided in the news sections by education and society editors.

## Concluding Remarks

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the media actively contribute to the production of knowledge, driven by different ideological and commercial stances. In contributing to public debates and the production of knowledge, during the years 2013–2019 the highest circulating newspapers in Denmark, Italy and the United Kingdom made use of PIAAC data in different ways, adjusted to each country's socio-economic and political context.

Specifically, in Denmark, PIAAC data were used to focus attention on a decline in adult competences and the importance of information and technology skills, mainly from a business and competitiveness perspective, as well as on a need for reforms to primary and secondary education. In Italy, PIAAC data were used to focus attention on school-to-work transitions and the needs of the labour market. By comparison, in the United Kingdom PIAAC data were often used to point at the failures of the formal education system and its impact on the future labour force, including critiques of the Labour Party and its policy choices.

National differences are also evident in who contributes to knowledge production in the newspapers under consideration: in Denmark, researchers and experts were prominent; in Italy, it was mostly journalists; and in the United Kingdom, journalists and specialists, though they relied for the most part on the expertise and authority of the OECD.

Moreover, in each country, there are hints of different functions that each newspaper played within the public, national debate in relation to PIAAC. These functions are less distinctive in Denmark but rather differentiated in Italy and the United Kingdom (Table 8.2).

Specifically, in Denmark both *Berlingske* and *Jyllands-Posten* emphasised the business and competitiveness implications of the PIAAC results, supporting the economy's need for skills. By contrast, *Politiken* took a more progressive position and appeared to focus more on the workers' needs for skills. However, it also paid attention to low-educated employees and migrant workers and discussed education issues as a matter of social equality.

**Table 8.2** The function of newspapers regarding the view of education they promote by country and newspaper

Country	Newspaper	Function
Denmark	<i>Berlingske</i>	Supporting the economy's need for skills
	<i>Jyllands-Posten</i>	Supporting the economy's need for skills; mediating policy debate
Italy	<i>Politiken</i>	Supporting workers' need for skills
	<i>La Repubblica</i>	Supporting the economy's effectiveness of education and labour market reforms
	<i>Il Sole 24 Ore</i>	Supporting the economy's need for skills through the privatisation of education
United Kingdom	<i>Il Giornale</i>	Pursuing nationalist agenda
	<i>The Guardian</i>	Amplifier of political debate
	<i>The Daily Mail</i>	Blaming policy reforms of education and supporting market-oriented solutions
	<i>The Financial Times</i>	Supporting the educational role of business
	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	Supporting political agendas of the day

In Italy, *La Repubblica* made use of PIAAC data to highlight the economy's dependency on education and labour market reforms, based on a neoliberal view of education. *Il Sole 24 Ore* used PIAAC data to suggest the need for increasing private investment in education. In doing so, it promoted a specific view of education as an instrument for economic productivity. *Il Giornale* took an 'ideological' role, promoting specific conservative discourses on patriotism, nationalism and patriotic nationalism.

Finally, in the United Kingdom, *The Guardian* acted as a non-partisan 'amplifier' of the political struggle between Conservative and Labour parties on the economic consequences of policy decisions in education. By contrast, *The Daily Mail* undertook a judgemental attitude with regard to political and, especially, social issues like social mobility and inequality, while offering support for market-orientated solutions to both educational and social issues. *The Financial Times* stressed the needs of business, promoting a view of education as a commodity needed to support industry and economic development. *The Daily Telegraph* used PIAAC data selectively for different instrumental purposes, depending on the political agenda.

The Enliven project examined the intersectionality between micro-, meso- and macro-level factors that shape young adults' situations of vulnerability (see Chap. 1). Among macro-level factors is public opinion around topics of concern at country level, for both politicians and stakeholders. Our study shows that newspapers have mediated information about PIAAC and its results in different ways in three of the participating countries. Even in today's complex public sphere, with many types of electronic media, newspapers remain a key element of the public sphere, and are often taken as indicators of public opinion by politicians and stakeholders. Hence, representations in national newspapers contribute to shaping the policy implications of PIAAC.

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# 9

## Policy, Practice and Praxis: Computer-Aided Decision Support to Enable Policy-Making in Lifelong Learning

Sharon Clancy and Claire Palmer

### Introduction

How, ‘in our messy, fuzzy, anarchic field of practice ... can we produce neatly packaged bundles of evidence that might be useful to busy policy-makers?’ (Field, 2015). In a society dominated by information technologies, and in which data plays an increasingly pervasive role in economic, social, cultural and political life, it seems natural that we should seek computer-aided support in making intelligent decisions by which to improve policy. To this end, the European Commission encouraged the creation of a prototype Intelligent Decision Support System (IDSS) to

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support policy-making in lifelong learning. As developed within the Enliven project, this had a particular focus on young people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEETs). The aim was to provide a repository for existing programmes to enable anyone interested in offering programmes for young adults—particularly those from groups disadvantaged in terms of gender, ethnicity, culture and other factors—to examine what measures have worked, to identify what types of actions have previously been employed and to enable their assessment against suitable criteria. The work involved close collaboration between educational researchers and computer scientists and was enriched through the interaction of approaches from social and computer sciences. This allowed for examination of the key challenges and limitations of both disciplines in addressing one of the most intractable, or ‘wicked’, social problems of our times—one which repeatedly defies neat packaging into ‘bundles of evidence’.

Whilst we were clear on the ‘problem’ per se, understanding and characterising it, as well as piloting a computer-aided system which might create a mechanism for genuine policy adaptation, was deeply complex. From the beginning, creating a common discourse between two very different disciplines represented problems of ontology and epistemology. We needed to agree how we determined the important attributes or characteristics of ‘being NEET’, given the complex range of variables—age, location and geography, social and economic characteristics—across the Enliven project’s ten countries. From a computer science perspective, it became important to show the relationship between any defining characteristics and to determine a set of concepts and categories that represented the subject. From a social science perspective, it was vital to explore the factors which characterise this group of young people and the social constraints and barriers they face. We also sought to recognise how we would know whether the IDSS had worked, from the perspectives of practitioners, policy-makers and young people, how it would be evaluated and how we could demonstrate its impact in the longer term. This created an important phenomenological focus for social science partners. We attempted to gain access to young people’s own perceptions of what worked for them particularly through feedback from members of a Youth Panel.

The research aimed to uncover barriers to unemployment faced by young people furthest from the labour market and the programmes used to respond effectively to these issues. To add depth and nuance, and to gain access to more detailed evaluation material and data local to the research team, we evaluated 'Young and Successful', an employment support service for young people who had been unemployed for 12 months or more, based in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire (two counties in England's East Midlands region). The input of youth practitioners and youth representatives from this programme greatly enriched the research and gave access to practice-based knowledge.

This inter-disciplinary and inter-sectoral work proved groundbreaking and allowed for praxis: 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 2000, p. 51). Our practitioner focus enabled us to examine the coming together of research paradigms. We discovered how civil society practitioners, social scientists and computational social scientists can work to share expertise, create greater knowledge democracy and address the ontological differences between data expectations among policy-makers and target communities. Such differences might include, for instance, policy-makers' understanding of the reality of searching for work in areas where appropriate work is scarce, or a failure to adequately recognise the importance of prior work experience, or the importance of having mentors (and financial support) to overcome certain apparently small barriers (like access to buses and transport, or the right clothes) which can become insurmountable for vulnerable young people.

This chapter reflects on the exercise of collaborative cross-disciplinary and inter-sectoral working, as well as describing how the Enliven IDSS developed and giving insight into the lessons learned during the stages of its development. It offers reflections on both the limitations of the information available and the constraints of a computer-based response to a complex social problem. It also considers the instruments necessary to facilitate effective policy-making in lifelong learning. We have sought to explore the ontological differences between data expectations among policy-makers and among young people themselves, and how data can serve knowledge creation for those most excluded in society.

## Policy Focus: NEETs

Across the world, NEET young people are considered to face particular barriers including: a lack of work experience, poor qualifications, heightened employer uncertainty, and—by some policymakers—considered to represent certain negative typologies (e.g. poor work, lazy, quitters). (Mawn et al., 2017, p. 2)

According to Eurostat, in 2018, around one in six (16.5%) of young people aged 20–34 in the European Union (EU) were defined as Not in Employment Education or Training (NEET), corresponding to approximately 15 million young people (Eurostat, 2018). The term NEET has risen to prominence in recent policy debate due to the disproportionate impact of the post-2008 recession on young people. The unemployment rate for those aged under 30 is nearly double the average (Eurofound, 2016); long-term scarring and disengagement are known to result. This population is very diverse, encompassing groups of more privileged young people who voluntarily become NEET whilst waiting for a particular opportunity or attempting to pursue alternative careers, as well as unqualified early school-leavers and those taking on family caring responsibilities (Mascherini, 2018). In 2018, the NEET rate in the EU for young people (aged 20–34) with a lower level of education was 37.2%, compared with 14.7% for those with an intermediate level of education and 9.5% for those with a high level of education. People with a lower level of education were thus almost four times less likely to be in employment, education or training than those with a higher level (Eurostat, 2018).

Young people defined as NEETs often face a complex interplay of social, economic, political and psychological factors, and these can present additional barriers in terms of their visibility (socially and economically), the opportunities presented to them, and the outcomes they achieve in the labour and employment markets. For many such young people, individual factors—physical (e.g. sickness, disability) and emotional/psychological (e.g. poor mental health, dependence)—intersect with problematic material circumstances (e.g. poverty, homelessness, inadequate or uncertain access to health care or education) and social context (lack of support from their family or peer group, absence of

guidance in difficult situations, and immediate risks from the physical environment). A substantial body of research has also shown that the ‘post-industrial’ restructuring of the economy—flexibility, the ‘gig economy’ and so on—is generating a Europe-wide ‘precarariat’ (Standing, 2011) for whom insecure jobs, work with little formal or informal training and no annual or sick leave or superannuation benefits are the norm. Taking the UK alone, recent statistics show that young people aged 16–24 may be disproportionately disadvantaged by working practices: a third of people on zero-hour contracts are in the 16–24 age range, compared to 12% for all people in employment (Office for National Statistics, 2018).

People working in such precarious conditions are likely to be more vulnerable to, and less resilient against, deteriorations in both economic and personal circumstances, such as changes in their health. If all of our energy is focused on meeting basic needs for safety and security, or ‘deficit needs’, the individual is subject to vulnerability factors which make personal development virtually impossible. The search for education or training, or even for satisfying work, can seem remote from lives caught up in dealing with the immediate exigencies of poverty, homelessness, caring responsibilities or seeking physical safety. Instead, in such situations, we are more likely to be focused on the need for adequate food, housing, clothing and stable work—which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights defines as fundamental human rights (Article 25). This is clearly a major inequality issue to which policy-makers at European level and within the EU’s member states have responded in various ways.

## Computer-Aided Decision Support and Evidence-Based Policy

Decision Support Systems are information systems whose function is to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of decision processes (Pretorius, 2017). An Intelligent Decision Support System (IDSS) system ‘uses artificial intelligence, machine learning, taught algorithms and data analytics to help support decision-making in real-time, by setting out possible courses of action and evaluating the likely results of these proposed actions’ (Field, 2005). The intention is that policies will be based on

evidence: ‘evidence-based policy’ has been defined as an approach that ‘helps people make well informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy development and implementation’ (Davies, 2004).

The aim of the IDSS has been to provide a repository, or case base, for existing programmes across Enliven’s nine European countries—along with a comparator (Australia)—to enable policy-makers and practitioners interested in offering programmes for young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds, and furthest from education, training and the labour market, to identify types of actions that have been previously employed, to assess their suitability against specific criteria and to examine how similar programmes and measures have worked. The IDSS enables the sharing of information on policies and practices. It is based on the understanding that learning from and about the experience of others through collected project data can enhance both the delivery of more efficient policies and the discovery of better solutions for specific policy problems. For this, we have drawn on findings from research conducted by European and international agencies and research projects, as well as from Enliven itself. We hoped the IDSS would enable policy-makers at EU, national and organisational levels to enhance the provision and take-up of learning opportunities for adults, leading to a more productive and innovative workforce and reducing social exclusion.

In terms of theoretical positioning, we brought together methodologies and theorisations from artificial intelligence (Case-Based Reasoning) and adult learning (bounded agency) to develop and evaluate an Intelligent Decision Support System (IDSS) to provide a new and more scientific underpinning for policy debate and decision-making about adult learning, especially for young adults. Case-Based Reasoning (CBR) is a knowledge-based methodology where previously solved cases can be retrieved from a case base by using a similarity measure. Compared with traditional knowledge-based methodologies, which return solutions to user enquiries only where an exact match is available, CBR seeks to retrieve cases similar to the enquiry case: if a direct project match is not available, similar projects will be suggested.

Enliven employed the theory of bounded agency to point up structural vulnerabilities and inequalities. Bounded agency recognises the complex

interplay between personal or individual motivation and the broader structural and cultural conditions of a person's life—specifically their institutional and labour market settings, and the social support available to them—and argues that such factors are vital in shaping adults' decisions to engage in learning or education:

People living in specially disadvantaged circumstances are less likely to engage in lifelong learning, in part because they lack the financial resources to fund their studies and believe that there will be few economic benefits. In addition, their life experiences may have reinforced a sense of powerlessness and inability to control risk. (Róbert, 2012, p. 88)

Structural vulnerability results from unequal treatment by society in relation to a person's gender, ethnicity, job type or social status. While young people are resourceful and often develop imaginative solutions to create fulfilling lives under trying circumstances, there is clear evidence (Hagell et al., 2018) that their lack of control over key aspects of their lives results in anxiety and stress and impacts on their psychological health: 'Young people who are NEET are considered to be at greater risk of poor physical and mental health, being unemployed, and having low quality and low wage work in later life' (Allen, 2014). There is also evidence that policies that respect and facilitate personal choice and autonomy—such as the UK-based Activity Agreement Pilots between 2006 and 2011 (Maguire et al., 2011), which trialled individualised approaches to re-engaging young people defined as NEET—avoid the temptation to penalise young people who are unsuccessfully negotiating difficult circumstances and help to increase their sense of control and well-being.

Part of the normative nature of capitalism is its capacity to confer on the individual the responsibility for lack of confidence, skills or qualifications, and for levels of work experience inadequate for the job market. This individualisation promotes a myth of autonomy at odds with structures and systems dominated by 'competitive, self-interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain' (Giroux, 2004, p. 106) and without a real choice of genuine 'alternative activities'. It leads to 'agency inequalities' (Antonucci et al., 2014, p. 21): failing to manage

risk is a matter of individuals' responsibility; the real barriers that young people face are minimised.

Computer-aided policy-making methods have only recently started to be applied in lifelong learning. Little if any information has become available to assess its effectiveness. Wyatt (2017) provided a review of software to support computer-aided policy-making. An earlier review by Vennix (1990) noted that 'It is intriguing to observe that on the one hand computer models for policy support abound in policy making settings, while on the other hand their actual impact on policy making is considered to be limited'. Vennix found that modellers made three kinds of recommendations:

1. Build small models rather than complex, detailed ones
2. Involve the client in the policy modelling efforts as much as possible
3. For wicked problems, models are best used as communication devices to gain insight rather than for prediction.

## Wicked Social Problems

Whilst building the IDSS we realised that 'being NEET' is a 'wicked' social problem. Wicked problems are complex, intractable, open-ended and unpredictable (Alford & Head, 2017). From a computer science perspective, there are no overall solutions to such problems, although they can be mitigated. Examples of wicked problems are design planning (Rittel & Webber, 1973), social problems such as obesity (Finewood et al., 2010), and disadvantages faced by indigenous people (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007). The NEET phenomenon reflects key characteristics of wicked problems: it is difficult to define; it has multiple explanations and no single cause; it has no clear solution—even a combination of multiple solutions may be inadequate; there is no unambiguous indicator of when it has been resolved; addressing it very likely requires partnership arrangements or alliances between different agencies.

This identification of NEETS as a wicked social problem is critical in considering how intelligent information system tools can be utilised to aid policymakers focusing on this challenge. Such tools can assist

policy-makers to locate information readily and enable differing opinions to be viewed and compared, so they can make informed choices. However, the design of any tool applied to the domain of NEETs must allow for the features of wicked problems—such as an absence of consensus on what the problem is—if it is to be of use. This section will describe the features of wicked problems which need to be considered when creating a decision support tool for developing programmes for NEETs and how these features impact on its design. Features of wicked problems relevant to the design of an intelligent systems tool are:

1. ‘There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973). This implies that a tool must provide for the views of multiple stakeholders.
2. ‘Wicked problems are often not stable’ (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007). The problem may evolve as policies are implemented.
3. ‘Wicked problems do not have an enumerable (or an exhaustively describable) set of potential solutions’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973). A tool must therefore be able to support multiple solutions and to present information in ways easily comprehensible by end users.
4. ‘Wicked problems are socially complex’, involving coordinated action by a range of stakeholders; they hardly ever sit conveniently within the responsibility of any one organisation (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007). This means an intelligent systems tool must be able to manage information across multiple organisations—which may vary considerably in their information technology capabilities and corporate data policies. A tool should also employ data structures which recognise social complexity and allow for fuzziness and uncertainty.
5. ‘Attempts to address wicked problems often lead to unforeseen consequences’ (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007). For example, finding jobs for one social group—young unemployed people, for instance—may result in other groups (perhaps migrants) encountering difficulties in finding employment. A tool must be able to present a balanced view of the effects of approaches to problems.
6. ‘Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Wicked problems do not exist in isolation; they are related to other wicked problems.

The last feature requires a tool to be able to provide users with information on programmes considering related social issues. Causes of unemployment are diverse and complex:

Many of the barriers to employment are well known: illiteracy and innumeracy; and poor general educational attainment; weak employment history; contact with the criminal justice system; physical and mental ill-health and disabilities; alcohol and substance misuse, and more general indicators of a chaotic lifestyle; housing problems and homelessness; and long-term caring responsibilities. (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2016)

Practitioners designing a programme for NEETs need details of local and national programmes and funding relating to education, housing, health and other dimensions of social policy. This enables them to consider how to take advantage of, enhance, inform programme participants about, or identify gaps in, existing provision. Which features or methods could be applied to the NEET domain requires learning from other complex social problems and identifying intelligent support tools utilised within those problem areas.

## NEETs and the IDSS

The definition of NEET agreed by the European Commission's Employment Committee (EMCO) refers to young people aged 15–24 years who are unemployed or inactive and not attending any education or training courses (EurWork, 2013). The definitions of *unemployed* and *inactive* follow the International Labour Organization (2019): unemployed as being without a job, actively seeking work in the past four weeks, and available to start work in the next two weeks; an economically inactive person is someone outside the labour force. The definition of NEET was later broadened to include those aged 15–29 years (Eurofound, 2016).

However, programmes incorporated within the IDSS relate to young people aged 15–35 years. They include those whose needs or circumstances may prevent them from starting work or education immediately;

they also include school children at risk of becoming NEET. Due to a lack of suitable programme data (discussed below), it was necessary to expand the definition of NEETs in order to locate sufficient information to populate the IDSS; the focus on vulnerability was maintained, however. The term NEET goes beyond unemployment in that it captures all unemployed or inactive young people who are not accumulating human capital through formal channels (Mascherini, 2018).

## Key Challenges

### Limitations of Information Available

In CBR systems, not all attributes can contribute to retrieving the cases most relevant or useful for informing decision making. In the Enliven IDSS, therefore, only key attributes which can effectively measure the relevance between cases in terms of policy-making were used in calculating the similarity between cases and thus to retrieve cases. The creation of the IDSS identified a list of 52 attributes required to capture the characteristics of programmes concentrating on NEETs. These fell into three groups: 'Project information' attributes, 'Project participant' attributes and 'Project outcomes' attributes (see Table 9.1).

To support informed decision-making, an IDSS also requires a source of current actions and evaluations of these actions. To allow practitioners and policy-makers to design programmes targeted at young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds (by learning from past programmes' effectiveness), detailed descriptions of the past programmes, profiles of the participants they targeted and evaluations of project outcomes are required. Whilst searching for programmes designed to aid young people defined as NEET to populate the IDSS repository, we discovered not only a lack of detailed programme data but also non-standard data formats across programmes and inadequate programme evaluation data. Where programme evaluation data was available, its scope was limited in depth and there was no consistent approach to evaluation. This section describes this situation and provides examples.

**Table 9.1** Categories and sub-categories for Intelligent Decision Support System (IDSS) key attributes

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*Key attribute: Aims**Category: Provide Work Experience*

- Work experience
- Provide work placements
- Provide internships

*Category: Education/training*

- Work-based education
- Vocational education
- Provide training
- Future education
- Vocational training

*Category: Employability*

- Future employment / employability
- Provide counselling for young people
- Provide
- Employer subsidy
- Enhance economic growth
- Match skill development to economic needs
- Help employers fill vacancies more efficiently
- Promote youth entrepreneurship

*Category: Provide direct Support measures*

- School to work transition
- Re-engage marginalised youth
- Prevent early school leaving
- Improve qualifications
- Financial support for education

*Key attribute: Activities**Category: Provide work experience*

- Work experience
- Workplace training or work experience (paid)
- Work experience or workplace training (unpaid)

*Category: Education/training*

- Training
- Vocational education and training
- Training grants, wage subsidy or financial incentives for participants or employers
- Second chance for those who have left school to complete high school education
- Development of personal skills, soft skills or social skills

*Category: Employability*

- Developing relevant labour market skills
  - Improving access to the labour market/first job for NEETs
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*(continued)*

Table 9.1 (continued)

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Promoting entrepreneurship
<i>Category: Provide direct Support measures</i>
Basic skills training or basic education
Mentoring or counselling
Community learning and development, active citizenship
Facilitating the school to work transition
Preventative measures against early school leaving
Supporting a first job/work experience
Subsidised youth employment/work experience projects through the provision of a wage subsidy to employers
Subsidised youth employment through additional in work benefit
Remedial measures for the re-integration of early school leavers
<i>Key attribute: Target group</i>
<i>Category: General</i>
None specified
Jobseekers
<i>Subcategory: Individual</i>
<i>Sub-subcategory age-related</i>
Young people
Young carers
Young people with lack of work experience
Vulnerable/disadvantaged young people
Young people who are unemployed
Young people with secondary education (
Graduates who are unemployed (case 44, 50, 54, 56, 63)
<i>Sub-subcategory: Disability/Health</i>
Physical disability
Mental health
Learning disability/ leaving a special school
Long term health condition
Behavioural difficulties
<i>Sub-subcategory: Educational</i>
Early school leavers
Low educational attainment /low qualifications
People who are disengaged from education or learning (case 17, 18)
Truants (Case 2, 7,9)
School children
<i>Sub-subcategory: Additional social disadvantage</i>
Homeless/young homeless
Care leavers
Young offenders
Drug/alcohol abuse
Lone parent

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(continued)

Table 9.1 (continued)

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Young parent
<i>Sub-subcategory: Ethnicity</i>
Ethnic minority
Refugees/ asylum seekers
Migrants/English as second language
Gypsy/travelling
<i>Sub-subcategory: Gender</i>
Women
<i>Subcategory: Structural</i>
<i>Sub-subcategory: Institutional</i>
Transport barriers
People living in deprived areas/disadvantaged communities
<i>Sub-subcategory: Labour market</i>
Lack of jobs locally
Job seekers allowance claimant
Unemployed
<i>Subcategory: Cultural</i>
Workless households
Low income families
Chaotic family background
Lower socio-economic backgrounds

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Much publicly available programme data is not extensive enough to provide insights for practitioners. The well-known European Social Fund database ‘Creating Chances for Youth’,<sup>1</sup> for instance, provides short (200-word) project descriptions which vary in amount of detail provided on project aims and activities. Others consist of vignettes of individual students but no insights into the overall project, its objectives or its success in achieving its objectives.

Each programme was found to use its own format to record attributes describing its target groups, participants and outcomes. Two project descriptions of unemployment amongst participants illustrate this point: ‘56% of starts had been claiming unemployment benefit for over 3 months before starting’ (Haigh & Woods, 2016); and ‘Looking for work less than 1 month: 7%; 1–4 months: 39%; 5–8 months 22%; 9–12 months: 8%; Over 1 year: 16%. Less than 1 year: 76%; 1 year or more:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/esf/main.jsp?catId=534&langId=en> (accessed 19 October 2021).

16%' (Thornton et al., 2014). Clearly, the two sets of figures, referring to different categories and time spans, are not comparable.

Attributes also vary as to the stage in the programme when the data was gathered, or had unclear definitions. For example, the numbers entering employment might be recorded when each person left the programme, at the end of the programme, or at a specified time period after the end of the programme. The percentage of people achieving employment varied as to whether or not it included people who had failed to complete the programme. The definition of what 'achieving employment' meant (in terms of hours employed and duration of the employment) could often not be found. Although some guidance on providing programme data is given by the European Social Fund (ESF Support Centre, 2016), this is insufficient to ensure programmes utilise common data formats.

Youth members of the Enliven project's UK Youth Panel identified another data issue pertaining to programme comparison. They thought finding employment could be the result of more than one programme, running either concurrently or consecutively. For example, an individual might be helped by both an employment programme and a mental health programme. There is no way of tracking the number of programmes with which an individual is involved—in order to discover successful programme combinations—as each programme uses its own participant identifiers.

This lack of programme evaluation data has been referred to in academic literature, but policymakers do not seem to be aware of the need for thorough evaluation: 'a key finding' of Mawn et al.'s (2017) review 'was to highlight the need for future research to adopt high-quality evidence methodologies to determine what works best for this population' (see also Impetus Private Equity Foundation, 2014; Britton et al., 2011).

It is worth noting that no single programme included in the Enliven IDSS repository (220 programmes in all) contained a full set of the attributes we regarded as necessary to describe programme characteristics. However, all the attributes had a value specified for at least one programme—showing that the programme provider required the attribute.

When undertaking programme evaluation, it is necessary to consider the reader. What outcomes are of interest will differ between, for instance,

potential programme participants, practitioners and policy-makers. The process of finding well-evaluated programmes for the IDSS demonstrated that there is little commonality—in how, and for whom, interventions are evaluated—across countries or funding regimes.

To enable programme comparison, a core set of uniform indicators is needed. Enliven identified a set of attributes necessary to describe programmes focusing on young people defined as NEET. However, programme providers should also have the freedom to develop their own indicators, supplementing the core set: this would aid an ongoing process of learning about relevant indicators to take place. Indicators may, of course, be more (or less) appropriate depending on circumstances.

Within the limited number of evaluations of programmes which were available for inclusion in the IDSS repository, most were found to comprise process evaluations providing statistical analyses of programme outcomes. Practitioners and researchers need to work together to identify and develop appropriate methods for evaluating programmes (that aim to support young people who are NEET) which provide sufficient information to enable improvements in policy and practice to take place but whose implementation does not, at the same time, place too heavy a burden on practitioners.

The correct level for programme evaluation (national, regional, provider) should also be considered. Employment levels typically vary between regions within a country (Eurostat, 2021); so can programme implementation. For example, the UK's Talent Match programme (Big Lottery Fund, 2018) has core ideals, based on the importance of building trust and ongoing communication, and offers a localised and individualised approach to address the heterogeneity of young people at risk of social exclusion. Each of its 21 regional partnerships is therefore autonomous, developing solutions in response to local needs.

Within the Enliven IDSS repository, there are many examples of programmes specifically focusing on regional areas, such as Moin Moin Hamburg—Welcome Tours for Refugees (Hawash & Gehrke, 2015), and Skilling Queenslanders for Work (Deloitte Access Economics, 2012). Regional contextual information needs to be precisely targeted as there can be considerable differences between adjoining regions due to factors such as demographics, transport linkages, and the balance of agriculture

and industry. For example, the city of Nottingham contains both areas that are amongst the 20% least deprived and the 20% most deprived within the UK (Rae et al., 2016).

For the UK, detailed regional information is available. The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) calculates information from seven domain indices for neighbourhoods in England with an average of 1500 residents<sup>2</sup> (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015). The UK Office for National Statistics' NOMIS service provides UK labour market statistics for electoral wards with an average size in England of 7000.<sup>3</sup> However, for comparing regions across Europe, the best information available is provided by Eurostat. The social information on young people it provides is available only at the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) 2 regional level (NUTS 2016 Classification). NUTS2 regions have a population size between 800,000 and 3 million—too large to provide contextual data of sufficient detail for comparing programmes (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2016). There are thus limitations on the contextual information available for comparing NEET programmes across Europe

## Information Modelling and 'Soft' Attributes

We discovered that programmes and their evaluations consist of a mix of textual data and nominal, ordinal and quantitative information. Textual data might be a description of programme improvements which could be made. Ordinal information consists of unordered categories—for example, the attribute 'type of programme provider' consists of the categories 'Public sector', 'Not for Profit/ Third sector', 'Private sector', and so on. Ordinal information comprises ordered categories, such as how successful (on a scale of 1–5) the programme was. Quantitative information is a numerical measurement, such as the number of participants in the programme. Some programme attributes are composed of both ordinal and numerical information—an ethnicity profile of participants, for instance,

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<sup>2</sup><http://dclgapps.communities.gov.uk/imd/idmap.html> (accessed 20 October 2021).

<sup>3</sup><https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/> (accessed 20 November 2021).

might consist of values such as White: 47%; Black: 23%; Asian 7%. An intelligent information system needs to incorporate suitable information models to store this complex mix and to utilise appropriate algorithms so users (policy-makers or others) can locate what they wish to find. Thus algorithms based on quantitative reasoning alone would not be appropriate.

Some programme attributes proved hard to pin down. For example, in the attribute 'percentage of participants more optimistic about finding a job', what does 'more optimistic' mean? Although 'soft' attributes are difficult to define, they can be of use in indicating whether a programme achieved its objectives when precise data is missing. When participants leave a programme, contact with them may be lost and the impact of the programme on their future employment and careers not recorded. Investigation is needed into how to define 'soft' attributes satisfactorily, so they can be understood by both programme participants and policy-makers. Commensuration—transforming qualities into quantities, difference into magnitude, reducing complex information into 'numbers that can easily be compared' is needed. Such transformations enable 'people to quickly grasp, represent, and compare differences, offering standardized ways of constructing proxies for uncertain and elusive qualities' (Espeland & Stevens, 1998). Commensuration is of course ubiquitous in modern society—examples include prices, temperature, grading of student essays, rankings (from football leagues to universities), cost-benefit ratios, censuses, financial instruments such as shares and futures, and Likert scales.

An initial start towards this was made by Rose et al. (2005). They created a motivation scoring scheme for clients attending a supported employment agency for people with disabilities. A detailed description was provided for each level of the scale (Rose et al., 2005). It is also necessary to be consistent about when information is gathered as participant opinions on 'feelings' may vary over time as skills are learnt and jobs are gained and lost. To capture, store and search complex information about social programmes efficiently—so policy-makers can use the information—we need to develop appropriate models.

## The Individual Story

Enliven youth panel participants pointed out that each young person on a programme has a unique individual story, which is difficult to capture in a statistical format. ‘Blanket’ figures can miss individual barriers. For example, the attribute ‘25% of people secured employment’ does not indicate what characteristics those finding employment possessed. Just because certain people found work as a result of attending an employment programme, it does not follow automatically that others will be able to do so. Neither does this attribute indicate anything about the nature of the employment secured: for example, the salary, whether the employment is full-time, part-time or a zero-hours contract. Members of the UK Youth panel were concerned to gain not just employment but *quality* employment. This is difficult to measure: which employment conditions are deemed satisfactory depends on the individual’s perspective. The youth panel also suggested an attribute, ‘improved quality of life for participants’, could be used to assess programme effectiveness. Capturing this concept is problematic, but the young people proposed that it might be measured in terms of social engagement (such as the last time a person talked with a friend or relative) and financial independence. Such nuanced understandings require individual stories and narratives: input from youth panels and experienced practitioners proved vital in ‘humanising’ statistical data.

Long term outcomes—the eventual effect of a programme on employment—are also almost impossible to measure. People may remain unemployed for a period after completing a programme, or choose to attend a course of study before attaining employment. More research is needed into what proxy variables would be appropriate for detecting the success of a programme. For example, is attendance at job interviews an indication that employment will be found in the future? The ‘Proximity to Labour market’ measure (Sanderson & Wilson, 2015) is an initial attempt to provide a proxy for employment: it considers how likely a young person is to be in work given their characteristics, experiences and capabilities, and consists of 12 separate categories (including qualifications, experience, well-being and issues such as alcohol or drug dependency).

Within the IDSS knowledge base, a picture emerged suggesting that small, specialised programmes were more effective at finding employment for their participants than larger scale programmes. For example, the Luxembourg ‘Practical training for young construction workers’ programme had 19 participants and an outcome of 86% employment. The Romanian ‘Proiectul tinerilor cu initiative’—supporting Arad city’s candidacy for the European Capital of Culture programme 2021—provided participants with experience in public engagement; 80% of its 16 participants found employment (personal communication). By contrast, the UK traineeships programme, aimed at improving participants’ English and Maths to help them in gaining an apprenticeship or employment, had 19,400 participants, of whom 28% found employment and 22% an apprenticeship (Dorsett et al., 2019). A large number of small programmes is apparently more effective than a single national-level programme.

Whether this provisional finding is valid—and if so, why—is important and demands further investigation. Talent Match (2018)—a five year, UK-wide, initiative between 2014 and 2019—aimed to provide employability support services to young people furthest from the labour market on a regional and sub-regional basis, responding to local need. Similarly, the Activity Agreements, piloted in eight areas of England between 2006 and 2011, repeatedly showed the effectiveness of local, personalised programmes for the most vulnerable young people (Maguire et al., 2011). Both these intensive, personalised, initiatives included not only a financial incentive to secure young peoples’ engagement and participation and give them some degree of autonomy, but also impartial personal support and tailored learning over a specified period of time.

## Funding Regimes

Competitive tendering for funding limits information sharing between programme providers (which may be rivals). To the detriment of the vulnerable young people whom the providers and funders seek to serve, the elements of a successful project may not be shared with competitors. When programmes funded for a limited time-span close, personnel leave and information and expertise are lost. Departing (and remaining)

professionals may be unaware of the tacit knowledge they possess—which the organisation is losing—and it may be impossible to capture and store it for future use. Funders need to ensure that organisations have sufficient budget to record programme data and allow evaluation to take place. Data gathering is time-consuming and requires that sufficient, capable staff remain available.

## Facilitating Effective Policy-Making: Learning from the IDSS

At a demonstration of the IDSS, an audience of adult educators (Boeren et al., 2019) pointed out the importance of users' being aware of a programme's context. Gathering evaluation data during and after a programme, and comprehending the data gathered in order to make use of in designing future programmes, are time-consuming, though they can be made easier and quicker by appropriate use of information technology.

When considering a knowledge management framework for evaluating a complex social problem (disaster management), Otim (2006) suggested that a component of the knowledge should be 'Contextual information: data/information that pertains to a particular context'. As we have seen, participant narratives personalise and contextualise and can be useful in enabling programme providers to understand and interpret bald programme statistics.

Programmes do not operate in isolation. They are subject to external influences such as economic conditions, government policies and the effects of other interventions. These mean programme statistics are difficult to interpret. For example, economic conditions affect the number of jobs available, so a programme will appear less effective during a recession or in a depressed area; social security policies may determine whether certain types of jobs are financially viable; what transport is available allows (or prevents) access to workplaces. To understand programme evaluations, policy-makers need to be aware of such external influences.

If information technology is to help us learn from existing programmes, it must aid data collection from programme practitioners and

participants and facilitate data understanding for practitioners and policy-makers. Programme data must also be preserved: otherwise, lessons learnt may be lost. This is key to knowledge management.

When gathering programme data to provide data sources for the IDSS, we discovered that a researcher with specific knowledge of youth unemployment was needed to understand the domain specific vocabulary used by the programme practitioners and evaluators. Enliven project youth representatives told us that wording mattered. Questions should be jargon-free and youth-friendly, and – to encourage answers – why the information was being collected should be explained. Designers of information technology tools should work with domain experts (both practitioners and programme participants) to ensure that those they create are fit for purpose.

To overcome problems with inconsistent evaluations (as described above), and to enable programmes to be compared and lessons learnt and applied in future, funding bodies should ask uniform questions of practitioners and participants. Providing a template based on an underlying information model would help ensure that answers follow a consistent format. The use of simple, easy-to-use forms and websites would help practitioners in gathering and inputting programme information.

When supporting programme design through learning from past policies, a knowledge-based repository of existing programmes (such as the Enliven IDSS)<sup>4</sup> is required. As many—or all—of the problems for which an IDSS is likely to be needed will be ‘wicked’ and constantly evolving, information techniques must ensure programme information is relevant and up-to-date. User feedback and comments must also be assimilated. A policy-maker, for instance, may want national evaluation data, while a practitioner may prefer details of activities delivered by a single provider within a programme.

Information visualisation techniques can present programme information in ways which stakeholders can quickly assimilate. Appropriate representations of complex data can enable commissioners and policy-makers to understand better what the needs of a target community of disadvantaged young people are. Complex contextual information in particular can be enhanced by visualisation. There is research in this area: for

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<sup>4</sup><http://enliven.cs.nott.ac.uk/>

example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Well Being website<sup>5</sup> provides infographics enabling regions across the world to be compared in terms of eleven topics important for well-being, such as education, employment and access to services. Eurostat's visualisation, 'My country in a bubble',<sup>6</sup> compares EU member states using 50 indicators grouped into themes, such as 'Population and social conditions', 'Transport', and 'Industry, trade and services'.

While collecting programme data for the IDSS repository, we discovered that online information on previous programmes had often disappeared. Many project websites were not maintained after the project ended; URLs became defunct. Thus, the International Labour Organisation's Youth Employment Inventory,<sup>7</sup> initiated by the World Bank, provided comparative information on youth employment interventions worldwide. Its global inventory (over 400 such programmes in over 90 countries) covered programme design, implementation and results achieved. Yet this informative and substantial database—recommended to us by a local practitioner—no longer has an internet presence. Programme information should be permanently archived so that it can be found and used by practitioners, policy-makers and scholars.

Ideally, programme information should be managed in a circular process whereby users learn from existing and former programmes, later recording information about their current programme's experience, thus informing others. Progress in this can be assisted through information technology tools, such as document management software.

## Conclusion

Reviewing the Young and Successful programme provided the authors with a rare opportunity to examine an intensive, tailor-made intervention. It also allowed us, using an interdisciplinary approach, to focus on how 'distance travelled' (measuring soft outcomes and steps towards

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.oecdregionalwellbeing.org/> (accessed 20 October 2021).

<sup>6</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/BubbleChart/> (accessed 6 September 2019).

<sup>7</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20161201175912/http://www.youth-employment-inventory.org/inventory/> (accessed 20 October 2021).

entering education, employment and training) in employability programmes can be captured and demonstrated. The programme recognised that the journey to ‘employability’ for the most vulnerable young adults is not linear; it cannot be encompassed in rigid time limits; neither is it consistent between individuals. Attempts to standardise interventions have a high probability of failure and have unintended—often negative—results. ‘Hard’ outcomes, such as becoming employed, are too narrow. While smaller-scale, more person-centred approaches are labour-intensive and costly, we believe that embracing them would (as the Young and Successful programme suggests) ultimately help reduce levels of long-term economic and social exclusion for young people across Europe.

Computer-aided support for decisions would make policy-making more efficient, avoiding past mistakes. However, before information systems tools can be implemented, we need to ensure programme data are collected in a standardised model format. For this, research into appropriate methods of programme evaluation is required. The Enliven IDSS research has discovered the attributes necessary to capture the characteristics of NEET programmes. Intelligent information system tools for this domain must encompass the features of NEETs as a *wicked social problem*. If users are provided with contextual information and computer support throughout a programme’s life cycle, an IDSS can be a powerful tool. But policy-makers may have to reappraise their own ways of working.

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# **Part III**

## **Young Adults' Learning in the Workplace and Beyond**



# 10

## The Interplay of Organisational and Individual Bounded Agency in Workplace Learning: A Framework Approach

Günter Hefler and Ivana Studená

### Introduction: Agency in Workplace Learning

The workplace is a vital site of learning during adulthood, allowing for learning experiences rarely available in formal education. Without ‘a proper job’ available to them, young people miss out on key competences attainable only through workplace learning and cannot complete their professional development.

The features of the workplace shape the opportunities for day-to-day informal learning while at work. Various concepts and measures of the latter have been developed, including the ‘learning conduciveness’ or

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‘learning potential’ of workplaces. What type of work you have matters: while some jobs provide ample opportunities for learning, others—in stark contrast—offer hardly any.

What type of workplace is created is largely within the employer’s discretion. Organisations’ decisions about job design are captured by the term ‘organisational agency’. However, as individuals need to apply themselves to turn learning opportunities into learning, individual agency is also important in workplace learning.

In this chapter, we present a research framework on the interplay of ‘organisational’ and individual agency in workplace learning. The framework has been developed as the underpinning of Enliven’s empirical work on early career workers’ learning, their employers’ organisations, and how workplace learning is the outcome of the interplay of the various parties’ agency.

Agency is the core element of our approach. Agency is a frequently used concept for studying individual behaviour, and we use it to understand why individuals take up learning opportunities in different dimensions of their lives over the life course. Agency needs to be understood as a relational concept: actors’ choices are bound—enabled and restricted—by their environments. However, we go beyond individual agency, asking about its organisational ‘counterpart’. We see an organisation as a specific type of actor with its own agency. Whether workplace learning actually takes place results from the interaction between individual and ‘organisational’ agency.

Our framework guided work on 17 organisational case studies. Each builds on two rounds of in-depth interviews with about four members of management and four early-career workers. Cases are spread across three economic sectors and nine countries. Key results are presented in Chap. 11 (on Retail in Belgium (Flanders), Denmark and Estonia), Chap. 12 (on the Machinery Sector in Bulgaria and Spain (Basque Region)), and Chap. 13 (Adult Education in Austria, Italy, Slovakia and the UK (England)). Moreover, Chap. 15 applies the approach to observing individual agency over time by reconstructing the evolving life structure. It does this by using three examples where early career workers managed to achieve high levels of workplace learning in unfavourable circumstances.

The current chapter also discusses our cross-country comparative approach and how we explore the significance of societal environments for individual and ‘organisational’ agency. The framework proposed is rooted in the sociology and political economy of work and research on workplace learning. The latter comprises intentional, non-organised, learning as well as non-intentional (‘accidental’) learning that occurs while doing one’s day-to-day work (the latter often proxied as ‘work experience’) (Eurostat, 2016; Rogers, 2014).

Analysing the interplay of individual and ‘organisational’ agency in workplace learning is quite new (Goller & Paloniemi, 2017). By understanding it better, new strategies can be found for overcoming deadlock situations where all actors support workplace learning, but little actually takes place.

We start this chapter by reviewing key concepts developed in the literature on workplace learning, which have informed our approach. Next, we explain how we study the interplay between organisations’ agency to create more or fewer opportunities for ‘workplace learning’ and individual workers’ agency to use or refuse the opportunities on offer. We then look at the application of the framework presented in Chaps. 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15, before closing with conclusions and an outlook.

## **How Workplaces Can Invite Learning: A Short Review of Concepts**

Employees’ accounts of poor and rich day-to-day learning at work can be traced back to features of the workplace. How a job is designed determines the learning opportunities available. Whether this design is broad or narrow, whether it is based on a standardised vocational or professional qualification, whether it includes or excludes non-routine activities—all of these make a significant difference. The presence or absence of sources of severe ‘distress’, such as unhealthy conditions (e.g. hot or noisy production sites), intense work pressure, or an abusive environment, affects whether opportunities are likely to translate into individual learning.

Whether one has access to a ‘decent job’ with, among many other features (Warhurst et al., 2012), rich opportunities for learning, constitutes a key dimension of social inequality. Jobs which offer few learning opportunities are a source of individual vulnerability. The longer an individual holds a learning-deprived job, the stronger the repercussions are for the individual’s skill base and overall well-being; poor learning opportunities at work are detrimental to psychological well-being and functioning in general (Kohn & Schooler, 1983).

Workplace features essential for learning opportunities available are addressed by different approaches. Workplaces are studied for their ‘learning potential’ (Nijhof & Nieuwenhuis, 2008), their position on a multifaceted continuum of conditions expressing expansive or restrictive learning opportunities (Fuller & Unwin, 2004) or ‘learning conduciveness’ (Lorenz et al., 2016; Skule, 2004).

The impact of work organisation on the learning conduciveness can be explored by two seminal concepts from the sociology of work, namely the *integration* versus *separation* of routine and non-routine activities (Koike & Inoki, 1990) and the *organisational space* versus *occupational space* framework (Maurice et al., 1986).

In order to pin down the key difference in work organisation in manufacturing between the US and South-East Asia in the 1980s, Koike and Inoki (1990) distinguished workplaces as either ‘separating’ or ‘combining’ routine and non-routine activities.

In typical workplaces applying *separation*, the worker is responsible only for routine activities; non-routine activities are the prerogative of technical specialists and managers. For (unskilled or semi-skilled) workers doing routine activities, skill requirements are limited, resulting in lower wage levels. They are told what to do in non-routine situations; they are not expected to work out solutions or to learn from problem-solving activities. For this, specialists with higher levels of skills—and earning higher wages—take over. The separation of non-routine from routine tasks is the hallmark of *Taylorism* and its narrowly defined jobs.

Under the *combination* approach, such as Toyota-style lean management, workers are assigned both routine and non-routine activities, calling for a much broader skill set and a strong preference for teamwork: groups of workers with multiple skills develop and collectively provide

the skill base to run the whole production process. Teams' performance of non-routine activities fosters learning for individual participating workers. High levels of (firm-specific) skills increase individuals' value to the organisation, resulting in long-term (even lifetime) employment relationships.

Compared to separation regimes, average wages are higher, while fewer managers and specialists are needed. Work teams draw their conclusions from non-routine activities, contributing to bottom-up innovation, as captured by Nonaka and Takeuchi's seminal SECI (Socialisation, Externalisation, Combination, Internalisation) model of the 'Knowledge creating company' (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), where individuals' workplace learning translates into organisational learning and innovation.

Whether or not workers are responsible for non-routine activities is therefore a core indicator, representing different logics of how to organise work. The differences between *Taylorist* and more *discretionary* types of work organisation are captured neatly by this one single distinction.

The *separation* versus *combination* divide affects the opportunities for workplace learning in two ways: the learning itself is available from non-routine activities, and whether this learning is likely to be rewarded. With 'separation', ordinary workers are expected to wait patiently for others to overcome a problem; they have no role in or reward from the process. By contrast, with 'combination' the creative solution to the unforeseen event is a rewarded part of everyone's job, enabling the acquisition of tacit knowledge—the foundation of individual expertise and excellence.

The ideas encapsulated in the *separation* versus *combination* paradigm are explored empirically in work on the link between work organisation and innovation based on the European Working Condition Survey (Arundel et al., 2007; Holm & Lorenz, 2013, 2015; Holm et al., 2010; Lorenz et al., 2016; Valeyre et al., 2009). Indicators measuring the problem-solving activities and job discretion (among others) are used to distinguish types of work organisations. Indicators signalling 'combination regimes' are present to a larger extent in workplaces labelled as *discretionary* or *lean* compared to workplaces labelled as Taylorist or *simple*. Economic sectors—and countries as a whole—differ markedly in the prevalence of the four types of workplaces.

Separation versus combination of routine and non-routine is also at the heart of another approach to capturing key differences in work organisation and their effect on learning. Comparing manufacturing plants in Germany and France in the early 1970s, Maurice et al. (1986) fleshed out two sets of arrangements for linking preferred forms of work organisation to (vocational) education systems and social organisation in general.

In places and times where 'organisational space' gained relative dominance, such as France in the 1970s, work is organised according to the organisational preferences of a single firm, limiting the potential role of (broad and standardised) occupations. In the case of France, work was organised along Taylorist lines, with narrowly defined workplaces for the average worker, who—after entering the firm without any specific skill set—was responsible only for routine activities. To complement this, higher proportions of employees in specialist or managerial roles were employed: the non-routine was their prerogative. Strong reliance on firm-specific work organisation limited workers' options to switch employers without substantial losses in skills and pay.

In contrast, in Germany in the 1970s, the principles of the 'occupational space' gained dominance. Work was mainly organised alongside standardised, broadly defined occupations, with the vast majority of workers obtaining full organisational membership only after completing broad and standardised multi-year initial vocational education. In this approach, workers are prepared for broadly defined roles and high levels of individual autonomy as members of multi-skilled work teams. The latter manage daily business and take care of both the routine and the non-routine. There are fewer managers and specialists than in 'organisational space' regimes.

Whether jobs are organised mainly according to organisational needs or occupational patterns is of key importance for several issues related to workplace learning, including the importance of formal adult education (Hefler & Markowitsch, 2012). At a societal level, it helps establish overall expectations about work organisation. In some countries, one of the principles is clearly dominant (e.g. occupational space in Denmark, Austria, Germany or Switzerland; organisational space in the UK and Mediterranean countries). In other countries, neither occupational nor organisational space clearly predominates (e.g. in the Visegrad countries

with their strong vocational streams in upper secondary education). However, in any country, there may be sectors out of line with the dominant pattern. Individual companies may break with the established pattern of their sector or country (see the case of the Danish retailer in Chap. 11) or build up a substitute for the occupational principle when there is no established vocational system (see the Basque cases in Chap. 12).

Whether a particular organisation leans more towards an 'organisational' or an 'occupational' pattern has a strong impact on other aspects of its approach to human resource management and development.

Organisations following an occupational model typically provide demanding, complex workplaces, organised within teams and employing almost exclusively skilled workers or Higher Education graduates. They are likely to be engaged in initial vocational education and training and support formal upskilling, such as craft masters' examinations or their equivalent. Organisations leaning towards 'organisational space' tend to display a much more varied pattern of human resource management and development. They are split between a 'low-skills' road, with large numbers of (at best) semi-skilled workers and a smaller proportion of employees who hold broadly defined, demanding jobs, and a 'high-skills' road. The latter follows the South-Asian model (Koike & Inoki, 1990), where the majority of workers hold complex and demanding jobs. This approach is also captured by the notion of 'high performance' work systems (Appelbaum et al., 2000). These require highly sophisticated internal skill formation programmes, combining off-the-job training with extensive support for informal workplace learning.

In consequence, different patterns of organising work translate into differentiated opportunity structures for individuals, both with regard to workplace learning and in relation to their overall careers. The forms of work organisation shape individuals' choices for further education, as only some forms of individually chosen training pathways pay off. Hence, individuals face very different opportunity structures depending on how employers choose to organise their work.

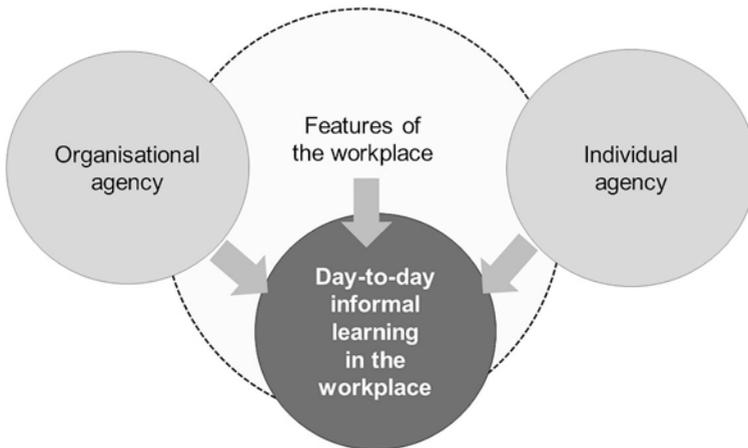
As individuals react to opportunities provided (individual agency) with the opportunities in place as a result of organisational agency, the interplay between these agencies lies at the centre of our discussion.

## How Organisational and Individual Agency Are Intertwined in Workplace Learning

In this section, we set out the key arguments we use to study the interplay of ‘organisational’ and individual agency in our empirical work, the results of which are presented in Chaps. 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15.

Organisations enjoy considerable leeway in how to organise work and design jobs. The learning potential of jobs created through organisational decision-making does not, however, automatically translate into individual learning, as individuals must apply themselves if learning is to take place. While organisational decision-making creates an opportunity structure, individual agency is equally important. Therefore, we emphasise both organisational and individual agency (see Fig. 10.1).

We start with the known impact of observable features of the workplace. We emphasise the fact that organisations enjoy considerable leeway in workplace design and have the prerogative to do so—this is part of their ‘organisational’ agency. They shape the features of the workplace;



**Fig. 10.1** Informal workplace learning as a negotiated outcome between ‘organisational’ and individual agency mediated by the features of the workplace. (Source: The authors)

this in turn defines the learning potential available. Organisations may also support workplace learning by their HRM and HRD policies.

We stress equally that learning opportunities do not automatically turn into learning. Individuals must apply themselves. Some individuals overcome poor workplace learning opportunities by finding their own ways of informal learning against the odds, becoming highly knowledgeable and skilled. We therefore allow for individual agency. Overall, we take workplace learning as the intertwined, negotiated outcome of organisational and individual agency. We now discuss our understanding of these two pivotal concepts in detail.

## Organisational Agency in Workplace Learning

By the term *organisational agency*, we refer to an organisation's capacity to make choices which cumulatively generate stark differences between organisations (see Hefler, 2013). These differences can be observed even when organisations offer similar products and services, are of similar size, and work in the same institutional environments. From the perspective of organisational agency, the key questions are why organisations act differently, and how these differences can be traced back to the actions of their members and developments within the organisation over time.

We suggest using *organisational agency* analogously to individual agency, emphasising the choices made by particular organisations. This takes us beyond explanations based on rational behaviour, which assume that—in the aggregate—organisations behave in accordance with their best interests. 'Organisational agency' refers to the room available for forging very different compromises between the conflicting interests of capital and labour and the preferences of groups of members of an organisation.

Our argument is informed by various strands of literature. We refer to organisational institutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Greenwood et al., 2017; Scott, 2014; Scott & Davis, 2007), and emphasise organisational perspectives to social stratification. The latter echoes key arguments of the Labour Process debate (Baron, 1984; Thompson & Smith, 2009;

Tomaskovic-Devey, 2014), as well as the Societal Effects school on the political economy of work (Maurice, 2000; Maurice et al., 1986).

Colloquially, we often speak of organisations as ‘actors’, ‘who’ are ‘doing’ ‘something’, where ‘an organisation trains its employees’ or ‘changes its innovation strategy’, or ‘announces a mass lay off’. As a ‘legal’ entity, an organisation makes a taxable profit or is fined for misconduct. As a ‘statistical’ unit, enterprises of one type (e.g. belonging to one sector) ‘behave’ (on average) differently from others. Nevertheless, differences in the behaviour of classes of enterprises are typically interpreted not as the result of decision-making processes of single organisations but as reflections of features of their environment (e.g. shortage or abundance of skilled labour).

The term ‘organisational agency’ is seldom used—and for good reason. A key premise of organisational research is that organisations cannot act on their own accord: individual members act on their behalf; their deeds are attributed to the organisation. The established term *organisational behaviour*—a frequent textbook title (e.g. Robbins and Judge (2018))—refers to the behaviour of individuals as members of, and in roles assigned to them within, organisations, the latter understood as formal structures or legal constructs. It also refers to individuals’ observed behaviours in group situations, whether formally arranged or informal.

As a metaphor, organisational agency highlights one cause of variation in organisational behaviour. However, we do not refer to a (reified) super actor but to the intended or unintended outcomes of what an organisation’s members do, the latter always rooted both within the organisation and the wider social environment—as captured by the ‘natural open systems’ perspective (Scott & Davis, 2007). Organisational agency therefore rests on the individual agency of its members.

Members of management have rights and are more powerful than members of non-managerial groups individually. However, all strata of the organisation, and even each individual member, have some power and can leave their mark. Any member may seek support from collective structures within or outside the organisation: for example when technicians liaise with their professional organisations or workers call upon their trade unions. An organisation’s agency therefore rests on the

shoulders of its members and represents the outcome of the complex interplay of their drives and struggles.

*Organisational agency* thereby captures both the current struggles of its members and the outcomes of these struggles over time; the latter become imprinted into the formal structures of the organisation, thereby further enabling or constraining the current behaviour of member groups. It equally determines how members of an organisation expect an organisation to develop: current action taken is therefore tainted by the ‘shadow of the future’. What—metaphorically speaking—an organisation can do in the present is shaped both by what the organisation has done in the past and by what its members see as its possible futures.

What members of the organisations do and can do—and thus organisational agency—is bounded by its essential environment: its *organisational field* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). As an open system, organisations respond to their environment in more or less active ways. As with individuals, their agency is influenced by the constraints and expectations of their environments and the ‘building blocks’ offered for responding to them in acceptable ways. Environmental factors, as present in a particular organisational field, explain much of the similarity between organisations’ formal features and help explain why organisations are similar. However, the environment also needs to be understood as providing a ‘menu of choices’ which allows for doing things differently—even though choices emerge from strategic decision-making or are unintended outcomes of conflicts that need to be resolved.

## Individual Agency in Workplace Learning

Some individuals act and achieve much as a result of their ‘action’; others in a similar structural position either do not ‘act’ at all or achieve less. Applying this to workplace learning, we see some individuals seizing opportunities while others do not. Why? What does it take for a person to take advantage of what is offered? How does an individual respond to a lack of such offers? Why do some individuals break the mould and succeed under conditions which most people in the same position find

limiting? Our explanation starts with the social structures which enable and limit individual agency; we then turn to individual agency itself.

Following Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and Evans (2007), we take agency as a fundamentally *relational* concept, meaning that individual opportunities to act are constituted—enabled and limited—by the *totality* of social relations, conceptualised as a (Bourdiesian) *social space* with individual positions defined as holding more or less power over others in the same space. In liberal democracies with comprehensive welfare states, even lower-tier social positions offer considerable leeway for applying agency. However, a broad range of opportunities are—in a foreseeable, regular way—accessible only for individuals in more privileged positions, while those in less favourable positions are practically excluded from the same opportunities (unless the ‘big lottery of life’ plays a part). In short, *opportunity structures*, defined (echoing Robert Merton) as ‘the options of individual choice, determined by structural and institutional properties of the societies, open for individuals in a particular social place within [its] society’ (Hefler, 2013, pp. 176–177), differ sharply across positions in the social space.

The leeway available for applying one’s agency is therefore constituted by the power differentials within the social space and is larger for those in privileged positions. The differences between positions can be expressed in various ways. Bourdieu (1986), for example argues for a particular blend and volume of various sorts of ‘capital’—economic, social, cultural—with educational credentials expressing some of the last; the value of capital given is, however, strictly relative. One is ‘poor’ or ‘rich’ only in relation to others.

Social institutions of all kinds materialise into the *class structure* of the social space and are experienced by individuals as *enablers* of or *barriers* to any undertaking. Forms of discrimination—by gender, race, religion, social origin, citizenship and others—are inscribed and institutionalised within the social space, putting individuals at an advantage or disadvantage. Individuals are socialised into the expectations linked to their social position; they may experience a taste of power when reaching out for opportunities not meant for them. They may exert their agency by fighting uphill battles—and may even succeed. Finally, as social institutions structuring the social space reflect the outcomes of past social struggles,

the space needs to be understood as malleable by collective action: this can weaken limitations on social positions (e.g. for women) or establish new ones (e.g. for non-citizens).

While social space and opportunity structures set the stage, how does individual agency enter the scene? With Emirbayer and Mische (1998), we focus on how individuals act and apply their agency by relating both to domains and to time—by accommodating to the social domains, an individual takes part in while simultaneously relating this to different temporal modes, past, future, and present. We study how early-career workers integrate their workplace learning behaviour with their striving in other parts of their lives and how they make sense of their past experiences and anticipated futures when applying themselves in the present.

Actors are always living simultaneously in the past, future, and present and adjusting their various temporalities of their empirical existence to one another (and to their empirical circumstance) in more or less imaginative or reflective ways. They continuously engage patterns and repertoires from the past, project hypothetical pathways forward in time, and adjust their actions to the exigencies of emerging situations. Moreover, there are times and places when actors are more oriented toward the past, more directive toward the future, or more evaluative of the present; actors may switch thereby changing their degrees of flexible, inventive, and critical response toward structuring contexts. Such a perspective lays the basis for a richer and more dynamic understanding of the capacity that actors have to mediate the structuring contexts within which action unfolds. (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 1012)

Agency thus appears as a reflective practice in which individuals engage, more or less skilfully, and by which they can generate different outcomes under similar circumstances. Agency resonates here with Bourdieu's concept of practice, where actors are invested in a game and play it as best they can supported and limited by internalised dispositions (*habitus*); the rules and strategies of the same game characterise the given condition in a social field (Bourdieu, 1990). Both are crucial, in that an individual can become invested in the social games at hand and can make achievements which go beyond, or fall short of, what their starting

position might suggest. While social inequality imprints the outcomes of the games individuals take part in, how individuals apply their agency still makes a difference—in particular when we compare the outcomes achieved by players from similar starting positions.

When agency is made the object of research, patterns of agency characterising individuals' behaviour with considerable independence from social structures emerge. As a guiding example, we refer here to Evans and Heinz's proposal for a typology of patterns of individual transitions behaviour in school-to-work transitions, representing a dominant mode of agency, at least with regard to career choices (Evans & Heinz, 1994). They identify a 'strategic' pattern, a 'step by step' approach, a 'taking chances' pattern, or a 'wait and see' attitude as underpinning career transitions, and while the frequency of single patterns of agency obviously varies with the opportunity structures available, the various patterns can be found within groups of young people starting from very similar social positions.

We now explain how we have applied the conceptualisation of individual agency to workplace learning. For workplace learning, the immediate opportunity structures are defined by the features of the workplace; however, individuals' agency—the games they play—is characterised by how they relate the domains of work to their other life domains: relationships, family, communities, civic engagement, and leisure. Moreover, we see how individuals make sense of their past experiences and expected futures and how this informs their engagement with workplace learning.

We are interested in individual agency in workplace learning: how individuals apply themselves to opportunities for learning present at work. A full account will involve how (a) an individual turns opportunities at hand into learning and (b) responds to a lack of learning available by coming to a standstill in related domains of learning. We are equally interested in more unexpected cases, where individuals (c) find ways to learn in workplaces which restrict opportunities for learning or (d) refrain from learning at work, although opportunities to do so abound.

We observe agency in workplace learning by focussing on:

- Learning in the initial phases of work engagement, where responding to and surviving despite a job's immediate demands is the dominant theme
- Continuous learning in day-to-day work after the saturation point of the initial learning processes upon entry to work, irrespective of whether the latter has taken a few days or a number of years
- Individual learning from non-routine activities, in particular, where non-routine activities are explicitly covered by individuals' job descriptions (non-separation of routine and non-routine) (Koike & Inoki, 1990)
- Learning from various approaches implemented with the intention of supporting workplace learning, such as workshops, quality circles, or job rotation
- Learning from non-formal courses directly linked to the current workplace

We understand agency in day-to-day learning at work as the outflow of individual agency in general, the latter being applied in shaping individuals' life course development (Evans, 2007). We expect individuals to perceive learning opportunities in the workplace in the light of the availability or absence of institutionalised options on offer. They may respond to available life choices differently, depending on how they experience learning opportunities at work.

In particular, we are interested in:

- The options at play for earning and enjoying organisational membership, resulting in the development of an identity as a member of a particular organisation
- The patterns available for becoming a member of an occupation and taking part in an occupation's identity
- The ways in which day-to-day learning in the workplace is inscribed in well-established, institutionalised career pathways within the organisation (*job ladders*) or in *educational ladders*, leading to upward educational mobility. Alternatively, the presence of unstructured but visible ways for making progress—e.g. with new positions created in an

expanding organisation—which appear to be developmental opportunities

- The patterns available for making good use of lessons learnt in the workplace in accessible career pathways, providing a way out of the current job trajectory

Finally, we understand agency in day-to-day workplace learning as a reflection of the individual's evolving life structure. The latter has a strong influence, regardless of whether the current position and the learning available are rated as fully desirable, an acceptable valid compromise for the time being, or an unwelcome point from which one needs to escape. Agency in workplace learning thereby reflects varied attempts to reconcile one's life domains.

For observing life domains, we refer to the concept of *life structure* (Levinson, 1980). We observe individuals' evolving life structures over time, focussing on how they relate their gainful *work* with intimate relationships and family obligations (*love*), self-care, recreation and leisure time activities, civic engagement, and—as one form of the temporal components of the life structure—participation in organised non-formal or formal education. Beyond *work* and *love*—central components which shape various phases of one's life structure—the constant modification of (so-called) peripheral components (such as leisure or participation in social movements) may significantly alter the overall pattern. Finally, unfilled components in one's life structure may become highly influential: 'A person urgently wants but does not have a meaningful occupation, a marriage, a family; and this absent component plays a major part in the life structure' (Levinson & Levinson, 1996, p. 23). Levinson's concept of the life structure, incorporating adult development as a socio-psychological entity, is closely related to the sociological concept of agency, as it aims to overcome unproductive dichotomies between the 'inner' versus the 'outer' world: 'the individual psychological' versus the 'social' (Hefler, 2013, p. 111). 'Theoretically, the life structure forms a bridge between personality structure and social structure' (Levinson, 1980, p. 288):

To be truly engaged with the world, one must invest important parts of the self in it and, equally, must take the world into the self and be enriched,

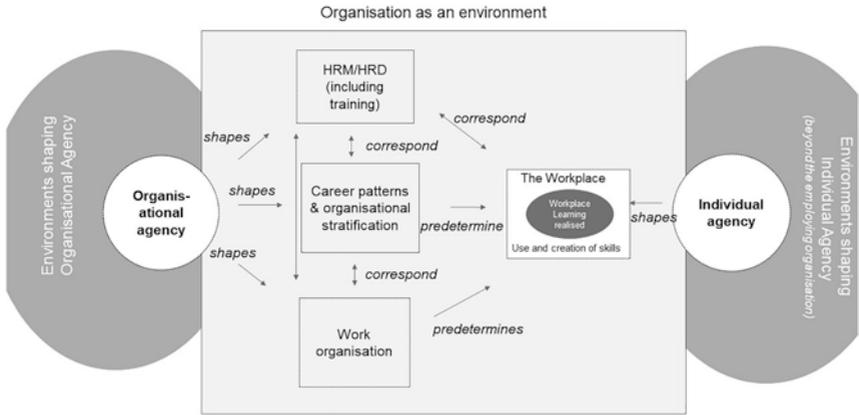
depleted, and corrupted by it. In countless ways, we put ourselves into the world and take the world into ourselves. Adult development is the story of the evolving process of mutual interpenetration of self and world. (Levinson, 1980, p. 278)

To sum up, we conceptualise agency in workplace learning as an individual's activity in accommodating social domains (the workplace as part of his/her overall life structure) and temporalities (the past, the future) in present-moment decisions. As a relational term, agency refers to a social space, its particular social fields, and its power differentials; these provide individuals with different initial 'opportunity structures'. The concept of agency prepares us for encountering highly diverse outcomes with regard to workplace learning under similar structural conditions (e.g. the same type of workplace within the same organisation). We argue that these diversities of outcomes can be explored and understood against the backdrop of an individual's overall life course development. In Chap. 15, we show how we have applied this framework.

## The Framework Summarised and an Outlook on the Empirical Results

In this section, we summarise the key arguments underpinning the empirical work which is presented in Chaps. 11, 12, and 13. Figure 10.2 brings together our argument about how *organisational* and *individual* agency come together in shaping day-to-day workplace learning. The key proposition is that workplace learning is the negotiated outcome of organisational and individual agency with features of the workplace shaping the *opportunity structure* in place.

Organisations enjoy considerable leeway in designing workplaces; they apply their agency when designing jobs in the first place. They make decisions about the overall work organisation in which single jobs are embedded. They define the overall distribution of jobs with more or less favourable features, including autonomy, power, security of tenure, and pay, and they define the routes available for moving up the ladder from less to more favourable jobs. Organisational choices inform their HRD



**Fig. 10.2** Map of the key line of arguments linking the elements of the study. (Source: Authors’ development)

strategies and their offer of corporate training in particular. The various ways in which organisations apply their agency to shape workplaces show how powerful organisations actually are—compared to individual workers—in shaping workplace learning.

Nevertheless, organisations’ behaviour with regard to workplace learning, job design and work organisation is far from unrestricted. Organisational agency is bounded—enabled and restricted—by features of the environment. The latter can be seen as the organisational field to which an organisation belongs: organisations define and justify their own ways of doing things against the backdrop of what other organisations in the same organisational field do. Organisational fields are permeated by the societal effects of the particular society (e.g. the organisation of the education system, the institutions governing employment and industrial relations) as well as by transnational fields (such as the opportunities available for off-shoring or entering distant markets).

While the learning potential of a single workplace is mainly shaped by organisational decision-making, whether or not workplace learning actually takes place also depends on individual agency. Individual agency contributes to the shaping of workplaces themselves, as workplaces over time may change in line with what job holders do and what they succeed in learning. Individual agency itself is seen as rooted not in the workplace

alone but in an individual's evolving life structure: this can be captured by appropriate frameworks. As with organisational agency, societal level institutions and their effects on the individual opportunity structures imprint themselves strongly on individual agency and one's evolving life structure. In Chap. 15, we demonstrate our approach to observing an individual's evolving life structure in order to achieve a better understanding of agency in workplace learning.

The conceptual framework outlined in this chapter has been applied to studying the workplace learning of 71 individuals in early career stages working for one of 17 organisations studied in detail. Our depiction of 'organisational agency' is based on an overview of the characteristics of the various forms of work organisation across the sample. We consider three key factors: first, whether the job content is defined in a more restricted or deliberately broader way; second, whether for the typical job a specific vocational or professional qualification is required; and finally, whether job design typically opts for combining or separating routine from non-routine activities.

The sectors and types of organisations were selected to allow for observing different approaches to work organisation and job design. For selected types of enterprises in the retail sector—major retailers for daily necessities with more than 1000 employees—we expected to find a mainly Tayloristic work organisation with narrowly defined entrance-level jobs for shop floor workers. For the machinery sector, we expected to find a variety of forms of work organisations resulting in jobs with high and low learning potential. For the adult learning sector, and our preference for studying teachers in particular, we expected to find chiefly learning-rich jobs organised according to patterns typical of professional work.

As we show in Chap. 11, the five organisations in retail studied confirmed our expectations and our grounds for selecting the retail sector: all five organisations studied provide, for early-career job assistants, mainly narrowly defined jobs, with limited opportunities for learning from non-routine activities. Only by various kinds of job rotation between similar jobs can a broader range of skills be applied in day-to-day work. More learning in the workplace is available only to those early-career workers selected for managerial career pathways or specialised roles.

In the metal sector, explored in Chap. 12, a clear distinction emerged between the two Basque workplaces—with rich learning opportunities—and the two studied Bulgarian companies, where we found comparatively poor learning opportunities. The learning-conducive workplaces clearly elicited high levels of motivation to learn among early-career workers, allowing them to embrace their workplace and permanent organisational membership as a part of their emerging identities. However, the high demands at work also took a toll, moving gainful work into the centre of their emerging life structures and, leaving little space for anything else, called for postponement of other important tasks.

The two Bulgarian workplaces allowed—after a more prolonged induction phase—limited space for day-to-day learning. However, in a low-wage country and in regions with poor employment opportunities, especially for highly qualified young people, routinised factory work was sweetened by above-average wages. Finally, early-career workers could benefit to some degree from the rapid growth and economic success of the two factories, with new job positions being created. In growing organisations, early-career workers may find opportunities for career advancement even without formally ascribed pathways. And in a relatively well-paid job and with a degree of job security, early-career workers could focus on other important aspects of their lives.

Teaching in adult education typically allows for rich day-to-day workplace learning—a pattern common in professional work organisations, where individuals are responsible for all tasks, routine and non-routine. During the early periods, the demands of the job often seem overwhelming. Novice teachers face a steep learning curve and need levels of personal commitment far beyond their paid working hours. The teachers reported that it had taken 2–4 years to feel confident with all aspects of their job, although there was a broad agreement that opportunities for further informal learning are practically unlimited, with new tasks and challenges becoming visible with each year of practice. As a (para-) profession, adult education also provides a stable base for forming one's identity.

While the nature of professional work clearly favours workplace learning, poor employment conditions, low levels of pay, and organisational support often limit early-career workers' opportunities to stay in the field.

In order to enjoy work with rich opportunities for learning and individual development, early-career workers must give their profession an important role in their overall life structure and accept employment conditions and income below the average for many other teaching professions. This pattern emerged across organisations and countries. Better opportunities were provided only in organisations where teaching was combined with more managerial tasks. Nevertheless, for many early-career workers, improving their employment and income position meant, in the long run, leaving adult education.

## Conclusions

In terms of lifelong learning policy, the features of the workplace matter: they shape the opportunity structures for people's learning at work. An individual may look for a more learning-conducive job or try to overcome poor learning opportunities at work in other areas of his/her life structure. Policies can promote meaningful learning opportunities not connected to the world of gainful work. But the limitations set by workplaces offering poor learning are a key barrier to making lifelong learning a reality for all.

Organisations are the gatekeepers to lifelong learning. This is partly because they provide job-related non-formal education—or do not. Yet their role in providing learning-conducive work is even more important: how they divide up the work required, with jobs or sequences of jobs, either providing or denying rich opportunities for learning and development. Organisational behaviour determines the overall composition of available workplaces (as either learning-rich or learning-poor), and thereby the available opportunity structures for learning. And while the availability of day-to-day learning opportunities is only one dimension of job quality, it is typically associated with other criteria of a 'decent job'.

In order to immerse themselves in opportunities for workplace learning, early-career workers need to develop an idea about their futures which informs their agency in the present. They need to trust that today's learning will be meaningful in the light of promises made by their current organisation or by such social institutions as occupations and professions.

The latter allow them to identify as skilled or expert workers in a field, even without support from their current employer. They also need to be able to embrace learning as a way of moving out of a limiting or unpleasant job.

As with job design, lifelong learning policy finds it hard to embrace the structuration of early career pathways. While it is widely accepted that motivation to learn calls for expectation that learning will have positive consequences, this has had little impact on workplace learning policy. Lifelong learning policy is ill-equipped to ask enterprises for more comprehensive or fairer structuring of early career opportunities. The role of occupations and professions in providing orientation to a person's learning pathway is still hardly grasped, especially in lifelong learning policies that go beyond the provision of vocational or professional education.

With some exceptions shown in Chaps. 11, 12, and 13, no organisation studied included early-career workers in innovation activities or paid attention to how a new entrant might contribute to its capacity to absorb innovation. Where narrowly defined workplaces dominate or professional activities are isolated from managerial decision-making, organisations can profit little from the potential that early-career workers offer for driving organisational innovation.

Here a vicious circle can be observed. Narrowly defined jobs restrict learning, limiting early-career workers' opportunities to contribute to organisational innovation, other than by mutely accepting new rules to implement top-down innovations. Being thus marginalised, early-career workers have little chance to contribute; they may even be seen as a barrier to successful implementation, calling for still more regulation and control.

For lifelong learning policy, this means it is crucial to revitalise links to innovation studies and approaches to organisational learning in particular. Learning needs to be seen not only as the acquisition of established knowledge, nor simply as socialisation into professional roles and communities, but also as innovation. When it comes to innovation, lifelong learning policy is far too often caught up in chimeras about 'cutting edge' content or 'novel' methodologies. It should return to the question of how workplaces can be shaped to allow workers an active role in the processes underpinning innovation.

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# 11

## Working and Learning in the Retail Sector: A Cross-Country Comparative View

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### Introduction

Historically, the retail sector has been recognised as a testing ground for new, less employee-friendly practices. The concentration of the growth of precarious employment in the service sector and especially the retail sector can be explained by the low hiring costs as the jobs are constructed to be rather low-skilled and, therefore, also low-cost (Gautié & Schmitt, 2010; Grugulis & Bozkurt, 2011). The retail sector has been claimed to

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‘lead other industries in experimenting with changes that affect labour market and job quality’ (Carré et al., 2010) as with low-skilled low-paid unorganised workforce, it is easier to lower standards. Indeed, retail sector jobs have been constructed as low-skilled or experiencing deskilling in Europe since the 1990s (Cedefop, 2019a). Thus, the retail sector presents a good testing ground for the analysis of learning opportunities and challenges with precarious work. This begs a question: with the retail sector increasingly associated with precarious employment, how are early career workers supported in pursuing their learning projects?

To answer this question, this chapter presents results from a cross-country analysis of workplace learning opportunities amongst early career workers occupied in the retail sector, comparing retail organisations and their early career workers in Belgium, Denmark and Estonia. Despite the existence of rewarding managerial careers, the retail sector provides mainly low-skilled and routinised occupations, with an increasing proportion of part-time and fixed-term employments in overall low-wage positions (Duemmler & Caprani, 2017; Esbjerg et al., 2008; Nielsen et al., 2013). The non-specialised retail sector has even been claimed to be ‘one of the main entry gates to the labour market for young people and a re-entry point for those who had left the labour market for personal reasons’ employing roughly one in ten employees in the EU28 (Eurofound, 2012; Eurostat, 2021).

Options for workplace learning, continuous education and further career development are, however, often limited in relation to their workplace learning possibilities, future occupational intentions and well-being (Cedefop, 2019a; Fettes et al., 2020; Reegård, 2015; Roberts, 2013). Still, in order to become more productive and use more complex socio-technical arrangements, the retail sector is partly aiming to change its low-skill profile, demanding more skilled and agile employees and making workplace learning a more vital issue for retail organisations (Cedefop, 2019b). On the other hand, given retail’s role as a young people’s bridge into employment, it is particularly important that they can expand their skills, competences and educational levels while working in the sector, either if they decide to attain careers in other occupational fields or to change career tracks within retail (Fuller et al., 2012; Simpson et al., 2018).

This paper analyses the personal accounts of day-to-day workplace learning experiences amongst early career workers from five retailers: two in Belgium, one in Denmark, and two in Estonia. Young people's perceptions of their learning opportunities are studied against the backdrop of the work organisation within the five supermarket chains and the practices deliberately chosen to foster early career employees' learning in the workplace. We have employed the integrative theoretical framework on organisational agency developed in the Enliven research project for the cross-country comparative analysis. This framework comprises the reciprocal interplay between individual, organisational and institutional factors to better explain and capture the circumstances of workplace learning and early professional socialisation of young adults in the early career phase of employment (Evans, 2017). A more complete and integrative understanding of the theoretical framework is explained in more depth in Chap. 10. For each organisation studied, organisational features have been captured mainly by a set of management-level interviews. Individual views of early career workers of the relevant organisations on their workplace learning and its embeddedness in their overall lives have been harvested in extended semi-structured interviews. Full accounts on the five organisational cases, methods employed and structured summaries of the early career workers are available in the Enliven reports (2020a, b); more details on organisations studied are provided in Appendix 2.

The chapter on retail cross-country comparative case study is organised as follows. First, a case study overview is presented, focusing on key sectoral and case study features. A special focus is placed on recounting attributes and characteristics of the Belgian, Danish and Estonian cases, aimed at forming a more general understanding of background and context. Second, based on the data that originates from country and cross-country reports produced in Enliven, the chapter accounts for main findings with reference to two recurrent themes emerging from the comparative analysis. Findings show how organisational agency shape early career workers learning opportunities in the workplace and beyond in the retail sector via everyday work, workplace design and formal, non-formal and informal learning opportunities and learner strategies. The chapter concludes by highlighting the main results from the comparative analysis of situations of workplace learning in the retail sector.

## Case Study Overview

According to terminology used by Eurostat, retailing is the trade of new and used goods mainly to the public for personal or household utilisation (Eurostat, 2021). Sales may be made in stores, at stalls or markets, or through other forms such as remote selling (mail order or internet), vending machines or door-to-door salespersons. In the Enliven retail sector analysis, the selected case studies are centred on the retail sector for personal or household utilisation. The distributive trade sector is characterised by a large number of enterprises. In total, 6.171 million enterprises were classified into this sector in the EU-28 in 2018, making it the largest enterprise population among any of the NACE sections within the non-financial business economy (Eurostat, 2021). The total number of distributive trades enterprises in the EU-28 amounted to more than a quarter (26.4%) of all non-financial business economy enterprises.<sup>1</sup> Data shows a similar pattern for employment, as the 33 million persons employed within the EU-28's distributive trades sector accounted for 24% of the non-financial business economy workforce. This cross-comparative analysis has been carried out in five large retail organisations with more than 250 employees each: two in Belgium (BE1 and BE2), one in Denmark (DK1) and two in Estonia (EE1 and EE2). General characteristics of the organisations and of the specific samples are presented in the following case descriptive analysis, comprising a general account of the organisational background for each country, followed by a more specific outline of the selected cases.

### Belgium

As in many countries, retail plays an important part in the Belgian economy and labour market. With an estimated 200,000 employees, the majority of whom are white-collar workers, it represents a non-negligible share of the 3.96 million Belgian employees. On average, the Belgian retail sector employs more women, young employees and low-educated

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/structural-business-statistics/data/main-tables>

employees than other sectors. This makes the retail sector a potential low-threshold entryway job for early career workers. Between 2008 and 2017, the share of the temporary retail workers who are under 25 years old remained relatively constant and high at 51%. Also, half of the employees in retail who are under the age of 25 have a temporary contract (52.3%), and nearly half of these young employees have a part-time contract (46.3%). In Belgium, social partners, i.e. representatives of trade unions and employers' organisations, come together at different levels to discuss and negotiate the terms of employment. At each level, agreements are made by social partners on the terms of employment, including remuneration, and are written down in a collective bargaining agreement.

## Denmark

A general description of the features of the Danish labour market structure shows that the wholesale and trade industry has the second largest population of full-time employees and the highest number of enterprises in Denmark (Statistics Denmark, 2019). The Danish non-specialised food retail industry is characterised by the employment of a large proportion of part-time employees. Overall, the wholesale and retail trade sector is characterised by low educational attainment and relies on a large representation of young adult workers. Four types of young adult workers are identified in the Danish non-specialised retail sector: skilled workers and apprentices (skilled professionals), sabbatical workers (unskilled), student workers (unskilled) and lower secondary school dropouts (unskilled) (Nielsen et al., 2013).<sup>2</sup> The industrial relations in the retail sector are founded on collective bargaining agreements of different types. On the employer side, retailing is organised under the Danish Chamber of Commerce. On the employee side, most workers in the retail sector are organised in different types of trade unions representing the different occupations engaged in the retail sector. The collective agreements constitute the basic charter for wages and working conditions for employees in the retail sector.

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.statistikbanken.dk/10100>

## Estonia

Since the 1990s, retail has become an important industry for the Estonian labour force, representing the country's second largest industry by employment. In the early 1990s, during the years of the restructuring of the Estonian economy from industrial-agrarian (industry 60% and agriculture 20% of GDP accordingly) into a service economy, the retail sector experienced intensive hiring. In the 1990s, the workforce in retail was educated in the specialised VET programmes, there were continuous vocational education and training programmes in place for employees, and in the context of scarcity of consumer goods, working in the field was associated with privileges in accessing these. Over time, the pool of labour force for expanding retail sector started to overrepresent 'casual workers', e.g. students with short-term employment interests, school dropouts and socio-economically disadvantaged young people, including those with lesser knowledge of the Estonian language. Up until most recent times, and with the continuous increase of the relevance of the sector, retail jobs have been absorbing everyone, being the last resort sector, where jobs are available if everything else fails. The trained workforce from the 1990s is still active as well, so there are differences between those with specialised qualifications and those with none, doing the same jobs. At the time of our fieldwork, nearly 52,000 people work in food retail, accounting for more than 70% of the retail industry's labour force and approximately 8% of the total labour force. Characterised by low-skill levels, routine work, low pay, and high volatility in job mobility, the sector now provides possibilities to start unskilled at the lower-level jobs and work one's way up the career ladder with the support of on-the-job training and continuous vocational education and training courses. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the retail story is the relative absence of industrial relations institutions and collective agreements. Estonia has low trade union coverage and predominantly the labour relations are organised on the individual rather than organisational or sector level (Kall, 2020; Mrozowicki et al., 2013).

## Findings

### Organisational Agency Shaping Workplace Learning Potential in the Retail Sector

The first comparative theme discusses how organisational agency shapes the learning potential of the studied workplaces. Focus is placed on the way institutional factors, job design and organisational structure lever the learning potential available for early career workers, based on the variety and complexity of task solutions.

In the Belgian case, analysis shows that BE1 is highly centralised and corresponds to Mintzberg's (1980) machine bureaucracy: decision-making is centralised in the headquarters, for example hiring and formal training courses are all done at the level of the central HR department. Employees have concrete role descriptions. The company has a document with the role descriptions and the related competences and requirements (a 'catalogue'). A typical store has a store manager, several assistant and divisional managers and the store clerks. The store manager has the final responsibility for accounting, administration, and people management and is in direct contact with the central management. BE2 corresponds more to a divisional organisation structure: while the central headquarters support the different divisions, each division still has autonomy in its HR decisions. At least at the level of non-managing functions, stores have full autonomy in their hiring and training decisions. Stores are organised according to six departments: front end (cash registers), fruit and vegetables, bakery, meat and fish counter, dairy and frozen, and the supermarket store. Each department has a team leader and an assistant team leader, who are responsible for stock orders, promotions, and the general functioning of the department.

At the sectoral level, minimal support exists for corporate training. Article 3 of the collective bargain agreement for the retail sector stipulates the provision of a training opportunity that is at least equivalent to a training opportunity of 2 days on average per year, per full-time equivalent. However, as this is an average, it does not mean that every employee category would receive 2 days of training. We have seen that—especially

for company BE1—there is a very extensive internal training centre with in-house trainers. Concerning collaboration with the formal education system, we see a more structured approach in the programmes aimed at management functions. The Flemish education system recently introduced a system of dual learning in the initial vocational education and training system, inspired by the German vocational education system, with more apprenticeships for students. However, the employers' federation notices a rather ambivalent stance by retailers in that not all companies that apply to these apprenticeships find (or foresee) staff within the company to coordinate the programme. The HR management of BE1 finds that the formal secondary education system does not adequately prepare young graduates for the labour market and would wish to see a more innovative and practical orientation in the school system, with a focus on soft skills, creativity and applied STEM skills. Besides accommodating apprenticeships, the company sometimes sends trainers to teach in schools in programmes in retail management.

From the interviews, DK1 is described as an enterprise with a chief focus on sales as the core activity and overall purpose behind all operating activities. The case organisation comprises an operating core, a strategic apex, middle line managers and a techno-structure (in the sense of Mintzberg). The division of labour and configuration of structure in the case organisation comprise overall a standardisation of work processes with some elements from the divisionalised form as described in Mintzberg's work (1980). In the standardisation of work processes, employees follow pre-defined standards to guide the undertaking of the work itself in the form of work orders, rules and regulations. In DK1, formal and non-formal learning types in the retail sector are structured around two systems. The first system is the vocational education system, where all apprentices and future assistants and managers follow a curriculum before and during their engagement in an apprenticeship or trainee contract to become a 'skilled professional'. The second system is the internal learning and training system. In the enterprise, all employees can apply for resources and can be compensated for formal and non-formal, internal and external, programmes and courses where predetermined knowledge, skills and competences are required.

Generally, DK1 provide and compensate for relevant formal and non-formal learning activities when needed. The case organisation has signed an agreement with the trade unions that makes them a self-governing body when it comes to the compensation and delivery of lifelong learning policies and resources. Thus, despite the enterprise not actively searching for lifelong learning compensation outside the organisation, the system and collective agreement make funding available for continuing vocational education and training for all employees. The case organisation does not need further support for formal and non-formal learning activities since it has been resolved by the trade union agreement with the industry.

Nevertheless, the learning opportunities provided for employees working in a machine bureaucracy are distributed in different ways depending on where the single employee is positioned. For the studied group of early career workers, the design of work and division of labour delineate an organisation that employs a highly standardised description of required competences and skills to do the job based on simple rules and procedures. Work is highly routinised at the staff/employee level in that qualifications necessary to solve a task are defined in a narrow and simple sense and, in general, do not contain complex task solutions that require an explorative search for new skills and competences on a daily basis. The knowledge, skills and competences transferred from formal vocational qualifications and acquired through formal learning enrolment are in conflict with the routine nature of their day-to-day work in the eyes of the early career workers who were interviewed. The early career workers were all enrolled in a vocational educational programme, the so-called dual system. On the one hand, knowledge, skills and competences from the school programme and curriculum support the creation of positive intentions and open up the possibility for building new and mandatory formal qualifications relevant to their chosen profession for the early career workers. On the other hand, several of the early career workers underlined that newly acquired knowledge, skills and competences were rarely used or employed in their daily tasks and that this was often not addressed or linked to practice since the required practical qualifications lent themselves to simple and routinised work.

In both Estonian cases, work organisation is characterised by lower levels of employee discretion in setting work methods; however, this feature is more salient in EE1 than in EE2. The use of job rotation and teamwork is at a high level in EE1. These features point to a more structured or bureaucratic style of organisational learning that corresponds closely to the characteristics of the 'Lean production' model. Job rotation, which is heavily used by EE1, may have reduced monotony. At the same time, the tasks at the different workstations are quite similar and do not require many new skills, autonomy is not increasing and work pressure has increased as employee 'down time' has decreased.

'Lack of staff with the right skills' and 'out of date' vocational education were named by EE1 managers as two of their main concerns. The growing demand in the sector and the increasing lack of workforce also denies them the opportunity to choose from among skilled and experienced candidates. However, they also do not seem to prefer those with vocational education in the field or those with the right skills over others with no skills or education but attempt to integrate everyone. This partly explains why EE1 sometimes suggest to their early career workers the different training courses offered by public institutions. Still, even if these are free of charge, this is not a regular or systematic practice, and excuses of 'this is out of date' are voiced at some level. The solution to the problem is seen in the standardisation of the worker who comes into the workplace, which can be achieved through 'in-house' indoctrination and on-the-job training. Early career workers are regarded as 'blank sheets' or 'empty vessels'. A universal, multi-tasking and interchangeable worker seems to be the ideal pursued. The kinds of training courses offered are thus also narrowly instrumental, focused on imparting specific practical skills or knowledge.

The relatively small role of trade union representation in both EE1 and EE2 needs to be mentioned here. The unions' position did not come up during early career workers' interviews and only occasionally during management interviews. One obvious assumption would be that, with the absence of trade union negotiations, the organisations have more agency and leeway to design workplace learning and development for early career worker as they see fit. While in both organisations, trade union membership does exist in general, its coverage and engagement is

rather low, and if it is present at all, discussions happen at a sectoral level. Individual employees can also directly belong to sector-level trade unions and therefore, do not have to formalise their company-level trade union unit into an independent organisation.

In relation to the organisation of workplace learning processes in the Estonian cases, both organisations assume the role of early career workers as an *apprentice* under a *master*, who himself/herself learned the job earlier in the same way. Such work is generally referred to as craft. In both cases, on-the-job training includes coaching, mentoring, job rotation and 'sitting by Nellie' methods. Self-development and motivation are considered of most importance in both organisations, whilst moving up the career ladder step-by-step. Working time flexibility and (temporarily moving to) part-time contracts are the only support early career workers receive from the employing organisations for participating in formal learning. However, in EE2, we also noticed the supervisors' willingness to accept that some of the individually pursued formal learning practises were also occasionally continued during working hours, as long as this did not interfere too much with work organisation.

The account in this section examines how organisational agency shapes learning potential in the workplace. Analysis shows critical uncertainties inhibiting the learning potential of the early career worker bound to standardised and narrow job design and tasks. Comparisons between the three countries show variations in the way that organisational agency shapes the learning potential in the sample cases as well as internally at a country level (see Table 11.1 for a summary).

For the retail sector, analysis showed that some case study organisations create large numbers of narrowly defined jobs, requiring no initial vocational qualification and showing a clear-cut division of routine and non-routine activities. Overall, all five studied organisations had designed jobs for shop assistants where practically all non-routine activities are reserved for management-level employees, limiting both the need and the opportunities for learning from unforeseen events. In the Estonian cases, however, a lower degree of formalisation of job roles allows for more experiences with non-routine activities for early career workers, including access to middle-level managerial roles.

**Table 11.1** Organisational agency and workplace learning potentials in retail sector: key features

Comparative feature	Belgium		Denmark		Estonia	
	BE1	BE2	DK1	EE1	EE2	EE2
Organisational structure	Machine bureaucracy	Divisional form, each store has full autonomy	Machine bureaucracy	Machine bureaucracy	Machine bureaucracy	Divisionised, each store has autonomy
Coordination of work	Rotation of clerks between departments besides butchers	Normally the clerk stays in one department but rotation is expected to happen	Highly standardised and narrow defined for each job. Early career workers specialise in one department/ profession	Standardisation or work process. Limited horizontal decentralisation. Technostructure is the key part	Standardisation of work outputs. Limited vertical and horizontal decentralisation. Job rotations	Standardisation of work outputs. Limited vertical and horizontal decentralisation. Job rotations
Competences	Catalogue with role descriptions and required competences for all employees	Specific to the department but all have to learn to operate the cash register and other type of work in other departments	Hard skills and competences specific to the department and job type but all have to learn to be customer oriented (soft)	Specific job related skills for each department, functional flexibility encouraged with pay scale, training provided also for managerial roles	Specific job skills by specialisation, but possible substitutions; early career workers may be tested in managerial roles (without training)	Specific job skills by specialisation, but possible substitutions; early career workers may be tested in managerial roles (without training)
Employment type	Temporary student workers during seasonal peaks but otherwise full-time employees unless you choose to work part-time	All early career workers start in a temporary part-time position	Besides temporary workers (e.g. student, sabbatical) all early career workers follow an apprentice dual system program	Regular contracts most common. Part time options available. Possible to enter as temporary during season	Regular contracts most common, part time options available.	Regular contracts most common, part time options available.

Learning system	No sectoral coordinated learning system (private). Partnering with training institutions Do not use the dual learning system even though they have the option to do so	No sectoral coordinated learning system (private) Partnering with training institutions Do not use the dual learning system even though they have the option to do so	(1) Formal vocational system (public) for early career workers apprentices; (2) Non-formal internal learning system (private) for all employees	Formal national qualification framework exists but not followed. Specialised vocational education and training available but not compulsory for early career workers. Provides apprenticeships for early career workers. Provides apprenticeships. Internal (private) learning systems developed. Partnering with continuous vocational and training providers for non-formal learning. Mostly do not use dual learning systems	Formal NQF exists but not followed. Specialised VET available but not compulsory for early career workers. Provides apprenticeships. Internal (private) learning systems developed. Partnering with continuous vocational and training providers for non-formal learning. Mostly do not use dual learning systems
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Source: Compilation based on the case studies reports

All five cases have little use for standardised vocational qualifications, as their preferred form of work organisation does not follow the broad job profile of vocational qualifications in retail or for the various occupations performed in a contemporary hypermarket. While a comparatively low importance placed on vocational qualifications in retail seems in line with the expectations of the Estonian vocational education system, it does not fit well with the Flemish and, particularly, the Danish traditions, which hold vocational education in high esteem.

In the Danish case, the organisation's deviation from the institutional pattern established is particularly pronounced. On the one hand, the firm complies with the legal requirement that their early career workers must be included in formal vocational training, preparing them for broadly defined job roles. However, most apprentices do jobs, which are narrowly defined and barely apply the skills and competences provided by their vocational programmes. Analysis shows clear differences with regard to the breadth of jobs designed; BE1 clearly prefers broader job profiles and has a strong preference for multiskilling, both in line with a policy for long-term employment. BE2 and DK define narrower roles for the sales assistants. EE1 and EE2 show a leaning towards functional flexibility, even if only EE2 tends to maintain longer employment relations, while EE1 accepts short-term nature for early career workers' contracts; however, company-based training provided cannot be recognised outside.

Among the enterprises in retail, the Danish organisation stands out for its mandated involvement in initial education and training; in order to be allowed to employ young people, the need to offer initial education is vital, even when the introduced form of work organisation makes only partial use of the knowledge and skills delivered by the initial vocational education and training program. The very same firm shows only a low commitment to further education, with courses provided mainly in-house: any policy supporting CVT is of relatively poor use for the company. Only for BE1 are comparably high levels of training activity reported, so that the company might be able to profit from public support. While interviewees in EE1 and EE2 are engaged in formal education, they do it outside of company HRD strategy, even though the strategy does involve cooperation with initial vocational education and training and continuous vocational education and training institutions.

## **Organisational Agency Shaping Early Career Pathways and Individual Agency in Workplace Learning in Retail Sector Jobs**

In the following, we offer a breakdown of organisational approaches and employees' voices on the day-to-day workplace learning (informal and/or incidental), non-formal education (training courses) and related support (such as one-to-one on-the-job training and tutoring) and formal education (e.g. apprenticeships) opportunities and experiences.

In both Belgian cases, we note that lack of time is a barrier to learning. In BE1, management utilises a combination of using the state-funded educational paid leave system and an individualised approach whereby employees need to take a personal leave day for external learning activities. In BE2, the problem is structural and is exacerbated by understaffing problems and large absentee rates. Secondly, we see that store management acts as an important gatekeeper to learning opportunities for employees. Access is largely influenced by the store manager's ability to manage work schedules and the manager's priorities in HRM issues. Thirdly, even when the learning environment is reified, such as through leaflets, online platforms or checklists, the actual use of these artefacts appears to be largely influenced by store management, both positively (encouraging staff to consult them) and negatively (omitting distribution).

Workplace learning opportunities are much more centralised in BE1 than in BE2, where they are currently still an afterthought more than a policy. In BE1, employees are encouraged to follow a learning pathway, have regular appraisal interviews, are appointed a mentor, and can follow a wide array of course modules, both in transferable and non-transferable skills. The catalogue of learning activities is easily consultable via an online platform. Some possible barriers are that many of the learning activities have to be taken on employees' personal leave days, and that approval still needs to be granted by the store manager. Furthermore, the mentorship system is not perfect in reality and more senior employees notice that there used to be more time to properly mentor newcomers. These aspects risk being heavily influenced by specific store dynamics.

Overall, in BE1, early career workers described a positive learning climate with many opportunities for informal learning, with additional opportunities to cross boundaries of communities of practice through rotational shifts in other stores. It is even possible to be temporarily relocated to stores in the other language community with the intention of learning or improving a second language. This enriched other learning-by-doing, still an essential way to learn many technical and soft skills. BE1 also asks a certain responsibility in return; to adhere to the company's core values and take charge of the learning process. However, there is a large amount of trust in the intrinsic willingness of people to be responsible. HR management sees learning activities more as an addition and improvement to the work practice than as an impediment to work schedules. In BE2, workplace learning seems more scattered and ad-hoc. Starting employees receive on-the-job training as a way to learn how to correctly do the required tasks in their job, usually by a more senior employee. However, this is very dependent on the available time and of available senior personnel in the store. In some departments, early career workers were left to learn by doing, watching, and making mistakes. One early career worker tried to minimise making mistakes in her first weeks by always keeping a small notebook on her where she copied instructions.

Workplace learning that is happening is almost purely job-related and focuses often on non-transferable skills. Employees that reported being interested in training for specific skills that are not 100% necessary for their job did not always find their needs met, e.g. learning about the stock order system. On the other hand, the part-time nature of the work in BE2 enables employees to pursue formal learning activities outside work hours. In fact, some of the interviewed early career workers explicitly mentioned working in the store because it fits with their educational activities, in preparation for, or alongside, another career path. The management of the store was also accommodating of their schedules. In that way, the work in BE2 is convenient for young people in a more transitional phase of their life. Working for BE1 requires a more deliberate choice.

DK1 employs a wide-ranging specific allocation of resources for formal, non-formal and informal learning activities, functioning as a standard for the structure and content of the learning system and learning

strategies. The case study organisation labels it the '70-20-10 rule' of workplace learning support and strategy, covering all employees in the enterprise. About 90% (70% + 20%) of all learning in the workplace originates from informal learning activities in some form, i.e. from daily task solutions (70%), collaboration and supervision from managers and with peers (20%) and finally, 10% is allocated for formal and non-formal learning activities. The '70-20-10' rule emphasises that the informal learning dimension is an important arena, thus learning is not confined to being identified with 'folklore' understandings of learning as acquirement of knowledge.

As regards the 20% component, the early career workers themselves underline that the most important learning interaction is feedback from the appointed learning responsible person/supervisor. For some of the interviewed early career workers, the supervision and support from the learning responsible person was a positive and supportive arrangement. For the majority, supervision and support were lacking, resulting in the responsibility for competence development being placed on the shoulders of the individual young adult. The case study shows this difference as related to two explanatory factors: The first one was employee type—whether an individual is employed as a trainee or apprentice. The tendency, in this case, was to believe that the trainee had a stronger requirement for, and entitlement to, supervisory support than the apprentice, who was often left to his/her own devices. The second factor was occupational type. The case study observations showed that for some occupations and professional fields, the early career workers' learning trajectory was structured and balanced in relation to supervisory support, while for others, learning basically became a matter of participation and acquiring the social and cultural codes of the community of practice, which created considerable frustration amongst the early career workers.

The case study shows different responses to this situation of lack of supervision for learning in the workplace. The early career worker, Eva, told a story about how she challenged the feeling of being stuck when it came to workplace learning opportunities in the enterprise by confronting her nearest manager and demanding that she needed new challenges and learn more. In addition, from accounts given by Sara, there was nothing else to learn about manufacturing bread products in the bakery

section after a short period in employment. Early in her career trajectory, she felt that she had to administer her workplace learning by herself, with no management/organisational support and further competence development opportunities in sight, indicating that she felt 'stuck' in her learning.

Sara told a story about how she came to a halt in creating learning opportunities in the enterprise. In Eva and Sara's view, the enterprise provided a restrictive learning environment characterised by highly routinised job tasks. In similarity to other early career workers' accounts, Eva and Sara managed their workplace learning process mainly by themselves, and workplace learning was mainly self-directed, with minimum support from the nearest manager/supervisor. Learning opportunities in the enterprise remained tied to a highly routinised work practice, orientated towards control and following prescribed standards, thus both case illustrations show that they felt skilled and competent shortly after their employment, while it took much longer to gain access to, and feel part of, the community. Not all early career workers have the ability (and courage) to self-direct their learning process in retail and trade within the described conditions and organisational culture. Eva, however, positively took up the challenge, which resulted in her staying in her apprentice contract and fighting for her right to learn more about her profession and to continue her profession. Sara could not take up the challenge, which resulted in her ending her apprentice contract.

Looking at the trainees, a different account is presented. The trainees perceive the workplace learning context as more balanced between the expansive and restrictive types. For example, Morten found that the enterprise provided a learning environment that included management support, which helped the development of necessary competences for a sales assistant trainee. Nevertheless, interpretation shows that even for the trainees, the predominant learning opportunities provided in the enterprise are tied to a highly routinised work practice orientated towards control and following prescribed standards.

The 70% component within the informal learning type covers learning as an essential part of everyday work, sending the message that individuals learn through experiences provided and mediated by the affordance of both organisational and individual agency. For the early career workers, it

became evident that informal learning contributed to the creation of motivation and learning opportunities were seen as key factors for their development and intentions to continue in their job. The organisational agency played a significant role in creating the foundation for learning in the workplace. Here, analysis of collected data showed that the learning environment created by the case study organisation was, in general, of the restrictive type in the restrictive-expansive continuum.

In the case data, the three trainees (Morten, Peter and Rasmus) perceived the workplace learning environment as expansive. One apprentice (Christina) was in a mixed position in the expansive-restrictive workplace learning continuum, while four early career workers (Lotte, Eva, Solveig and Sara) experienced the workplace learning environment as restricted. Only a few identified their job as unsustainable in relation to future intentions and career aspirations, and amongst them, it was mainly early career workers engaged in a production and manufacturing profession. Thus, the chosen profession, reflecting institutional and organisational agency, has a key influence on learning opportunities in the workplace.

For example, in the food departments (e.g. butchery and bakery) it seems as if it takes longer to participate and be granted access to core competences and to become a member of the community of practice. This type of social learning process involves more than mere knowledge acquisition. The focus for this type of workplace learning environment is placed on how to learn the dominant cultural codes, language, jargon and rituals. In addition, a recurrent theme throughout the data is that the career orientation amongst the trainees is to stay and evolve in a managerial position, while the career orientation and goal intention for the five remaining early career workers was more open. Almost all interviewed early career workers had as their foremost career intention to become a manager within the non-specialised food sector. However, the actualisation of this career intention is expected for the trainees while it is not expected for the apprentices, which makes their future ties to the enterprise of a more fragile and uncertain type.

In EE1 and EE2, the jobs at the shop floor were designed to encourage functional flexibility and thus, career advancement by horizontal as well as vertical mobility would be supported by internal career development mechanisms. However, early career workers were not presented with

these career plans in a systematic way upon the start of their employment with the organisations. Instead, they were given access to basic training for their narrowly defined jobs, and only later in their employment would the early career workers be given new tasks and skills requirements. Early career workers we interviewed, planned their further careers with the organisation, and generally, they did see more or less ambiguous pathways. In fact, even if the early career workers had landed the job accidentally, with little planning, they started to see options for staying with the company for a longer term. This was especially the case for the EE1, which has a larger organisation with foreign exchange possibilities. Still, early career workers in managerial track positions who were not certain about their plans to stay with the organisation (e.g. Siiri and Inga in EE1), as well as some in positions requiring lower levels of qualification (Robert, Markus and Maria in EE1, Liisa and Mirtel in EE2).

Analysis of both EE1 and EE2 also outlined several learner-directed learning opportunities that were designed as taking up formal learning opportunities outside of organisations' HRD practices, ranging from acquiring general higher education (Robert and Markus in EE1, Mirtel in EE2) to participating in graduate studies (Siiri in EE1, Tarmo and Liisa in EE2). We do not assume these to be representative cases across the sector, as the managers had mediated the interview requests with them; however, it was illustrative that although the studies were up to individual agency, the workplaces were informed about their studies outside of the organisation. Both in the cases of EE1 and EE2, it was those in jobs with lower qualification requirements as well as those in office or managerial tracks who used these opportunities, and in some cases, they needed additional flexibility from the employers while in others they had chosen or even moved to the more positions with more time flexibility and easier substitutions of missed shifts. Since EE1 and EE2 managers mostly assumed early career workers were not interested in staying with the company, their training and learning aspirations were supported not necessarily as strategic HR investments but rather as additional motivation strategy—especially considering the relatively low pay level in the sector.

The cross-country comparison shows diversity, analysing the interplay between organisational and individual agency in relation to workplace learning opportunities. In BE1, interviews and case data indicated a

positive learning climate with many opportunities for informal learning, with additional opportunities to cross boundaries of communities of practice by rotational shifts in other stores. It was even possible to be temporarily relocated to stores in the other language community with the intention of learning or improving a second language. This enriched other learning-by-doing, still an essential way to learn many technical and soft skills. In BE1, which is characterised by an expansive learning environment, employees are encouraged to follow a learning pathway, have regular appraisal interviews, are appointed a mentor, and can follow a wide array of course modules, both on transferable and non-transferable skills.

In BE2, workplace learning is more scattered and ad-hoc, reflecting a more restrictive learning type and environment. New employees receive on-the-job training as a way to learn how to correctly do the required tasks in their job, usually by a more senior employee. However, this is very dependent on the time available and of available senior personnel in the store. In some departments, early career workers were left to learn by doing, watching, and making mistakes. DK1 and the Estonian cases are characterised by a restrictive learning environment, including limited opportunities for growth and for job mobility (horizontal and vertical), unless the individual is employed on a trainee contract, foreseeing a managerial career path after engagement as an apprentice. All early career workers underlined that they had experienced a rapid competence development as work was primarily routinised, thus core professional functions could be mastered within the first 3–4 months of employment. In addition, they all underlined the importance of their closest manager's supervision and support in creating expansive workplace learning opportunities in the early stages of their professional life. The cross-country comparative analysis thus shows variety; internally, within the specific country case studies, in relation to workplace learning opportunities and in terms of future goals in life.

## Conclusion

Throughout Europe, the retail sector allows early career workers a first entry into gainful employment while also employing a large proportion of young adults on a part-time and/or temporary basis. This chapter

presented findings on workplace learning opportunities in the retail sector, comparing cases from Belgium, Denmark and Estonia. Conditions for workplace learning as experienced by early career workers were analysed and discussed, to reveal if these can substitute for generally poor pay and career opportunities in the sector while supporting individual career advancement.

For early career workers, what is required is experienced as easily learned and rather narrow in content range since work in the retail sector can be highly standardised and routinised. The learning potential in the workplace contains uncertainties and is viewed as inhibiting the learning potential of the early career workers from a standardised and narrow job design despite the formal compulsory acquisition of a broad vocational qualification. Our analysis illustrates that the case organisations provide and compensate for relevant formal and non-formal learning activities when they are needed. All five organisations predominantly provide narrowly defined jobs for early career entrants, with limited opportunities for learning from non-routine activities, but there remained an important variation within and across the studied cases. Only by various degrees of job rotation between similar types of jobs and some functional flexibility, a broader range of skills was applied in day-to-day work. In contrast, workers selected into managerial career pathways or into specialised roles demonstrated that learning opportunities in the workplace were more readily available.

Our comparative analysis shows that early career workers across case studies respond in different ways in their behaviour to the limitations for meaningful learning and career development in the workplace set by the retail organisation. Their ways of responding to the (lack of) learning opportunities are shaped by their evolving life structures and organisational settings, where retail work might be the right thing to do for the time being, even though it creates, overall, restrictive workplace learning opportunities for the early career workers. Given their size and dominant role in society, retailers enjoy considerable leeway in deviating from the standards expected in the employment system of a given country; this also allows for a better understanding of the role of organisational agency.

Given the outlined organisational structures for each workplace in the retail sector, early career workers have only limited options for breaking

out of the limitations set by the job design, with a change between career tracks as the most promising one and vertical mobility a possibility. Beyond that, many early career workers in the retail sector channel their attention away from gainful work to other areas of personal development and learning. For some early career workers, a need for a less demanding—less ‘greedy’—job that allows pursuing formal education or other personal projects has motivated them to try the retail sector in the first place. For others, while the learning at work is limited, balancing the needs of work and their personal needs and interests in other parts of their life structure represents an important developmental task on its own. Finally, the experienced lack of learning opportunities can become a driver for change in its own right, with early career workers planning on returning to education or at least combining self-selected educational projects with an ongoing retail engagement.

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# 12

## Organisational and Individual Agency in Workplace Learning in the European Metal Sector

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### Introduction

The chapter compares the evolution of day-to-day (informal) workplace learning and the work-based training arrangements in the metal sector in Bulgaria and in Spain, specifically the Basque region. Based on the literature about European social models (Sapir, 2006; Gallie, 2007; Delteil & Kirov, 2016), Bulgaria and Spain belong to the group of Post-Communist and respectively Mediterranean States, with the Basque region being

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quite different from other Spanish regions, due to its advanced industrialised economic model, which requires an efficient skills provision system. While in the Basque country system, the link between the labour market needs and vocational education is successfully mediated by institutions, Bulgaria represents an example of the weakness of the state educational system in delivering the necessary skills. Moreover, within the Basque region, the cooperative sector is still of high significance and therefore two cooperatives are chosen for in-depth study. Growing up in the global value chain, Bulgarian companies have recently started to develop in-house training arrangements in order to cope with the deficit of qualified labour. This process is observed both in domestic companies and subsidiaries of multinational companies. The empirical data for the analysis was collected within the framework of the Enliven project.

The objective of this chapter is to investigate the workplace learning practices in the European metal sector,<sup>1</sup> on the basis of four case studies in two countries. While complex manufacturing is undoubtedly increasingly needed for the economic development of Europe, the supply of skills and the integration of early career employees by the industry are problematic. The metal sector is one of the most important contributors to the European Union's manufacturing industry (Alessandrini et al., 2017). The manufacture of metal products, except machinery and equipment, together with the manufacture of machinery and equipment include almost seven million employees in more than 480,000 companies in the European Union in 2016.<sup>2</sup> The value added by these subsectors is about one-fifth of the total value added in European manufacturing.

However, beyond the overall figures, the two above-mentioned subsectors hide a diversity of situations in terms of technological development, work organisation patterns and use of routine or non-routine work, labour productivity and value added. They include a wide range of companies, from very simple producers of metal products (situated mainly in

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<sup>1</sup>This chapter covers the manufacture of metal products, except machinery and equipment, together with the manufacture of machinery and equipment.

<sup>2</sup>[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/d/d7/Sectoral\\_analysis\\_of\\_key\\_indicators%2C\\_Manufacturing\\_%28NACE\\_Section\\_C%29%2C\\_EU-28%2C\\_2016\\_%28Table\\_2a%29.png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/d/d7/Sectoral_analysis_of_key_indicators%2C_Manufacturing_%28NACE_Section_C%29%2C_EU-28%2C_2016_%28Table_2a%29.png)

Southern and Eastern Europe) to very complex companies, leaders in their respective value chains. Within the theoretical perspective of the value chain approach (Gereffi et al., 2005), the position of countries and companies in the respective chains is dynamic and can rise or fall. This dynamic perspective is important in understanding technological and organisational changes and the related dynamism of workplace learning practices. The two countries under scrutiny, Bulgaria and Spain, represent different configurations in these value chains. In the case of Bulgaria, companies are often integrated mainly as low-wage producers, either within the value chains of large European Union-based multinationals or as independent subcontractors to leading European Union metal and machinery producers. Those Bulgarian companies have gradually moved upward on the value chains, engaging in more complex tasks and investing in more sophisticated technologies and therefore demanding higher skills. The Spanish companies from the Basque region are highly specialised in complex machine building, delivering tailored products. The Spanish machine tool sector is the third largest producer and exporter in the European Union (just behind Germany and Italy) and is ranked ninth in the world. The vast majority (75% according to some reports) of this manufacturing activity is located in the Basque Country, where the enterprises studied in this chapter are located.

This diversity of situations within this sector also reflects the interplay between the skills acquisition provided by the educational system, the initial vocation education and training system and the work-based learning arrangements (Boyadjieva et al., 2012). In some countries, the cooperation between the worlds of education and work is well developed, as it is the case in the Basque region (López-Gereñu, 2018), while in others, such as the region of Bulgaria under study in this chapter, the formal education system is not able to provide the required skills for a number of reasons, including the lack of specialised vocational education and training classes, the low motivation of pupils and so on (Kirov, 2018) and therefore companies count mainly on workplace learning to train the early-career workers.

Based on the theoretical framework developed for the purposes of the Enliven project (see Chaps. 10 and 15), the chapter addresses this interplay on the basis of the bounded agency model (Evans, 2007). According

to Evans (2007: 17), ‘Bounded agency is socially situated agency, influenced but not determined by environments and emphasizing internalized frames of reference as well as external actions’. The concept of ‘organisational agency’ is therefore used—analogously to individual agency—to give emphasis to the choices made by a particular organisation (ENLIVEN, 2020a). In this model, the structural (organisational) choices provide a space for individual agency.

More concretely, the following key questions are addressed in the chapter. First, how do organisations apply their agency in shaping workplaces, thereby unleashing or inhibiting their learning potential? Second, how do organisations apply their agency in structuring early career pathways? Finally, we address the question of how the organisation’s decisions on workplace design, workplace learning, career structuration and human resource management impact on early career workers’ agency to learn in the workplace and beyond.

We are interested in workplace learning, understood as learning available in day-to-day work experience and the related forms of relating to others and belonging to groups. With organisational agency, the focus lies within the difference put into motion by particular decisions, which an organisation makes despite similar organisations under equivalent conditions opting for different solutions (see Chap. 10).

## Overview of Cases Studied

The empirical work for this analysis has been carried out in the framework of the European comparative research project Enliven.<sup>3</sup> Four case studies have been undertaken in the metal sector, two in the Basque Country and two in Bulgaria. The main characteristics of the organisations are presented in Table 12.1. The two Spanish cases, medium-sized companies, are cooperatives, founded respectively in the 1950s and 1960s. The two Bulgarian cases are private companies, one established in 1992 and owned by its founders, the other established in 1972 as a state-owned company and then privatised by a foreign investor in 2003.

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<sup>3</sup><https://h2020enliven.org/>

**Table 12.1** Characteristics of the organisations involved in the case studies

Country	Code/ Pseudonym	Sector	Size class	Year of foundation	Location	Ownership
<i>ES</i>	<i>ES1</i>	Machinery	400 approx.	1954	Rural	Worker cooperative
<i>ES</i>	<i>ES2</i>	Machinery	200 approx.	1962	Rural	Worker cooperative
<i>BG</i>	<i>BG1</i>	Manufacturing of metal products	200 approx.	1992	Urban	Local company
<i>BG</i>	<i>BG2</i>	Manufacturing of metal products	600 approx.	1972	Rural	International group

Source: own compilation, based on the case studies reports

The methodology used for the case studies was qualitative. Two rounds of interviews were conducted with both managers and early career workers in 2017 and 2018. Up to four managers (the line manager, the human resources director and the president) and four early career workers were involved from each organisation in Spain. The characteristics of the participants as early career workers are presented in the project report (ENLIVEN, 2020a, b). In Bulgaria, in total ten interviews have been carried out in the case of BG1 and eight in the case of BG2. The information gathered in the interviews was deductively coded according to the framework of the study. In the case of early career workers, the information was also represented in life biography vignettes. The data collection was reinforced by desk research and action research with the participating companies. More details on the methodological framework is provided in Chap. 10 and in Appendix 1.

## **How Does Organisational Agency Shape the Learning Potential of Workplaces in the Metal Sector?**

The theoretical understanding sustaining the analysis is that day-to-day informal workplace learning is impacted both by the agency of the organisation (company) and by the individual choices to act on (or not) the opportunities provided by organisations, as well as the dynamic interaction between the individual and organisational agencies. For this reason, we examine first the organisational agency and second how individuals use (or not) the learning opportunities.

### **Agency in Shaping Workplaces and Their Learning Potential**

‘Organisational agency’ impacts on the learning potential available in the workplace in many ways (see Chap. 10). The main elements considered here are the division of labour and work structures, the job design and job ladders and the career structuration.

In Bulgaria, the two case studies examined represent two typical configurations for the Bulgarian Metal sector, one being a local medium-size company (BG1) and the other a subsidiary of a multinational company with European origins (BG2). Both produce metal details that are delivered to their contractors (external or internal, in the case of the multinational company) in order to be further utilised in the production of machines or machine components in other locations of the respective value chains. The work organisation in both cases follows an approach dominated by Taylorist organisation (rather typical for Bulgarian companies in this sector), but with (increasing) introduction of elements of lean production. Work is mainly routine. In both cases, the material (metal) is introduced on the production site, cut and then submitted to a series of manipulations. In addition, BG2 has some structures focused on the continuous improvement of the manufacturing process.

The key principles for designing jobs depend on organisational structure frequently adopted in Bulgaria. Both in the local company and the multinational company, new jobs are made available only if there is a need to add new machines. Production employees are expected to specialise on the respective machine (mainly CNC<sup>4</sup>) to which they are assigned. In the examined company there are various narrowly defined jobs (specialisation on the machine) with some job ladders from less to more complex machines, but rarely to other types of machines or to first line management: 'Basically, when we appoint a new collaborator, from the first day... he is already directly engaged in production and we are all there to help the production' (BG2\_M1\_1\_985); 'Before the person starts, I know beforehand at what machine he must start working' (BG2\_M1\_1\_1000).

The two Basque companies belong to an important cooperative group and are well positioned in the respective value chain, bringing their social capital to a key component of the regional innovation system (Landabaso et al., 2003). The cooperatives' objective is not to enrich the business owner but to achieve sustainable growth and bring well-being to the workers and the social fabric of the area where they are located. This is

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<sup>4</sup>CNC (computer numerical control) machining is a manufacturing process in which pre-programmed computer software dictates the movement of factory tools and machinery.

possible through collaboration and mutual aid between their members and the creation of a common heritage that cannot be divided (Martínez, 2009). Cooperative enterprises have similar business cultures, though their different environments, products and markets condition their individual strategies (Bakaikoa et al., 2004). Workers who join cooperatives do so for life, so cooperative staff members have a long-term vision for their careers. They show a conscious commitment to cooperate and progress together (Williams, 2007), taking responsibility for themselves, their colleagues and society (Kasmir, 1999).

The jobs studied, from low-skilled to high-skilled, are designed according to the preferences and needs of the organisation. They specialise in 'turnkey products', designed ad-hoc for the client and with high added value (organisational work within a project-based, customer-orientated, adhocracy, with 'turnkey' products). In some products, they are world leaders. Higher levels of skills (with higher ranked credentials) allow for faster progression on job ladders.

The links between jobs are constant, as they are team workers with multiple skills. Their professional roles are stable, changing from professional (expert) roles to managerial ones. New workers have a short induction phase in tightly defined jobs, with multi-skilling (for groups of jobs) and additional skills as they move up the job ladder. They start with less demanding tasks, moving on to more demanding tasks; starting with some specialisation and broadening the areas of expertise. They learn how good work is done by relying on peers, supervisors, and meetings to analyse unexpected events. In both companies, non-routine work predominates, as different products are designed and produced for each client.

Workers are expected to take part in a high level of customer relations (over 93% of products are exported); jobs are not defined according to stable patterns but constantly adapted to clients' different projects; workers have professional training in the company and learn languages so they can communicate with international clients. They assist customers in product design (turnkey) and its implementation in the customers' countries. The most highly recognised workers in particular fields of expertise teach others, acting as mentors. Engineers work with employees in the workshop, sharing workspaces side by side, facilitating mutual learning and exchange of tacit knowledge. Each project has a person in charge who assumes responsibility for the project vis-à-vis the client.

Although there is a high demand for workplace learning during quite a long incorporation ('survival') phase, spanning several months or even years, the additional learning requires individual initiative and a strong commitment to the company. The organisation therefore incorporates a talent management strategy to elicit a high level of commitment.

In the Bulgarian companies, we observed a transition in the provision of learning practices. This transition, which probably also applies to other manufacturing subsectors, was based on the formalisation of learning provision through training centres rather than (guided) on-the-job training (achieved mainly through mentorship by experienced workers). The emerging enlargement of the training curricula (theoretical courses, some soft skills, programming and so on) contrasted with the previous focus on technical skills. This change was demand-driven and influenced by factors such as an upgrade, from simple operations to more complex metal working, in the *global value chain*. What is surprising is that this process occurred almost simultaneously both in multinational subsidiaries and in local small and medium enterprises. Even if only part of the early career workers' cohort is affected by this greater emphasis on formalised training, overall perspectives in workplace learning are changing. In company BG1, training was formerly delivered only on-the-job, sporadically and in case of particular need, such as with a new hire or the acquisition of new machines. Since the recent launch of the training centre, it became more formalised, mixing theoretical and practical training, though the employees enrolled remained a minority. In September 2017, BG2 also inaugurated a modern training centre at the factory. This trains employees and pupils in initial education: in this company, both became important priorities during its recent expansion (Table 12.2).

In Spain's Basque country, cooperatives—whose employees are at the same time owners of the company—have a particular position, distinct from other companies. Their corporate tax rate is much lower than for public or private companies. Cooperative workers neither contribute to employment training funds nor benefit from subsidised training. They have typically created their own research and training centres; there is also a cooperative university. The latter's origin lie in vocational training and, probably because of this and because the cooperatives constitute their own ecosystem, relations between cooperatives and training

**Table 12.2** Agency in shaping workplaces and their learning potential: Examples of dimensions

	BG1	BG2	ES1	ES2
<i>Type of work organisation</i>	Tayloristic	Lean	Discretionary learning	Lean organisation
<i>Organisational v occupational space</i>	Strictly organisational—weak role of formal qualifications	Strictly organisational—weak role of formal qualifications	Organisational with a stronger role of occupations/profession	Organisational with a stronger role of occupations/profession
<i>Dominating type of employment</i>	Permanent and full-time	Permanent and full-time	Permanent and full-time	Permanent and full-time
<i>Labour turn over</i>	Low	Low	Low	Low
<i>Type of work &amp; broadness of the task</i>	Mainly narrowly defined ('one machine—one person')	More narrowly according to the level of subprocesses	Broadly, part of multi-skilled teams	More broadly
<i>Responsibility for the non-routine</i>	Clear separation of routine/non-routine	Clear separation of routine/non-routine	Clear separation of routine/non-routine	Clear separation of routine/non-routine
<i>Present activities increasing/decreasing the learning potential</i>	Increase	Increase	Increase	Increase

Source: own compilation based on the case study report

institutions are close. Training for professionals has been nourished by the good relations between training centres and companies, and by in-company traineeships (more common than in other universities). Though of relatively short duration, it is orientated to specific needs and more suitable for the continuous learning of workers. Staff consider that, as it is paid for by the company itself, the courses are more demanding, effective and responsive to needs. Even in small and medium companies, the incorporation of a practical module meant an exchange of information and assessment of the training provided in the centre. This often facilitated the adaptation of training programmes and joint design and implementation of new programmes, such as dual programmes on an alternating basis and specialised programmes, which responded to company demands. Since the first dual training programme in the Basque Autonomous Community, Ikasi eta Lan, started in 2008 in response to business demand, supply has evolved. The Basque model of dual vocational training on an alternating basis now allows for key aspects of business competitiveness, such as specialisation, internationalisation and innovation, to be incorporated into training, in collaboration with companies and their research and development departments, and with research and development centres or other agents in the Basque vocational training system (López-Gereñu, 2018).

Comparison of the Bulgarian and Spanish cases in terms of organisational agency suggests huge differences in the preferred ways of organising work between the two countries' metal sectors. In Bulgaria, training is emerging and expanding, despite an organisational profile combining *Tayloristic* and *lean* elements. The model of on-the-job-training remains dominant, but in parallel, formalised training through training centres, providing theoretical skills, is emerging. Training in soft skills and languages is marginal and mainly confined to multinational company subsidiaries. In the Spanish case, workplace learning is massive and supported by provision of non-formal training, such as in foreign languages (given the importance of customer support in turnkey products and international clients). In the Basque Country, the companies themselves have played an important role in improving vocational training. It is thus important to highlight the role workplace training has played in revitalising relations between training centres and companies, with centre tutors and company instructors as key figures (López-Gereñu, 2018).

## How Organisational Agency in Human Resource Management Structures Organisations' Perceptions and Preferences for Learning Policies

Human resource management is the key factor for the development of learning in the workplace. In Bulgaria, the two companies have completely different human resource management policies and structures. Usually, the human resource and development instruments are well developed in the subsidiaries of foreign multinationals (using transferred or locally adapted models) but absent in local companies. This is the situation in BG1 and BG2. In BG 1, a medium-sized company without formalised human resource management structures, human resource functions are fulfilled by general management. BG2 has a relatively well-developed human resource management department and policies. Human resource specialists are all recruited from the local area. Most have extensive work experience, but not necessarily diplomas in human resource management. They have a high degree of autonomy with respect to the human resource managers at headquarters. Human resource objectives are not strictly formulated in company documents. Some practices have been translated from the mother company, but initiatives were also developed at the level of BG2.

What can be seen is that in both cases, companies focus on work-based learning and develop internal capacities through training centres, trainers' skills and so on. However, in BG1, there are no formalised policies, for example for career development; in BG2 this is more structured. In addition, a focus on organisation, leadership and soft skills seems particular to BG2 and to companies with more developed human resource management practices (often subsidiaries of multinationals), and contrasts with local companies like BG1, where the focus is on technical skills. A possible explanation is transfer of the headquarter's organisational and learning culture.

In Spain, when the restructuring of the metal sector was tackled in the 1990s, the Basque Government made a commitment to promote a technologically advanced new metal sector: 'Policies to upgrade the competitiveness of industry became the centrepiece of the Basque policy agenda, to which the rest of policies became subordinated' (Porter et al., 2013: 7 quoted by López-Gereñu, 2018: 505). The policies subordinated to industrial competitiveness included, in chronological order, quality (ISO

9000 and later EFQM and Euskalit) and professional training, with the First Vocational Training Plan and its successors; the promotion of innovation and the creation of Innobasque; and internationalisation.

In the Basque cases, companies were committed to training. In the case of languages, internationalisation being a very important aspect, they offered language studies before workers started their working day. Employees were asked about their training interests. Employees with a particular interest in taking a specific course might find the company willing to finance part of it, though the training usually occurred outside working hours.

We're very lucky. They offer us the course, they tell us "I think it could be good for you" and I decide. You always say yes because they are usually interesting. (ES1\_ECW3\_1\_653)

Depending on whether the company is the one proposing it, it falls within your work schedule because it is interesting for the position. If it is not the company's proposal but the worker's but related to their job, they would support you financially but outside of hours. (ES1-ECW4\_1\_605).

The development of human resource management in the Spanish companies is related to the imperative to upgrade the sector and is linked to the different requirements and standards of high-profile manufacturing. In Bulgaria, practices are more situational, less developed in local companies, and stimulated in subsidiaries of foreign multinationals. In this sense, the Spanish case illustrates a more long-term approach to training, while in Bulgaria, policy seems to respond to urgent challenges.

## **How Organisational Agency Is Applied in Shaping Early Career Pathways**

### **The Structuring of Early Career Pathways**

We now turn to the structuration of early career pathways. For this purpose, we analysed a number of organisational and human resource management characteristics. In Bulgaria, all the employees of the two

companies were engaged on permanent full-time contracts, with no part-timers, as is usual in Bulgarian companies in general and in this sector in particular. All newly recruited employees pass a six-month probation period and then, depending on performance, start working with permanent contracts. The companies under scrutiny have different career development pathways for workers. However, these are not formalised, existing only as informally shared expectations deduced from interviews, especially in BG 1. There are some examples of vertical or horizontal job mobility, but these are less common, and the majority of workers do the same job for years. In general, in both companies, the philosophy is that a person does not need any specific education for a new job, even in management; what is needed is to show the potential to cope with that job. Support for day-to-day informal workplace learning is provided mainly by team leaders.

Early career workers in BG1, were formerly guided only by experienced workers (mentors) during the time necessary to learn the basic functioning of the relevant machine(s). This process could take different periods of time—usually between 2 and 3 months, up to a maximum of 5–6 months. This coincided with the probation contract (6 months, according to Bulgarian labour legislation). In case of difficulties, the worker could speak first to the mentor or shift leader and then to the workshop manager or engineer-in-chief:

If there is a difficulty or problem, we turn to him. If it turns out he can't decide either, we turn to the workshop manager or the engineer-in-chief. In general, the engineer-in-chief is the one most responsible for everything, and if there is a problem, it always comes to him to decide. (BG1\_ECW1\_1\_28).

In the Spanish cases, the initial hiring involved a fixed-term contract for three years, with a further year of transition. Following this, an evaluation took place, conducted by two people in charge of monitoring the early career worker. Long-term contracts meant a permanent contract as a cooperative associate. The most important reward in structuring the early career pathways may be becoming a member of the cooperative and providing a secure and stable job virtually for life. In addition, if the

cooperative achieves its goals, they share in the profits distributed among the members. They also have assemblies where members make decisions about the company and its social benefits.

Hiring is done with an eye to prospects for long-term employment and to an undefined sequence of jobs and roles within multi-skilled teams. This continuously enriched job roles and levels of responsibility; the early career pathway is thereby organised around the goal of achieving 'partnership status' as a key early career transition. Both Basque organisations embraced a strategy based on a stable, highly skilled and motivated, flexible workforce, capable of moving and growing with unknown technological challenges; employees enjoy particular membership rights and partake in the success of the cooperative.

For new job openings in ES1 and ES2, there was no hierarchy between the entry routes, but preference was given to internal promotion before the position was externally advertised. It was a strategic goal to provide workers with competitive knowledge and to develop talent within the company. Support for new entrants and their transition to full productive work or to longer, well-structured induction was quick, supervised by a person responsible for its follow-up. The companies implemented collective agreement for the metal sector.

Comparison of the Spanish and Bulgarian cases shows that in both cases, long-term engagement of employees is preferred. However, in Spain, the learning pathways and curricula were well established and formalised, while in Bulgaria, formalised training is just emerging and covers only a small proportion of early career workers, though a trend towards higher levels of formalisation can be observed. The Spanish companies focus on multiskilling from the outset, while horizontal job transitions were rare in the Bulgarian companies.

### **The Impact of Organisations' Decisions on Early Career Workers' Agency to Learn in the Workplace and Beyond**

The organisational arrangements described above impact in a different way on the interplay between the external and the internal provision of skills.

Bulgarian early career workers have been trained mainly on-the-job-training schemes through the post-communist period (previously very structured training was in place). During the last few years, the vocational education and training system has been poorly connected with the real needs of companies (Kirov, 2015), which impacted on the companies' willingness to invest in internal skills acquisition. This had been reinforced by both companies being located in rural areas where vocational education and training had been interrupted (BG1) or diminished significantly (BG2). However, in BG1 all efforts have been focused on internal processes. In BG2 investment was also external, supporting the country's emerging dual vocational education and training. BG2 is one of the pioneers in the establishment of dual apprenticeships in Bulgaria, having launched this initiative in the district together with three other metal sector companies. This pilot dual-apprenticeship initiative was supported by the Austrian Chamber of Commerce (*Wirtschaftskammer*).<sup>5</sup> Thanks to this programme, BG2 now had one of the first (and soon-to-graduate) classes of work-based learners:

But these two classes are actually with us, the first one graduates this year. When it became possible, and it was accepted that such training through work can exist, we already had a class in fact. After which the second class came and after that we were able to find children, not only we, but with the support of the school of course, children who would enter into the dual form of training. (BG2\_M1\_1\_181).

In both companies, establishing training centres had been achieved through their own investment. However, they also benefitted from external support schemes. For example, in 2017 BG1 was involved in a European Structural Fund project for training and recruitment of vulnerable youth (12 people in all). According to the rules of this Youth Guarantee project, at least six people were supposed to be hired for at least one year after the completion of the project; the project was completed successfully.

In Spain, there were good relationships between the companies and the vocational training centres (accredited by the company itself). The

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/article/2017/bulgaria-more-backing-needed-for-pilot-dual-track-vocational-education-and-training>

company requests the number of assemblers needed each year; its human resource managers evaluate the people and choose the most suitable. The corporation also has a university offering substantial training for professionals, nourished by relationships between centres, companies and in-company training. Training aims at continuous learning for workers and when financed by companies themselves is more effective.

When early career workers arrive at the companies, they have an 'onboarding' process which includes learning what a cooperative is, how it is organised and what the functions of each body are. ES1 has an in-house vocational training school to train young workers, as well as specific language training and tailor-made courses for specific projects. ES2 selects expert workers to mentor and train new workers and prepare manuals. In addition, there are courses and other specific training activities; both companies have human resource departments to collect and provide information about available training for all workers.

Both companies support pathways for early career workers in a fairly structured way, in the form of actions such as rotation, internal training, mobility and progressive delegation of responsibility. Company support for early career workers' pathway makes it easier for them to become aware of the learning opportunities available in the workplace and has a positive effect on the young workers' agency.

The comparison of the Bulgarian and Spanish cases allows us to identify a number of differences. The training structure is more formalised in the Spanish cases, while still in the making in Bulgaria. The training centres are accredited by the Spanish companies; while Bulgarian companies have started to use some external support schemes, the bulk of their investment in training is internal.

## **How Organisational Agency in Workplace Design and Career Structuration Interacts with Individual Agency to Learn in the Workplace**

In the previous two sections, we examined how organisational agency has shaped the structuration of workplace learning opportunities in practice and how early-career pathways are shaped. In this section, the focus is on

individual agency or, in other words, how workers in the same firm behave differently or in the same way. Here our inputs come from the learning-biography vignettes.

In Bulgaria, the majority of the workplaces were characterised by monotonous routine tasks and poor learning potential; over-qualification among the respondents was common, being accepted as a trade-off for secure long-term employment opportunities and secure earnings.

In the Bulgarian metals sector, a pattern was observed of individuals' learning benefitting from—sometimes only small—changes in work tasks, such as moving from a simple to a more advanced machine, or from taking on additional work as a trainer for in-house training programmes.

Some examples from the Bulgarian cases illustrate the trajectories of early career workers with previous experience from different sectors and focus on the on-the-job-training within the company. Two representative trajectory cases are illustrated here.

The first is Kalin (30–34 years old), who had come from the construction sector. He had been working for six years at BG1. When he started work as a mechanic, he had an instructor: he was attached to a supervisor who guided him in purely practical tasks. The company at that time did not offer theoretical training. With every new position he held, Kalin received only practical training:

I first started with the mechanics, after that with the digital milling machine, but with ordinary attachment. It is digital too, but with manual setting, it has no measuring appliances within the machines like these ones. After that, after two-three years, they transferred me to the newer machines and now, since last year, to one of the newest. (BG1\_ECW2\_1\_55).

However, Kalin acknowledged that the theoretical training his more recently hired colleagues received helped them to adapt more easily to the production process.

For them it is sort of easier this way, getting more advanced in the work, and not... Theoretically and gradually, to advance in the work and not being required to start production at once. Everything is sort of gradual, right—first in theory and then in practice. It's not so hurried. (BG1\_ECW2\_1\_233).

The second trajectory examined here is Snejana's. Aged 30–34, she worked as a lathe operator in a milling machine unit of the same company. She pursued a higher education and received a bachelor's diploma in Pedagogy of Mathematics and Informatics. After taking parental leave, Snejana received a permanent work contract after working for the company for two years. When she started working for the company, she passed a course of training, which was both theoretical and practical:

the engineers, the head of the workshop also, the people in higher positions than us, were reading something like lectures to us, in order to familiarise us with the measuring equipment, the kinds of materials, the kinds of instruments' (BG1\_ECW1\_100); 'For two months I was with another person on a machine, after that they let me work independently with a machine' (BG1\_ECW1\_1\_113).

At the time of the field work, Snejana was fulfilling the role of a trainer, expanding her job role by working not only in the milling machine unit but also at the company's training centre, contributing to the practical training of new employees.

These examples illustrate how individuals benefitted from the learning opportunities to advance in their careers, being transferred to more complex machines or expanding their job profile as a trainer—despite, particularly in the case of Snejana, having exchanged her higher education qualification and career prospects in upper secondary education to become a semi-skilled worker.

However, other individual trajectories suggest that some early career workers have not been changing their positions and have only acquired initial on-the-job training. There are cases of relatively intense learning in a poor learning environment, such as Rositsa's. She has a bachelor's degree in culture studies but has never worked in this field and spent years in different jobs, such as retail. In BG1, she entered a routine position, but following a training course was promoted to a milling machine operator position; as this involved more non-routine activities, she considered it a step up in the hierarchy (see Enliven, 2020b, p. 82).

In Spain, employees described their work as a challenge in which they were continually learning. They found it stimulating because each project

and machine meant they had to put different skills into play: autonomy and teamwork, problem-solving, systemic and logical analysis and team leadership and management. For example, the company's projects in different countries meant it was sometimes necessary for early career workers to go abroad to assemble the machines. John had to go several times, finding his learning much greater as a result, because he had to solve the difficulties of assembly without the support from his group:

This is nice because every day there are problems, new problems. In that sense it's the best this job has. You're satisfied because you're every day with little problems, and telling the others... how does this work? This does suit me. (ES2\_ECW7\_1\_136).

Oscar assumed greater responsibility and autonomy when he was in charge of setting up a company delegation in another country:

In the beginning change was challenging because there I had quite defined what I had to do on a day-to-day basis. I had my projects, my plans, my resources... I arrived at work every day and knew what I had to do. Here, everything is new and what you do is welcome. I haven't had a clear guideline 'today you have to do this, for next week, this.' (ES1\_ECW3\_2\_132)

In Spain, unlike Bulgaria, the Basque companies encouraged workers to develop their full potential. In both ES1 and ES2, there was no separation of routine from non-routine learning. Employees had support structures for non-formal learning, such as individual training plans for new recruits, technical courses and language training in the workplace, an assembly school (in ES1) and support (in ES2) from a mentor who documented the processes. Supported by the team, by a mentor and by the organisation itself, they also had many opportunities for informal learning from the challenges of unexpected situations. They also rotated through different positions as part of their learning process, giving them the opportunity to learn about the different processes that are part of their work.

Workers who have the attitude and aptitude, highly valued by the company, would continue to be promoted: 'My goal before was to get to

know the company, the world of work, to learn. Now it has to do with responsibility, develop yourself, to make a contribution.’ (ES2\_ECW8\_1\_1124).

This exploration of how individual agency is applied in the four cases shows that the Spanish early career workers were aware that they were learning formally, non-formally and informally, and that they received support from the company, valuing this highly. They described their learning as linked to their day-to-day experience and supported by colleagues and supervisors in non-routine jobs.

For example Martin (20–24), an assembler who has been working full time for a year and a half, expresses his trajectory in the following way:

I think I feel competent already (ES1\_ECW1\_2\_152). At work, after a year, those on top see me in a different way. I also see myself in a different way. Your attitude changes, because at the beginning, you feel inhibited... but now, if you have a problem, you know how to solve it. I feel more relaxed. Gradually they are giving you more responsibilities. Yes. What happens is that sometimes they give responsibilities very easily, but... now I feel like one more worker. I think I used to be like an assistant, now I feel I am one more - ‘tomorrow it’s Martin’s turn’ (ES1\_ECW1\_2\_158).

Oscar, on the other hand, was committed to his responsibilities and valued the trust the company placed in him. This enabled him to learn and become more and more competent. About his duties in China, he said: ‘But well, they expected that from me: we will send him, who has potential, there and let’s see what he does’ (interview 2) (ES1\_ECW3\_2\_157).

In the Bulgarian context, the agency of individual early career workers is applied in the context of poor learning potential. As shown, those workplaces also provide conditions for active agency, even if, generally, most individuals are satisfied to accept the routine work for the sake of decent pay or a kind of late Fordist wage compromise (Boyer & Durand, 2016).

In Spain, the agency of individual early career workers was applied in rich learning environments. However, despite the importance of stability and opportunities for promotion, the challenges posed by innovation, international mobility, the possibility of changing jobs and professional

categories allow us to extract from the interviews that around the age of 30 (a key moment for vital decisions), workers are often faced with challenges in reconciling well-being at work with other areas of personal and social life.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored how organisational and individual agency provide space for informal workplace learning, and the outcomes of this learning for early career workers, in the Spanish and Bulgarian metal sector.

Regarding the first dimension, organisational agency, organisational patterns and complexity of production support intensive workplace learning in Spain's Basque country. Learning is provided at different stages of career development, both in technical knowledge and soft skills; the companies examined provide turnkey solutions, with workers being involved in interactions with client personnel during the installation and maintenance of individualised technological projects. Company policy evolved in the context of the region's developing vocational education and training system, combined with strong learning structures in or around the companies. In Bulgaria, metal sector companies act largely as subcontractors, producing only particular items and components for the contractors. For a long time, informal workplace-based learning consisted only or mainly of on-the-job training for fixed jobs. Recent production upgrade and lack of previously trained personnel, however, stimulated the emergence of broader and more formalised training, covering not only basic technical skills but also theory and some elements of soft skills. In this situation, early career workers with potential have had chances to move to more complex machines, to experience horizontal mobility or even vertical promotion to first-level managerial responsibilities.

Individual agency in the Basque cases is expressed in the way employees take advantage of the rich formal, non-formal and informal learning opportunities offered by the companies. Early career workers are motivated and want to stay in their company. Those who are already partners

enjoy autonomy and responsibility; others aim to become partners. Individual agency in the Bulgarian cases opened some limited opportunities for further training and career development, depending on volunteering by early career workers (e.g. such as for those in BG1 who wanted to take theoretical training), but this was largely shaped by the hierarchy and occurred without explicit rules. In the Basque country cases, companies offered opportunities for promotion and workers valued this, acting with initiative and commitment.

This chapter has also addressed work-based learning in countries that have been less well-covered in the literature: Bulgaria (representing the Eastern European or post-communist model, as discussed in Delteil and Kirov (2016)) and Spain (representing the South-European model). The approach adopted, using a qualitative methodology, has allowed us to go beyond the analysis of relatively static macro-data about lifelong learning in the sector and to build an interpretation of the developments observed.

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# 13

## Work and Learning in the Adult Education Sector: A Cross Country Comparative View

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Eva Steinheimer, and Ivana Studená

### Introduction

This chapter presents research on workplace learning among early career employees in adult learning across four countries (Austria, Italy, Slovakia, and the UK) and covers different sub-fields of the adult education sector. When following employees working for adult learning providers, the

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focus of our interest is early career teaching staff. The two preceding chapters have followed early career workers' workplace learning in the metals/machinery and retail service sectors. The adult learning sector complements these, differing by its employment of predominantly high-skilled workers. Organisations engaged in the provision of adult learning form a particularly diverse sector in terms of the content, range and type of services, subject areas, and learning programmes or courses provided, as well as in their primary sources of funding (public/private), their organisational forms, and their human resource strategies. Teachers in the adult learning sector ('adult learning teachers') have diverse professional backgrounds and, in most cases, hold high-level educational qualifications, though these are not always a condition of recruitment. Formal qualifications are not systematically linked with high professional skills.

Despite employees' high levels of skill, conditions for young or early career teaching staff may vary significantly across and within sub-fields of adult learning. Some research has focussed on adult learning teachers' competence profiles, and their role in influencing adult learning participation outcomes (e.g. Buiskool et al., 2010; Egetenmeyer & Nuissl, 2010; Mikulec, 2019); Milana (2010) provides insights into training opportunity structures for adult educators in selected European countries. However, evidence on how adult learning teachers access workplace learning remains limited. Our investigation mainly concerns workplace learning, understood as learning available in the day-to-day work experience and learning from one's relationship with others, individually, and in groups. We investigate workplace learning's interaction with organisational practices using the concept of organisational agency: this allows for a focus on the differences set in motion by particular decisions which an organisation makes, although similar organisations under equivalent conditions might make different decisions (see Chap. 10).

Providers constitute the key element of adult learning frameworks within adult learning systems, but the overlap of this provision with other services, such as business consultancy, human resource services, social work, and others, prevents researchers from clearly delineating organisations involved in adult learning provision. Adult education is an immensely complex sector in Europe, with an interplay of different providers—private/corporate, not-for-profit/charitable (voluntary) sector,

and state-funded—operating with diverse sources of funding and governance structures and providing learning in a variety of subjects. Adult education provision is also influenced by societal and welfare state structures (Saar & Räs, 2016). Some countries collect data on provision, but overall data on the adult learning staff is scarce. The focus of national statistical efforts in this area is often on accreditation or certification of teaching professionals or programmes. The focus here on adult learning professionals, and their opportunities to develop teaching skills, against the backdrop of organisational practices, contributes to the growing body of literature on adult learning and on human capital development.

## The Case Studies: Organisations as Embedded in Adult Learning Systems

The organisations selected for case studies stem from different sub-fields of adult learning and are embedded in quite different adult learning systems (Desjardins, 2017), characterised by a wide array of dimensions. These dimensions include forms of governance, the role of public funding, links between initial education and formal adult education, links between adult learning and systems of qualifications, and frameworks for guidance, and recognition of prior learning.

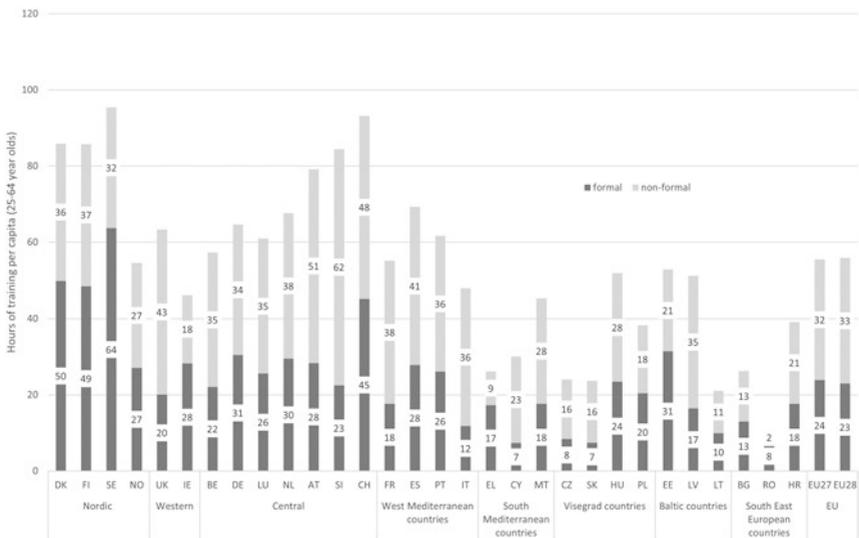
With regard to the sub-field of adult learning provision, unfortunately, no widely used typology of sub-fields of adult learning is available (for a review see Merriam & Brockett, 2007, Chapter 5). Typologies often use the category of learning provision (formal versus non-formal), the sources of funding (private versus public) or the type of provider organisation (see example below) as their basis. More comprehensive typologies have been constructed for the purpose of a particular survey or study only, such as the typologies for covering formal adult learning (Hefler & Markowitsch, 2013) or for adult education provision targeting disadvantaged groups (Boeren & Whittaker, 2018).

Unfortunately, there is no comparable cross-country statistical source on organisations active in adult learning. However, as a proxy for the size of the adult education sector, and, respectively, some of its sub-fields, information stemming from the Adult Education Survey (2016) can be used.

When comparing countries based on the data available (which, taken overall, is scarce), adult learning systems differ, first of all, by their relative size, as captured by the indicator of the number of hours of provision per adult—the more hours per capita, the larger the provision (see Fig. 13.1). Relative to the size of the population, among the four countries compared, Austria provides the highest number of hours (79) of organised learning. Only in the Nordic countries and in Switzerland are the figures significantly higher. In the UK, more hours of organised instruction (63) are provided than the average of the EU27. In Italy, the number of hours provided (48) is slightly below the EU27 average. Slovakia has one of the EU’s lowest numbers of hours provided per adult (23).

Focussing on non-formal adult learning and again using the number of hours per capita as a proxy, further relevant differences between the four countries’ adult learning systems emerge. The role of employers in sponsoring non-formal education and training differs substantially.

Examining the distribution of absolute hours per capita in non-formal adult education across sub-types of provision, in Austria, approximately



**Fig. 13.1** Number of hours in formal and non-formal learning activities per adult (25–64) in 2016 (Adult Education Survey). (Source: Eurostat—Adult Education Survey, own calculations)

24 hours per capita (46.8% of all hours in non-formal adult education) are job-related and employer-sponsored, 13 (25%) are job related but not sponsored by the employer, while 14 (28.2%) are not job related. In the UK, the importance of employer-sponsored job-related training is even more marked (21 hours, 59.7% of all hours); this compares with approximately 4 hours in job-related training without the support of the employer (10.4%) and 10 hours in training not related to a job (30%). In Italy, approximately 18 hours (51%) are employer-sponsored job-related training, about 9 hours are job-related training not supported by the employer (24.4%), and 9 hours are training not related to the job (24.6%). In Slovakia, much lower numbers of training hours are provided. However, the structure of non-formal provision is similar to that in the UK: 9 hours (59.9%) of employer-sponsored job-related training, 2 hours of job-related training not supported by the employer (14.3%), and 4 hours of training not related to a job (25.8%).

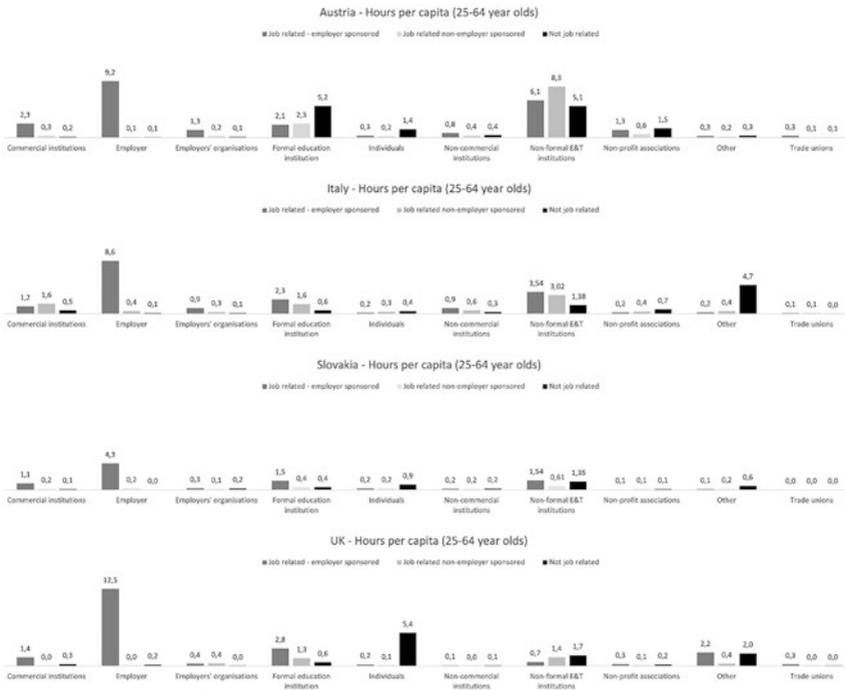
The Adult Education Survey (AES) uses a long-standing typology of types of providers of non-formal education and training.<sup>1</sup> In all countries, the participant's employer is not only the main funding source for non-formal training but also a key provider of these activities (AT: 18.9% UK: 35.8% IT: 24.0% SK: 27.9%). However, employers make substantial use of external training providers for delivering training activities, (Cedefop, 2019), so for their in-house training as well as for external training activities employers are the source of funding for a whole sub-segment of the 'training market' within the adult learning system. The two case studies in Slovakia both concern organisations which mainly provide direct support for enterprises in the provision of internal training activities, so their activities appear primarily under the 'employer' category.

Countries also differ starkly in the size of their non-formal education and training sectors. The latter comprise both public and private, or not-for-profit and for-profit organisations. Organisations belonging to this

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<sup>1</sup> Formal education institution (as schools or universities), non-formal education and training institutions (no matter whether public or private, for-profit or non-profit); commercial institutions where education and training is not the main activity (e.g. equipment suppliers), employers (of the participant), employers' organisations or chambers of commerce, trade unions, non-profit associations, for example cultural societies or political parties which run adult learning programmes, individuals (e.g. students giving private lessons), and non-commercial institutions where education and training is not the main activity (e.g. libraries, museums, ministries). See Eurostat (2017).

sector play a key role in providing courses to all, irrespective of their employment; they do this through public funding, through taking fees, or by a combination of both. Organisations regarded as ‘adult education providers’ employing adult educators fall mainly under the statistical category ‘non-formal education and training institutions’; they would typically be regarded as the core of each national adult learning system, although their contribution to the total hours of non-formal education is only small in some countries. For the four countries, the relevant shares are 11% (UK), 22% (IT), 23% (SK), and 38% (AT). The hours provided by most of the case study organisations (AT1, AT2, IT1, IT2, and UK2) would fall within this statistical category (Fig. 13.2).



**Fig. 13.2** Number of hours of education and training per adult, with breakdowns of sub-type of non-formal education and sub-type of provider—Austria, UK, Italy, and Slovakia. (Source: Authors’ calculation/representation based on Eurostat—Special data extraction on behalf of the DG Employment used for the report (Molyneux et al., 2020))

The four countries' adult learning systems reflect wider differences in their institutional arrangements. Roosmaa and Saar (2017) constructed a typology reflecting the interplay between adult learning provision and broader 'institutional packages' (Mills et al., 2008). Austria is typified as having a conservative welfare state regime with generally good income protection, a highly developed active labour market policy, where education and training are configured to provide appropriate skills, and above-average participation in adult education. Slovakia has a post-socialist, embedded and predominantly neoliberal welfare state, which features minimal income protection and a less developed active labour market policy. Participation in adult education is generally low, with high inequality in participation; however, in relation to workplace learning, participation rates are above average in terms of coverage but very low in terms of the number of training hours per adult. Italy is typified by a Southern European familiaristic welfare state system, with a coordinated market economy, a medium level of income protection and a less developed active labour market policy. There is a medium level of participation in adult education generally, but inequalities in participation are high. The UK is a liberal, market-based economy and a related liberal welfare state regime marked by formal contracts, minimal income protection, and limited business coordination. Participation in adult learning is at a medium level and increasingly unequal.

Our choice of organisations for fieldwork and analysis represents different types of providers and sectoral sub-fields of adult learning and, within individual countries, vital sub-fields within the adult learning system. The case study overview presents a concise summary of the information gathered for each organisation. Each organisation was asked to fill out a questionnaire on company human resource and training practices and sectoral conditions, and desk research focussed on sectoral information and mapping of the sector according to organisational fields. Fieldwork relied on two rounds of semi-structured interviews with employees and management of each organisation. Table 13.1 offers an overview of the eight organisations involved.

**Table 13.1** Characteristics of the organisations studied

	Austria		Italy		Slovakia		United Kingdom	
Anonymised name	AT1	AT2	IT1	IT2	SK1	SK2	UK1	UK2
<i>Field</i>	General adult education	Alternative education/social work	General education	Vocational/publicly funded training (ALMP)	Corporate training	Corporate training	Further education college	Adult education college
<i>Number of employed</i>	50–249 (unit)	50–249	250–449	10–49	10–49	50–99	>500	50–249
<i>Year of foundation</i>	1887/ 2015 (unit under study)	1986	2013	1978	1995	1993	1928	1909
<i>Type of area/location</i>	Capital	Regional capital	Medium town	Medium town	Capital	Small town	Larger town	Capital
<i>Type of organisation</i>	NGO	NGO	NGO	Private association	Private for-profit	Private for-profit	College	NGO
<i>Target audience/participants</i>	Individuals	Individuals	Individuals	Individuals	Employers	Employers	Individuals	Individuals, employers
<i>Course financed (main source)</i>	Public funding	Public funding	Public funding	Public funding	Private/ employer	Private/ employer	Public funding	Public funding
<i>Type of provided learning</i>	Formal/ non-formal	Formal/ non-formal	Formal/ non-formal	Formal/ non-formal	Non-formal	Non-formal	Formal	Formal
<i>Primary educational goal</i>	Skills/ qualifications	Skills/ qualifications	Skills	Skills/ qualifications	Skills	Skills	Qualifications/ skills	Qualifications/ skills

Source: ENLIVEN

## Austria and the Sub-field of Adult Basic Skills

The two Austrian organisations studied both have a focus on the provision of adult basic education. While adult education as an organised field of activity has a century-long history, adult basic education as an independent field of activity emerged only in the early 1990s, and forms of governance, eligibility criteria and funding rules remain under constant development. A further strand of work relates to the provision of courses of German as a Second Language to learners with limited previous schooling in their mother tongue: this has gained in importance with every new wave of immigration—these are often caused by forced displacement. However, the field is also under constant pressure as laws and practices governing immigration and support for refugees have become more and more illiberal over the past three decades.

The first pilot projects in literacy education started in 1990 at the Vienna Adult Education Centre (Volkshochschule Wien, *VHS*); another strand of courses was developed for practically illiterate participants studying German as a second language (Doberer-Bey, 2016; Hefler & Steinheimer, 2020; Wieser & Dér, 2011). In response to the Lisbon Strategy and the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, Austria increased its policy attention on adult education. By 2000, the Ministry of Education had gained access to ESF funding, previously limited to the Ministry of Social Affairs. New initiatives could be supported in line with EU policy prescriptions. In 2000, the first PISA results became available, showing that up to a quarter of 15-year-olds lacked basic skills, and leading to a recognition that adult illiteracy is widespread in Austria (later confirmed by PIAAC).

## Italy: Basic Skills and Training Within Active Labour Market Policies

The case studies developed for Italy cover the sub-field of adult learning provision of general education with a focus on basic skills and employability. General adult education (also known in Italy as popular adult education) was developed to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged

sections of the population, in particular the working class, to fill a gap in training and social skills. Courses for adults were first offered in 1947 in so-called ‘social schools’ promoting literary and numeracy skills. From the 1970s to the 1990s, associations and trade unions played a key role. Since the 1970s, responsibility for adult education has mostly been transferred to the regions.

Data show the importance of adult education providers aiming to develop skills, including basic skills, as a means of empowering learners, especially those who dropped out of the mainstream school system. A first element concerns functional illiteracy among adults: in PIAAC (2012) Italian adults (aged 16–65) were lowest with regard to literacy skills and the second lowest for those of numeracy in Europe. A second area of concern was inactive young people: those included neither in the labour market nor in education and who have stopped looking for opportunities. Italy’s percentage of such people aged 20–34 is the highest in the EU 28, according to Eurostat.<sup>2</sup> Migrants are an important target of adult education provision offered by the third sector. Currently, popular education—which aims to empower disadvantaged people, offer a second chance for training, and develop critical thinking and participation—comprising non-formal education in a multiplicity of subjects, is organised mainly by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), with mainly volunteer teachers.

## **Slovakia: Training Provided by Employers**

The adult education sector in Slovakia can be considered newly developed after system changes following the ‘velvet revolution’ of 1989. Prior to that, the training provision had been centrally planned and ideologised, and establishing links between current and socialist structures remains problematic. Some legacies of the previous system can be identified with regard to the type of training adult educators typically have: for example ‘organisational psychologists’—who provided consultation to employees in socialist enterprises and worked for other institutions in

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<sup>2</sup> See Eurostat Dissemination Database EDAT\_LFSE\_18.

areas overlapping with current training provision—still have a significant role. Psychologists represent one of the stronger professional groups among adult learning teachers, in particular in ‘corporate training’. This sub-field is formed by organisations providing training to private companies; two such organisations took part in our research. The corporate training sub-field is also sometimes referred to as management training, and while managers at different levels of private commercial organisations represent the main kind of participant, employer demand for training of wider groups of employees is increasing.

Organisations active in corporate training vary in size and corporate type but are mainly small. The analysis of registration and survey data shows this sub-field comprises about 50 smaller companies, each with around 10–15 employees. The sub-field is marked by intensive competitive and innovative pressures, and international and foreign players are entering the market with products or complex services, often forming partnerships with local organisations. Some training is provided by self-employed consultants hired directly by employers. In terms of content, the organisations specialise in soft skills training or vocational (hard skills) training, or a combination of both.

## **The United Kingdom: Community-Based Colleges for Continuing and Further Education**

The UK has a long and rich history of adult education provision. This has taken a range of forms, which reflect the changing status of post-school education over the last century. The two case studies were chosen to reflect adult education’s complex and diverse offers, as well as particular issues of funding and sustainability currently affecting the sector.

The adult residential colleges in the UK, of which UK2 is an example, emanated from a tradition of community-based education and included short- and long-term residential colleges for adults. Many developed in the wake of the Second World War. Much of their work now focusses on basic skills and responds to burgeoning mental health issues connected with increased precarity and social inequality. Further Education colleges, such as UK1, largely continue the work of former technical schools, providing

technical and professional education and training for young people and adults. The Further Education sector in the UK also came into its own following the Second World War. Further Education colleges became associated largely with industry and its technical needs, developing strong links with businesses and employers in the areas where they were located. Since the 2008 financial crash, participation rates in adult learning and education have fallen significantly (Tuckett, 2018, p.14), showing a decline in education and training participation (in the four weeks prior to the survey) for 25 to 64-year-olds from around 21% in 2008 (double the then EU average) to around 14% in 2017 (EU average: 11%). Although all groups participate less, the well-educated and wealthier members of society remain the main beneficiaries of educational opportunities for adults.

## **Organisational Agency in Shaping Workplace Learning Potential: Key Results**

In this section, we explain how the adult education organisations support learning among the teachers they employ. We use the Enliven analytical framework presented in Chap. 10—which studies the interplay of individual agency and organisational agency in workplace learning—and build on the analysis presented in Chaps. 11 and 12.

We mainly address workplace learning, understood as learning available in day-to-day work experience. We investigate three areas where organisational agency affects early career adult educators' learning, assessing how organisational agency affects early career teachers in adult education organisations in terms of (i) their workplace learning opportunities, (ii) their career pathways, and (iii) their involvement in innovation processes.

### **Organisational Agency in Shaping Workplace Learning Opportunities**

In Austria, both organisations rely on the self-sustained work of teachers, who—as members of a (para-) profession—are able to deliver a demanding service on their own, taking responsibility for meeting participants'

needs and meeting professional standards. While teacher jobs in both organisations comprise a broad set of tasks and include a large range of non-routine work, AT1 somewhat limits the task requirements and, in particular, excludes practically all management-related activities, while AT2 requires the full set of tasks to be covered, including taking part in the management of projects. Its vision is to turn everyone in the project-based organisation, in the long run, into an 'independent contributor'.

In Italy, both organisations' core staff are composed of managers, administrators, and trainers. The core trainers are recognised as experts in education and training and design the general structure of the training programmes, but they seldom teach. The lion's share of teaching is provided by adult educators who only teach: often employed on non-standard contracts, they have no other role in the organisation. In both organisations, informal learning in the workplace is the dominant form of learning. Early career teaching staff perceived their workplace learning simply as 'learning by doing'.

Early career corporate trainers in both Slovak organisations reported that (i) learning by doing, enforced by 'being thrown into the deep end', was the key mechanism for learning and induction in the workplace, and (ii) learning from unexpected events was a regular feature of daily work. The two organisations differed with regard to how managerial and teaching tasks were divided: a strict division in SK2 but a more fluid division in SK1, where trainers were seen as para-professionals and at least partly encouraged to take a more active role in developing business opportunities. While new corporate training teachers in SK2 had some access to senior trainers' knowledge, this was not explicit and was seen by the new teachers as limited. In contrast to that, SK1 places emphasis on access to learning and support for new corporate training teachers and reflects on organisational forms that could lead to more intensive support of workplace learning for them.

Managerial and administrative tasks were clearly structured in the British organisations UK1 and UK2. Both employed experienced tutorial/teaching staff: given the skills-based focus of their teaching, there was an emphasis on industrial sector experts in UK1. In UK1, job descriptions for administrative staff were tightly defined, but there was an increasing expectation that they would take on additional work when

departing staff were not replaced. Continuing professional development was required to retain appropriate skills and knowledge; some staff paid for this themselves. In UK2, by contrast, there was a higher degree of flexibility in administrative staff job descriptions, though this was beginning to change as the job system itself was becoming more closely delineated.

## **Organisational Agency in Shaping Early Career Pathways**

Neither Austrian organisation foresaw any formal route of advancement for employees with teaching obligations. The organisations complied with sectoral collective agreements (AT1 for adult education, AT2 for the social work sector), under which improved professional competences were captured by a pay scale rewarding additional years of professional experience in a current organisation and (though to a lesser extent) in the field of practice. In AT1, adult basic education teachers were expected to focus on teaching and not take on other roles. Given the variety of basic education on offer, trainers could move internally between sub-types of programmes and sites of delivery. Moving to a non-teaching, administrative or managerial position was not formally envisaged, although new roles were frequently filled by former teachers, who gave up a temporary teaching position to assume a permanent administrative role. In contrast, in AT2, adult basic education teachers were expected to move on to related—yet different—situations, following the project-based logic of the organisation and changing fashion in demand. While the qualification for basic education teachers was decisive for work in AT2's current situation, it was expected that employees would adapt to changing certification requirements if they stayed with the organisation over several funding periods and regimes. Becoming a multi-skilled member of the organisation and engaging in its overall mission could be seen as the goal in career development, with less emphasis on the particular roles associated with any particular type of professional activity. Equal emphasis was therefore given to the generic aspects of how to support client groups with various needs, and to the capacity to make learning happen. Neither

AT1 nor AT2 could make lasting promises going beyond the funding period of the particular training programme. As the organisations lacked the resources to bridge interruptions in public funding, educators in the field needed to accommodate themselves to the constant risk of becoming unemployed, at least for a period (such as between the end of one funding cycle and the start of another).

For teaching positions in adult basic education, neither AT1 nor AT2 differentiated personnel into groups for different career pathways according to any formal criteria (for instance, according to the level of formal qualification or previous experience). Any decision on further advancement, such as an invitation to qualify for other roles or apply for an administrative position, was based solely on evaluation of individuals' demonstrated practice, rather than formal selection or stratification criteria.

Turning to Italy, the University of the Third Age programme tended to change little, and IT1 usually hired the same teachers every year. About 300 teachers worked for IT1, but a teacher might be hired for a limited activity, such as for a single course of a few hours. Teachers hired in one year had no assurance of being hired the next, though in IT1 they did in most cases. One progression route seems to have been to achieve higher volumes of teaching hours. As a public body, IT1 must adhere to regulations when hiring staff. Teachers usually work on the basis of freelance contracts, even when employed exclusively by this organisation. Avoiding permanent contracts for freelance consultants seems to be common practice in the field: after three renewals of a fixed-term position, an employer must offer the employee a permanent contract. Recently, IT1 developed activities to cover certification of skills as a new area of professionalisation for teachers. IT2 is privately owned and therefore more flexible in its hiring and human resource processes. Teachers usually start with freelance contracts but progression is open to fixed and (later) permanent contracts based on performance and interest. However, no career pathways were outlined: progression is limited to increased teaching and contract security. The trainers were experts in their respective fields and could therefore work for other organisations as well.

The two Slovak organisations employed different organisational strategies, which had an impact on career pathways for early career teachers

(usually called trainers or lecturers). SK1 emphasised selecting ‘the right type of talent for adult teaching’: prior experience and formal qualifications played little role in selection. New corporate training teachers were supported to find their own thematic focus or to assume other professional roles, such as management or marketing and sales. Corporate training teachers were expected to function as para-professionals responsible for a wide range of tasks related to company needs, but there were no strict requirements as to the actual mix. New teachers were strongly encouraged to develop organisational citizenship and—despite clear ownership by three managers—a horizontal structure was communicated; sharing responsibilities for company prospects was a strong factor in organisational culture. Core teachers worked full-time but flexible arrangements were possible (if mutually beneficial) so they could develop other activities outside the company. In SK2, teachers had consultant contracts. Their previous occupational experience in specific areas was often the key attribute for being offered engagement, new thematic areas being targeted to increase the scope of the training offer, and organisational prestige. Neither seniority nor previous senior executive positions were required, though SK2 recognised them as a marketing advantage. Progression routes were in general not clearly visible; some trainers were selected for closer cooperation with top management, and though formal qualification could be an asset, no general pattern was visible. Family ties may be a latent, unobservable, factor in SK2’s decision-making: it is family-owned. Decisions on further advancement in both organisations were made with reference to demonstrated individual practice, rather than to any formal selection and stratification criteria.

In UK1 and UK2, progression routes for staff in different employment areas were generally open only to administrative and managerial staff: teaching staff tend to be treated differently. Even at UK2, where they had job security and a defined position within the organisation, teachers seem not to have had the same flexibility to move upwards. Management staff in both institutions tended to come from managerial or administrative roles, either within the organisation or outside, and not from teaching, although the Principal of UK2 had started her early career as a teacher/tutor. At UK2, two management staff had worked in the organisation for many years, though the rest of the staff team was largely new. In UK1, as

is typical of the further education sector, financial issues and a shift in focus towards apprenticeships had impacted on staffing levels, and teaching staff numbers in particular had declined. Although guidelines on pay and conditions of service are recommended by the University Colleges Union, colleges can set their own salary scales: at UK1, teaching staff frequently work across a range of educational institutions—schools, further education colleges and community learning centres—on various part-time contracts. Adding to this sense of precarity, entitlement to sick pay, holiday pay, and pension schemes all depend on whether staff are employed directly or through an agency, and in UK1 the number of sessional agency teaching staff was large. For some roles, such as teaching core subject areas (e.g. English and Maths), the college was part of a national job evaluation programme: job descriptions were based on a model, roles were organised around teacher training system norms, and staff productivity linked to their qualifications. For other teaching staff, professional expertise gained in the workplace was preferred over teaching qualifications. With increased costs for higher education, UK1's teaching staff was expected to be appropriately teacher-trained before employment: the institution no longer supported studies on the Certificate in Education. UK1 also had a number of newer management staff, in their 30s, brought in as new areas developed, and there was an increasing use of business models. This was true, in particular, of business development and policy, where high-level skills from the corporate and governmental world were thought necessary and, in effect, 'bought in' (Table 13.2).

### **Organisational Agency in Involving Early Career Workers in Innovation Processes**

When discussing innovation in adult education organisations, as in the two Austrian organisations with which we are starting, we must distinguish between innovation at the organisational level (such as bidding within new funding schemes) and at the level of provision of courses (such as intensifying the use of smart phones in teaching).

**Table 13.2** Organisational agency and workplace learning paths for adult education teachers in early career stages

<i>Key routes of progression based on qualification levels/holding of specific qualifications</i>	<i>Staged models of progression</i>			
	<i>Visible or available for all</i>	<i>Visible or available for selected early career adult education teachers</i>	<i>Visible or available for SK2</i>	<i>Not outlined or not visible</i>
Closed (e.g. based on qualifications)			SK2	
Not closed	AT2			AT1, IT1, IT2, SK1, UK1, UK2

Source: own processing of information from the case studies

On an organisational level, both providers were pioneers in establishing adult basic education courses. The acquisition of funding was key from the very beginning. Adapting to ever-changing funding conditions remains a challenge. AT1 took the opportunity to engage broadly in the rollout of the ‘Initiative of Adult Education’, vastly expanding its educational offer and—as it grew to a substantial field of business—organising adult basic education in a unit of its own. Such processes are deeply bound up with the opportunity structures in place.

For AT2, the development of innovative educational programmes was a core aim. Besides adult basic education, it had previously taken other initiatives that eventually led to successful pilot projects. Whereas the introduction of new ideas to adult education was a key asset for AT2, the organisation subsequently had to step back from a broader roll-out of new programmes because—largely due to its commitment to long-term tenure and higher pay—it is less competitive with regard to costs than other organisations which only hire teachers on a project basis.

Responsibility for innovation at the organisational level is clearly linked to management positions in AT1. In AT2, most positions combine managerial and teaching tasks, and larger groups of staff are involved in organisational innovation. For educational providers, innovation at the teaching level also matters. Further development of teaching methods

and improving the quality of provision is an integral part of professional work for adult basic education teachers. Yet, there was at best a loose coupling between innovation in teaching and the overall performance of both organisations. Course quality does not seem to have been linked to ability to attract additional funding.

Without unconditional funding, the Italian organisations were also required to innovate and respond to ever-changing funding sources. Both IT1 and IT2 were able to respond efficiently to different challenges over the years. IT1 was founded in 2013 by rearranging components of an organisation first established in 1947, which had undergone several transformations over the decades; one of its main activities, the University of the Third Age, was founded in 1979. These different challenges meant it had rethought its objectives and mission. IT1 needed to ensure support from local government, its principal funding source. For five years, it had been struggling to occupy a niche not taken by other organisations. IT2, on the other hand, faced challenges relating to its need to find funding: in recent years, its focus had shifted to developing products tailored to particular customer needs. This has been led by an early career employee, whose strong entrepreneurial attitude the organisation recognised. IT1 trained its internal staff in new areas related to teaching, including certification of skills (a new service it offered). IT2's approach was different, hiring employees with relevant skills for specific projects.

The Slovak organisations' corporate training provision was financed by employers. The organisations were exposed to an ever-changing economic environment, which created both new training opportunities and threats from other competitors. Identifying new areas and niches in the demand for training was the key survival factor in this sub-field, and innovation was central to organisational development. The structures of both SK1 and SK2 evolved in line with their decisions to organise work to ensure constant delivery of high-quality training and to develop new services for financial stability. In both companies, some trainers, though remaining self-employed, could become intensively involved in company development (like internal employees); in SK1, however, internal employees form the core of the company, while SK2's workforce comprised trainers working as independent consultants and hired as experts in their field.

Both SK1 and SK2 were built on their founders' innovative ability, and this shaped their training provision. In SK2, the founder provided the innovative drive, with early career trainers not actively involved in innovation. SK1's management promotes a culture of cooperation on innovative ideas, focussing particularly on young trainers. It seeks to increase the company's innovative potential by developing its trainers' intrinsic motivation to strive for new solutions, encouraging all trainers—and specifically early career trainers—to develop their own solutions, and communicating internally that all trainers are potentially important contributors to its innovative capacity.

Both UK1 and UK2 considered themselves innovative in both organisation and the teaching and services they offer. UK1, required to become business-orientated by the removal of Local Authority control of further education in 1992, had worked hard since to become one of the largest colleges in the country. One of the main areas of its expansion until very recently was provision of apprenticeship support, with many teaching and support staff taken on to service the work and engage with employers. This offer was severely affected by the government's introduction of an apprenticeship levy; with a huge funding shortfall, the college subsequently lost over 200 staff.

UK2, one of the earliest adult residential colleges established, with a long record of supporting workers' education outside the state system, considered itself pioneering. Workers' education remained a key focus right until the 1970s, but UK2 has since gradually morphed into supporting 'second chance learning' with an increasingly therapeutic emphasis. It now plays a critical role in mental health, working with some of the most vulnerable adults in society. It argues through policy and research interventions to show the importance of adult education for health and well-being—well-being is a current 'buzzword' in government documents and connected funding. UK2 is increasingly one of the few adult learning organisations in the country that can manage support for people in education with such complex needs. It has engaged a number of staff in a recently created Business development team: this is deliberately situated within Education in the organisation and acts as a horizon-scanning mechanism for new trends in educational need, models of delivery, provision in community-based locations, and in evolving partnerships. This

**Table 13.3** Organisational agency and involvement of early career adult education teachers in innovation

<i>Active role of early career adult education teachers in innovation</i>	<i>Importance of raising the absorptive capacity by selecting or developing early career workers</i>		
	<i>Limited</i>	<i>Minor</i> AT1, UK1, UK2, IT1	<i>Major</i> SK2 AT2, IT2, SK1
	<i>Large</i>		

Source: own processing of information from the case studies

development has also been behind its creation of new learning support assistant posts and ensuring that teaching posts are integral within the organisational infrastructure, rather than being short-term or freelance.

We found that in adult education organisations, adult educators perform their professional roles, but often contribute little to organisational innovation or capacity to innovate (see Table 13.3). Teachers are seldom involved in organisational innovation processes beyond improving their teaching, and this is typically seen as part of their individual professional role. The situation is markedly different in the case of service providers, which mainly target enterprises: here organisations hire and develop trainers with the goal of expanding the range of customer services on offer (SK2). However, even in the case of two organisations which appear superficially similar, differences in approach to employee involvement play a role in shaping innovation. About half of the organisations studied (AT2, IT2, SK1, SK2, UK2) had a clearer understanding that by hiring and developing their own adult educators, they strengthen their potential to provide superior quality new services.

## Conclusions

Organisations in the adult learning sector rely on a (para-)professional model of work organisation for their teaching personnel. Adult educators are considered professionals, able to prepare and deliver teaching assignments on their own, and enjoy considerable leeway in how they do their job. They are typically responsible for both routine and non-routine aspects of their daily work, although they may be entitled to call in managers or other professional groups when responding to exceptional events.

Professionals' individual learning is—broadly speaking—considered the responsibility of adult educators themselves, although organisations may provide some support for formal and non-formal learning.

The organisation of work according to the professional model (Fligstein & Byrkjeflot, 1996; Freidson, 2001) can be observed across all European countries, not only for the iconic professions such as medicine or law but also in education, including adult education. However, differences in how countries prefer to organise work in general still need to be taken into consideration. As soon as professional work is provided within an organisation—rather than exclusively within the professional-client dyad—principles of professional work organisation are always blended with forms of hierarchical organisation and therefore managerialism.

The balance of power between managerial and professional members of an organisation differs not only between various types of organisations but also between societies (Fligstein & Byrkjeflot, 1996; Hefler & Markowitsch, 2012). However, the relationship between preferred types of work organisation and professional work is certainly not straightforward. Principles for work organisation present in manufacturing spill over into expectations about managerial behaviour in general. In societies where a strong occupational space limits the power of organisations and therefore managements' unilateral ability to decide how work is organised, the autonomy of members of professional groups should be greater.

The ambivalences reflected in how the ways non-professional work is organised shape professional work are visible in our Adult Education sector case studies, with its particularities—in particular its generally strong reliance on public funding—overshadowing more general patterns. The cases in the UK reflect a model where strong management dominates adult educators, though the latter belong to a group delineated and somewhat 'sheltered' by their credentials. The Italian cases also show a strong role for the management vis-à-vis educators, the latter being hired solely to teach and less shielded by their credentials. In Austria, adult basic education is a novel field and has only begun to define its professionalism: the two cases point to completely different arrangements, reflecting the organisations' size and particular histories. One is a major organisation dominated by full-time managerial staff; the other a medium-sized project-based organisation initiated on a self-help basis by unemployed

teachers. The Slovak cases represent another distinct part of adult education, made up of small, owner-dominated, for-profit organisations catering mainly for the enterprise sector: professionals with disciplinary backgrounds and different levels of expertise, seniority, and centrality within the organisations team up to meet the ever-changing tasks inherent within client projects.

Across countries and different types of organisations, the jobs of adult learning teachers are generally characterised by a strong emphasis on self-directed learning and professionalism. Management typically believes teachers benefit from their workplaces' high levels of learning conduciveness. However, we found evidence for significant variations in learning conduciveness of work available; this originated in organisational agency and cannot be attributed to the type of services provided alone. The organisation of work and HR practices can thus have a significant impact on the learning experience of teachers in adult education during their early career phases and beyond.

In terms of novice teachers' career pathways, the adult education sector is characterised by poorly structured career opportunities. Early career workers can seldom foresee what they can expect for the future. In practically all organisations, early career employees lack formally advertised career opportunities. Those organisations which pay attention to developing a sense of organisational citizenship usually provide richer progression opportunities than others, with teachers being invited to contribute directly to business. Teachers can engage in more managerial tasks and gain seniority in the profession: these usually involve winning new clients or client groups or taking on teaching roles in training programmes for new generations of teachers. Typically, in teaching roles, no career advancement whatsoever is foreseen: career progression means leaving teaching behind. In larger organisations, moving from a teaching position into management may be an option; however, this is generally not formally signposted and understood as exceptional, available only to a 'lucky few'. AT2, SK1, and UK2 represent interesting borderline cases: although they outline no formal pathways of progression, early career workers have been progressively involved in organisational cultures based on a strong sense of organisational citizenship.

Organisations with ‘business models’ focussed on providing large numbers of course hours often foresee no active role for teachers in innovation at the organisational level and take innovation in teaching to be part of teachers’ professionalism. The potential role of early career employees in organisational innovation often remains unacknowledged or underestimated. However, without involvement in organisational level innovation, adult educators are denied an important field of professional development, weakening their prospects of a decent future career in adult learning. Adult learning organisations which include teachers in their organisational innovation benefit from increased ‘absorptive capacity’ and staff motivation.

Despite high levels of skills and qualifications among adult learning sector staff, precarious employment conditions are almost omnipresent across the sub-fields and countries studied. While early career teachers enjoy their rich learning opportunities in day-to-day work, they suffer from precarious employment contracts and the absence of ‘career ladders’ which would allow them to pursue adult learning as a desirable long-term career option.

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# 14

## Speaking Up: How Early Career Workers Engage in Fighting for Better Working Conditions by Joining Youth-Led Social Movement Organisations

Maite Aurrekoetxea-Casaus, Edurne Bartolomé Peral, Günter Hefler, Ivana Studená, and Janine Wulz

### Introduction

Despite the undeniable legacy of labour movements for adult learning worldwide and the recognised role of social movements in spreading ideas of lifelong learning, the interplay of industrial relations and lifelong learning remains outside of mainstream lifelong learning research, a topic of interest only to specialists. The policy discourse pays lip service to the importance of social partners but treats industrial relations at best as a

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further context to control for when investigating cross-country differences in participation in lifelong learning.

This is unfortunate as countries' (or, more precisely, their economic sectors') industrial relations systems need to be seen as key determinants of political economy and as having a critical impact on the organisational agency in workplace learning—including support for organised forms of learning. Learning opportunities and rewards for learning depend largely on the employer-employee relationship: this is shaped mainly within organised forms of conflict resolution between organised capital and labour, involving organisations representing employer and employee interests. Typically, many institutions are involved in mitigating conflicts and strike action and in seeking lasting compromises. The compromises are often enshrined in formal laws, collective agreements and rulings of labour courts.

The Enliven project took the perspectives of young workers in their early years of employment as the starting point for exploring the role of industrial relations systems in lifelong learning. Industrial relations systems depend on constant reproduction of their organisations, with new generations becoming socialised into the institutions of the field. In general, to take on responsibility and fight for a collective cause, early career workers need to be attracted by established organisations, in particular trade unions. However, young workers who feel a lack of support for their cause by existing employee interest organisations may feel a need to create their own organisations. By creating organisations of their own, young workers gain visibility for concerns they see as taken too lightly by existing bodies.

Across all European countries, early career workers have ample reasons to organise and fight to improve their employment conditions. Young people are particularly vulnerable in tight labour markets and when the number of decent jobs—those providing rich opportunities for

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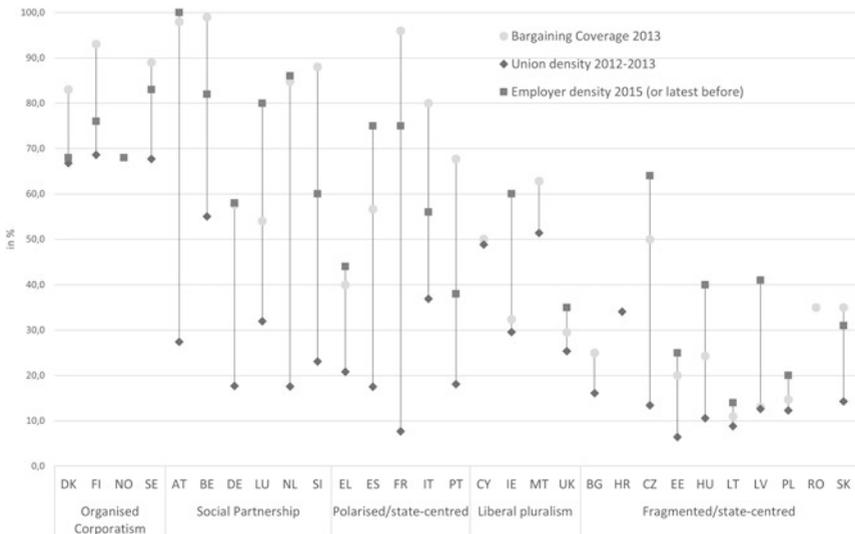
individual development and learning—is in decline (Blossfeld et al., 2005). Young people are typically more often affected by unemployment, underemployment, non-standard contracts, and precarious employment conditions. In consequence, they are not only approached by the youth branches of established trade unions but are the germ of many new social movement organisations which aim to improve working conditions for early career workers.

A social movement organisation is understood as ‘a complex, or formal organisation which identifies its preferences with a social movement or a counter-movement and attempts to implement those goals’ (McCarthy, 2013). Examples of such organisations trying to improve conditions for early career (and other) workers can be found across Europe (Hefler et al., 2017). They include organisations attached to long-standing organisations such as trade unions, independent movements focusing on a specific professional field or sector and social movement organisations working against precarious working conditions and for the improvement of society in general.

In this chapter, we aim to understand how early career workers engage in social movement organisations fighting for better employment conditions. We analyse three examples of recently founded youth-led social movement organisations aimed at improving the employment conditions of young workers. In the next section, we present a framework for analysing the position of novel social movement organisations within countries’ specific industrial relation systems, which we understand respectively as particular organisational and social fields (Pernicka et al., 2018, 2019). We then present case vignettes of social movement organisations in three different countries (Austria, Spain’s Basque Region, and Slovakia) with highly diverse industrial relations systems. All the social movement organisations studied had been founded in the past ten years, mainly by early career workers. We analyse how the members of the organisations are fighting for their causes and how they are finding their ‘niche’ within the established industrial relations systems of their countries. Each case vignette draws on a case study developed as part of Enliven research (Aurrekoetxea-Casaus et al., 2019). In the chapter’s final section, we compare the three social movement organisations against the backdrop of our framework and provide conclusions for lifelong learning policy.

# Comparing Industrial Relation Systems as Environments for Newly Founded Youth-Led Organisations

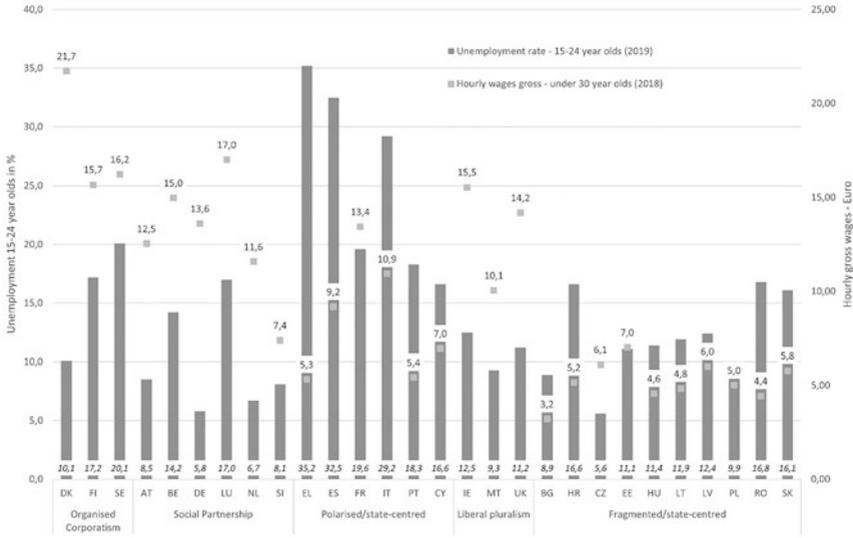
European industrial relation systems display a wide variety of legal frameworks, actors (employer interest organisations, trade unions), and patterns of behaviour, leading to large differences in key outcomes, such as how many employees are actually covered by a collective agreement and enjoy the agreed rights and wage levels (see Fig. 14.1). Beyond differences in *collective bargaining coverage*, how many employees are actually members of a trade union (*union density*) and how many firms (employers) are members of a business interest association (*employer density*) are of key importance. High rates of membership in business interest organisations often reflect the presence of regulations making membership mandatory for all, or many, employers.



**Fig. 14.1** Three key indicators for industrial relations systems (bargaining coverage, union density, employer density) (Sources: European Commission (2013), European Commission (2015), OECD (2017))

Following the influential typology developed by Jelle Visser (Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1997, 2000; European Commission, 2009), five *industrial relations regimes* can be distinguished across the European Union. The Scandinavian countries are characterised by *organised corporatism*, with high levels of collective bargaining coverage, employer organisation and union membership. In states characterised by the *social partnership* model (e.g. Austria, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands), collective bargaining coverage is generally high, with employers combining in interest organisations and moderate-to-high proportions of employees unionised. In Southern European countries, such as France, Greece, Italy, and Spain, a *polarised/state-centred* model can be found, with medium-to-high bargaining coverage, medium-to-high levels of employer organisation, and low-to-medium levels of union membership. In countries characterised by liberal pluralism, such as the UK and Malta, collective bargaining coverage is low or medium, the organisation of employers often low, and levels of union membership low to medium. In Eastern Europe—for example in Bulgaria, Poland, and Slovakia—the dismantling of communist industrial relations systems has left a diverse range of approaches summarised as the *fragmented/state-centred* type, with low-to-medium levels of collective bargaining coverage, low-to-medium levels of employer organisation, and typically low levels of trade union membership.

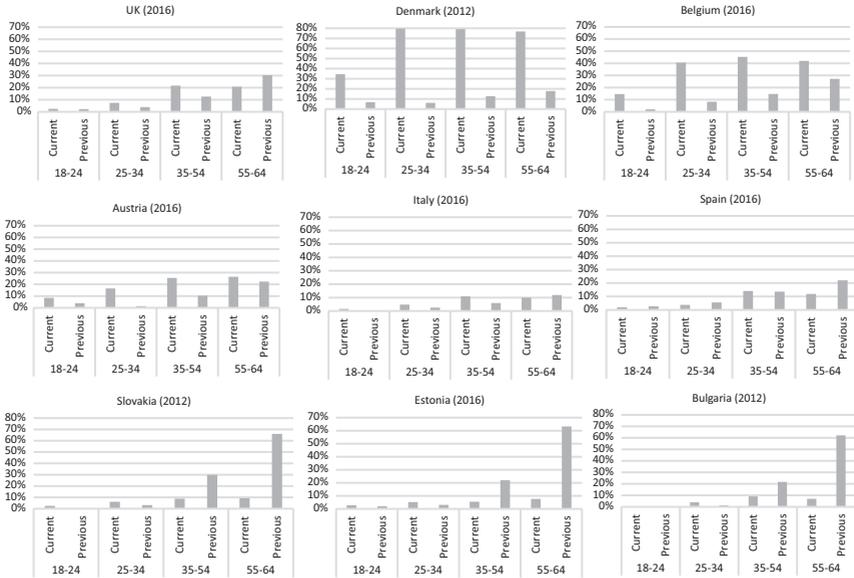
Industrial relations systems are often associated with other types of extended institutions—in particular education and welfare systems—contributing to ‘institutional packages’ (Mills et al., 2008). Together with these other institutions, industrial relations systems have a strong influence on young people’s labour market prospects—not least on levels of youth unemployment. Moreover, they correspond to marked differences in the wage levels young people can achieve (see Fig. 14.2). With *organised corporatism*, recent years have brought young people high wages combined with high levels of unemployment. In *social partnership* countries, quite high wage levels have been combined with moderate-to-high levels of youth unemployment: apprenticeship schemes have a positive effect. In countries with *polarised/state-centred* industrial relations systems, low to moderate wage levels are often combined with very high levels of youth unemployment. With *liberal pluralism*, wages are relatively high and



**Fig. 14.2** Youth unemployment (15–24; 2019) and hourly gross wages (in Euro, under 30-year-olds) according to Industrial Relation System. (Sources: Eurostat Dissemination Database *une\_rt\_a* and *earn\_ses18\_13*)

youth unemployment quite low—at least in a year, such as 2019, when economic conditions were good. In the states with a *fragmented/state-centred* industrial relations system, wage levels are very low or low, and youth unemployment is at a low to moderately high level (as in Croatia, Romania, or Slovakia).

Trade unions typically fight to improve employment conditions for young workers and to combat high levels of youth unemployment. However, their power to improve the situation of early career workers is limited in many countries. They also need to balance competing interests among their members; some labour economists’ assumptions about their having a ‘rational’ preference for mid-career male union members’ interests may not be in line with the reality, but conflicts about the best way to meet divergent interests among groups of workers certainly occur. Moreover, as young people need to be persuaded to join a union in the first place, their rate of membership is typically lower than for older workers. (Fig. 14.3 provides details for all countries studied in Enliven, apart from Australia.)



**Fig. 14.3** (Former) Membership of Trade Unions or comparable organisations in nine countries participating in Enliven WP5-7—breakdowns for age groups (18–24, 25–34, 35–54, 55–64); 2016 (for Slovakia, Denmark, and Bulgaria, 2012). (Sources: European Social Survey, ESS6-2012, ed.2.4 - ESS8-2016, ed.2.1 Post-stratification weight including design weight; own calculation)

## Studying Challengers Within the Industrial Relations Field

Recently founded youth-led social movement organisations aiming to improve working conditions for early career workers are at the same time locally embedded and rooted in national industrial relations and employment systems and cultural frames and welfare state systems. They implicitly or explicitly challenge long-established social movement organisations representing labour, such as trade unions and professional organisations, often drawing on experience from ‘sister organisations’ in other countries or portraying themselves as members of transnational networks and global movements. National traditions and institutional patterns of industrial relations are, however, important both for young people’s

chances in the labour market and for the social movement organisations as they fight to improve early career workers' employment conditions.

Examples of social movement organisations rallying for better jobs, fair pay, and equal opportunities for everyone and calling for a more active role of the state in redistributing wealth, constraining business action, and creating jobs can be found all over Europe and beyond. They include, from 2001, movements attached to the World Social Forum, various waves of movements of the unemployed (peaking in the late 1990s), waves of movements fighting against precarious employment, 'Occupy', and other 'anti-austerity' movements. Typically including many young people, they overlap or cooperate closely with one another, and advocate improved employment opportunities for all, including the young.

Social movement organisations may have close ties to established organisations,<sup>1</sup> whether as attached units or partner organisations. Engaged in ongoing, highly contentious debates on the future orientation of employment and labour market policies, they press for change on issues of employment—decent work, fair pay, and social justice—within political parties, trade unions, business organisations, churches, and many other bodies. Among these, trade unions, with their established representation of workers' interests, are important. While unions hold a key position in the industrial relations system in all countries we studied, social movement organisations tend to be initiated outside of trade unions. Often, unions are considered 'greyed'—over-concerned with older workers—although in fact, many take action (with varying degrees of success) in favour of early career workers, have a keen interest in building young people's trust, and try to enrol new generations of young workers. Generalised assumptions about how workers are best represented often prove erroneous; the specific national or regional context is vital.

Within the industrial relations field in their countries, social movement organisations take different roles. They are challengers among challengers. They address established trade unions and employer associations.

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<sup>1</sup> Such organisations may be expected to appeal to (a) business interest organisations, (b) organisations representing workers, (c) specific partners in collective bargaining processes on a sectoral or regional level, (d) political actors either holding office or representing the political oppositions and (e) state agencies responsible for particular aspects of their concerns (e.g., public employment services).

They may try to be heard in collective bargaining arenas (at sectoral/regional or company level) and, in the political field, representatives of ruling parties and opposition parties alike.<sup>2</sup> In many cases, they address elements of the state or semi-autonomous agencies (e.g. ministries of education, public employment services), or single-employer organisations, attacking them for poor decisions or praising their good practice. They may reach out to co-workers and their families but also try to attract wider public attention. Typically, they apply conventional, if often creative, repertoires of protest and refrain from violence or breaking the law in any significant way.<sup>3</sup>

We categorised the organisations studied into three groups: (1) youth organisations of or attached to trade unions; (2) social movement organisations fighting precarious employment; and (3) social movement organisations working towards better employment conditions among highly educated young people and professionals (Heffler et al., 2017). The three case studies fall into two subgroups. A case study conducted in Spain's Basque region represents a mixed form: the social movement organisation fights precarious employment in general but is strongly attached to trade unions. Case studies in Slovakia and Austria are both of social movement organisations working for better working conditions among highly educated young people or professionals, particularly in the adult education sector.

## Three Organisational Case Studies

The case studies are based on the exploration of the industrial relations systems in the countries and in the region and sector under study, the main challenges faced by young employees, the social movement organisation under study, and (where applicable) its relation to employee representation

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<sup>2</sup> Only in rather exceptional cases, as observed in the Southern European countries in the years after the *Great Recession* of 2008, newly found social movement organisations may—by cooperating in large alliances—become part of a political movement strong enough to gain broad electoral support see (Morlino & Raniolo, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> In line with ethical considerations, the field work in Enliven has deliberately covered organisations applying a conventional repertoire of contention only.

structures. The case studies involved desk research<sup>4</sup> and field work. The latter was conducted between November 2018 and mid-January 2019 and involved three face-to-face, semi-structured, problem-centred interviews. These used a common guideline but were tailored to each country's specific conditions. Interviewees included two early career activists representing and/or working for the organisation under study and one representative of a business interest organisation related to the social movement organisation. As the social movement activists might be in vulnerable positions, we were careful to protect all personal information and followed detailed ethical guidelines.

The Basque case study provides insights into a broad social movement organisation, established with major trade union support, focusing not on a specific sector but on the general improvement of society and working conditions. It shows how traditional trade unions develop new approaches by establishing stronger links with social movement organisations.

The Slovak and Austrian case studies both focus on the self-organisation of teachers in the adult education sector. Two sub-sectors were chosen: career counselling in Slovakia and adult basic education, including the provision of German as a second language, in Austria. The Slovak case describes the founding of a professional organisation of counsellors while the Austrian describes a grassroots initiative by teachers.

## **Charter of Social Rights of the Basque Country**

The Charter of Social Rights movement was founded in 2014 to face the challenges early career workers faced in the Basque region: high rates of youth unemployment, increasing prevalence of temporary work and digitalisation of the labour market had made it hard for young people to break away from their families, and many young adults—even the highly qualified—feared losing their jobs. The Charter of Social Rights movement aimed to counteract the effects of capitalism in general and the rise of precarious working conditions in particular: its aims included the general improvement of working conditions, a more egalitarian and

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<sup>4</sup>Desk research was based on diverse documents, including webpages of organisations, media coverage, and results of previous research on the cases.

supportive society, and defending the rights of young people in the industrial relations system.

The movement is a platform, inspired by similar movements in France, built by left-wing trade unions and other organisations from feminist, green and similar movements. The involvement of trade unions needs to be acknowledged: despite membership rates among the lowest in Europe (15.9% in 2013), they have a major role in the Spanish industrial relations system. However, few young people are union members, and union density varies between sectors. Trade unions are involved in public consultations and social dialogue processes and represent employees in a dual system—through election of worker representatives at company level and by elected representatives of trade unions at sectoral and national level.

The Basque industrial relations system is affected by the status of the Basque country as an autonomous community: under the Spanish constitution, labour legislation is a matter for the state at national level. Most Basque trade unions are nationalist and demand autonomy in labour relations. Having no representation at the national level, they rely on collective agreements; few participate in collective bargaining. The two major trade unions in the region, ELA (Euskal Langileen Alkartasuna—Basque Workers Solidarity) and LAB (Langile Abertzaleen Batzordeak—Nationalist Workers' Committee), are the main drivers of the Charter of Social Rights movement.

In 2012, a labour reform was adopted, aiming to decentralise collective bargaining and resulting in the weakening of collective agreements and a rise in company-level agreements. With precarious working conditions, and fearing losing their jobs, young people joined unions less, and the representation of young people within unions was weakened.

There is an individualism that leads us to compete in the labour market; it is also important that we don't help each other, and the conditions are difficult, bad labour conditions. And you have little time to be interested, to reflect, because you are so tired that at the end of the job, what you want is to turn on the TV and that's it. (Interview 1)

The Charter of Social Rights movement started as a reaction to the Basque government's neoliberal policies following the financial crisis of 2009. Its founders aimed to counter the loss of citizens' rights and public

services and the rise of precarious working conditions. The Basque national assembly of social and trade union movements drew up a Charter of Social Rights ‘to put our economy and our resources at the service of citizens and ensure that as many people as possible can access decent living conditions through the recognition and exercise of basic rights’.<sup>5</sup> The Charter covers the environment, the economy, democracy, solidarity, sustainability, diversity, and culture.

Though founded and funded by the two major left-wing Basque trade unions, many other social movement organisations and activists are involved in organising and managing the Charter of Social Rights movement. Activities are discussed and decided upon in an annual national assembly, involving all the movement’s activists. They are discussed in more detail and carried out by a national coordination or steering group of twelve people, six representing trade unions and six social movements (feminist, diversity, social rights, environmental, health, and youth) from different sectors and regions. Steering group members also act as spokespeople. The collaboration encourages hope that trade unions will grow stronger:

if the trade union majority once again raises the social base of social micro-movements that exist throughout the territory, as it is doing in the Charter of Social Rights of Euskalherria, it will acquire more strength (Interview 2).

The social movement organisation is decentralised in operation, using non-hierarchical models of decision-making. It is involved in an international network initiative, ‘Peoples of Alternatives’, which has organised events and protests during COP (Conference of Parties at the UN Convention on Climate Change) summits since 2013. The Charter of Social Rights was discussed and adopted in 2014, and the organisation has been active since then in various fields. For example *Alternatiben Herria* or *The People of Alternatives* events involved hundreds of activists and volunteers, mobilising 12,000 people to discuss questions of climate change (2015) or alternative social and economic models (2018). The latter, in Iruña-Pamplona, used the slogan ‘Let’s disconnect from capitalism’ (see Fig. 14.4).

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<sup>5</sup><http://www.eskubidesozialenkarta.com/es/eskubide-sozialen-karta/>

**ALTERNATIBEN  
HERRIA**

**IRUÑEA**

**EKAINAK 2 DE JUNIO 2018**  
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Fig. 14.4 Advertisement for the *Alternatiben Herria* 2018. (Source: Aurrekoetxea-Casaus et al., 2019)

The campaign we observed was an initiative, started in 2019, to change the law to extend social protection coverage, especially through a guaranteed income allowance and housing (for more details, see (Aurrekoetxea-Casaus et al., 2019)).

## **Association for Career Guidance and Career Development (ZKPRK) (Slovakia)**

The Association for Career Guidance and Career Development (ZKPRK, *Združenie pre kariérové poradenstvo a rozvoj kariéry*) aims to professionalise career guidance. It was established in 2018 by local members as a professional organisation to increase outreach at policy level and has a large range of grassroots activities.

The demand for career guidance can be understood within the context of the many challenges faced by disadvantaged groups in the Slovak labour market. Although historically relatively low youth unemployment (16.1% in 2019), unemployment rates among low-skilled youth and adults remain high, and labour market opportunities poor. Those inactive in the labour market are not registered by the public employment services and lack opportunities for adult education. The provision of adult education is fragmented and frequently changing, since public funding is limited and non-systematic, with precarious working conditions and high levels of self-employment and low public sector pay.

Career guidance as a sub-field of adult education has not yet achieved clear recognition and professional anchoring. Thus most people working in the field cannot sustain themselves with activities exclusively in the field of career guidance and must combine this with other work, for example providing company training or coaching.

ZKPRK is not involved in the traditional tripartite industrial relations system, represented by the Economic and Social Council of the Slovak Republic and involving the confederation of trade unions (KOZ), employers, and government. While the system is based on collective bargaining, a recent shift towards stronger legislation can be observed. The system itself has a trust deficit: as in many other Central and Eastern European countries, it is still affected by the legacy of trade unions' role

in the socialist regime prior to 1989. Associated with the old socialist system, union membership and bargaining coverage are declining, and unions are ageing (Vandaele, 2019). Specific outreach to younger target groups has been almost entirely lacking, apart from trade unions' youth council activities focusing on young trade union (KOZ) leaders.

In recent years, new unions involving more early career workers and social movements were established in various sectors, and a new confederation (joint trade unions of Slovakia) was founded in 2018. This shift towards new organisations also occurred in the education sector. The trade union of workers in education and science of Slovakia (OZPSV), established in 1990, represents 48,000 members and is the second largest union in the country. Because conditions in the sector have improved little, and the union is not considered 'sharp' enough, in 2012, a new school trade union was founded, focused on raising teachers' pay. The adult education sector remains underrepresented in both trade unions. In recent years, youth-led social movements have gained relevance, acting as watchdogs, revealing corruption in the political system and becoming active in the wide-spread civic movement 'For a decent Slovakia' following the murder of two investigative journalists in 2018. However, youth-led social movements rarely focus on work-related issues and suffer because large numbers of young people move to other countries.

The ZKPRK is a social movement organisation founded in 2014 by career guidance professionals to create a network of professionals and those interested in career guidance. It aims to foster professional growth, spread awareness about career guidance, improve access to guidance, and engender interest in both career guidance and career development. Distinct from other associations of adult education professionals, ZKPRK aims to change policy: it is considered a policy actor. Members meet at an annual general assembly, electing a council and chairperson for two years. Members are mainly employed and externally contracted counsellors working in labour offices connected with the public employment service and self-employed counsellors. The number of members increased from 20 in 2014 to 80 in 2018. The ZKPRK is a member of the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) and the Association of Institutions of Adult Education (AIVD).

The ZKPRP's activities include information awareness raising and provision of educational opportunities for members. It provides networking and non-formal learning opportunities at a summer school of career guidance, where members can learn from each other. A key priority is the recognition of career guidance as a professional field and communicating their messages within the policy community:

...this has never happened in Slovakia, our Employment law has never, as if, was not, I would say, capable to accept, that also a future participant at the labour market could be the client of the labour office. (Interview 3).

This organisation arranges regional events for potential members as well as national events, such as *The week of career guidance*, building awareness about the field, and promotes career guidance provision for low-skilled adults, filling gaps identified in public provision. The organisation is also involved in the preparation of strategic policy documents on career guidance, adult education, and public employment service provision with ministries, such as the national lifelong learning strategy. The ZKRPR promotes its policies among political actors, for example by appealing to all political parties to include career guidance in their programmes prior to the national elections in 2020. Moreover, the organisation has been an innovative partner in a research project aimed at developing skills assessment tools for low-skilled adults and is involved in the development of professional and quality standards. In 2019, the ZKPRP organised an international conference on career guidance (for more details on the organisation, see Aurrekoetxea-Casaus et al. (2019)).

## **IG DAF/DAZ Basisbildung (Austria)**

The IG DAF/DAZ Basisbildung (*Interessengemeinschaft Deutsch als Fremdsprache/Deutsch als Zweitsprache & Basisbildung*) in Austria was founded in 2014 following the introduction of new funding opportunities for adult basic education in Austria (Hefler & Steinheimer, 2020). Until the early 2000s, adult education stood out in Austria as a field of notoriously bad employment conditions and low wages. This resulted

from a tradition of adult education being considered voluntary work or secondary part-time work for those in full-time employment. Thus, non-standard contracts minimising social security contributions and income tax were standard and seen to benefit both employers and ‘moonlighting’ employees, who received ‘cash in hand’. However, over the past two decades, adult education has become a main job for many who do not have other regular employment. Changes in working conditions were achieved in the early 2000s and in response to rulings of the labour court in 2013–2014. While the number of adult educators in regular employment has been growing, higher costs for taxes and social security contributions were often not matched by increased public funding, and adult educators’ overall incomes have fallen. Thus teachers still face poor employment conditions, including forms of involuntary part-time work and unpaid preparation time.

The Austrian neo-corporatist industrial relations system is built on the principle of mandatory membership of interest organisations: the Chamber of Commerce on the employers’ side and the Chamber of Labour on the employees’. Sectoral level collective agreements, negotiated annually, are binding on all organisations in the sector. Very few economic activities (notably personal services in private households) are not covered by collective agreements; until 2010, adult education was one of these. Collective agreements cover wages and pay rises, fringe benefits, and employment conditions. In negotiations, employees’ interests are represented by one dedicated union for each sector, with all unions forming the Austrian trade union federation. At company level, employees have the right to elect representatives to a work council, to represent employees’ interests vis-à-vis their employers, and to be involved in key decisions; they also have some security from being dismissed. Moreover, social partners are involved in policy making in many ways: for instance, with a strong membership base as well as institutional power, they have close connections to political parties and parliamentary processes. However, the overall standing of Austrian corporatism has come under pressure over the past three decades, with signs of both decline and recovery evident, making predictions for the future difficult (Pernicka & Hefler, 2015).

Teachers in adult education used to be poorly organised, and neither members of a trade union nor members of professional organisations of self-employed people. They used to be mainly dependent self-employed workers, and therefore neither dependent workers nor members of a trade or profession. Members of neither the Chamber of Labour (or the Unions) nor the Chamber of Commerce, they were excluded from the Austrian industrial relations system.

It was only through a series of events from 1999 onwards, leading to the foundation of an adult education employers' organisation (BABE), that a collective agreement was reached for the sector in 2010. New pressures on employers led to them hiring adult educators (rather than just administrative staff) as direct employees from 2014; only since then has representation of teachers' interests in the sector started to grow.

As a response to deteriorating employment conditions in the sector and in consideration of the weak representation of teachers' voices within its new collective bargaining mechanisms, a new social movement organisation was formed in 2014:

There were these negotiations, that the BABE implemented, and we became employed under a regular contract, and at that time there was just a lot of insecurity among colleagues, what does this mean for us? – so, and I was just starting at that time, I started to be concerned with the issue of working conditions. (Interview 3).

The IG DAZ/DAF/Basisbildung was a grassroots initiative by adult education teachers in Vienna. Teachers of adult basic education and German as a second language began to meet on a regular basis and to cooperate informally in activities to improve teachers' working conditions. Later, the informal meetings became more regularised (see Fig. 14.5) and the initiative made a public appearance. The newly founded organisation aimed to make Adult Basic Education teachers' voices heard in public, as well as to prepare for collective bargaining and organisational negotiations in a few large Adult Basic Education providers.

By 2019, the IG DAF/DAZ Basisbildung involved more than 100 teachers, employed by various providers and facing conditions of varying quality. Organised as a voluntary grassroots initiative, it has no formal



**Fig. 14.5** Invitation to a network meeting by the IG DAF/DAZ/Basisbildung 2017. (Source: Facebook Site IG DAF/DAZ/Basisbildung)

board, spokesperson, or membership. Decisions are made during regular meetings and are discussed via a mailing list. Over time, this social movement organisation has contributed to a large number of initiatives and organisations in adult education, and worked with researchers, other social movement organisations, and trade unions.

Other main activities include providing opportunities for exchange among teachers in adult basic education and German as a second language, preparing public statements and publications on relevant controversial issues—such as the potential role of adult educators in implementing illiberal immigration policies, where a test in civic education (*Austrian values*) became required as a part of an important German test for recent immigrants. Adult basic education teachers came under pressure to devote a large amount of their teaching to preparing participants in this new regime, with the examination denying learners of any autonomy and requiring them to learn the undisputed *right* answers by heart. Members of the organisations also organised protests, for example opposing the restrictive

immigration policies of the centrist and extreme right government at public events and conferences between 2017 and 2019.

We started as IG, approximately in February 2017, to develop a strong focus on the topic, and really, we had meetings with many, many people, we were 40 or 50, and then the conferences that were organized in [city x] about the topic ... and the cooperation with the university was intensified. (Interview 3).

IG DAF/DAZ Basisbildung's understanding of itself as a platform supporting the self-organisation of teachers in adult education is distinct from most trade unions, which are typically more institutionalised and less activist-oriented. IG DAF/DAZ Basisbildung has grown stronger, both in membership and by becoming active in workers' councils. However, the employer's representation only recognises the formally assigned, responsible trade union as being a partner in negotiating collective agreements so far.

Many teachers active in IG DAF/DAZ Basisbildung have previous experience in other social movement organisations. Their diverse competencies are a major source for learning from one another. Besides a few workshops organised by the organisation itself, and initiatives in its network, they learn informally through social interaction: networking activities, providing opportunities to discuss and reflect on working conditions and political developments. During events and activities, IG DAF/DAZ Basisbildung members gain communication, campaigning, and public speaking skills and learn how to organise, protest, and publish articles. Other learning opportunities include self-organisation and self-management in a grass-roots initiative: internal communication skills, decision-making procedures, developing discussions in a non-hierarchical setting, and so forth.

## Comparison and Conclusions

The three social movement organisations studied were founded and developed in close relation to industrial relations systems already in place. While Spain, Slovakia, and Austria represent different industrial relations systems, each of the social movement organisations was founded because

of specific challenges insufficiently addressed within the national system. Precarious working and living conditions following the 'Great Recession', and declining numbers of trade union members, especially among younger workers, led to Basque unions establishing a new movement in close cooperation with existing but diverse social movement organisations. While the Basque organisation represents a more general approach—fighting precarious employment overall—the two case studies in Austria and Slovakia represent social movement organisations established because of a perceived lack of representation by trade unions. In Slovakia, counsellors in adult education founded an association for better recognition for the profession as well as for their own professional development. As a result of the role of trade unions in the pre-1989 socialist regime, existing unions face a trust deficit. There is a tendency in the country to establish new associations and unions, but the association was a response to a sense of being unrepresented by both old and new unions. It receives support from international networks. In the Austrian case, teachers in adult basic education have long experienced precarious working conditions, struggling to develop professional identity and representation structures, in a system strongly shaped by social partnership. Since trade unions are considered too institutionalised, offering poor representation for casual employees, teachers founded an association to exchange experiences and fight for better conditions of employment. Over time, they also became involved in wider movements related to migrants' rights.

All three social movement organisations operate at least partly outside institutionalised trade union structures. In the Basque case, it was initiated by the regional trade unions, aiming for closer links with other social movement organisations. The Charter of Social Rights movement was endorsed by the trade unions' conference and is funded by trade unions. However, the movement's structure involves shared responsibility between trade unions and other social movement organisations, with trade unions making up only half of the steering group. In the Slovak case, the association of counsellors was founded independently from trade unions with a primarily professional concern to make counselling more visible in adult education, lobbying for adult counselling at political level, and providing professional development. Despite the counsellors' unfavourable working conditions, the creation of a professional identity was the principal

reason for its establishment. The Austrian social movement organisation was also founded outside trade union institutions, aiming to create a network of adult education teachers to lobby for better working conditions at a time when their working conditions were changing because of court rulings and new funding rules. Over time, the organisation established ties with social partners, including trade unions and other social movement organisations, especially migrant rights movements.

The social movement organisations studied have diverse structures. All have a loose idea of membership: anyone who considers him or herself a member of the target group can easily join. They are active in reaching out to new members and adopt a network approach. The Basque organisation was established to create a network among trade unions and other social movement organisations. The Slovak organisation considers itself a professional network, for learning from each other and lobbying for the profession. The Austrian case is a network organisation of teachers, but also other social movement organisations, individuals and trade unions. However, the structures of the three organisations differ. While the Basque and Slovak cases follow the structure of a board in charge of daily business, in Austria we encounter a grassroots organisation with a less hierarchical structure. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages, providing diverse learning opportunities to those involved.

In all three cases, engagement in a social movement organisation provides rich learning opportunities to activists and members. In the Basque case, they learnt informally from the process of establishing a new structure and bringing together organisations and individuals from diverse backgrounds. Thus, organisational, community and individual learning took place. Learning activities, including providing non-formal learning opportunities for education counsellors, are among the main activities of the Slovak social movement organisation. Activists also engage in policy making and outreach, draft papers, develop arguments, lobby, and organise public events: these provide diverse learning opportunities, and support the development of new skills. Their activities contribute to building a new career guidance sector within the country's adult learning system. In the Austrian case, the main learning source is informal learning within social interaction. This mode of learning from others in networking activities and other events is based on collective reflection on individual working conditions and political developments. Activists also improve their

skills in communication, campaigning, organising protest activities, and writing and publication.

Young employees spend many hours at work, which is therefore a place where diverse forms of learning should occur. However, many workplaces are not favourable learning environments, not only because they lack non-formal learning opportunities (such as training courses), but because working conditions make it hard for employees to engage. Precarious working conditions, non-standard contracts without social security, short-term contracts, low wages, and job insecurity are major reasons for employees to focus on priorities other than learning—such as covering their basic needs or searching for a better job. While some find ways to learn against all odds (see Chap. 15), the majority cannot. Thus, young employees stepping up and fighting for the improvement of working conditions serve the cause of lifelong learning in two ways. They struggle for improved working conditions, making learning possible for all employees, and they themselves benefit from the learning opportunities that engaging in social movement organisation brings.

The three cases are based on diverse industrial relationship systems and traditions of trade unionism. However, all three seek a way to overcome limitations in the traditional institutionalised roles of trade unions without questioning the need for union action in general. In the Basque case, the trade union itself decided to open up to social movement organisations by establishing a shared organisational structure. In Slovakia, a lack of trust in unions, paralleled by the absence of recognition for the profession of careers counsellors, led to the new organisation. The Austrian case similarly stemmed from the union's poor engagement with adult education teachers, generating a grassroots social movement organisation with a strong network approach, collaborating with the union. The three cases show the need for union activity amongst employees affected by precarious working conditions but outside traditional structures of trade unions. The organisations do not seek to replace social partnership in industrial relations but aim for recognition as additional, specialised partners with deeper understanding of particular groups of employees. Currently, many young activists engaged in social movement organisations are not included in policy consultation processes; many of their ideas remain unused. Their experiences for improving employment conditions and opportunities for learning at work are unheard. By giving them a voice in

consultation processes, the social dialogue on important aspects of employment for young people can be enlivened. Activism and involvement in policy processes is also a major building block in individuals' professional socialisation and identity and supports recognition for newly established professions.

Trade unions experience difficulties in engaging with younger workers; as young employees are unable or unwilling to become involved, social movement organisations are founded outside traditional structures. Hence, the existence of social movement organisations is not only a signal that trade unions should rethink their roles and structures but also a chance to use social movement organisations' ideas to renew industrial relations systems. Youth-led social movement organisations are laboratories producing important knowledge and practical skills and challenging established organisations, including trade unions. They expand opportunities to renew and enliven structures for representing interests and developing strategy within industrial relations. Taking the idea of learning through participation more seriously may help traditional organisations move on from treating young people as objects of political action to a more dynamic understanding that young people should be supported in standing up for their own causes. This is also related to the renewal of trade union structures, since all the social movement organisations under study follow a network approach (with trade unions a partner, among others, in their network). In future, trade unions may perhaps further enable these networks by providing support in terms of partnership, knowledge, and funding. This could also be a chance for trade unions to win back trust and enrol new members and activists, especially by providing new ways for young people to become actively engaged.

Activism is a major learning source not only for individuals but also for organisations and society. However, learning from activism is usually informal and therefore rarely recognised. While European documents advocate better recognition of informal learning, tools for recognising learning from engagement and activism remain scarce. This is of specific relevance to lifelong learning since learning from activism enables young people employed in workplaces unfavourable to learning to compensate for learning opportunities otherwise unavailable to them. Thus, the skills and experiences they can gain need to be made visible—to the individual and to future employers.

This chapter is intended to contribute to the broadening of interest in the topic of ‘learning from activism’ as an essential part of studying learning in working life and thereby to reanimate earlier traditions by giving due attention to industrial relation systems in understanding both workplace learning, and participation in job-related education in general (Bratton et al., 2003; Stuart, 2019).

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# 15

## Early Career Workers' Agency in the Workplace: Learning and Beyond in Cross-Country Comparative Perspective

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### Introduction

When considering workplace learning, a well-known reversible figure comes to mind. As with the duck-rabbit-illusion (Jastrow, 1899; Wittgenstein, 1958), we see the duck appearing, that is a given workplace with its features enhancing or limiting the opportunities for learning at work. An individual's opportunities for workplace learning appear as defined by the way work is broken down into tasks and how much

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autonomy and discretion is assigned to the job holder. The latter implies that the workplace learning available depends on the ‘decent’ or ‘poor’ quality of one’s job: workplace learning thus seems determined by social *structure*.

Enter the rabbit. Learning opportunities do not automatically translate into learning: individuals also need to apply themselves to the opportunities on offer to make learning happen. Even in the same type of workplace, some individuals will make good use of the opportunities at hand, while others will not. More important, individuals’ behaviour has the potential to alter the workplace’s overall situation, as even alone they can push for more learning opportunities. Vice versa, an individual’s resistance to learning will alter the job at hand. In short, learning in the workplace appears as subject to *individual agency*.

To understand workplace learning, we cannot help but enter the long-standing debate about the interplay between social structure (the features of the workplace as embedded in the organisation and the wider social environment) and individual agency (as shaped by one’s overall life structure). Given that an employer’s interest takes priority in shaping workplaces, with individuals being required to accommodate (see Chap. 10), we cannot miss the conflict dimension present in workplace learning, with employers’ interests pitted against employees’ when it comes to shaping the workplace and its learning potential (see also Chap. 14).

Within the Enliven project, we have attempted to expand our understanding of both structure and agency. One strand of our work focuses on *structure*—how features of the workplace shape opportunities for learning at work. However, we have highlighted that structure mirrors previous organisational decisions: hence *organisational agency* (see Chap. 10). Our key interest had been to study the interplay between *organisational* and *individual* agency in workplace learning, taking account of the social conflicts involved.

The current chapter presents a novel approach to investigating the role of individual agency in workplace learning. We study individual agency of early career employees within the first 10 years of their careers. Employees are studied in three sectors (Retail, Metals and Adult Education) in the nine countries. Our approach allows us to study workplace learning as embedded both in the organisational context of the job

and in an individual's wider life structure. We developed accounts for 71 workers in 17 organisations, constructing between 3 and 8 individual learning biographies for each organisation.

As a result of the approach taken, we can compare differences between individual responses across largely similar workplaces offered by a single organisation. This means we can observe better how individuals apply themselves to opportunities for learning at work, as we have multiple observations reflecting similar 'structural conditions', yet can also observe different individual responses.

In this chapter, we introduce our approach before presenting three case vignettes referring to early career workers facing unfavourable conditions for workplace learning. However, in all three cases, individuals developed high levels of initiative to make learning happen despite dire conditions, and despite the fact that colleagues working in similar workplaces for similar organisations showed fewer efforts to overcome apparently similar structural barriers to learning. Details of the organisations and types of workplaces provided can be found in Chaps. 11, 12 and 13 (full accounts are available in Enliven Project Consortium, 2020a, b). Our aim is to further develop our approach to understanding the basis for what seems an outpouring of individual agency and its ability to trump structural constraints.

Our approach, explained in the next section of this chapter, starts with Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) seminal understanding of *individual agency*. Next, we introduce Daniel Levinson's conception of an *urge* for development inherent in an 'always poorly balanced' individual life structure, echoing his teacher Erik H. Erikson's conceptualisation of 'new tasks meet unfinished business' as the driving force in adult development. For the application of the approaches, we need 'thick descriptions': a reconstruction of our research participants' (learning) biographies, where we can observe their development over time and across areas of their overall life structure, such as education, gainful work, intimate relationships and family commitments, civic engagement and leisure time activities. To harvest data and organise them across areas of the life structure and time, we have developed an approach centring on summary graphic representations.

In the third section, we present three purposefully selected individual learning biographies, with research participants mastering considerably high levels of learning—within or outside work—despite fewer promising conditions in the workplace or resulting from their employment. All three learn ‘against all odds’, and we use their cases to demonstrate how individual agency can explore the more improbable opportunities at play. We use our reconstruction of the evolution of the life structure over time to understand better why the research participants claim good progress in workplace learning while colleagues in similar circumstances provide much less encouraging accounts. In the final section, we compare the cases and draw conclusions.

## Understanding Individual Agency in Workplace Learning: A Life Structure Approach

How can we understand why some adults achieve learning at work while others do not, when the type of work done and the organisation offering the job are the same or very similar? There is a growing literature that answers this question by highlighting the significance for workplace learning of individual agency—understood as the individual capacity to act, to stimulate change by meaningful choices made—echoing the Weberian tradition (social action—*soziales Handeln*) (Bishop, 2017; Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Evans, 2017; Goller & Paloniemi, 2017, pp. 111–114).

What individuals actually do when they apply themselves in a situation and learn as a result—in short, when they use their agency—is perhaps captured best by Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) seminal definition of agency (see Chap. 10):

Actors are always living simultaneously in the past, future, and present, and adjusting their various temporalities of their empirical existence to one another (and to their empirical circumstance) in more or less imaginative or reflective ways. They continuously engage patterns and repertoires from the past, project hypothetical pathways forward in time, and adjust their

actions to the exigencies of emerging situations. ... [A]ctors may switch, thereby changing their degrees of flexible, inventive, and critical response toward structuring contexts. (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 1012)

We agree that individuals navigate between their ways of making meaning of their pasts, their futures and their multiple present moments. Their lives populate various domains simultaneously: workplace, family, leisure, civic commitments and so forth. We understand agency as a capacity to relate competing claims of different *domains* and modes of *time*; that is by *accommodating* to one other the social domains in which an individual takes part and by *relating* to past, future and present. We therefore sought a framework which recognises this interplay between temporal modes; the *life structure* framework, developed by Daniel Levinson and colleagues in the 1970s for understanding adult development and learning over the life course, seemed particularly pertinent.

Levinson's framework (see Hefler (2013) for a summary) echoed a rich field of research since the 1950s. The motivation to learn in adulthood was understood as an outcome of events in an individual's life, both predictable (e.g. the timely death of parents) and unpredictable (e.g. an accident, military service in wartime, being laid off), and their inner world. Individuals need to find ways to adapt to change and strike new compromises between never diminishing needs and wishes. Levinson was, as we have seen, a student of Erikson, whose work had a huge influence on adult development theory in both North America and Europe.

Levinson defines life structure as the object of analysis thus:

The life structure is the pattern or design of a person's life, a meshing of self-in-world. Its primary components are one's relationships: with self, other persons, groups, and institutions, with all aspects of the external world that have significance in one's life. A person has relationships to work and to various elements of the occupational world; friendships and social networks, love relationships, including marriage and family; experiences of the body (health, illness, growth, decline); leisure, recreation, and use of solitude; memberships and roles in many social settings. Each relationship is like a thread in a tapestry: the meaning of a thread depends on its place in the total design. (Levinson, 1980, p. 278)

An individual life structure can therefore be captured by observing six areas: gainful work, intimate relationships, family (and care work), self-care (including topics of body, health, well-being but also religious activities), (organised) leisure activities and interaction with friends, and civil engagement and voluntary work.

Adults are expected to balance the demands and promises of all six areas in a satisfactory (or 'good enough') way: Time and again, as their environment changes, they need to intervene to rebalance their life structure. However, even when the 'outer world' works as individual hopes, the compromises required to hold everything together can become burdensome: dissatisfaction grows and motivates attempts to 'change one's life'; areas of life are re-arranged and a new balance sought.

A poor situation or break down in one area of life (e.g. no close friends, job loss, the breakup of an intimate relationship) burdens the life structure as whole and can make it precarious and unsustainable. A person may overcompensate for a void in one aspect of life by overly engaging in another. For example, being out of employment is stressful, given societal expectations and the dependence on wage income, but one may temporarily over-invest in another area. Early career workers may put their job first, exhausting themselves through long hours, at the cost of time for self-care and leisure with friends. This leads over time to growing imbalances in the life structure, perhaps requiring a sudden change—quitting 'out of the blue' is a possible scenario.

A poorly balanced life structure may be both the cause of developmental difficulties and a symptom of more severe psycho-social issues. Actively engaging in intimate relationships is considered an essential part of an individual life structure; the absence of initiative or good fortune with intimate relationships is expected to be experienced as overly stressful and limiting. To conclude, what takes place in one domain of life will spill over to other areas; the failure to fill vital gaps in one area will undercut the stability of the overall life structure, driving change even in areas, where—observed in isolation—everything seems fine. Actions which seem incomprehensible reveal their overall meaning when studied against the backdrop of the life structure.

Phases where individuals are open to engagement in serious developmental activities in an area of life can be considered 'developmental

windows'. They are often marked by changes in the balance of this life structure: former focal areas become less important, while others take centre stage. Many important life transitions (e.g. leaving the parental home, moving in with a partner, starting a family) demand temporary but significant shifts in the attention paid to various areas. To rework one life structure to fit with the needs of a new life stage, an individual needs to engage consciously or unconsciously in intense learning processes.

Tensions within the life structure are engines of change. The compromises required to achieve a fit between areas of the life structure are always unstable. Years of building up one life structure are followed by years where it is modified or disrupted. Adult development is understood as driven by the requirement to overcome the consequences of premature compromises made earlier.

On an objective level, life structures can be described by the outcomes of past achievements (or a lack of achievement). Levels of qualification attained or levels of occupational experience achieved are good examples of achievement and may last for considerable stretches of time. Having a stable place of one's own to live might be another. Individuals may, of course, be simply endowed with resources for which they did not have to work. So on top of their own achievements, the life structure is strongly affected by resources provided (or taken away) by other people. In addition to past achievements, individuals also may be confronted in their current life structures with overcoming the negative consequences of previous situations, such as financial debt or weakened health.

We have therefore developed graphical representations of the content of the two interviews implemented with each early career worker. We include information on the domains of the life structure (gainful work, intimate relations, family, self-care, organised leisure, civic engagement) as well as participation in organised learning (formal or non-formal education). We also recorded whether organised learning had been supported by public funds or other mechanisms. Moreover, we observed the evolution of the life structure from the late phase of compulsory schooling (early teens) to the time of the interview and asked for their vision of the future, chiefly in relation to gainful work and further education. In the next sections, we give details and examples of the approach.

## Learning Against All Odds: Understanding Resources for Individual Agency Embedded in the Individual Life Structure

In this section, we present three sketches of the learning biographies of early career workers. All faced conditions unfavourable to rich workplace learning or unstable employment: these suggest that their motivation to learn in the workplace or in general would be limited. However, in all three cases, they managed to stay motivated and to achieve considerable learning against the odds. These three case vignettes—all female—are taken from the three sectors studied and three rather different societal environments (Denmark, Bulgaria and Austria). They are summarised in Table 15.1.

### Compensating for Poor Workplace Learning: Solveig in Danish Retail Work<sup>1</sup>

In this case vignette, we study how wider life structure can provide the impulse for new plans to learn when the workplace offers practically no learning and very little motivation to seek opportunities to learn outside work.

Solveig (aged 20–24) was employed as a fresh food sales assistant in the food department of a large retail chain store (DK1 see Chap. 11). She had an apprentice contract for three and a half years and worked full-time (37 hours per week). Solveig was responsible for dressing and trimming the shop with fresh food and frozen products. She had just started her job in the organisation at the time of the first interview, with three years and three months left on her apprentice contract (Fig. 15.1).

Solveig's educational and career pathways seem close to the ideal type of non-linear trajectory: frequent changes in paths taken, difficulty in sticking to any decisions made (as she emphasised several times throughout both interviews). She completed the Danish lower secondary

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<sup>1</sup>Edited version of the original learning biography vignette written by Ulrik Brandt for (Enliven, 2020b).

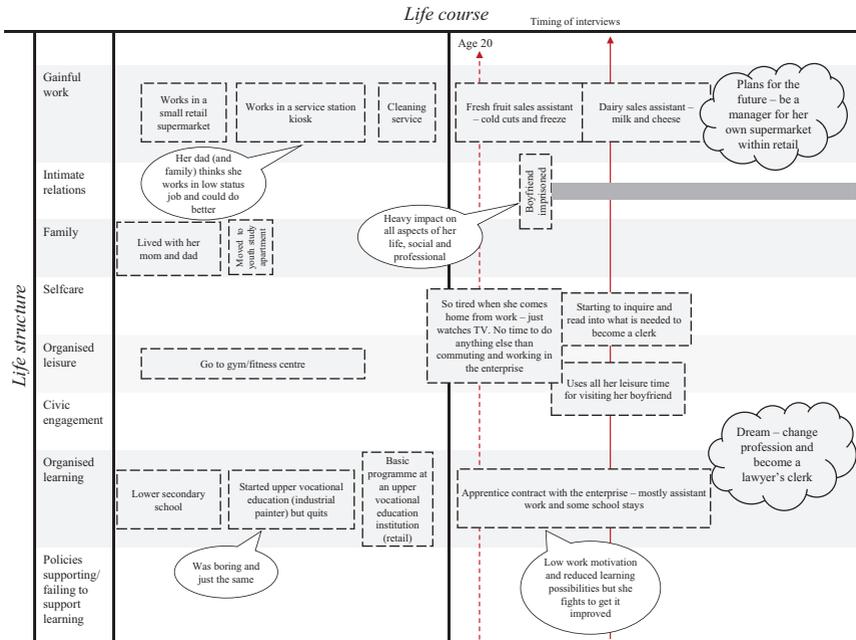
**Table 15.1** Overview on the three biographies studied in this chapter

Pseudonyms used	Solveig	Snejana	Nesrin
Gender and age	Female, 20–24	Female, 30–34	Female, 30–34
Country	Denmark	Bulgaria	Austria
Educational pathway	Non-linear	Linear; higher education	Non-linear
Family	Firm partnership; no children	Separated; two children	Married; two children
Migrant background			Born in Austria, however, family belongs to a conservative milieu of Turkish migrants
Economic sector	Retail	Metals	Adult education
Organisation (see Chaps. 10, 11 and 12)	DK1	BG1	AT1
Type of workplace/ opportunity for workplace learning	Unskilled work; routine only	Un-/semi-skilled work using one type of machine; routine only	Rich opportunities for workplace learning in routine/ non-routine activities
Type of employment; progress route	Apprenticeship contract; insecure outlook; no progress route foreseen	Permanent contract; no formal pattern of career progression foreseen	Fixed-term; part-time contract with insecure outlook; no career progression foreseen whatsoever

Source: own description

school system with a 10th grade diploma followed by enrolment as an industrial painter in an upper vocational educational programme (four and a half years). During that period, she moved into her own apartment, a so-called youth study apartment available to all young people in formal education. While attending lower secondary education and later the early phase of her painter training, she earned money as a student worker in a smaller retail supermarket and at a petrol station kiosk.

However, at a rather late stage, Solveig lost all motivation and dropped out of the industrial painting programme. She could not see herself becoming an industrial painter after becoming fully aware of what



**Fig. 15.1** Learning Biography Vignette: Solveig, a fresh food sales assistant in the food department in a store of a large retail chain in Denmark. (Source: (Enliven, 2020b, p. 99))

painters actually have to do. In order not to lose her student apartment, she needed to enter an alternative programme immediately; she therefore entered the retail programme, having found the opening for an apprentice on the web page of the company (DK1).

Solveig’s quick return to education was informed by her experiences of working in retail. She said she enjoyed interacting with clients and so was fine with the decision to enter a retail programme; however, the latter was prompted mainly by the need for any education in order not to lose the independence of living in a student apartment.

At the time of the first interview, Solveig’s day-to-day work was repetitive, routinised and with no learning requirements, other than to become acquainted with sheer boredom. Solveig performed the same tasks every day of the week with almost no variation. Customers asking for her assistance in finding an item represented a welcome diversion. New rules for

displaying different products brought a kind of variation, at least for a brief period. Non-routine activities were entirely absent, despite her being on an apprenticeship track and not working as an unskilled helper. Surprisingly, Solveig rated her retail job as nevertheless more varied than her former experience of training to be an industrial painter.

By that time, Solveig was also confident that she might move on to work with a broader range of responsibilities within her employer's organisation in the course of the programme. Indeed, by the time of the second interview, Solveig had changed departments, working in the dairy products unit. However, the nature of work had not changed at all: where she had previously placed fresh food, now she placed dairy products.

New tasks seldom required any complexity. Solveig illustrated this by describing new requirements for changing the price markings on frozen goods. This demanded some trial and error, but after a couple of attempts, she had fully absorbed this skill. Solveig mentioned only one area of personal development—how to handle difficult customers who became angry when unable to find the right items immediately. Over the months, she became more patient and relaxed with such clients.

Solveig described feeling stuck, bored and learning nothing at work. The lack of variation and challenges in her day-to-day work undermined her motivation, so she had difficulty getting out of bed in time. She explained that she had pressed for a change several times, but found herself rewarded with mundane tasks such as cleaning up the waste room. Moreover, she felt embarrassed by her inability to become used to her routine job, as though she were being unreasonable by asking for more variation and opportunities for learning.

Being asked about her future career plans, by the time of the first interview, Solveig reported the dream of running her own small shop, thereby reflecting that she did not foresee any managerial career pathway with her current employer. For the time being, the job's main function was to provide income and her student flat. Roughly half a year later, life events unrelated to her job had changed her career ambitions (see below), with her apprenticeship in retail to be completed only to avoid her again becoming a 'drop-out'.

The ambivalent significance of Solveig's workplace experience became visible only in the light of her overall development in young adulthood.

Neither the job itself nor the education programme but rather the attached right to student housing propelled her, allowing Solveig to move out of her parents' home and become her 'own woman', entitled to make her own decisions.

Solveig revealed very little about her family of origin but reported that her father did not support her decision to enter the vocational stream and that she constantly felt under pressure from her family for her non-prestigious choices. While she had difficulties maintaining her interest in the jobs she selected, she defended the level of autonomy she gained from Denmark's public support for apprentices. Through the money earned and the flat provided, she could live a self-determined life and invest in an intimate relationship comparatively early in life.

In a firm desire to defend this autonomy, Solveig learnt to survive the frustration involved in her current job. The latter took its toll. When she came home after a one-hour commute, she was too exhausted to do anything but watch TV and fall asleep, disrupting her previous spare time activities such as going to the gym regularly.

Solveig's life structure and development became focused on developing her intimate relationship, the latter becoming even more important between the first and second interview. Her boyfriend got into trouble with the law and was convicted and imprisoned. She emphasised that her boyfriend's trial had been a driver for her personal growth, changing her attitudes and perception of life as a whole and requiring her to immediately accept a much higher level of responsibility. Always considering herself a fighter, she focused on dealing with a very challenging situation where she could make a difference. Visiting her boyfriend in a distant prison became a key element of her life, leaving little space for anything else beyond work.

Having to give her relationship priority in this way, set Solveig's overall life structure in motion again. Her undesirable current job became a firm basis from which she could care for her imprisoned boyfriend. Witnessing the wheels of justice working fuelled her desire to overcome her own marginal position, resulting in a (vague) plan to seek training later as a legal office assistant. She envisaged taking this step only after completing her current apprenticeship, which for the time being she accepted as providing necessary stability in her life situation. While her workplace

learning remained limited, Solveig's overall life structure allowed her to explore her agency and to seek meaningful learning and individual development. Public support provided for young adults in education plays an undeniable role in creating a base for learning and development against the odds.

## Overcoming Limited Workplace Learning: Snejana in the Bulgarian Metal Sector<sup>2</sup>

In our next example, the rather limited day-to-day informal learning opportunities of a semi-skilled blue-collar job are outweighed by the potential for new opportunities within a rapidly growing enterprise, offering stable employment and above-average pay, and allowing for supporting a family and down-payments on a home.

Snejana (30–34) operated a lathe<sup>3</sup> in a milling-machine unit in a medium-sized company (BG 1—see Chap. 12 for details) in Southwest Bulgaria. The company, established at the beginning of the 1990s, has about 200 employees and specialises in small-batch production for larger metal companies.

The semi-skilled position Snejana held required only a few weeks' introductory training and did not match her education. She completed her secondary education at a vocational high school in her hometown, giving her an accounting qualification. Afterwards, she left her parents' home, moving to a nearby city, where she still lives. There she entered a higher education teacher education programme and received a bachelor's diploma in the pedagogy of mathematics and informatics.

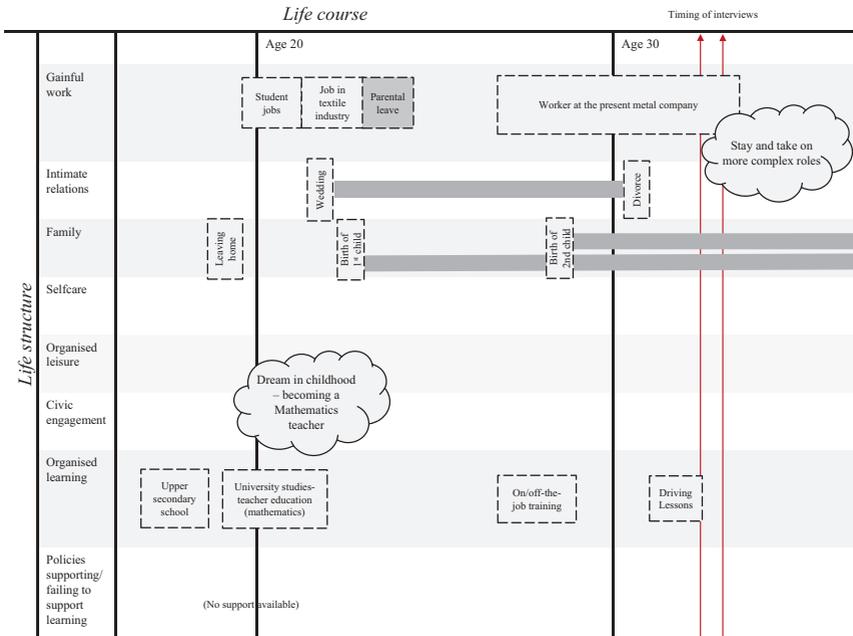
Although over-qualified for the job, Snejana emphasised that her previous education was of some help (Fig. 15.2):

I would not go so far as to say there is a match [between the completed education and the position she holds] but [the programmes] are of some use to me, because in university, I studied all kinds of mathematics and

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<sup>2</sup>This is an edited version of the original learning biography vignette written by Vassil Kirov (see Enliven (2020b)).

<sup>3</sup>A lathe is a machine for fabricating metal for manufacturing.



**Fig. 15.2** Learning Biography Vignette: Snejana, a lathe operator in a Bulgarian local company in manufacturing metal products. (Source: Enliven, 2020b, p. 96)

here, when we start calculating the points on the drawings as the programme is designed, it helps that I know how to calculate them. Because there are degrees, subtraction, addition, triangles. (BG1\_ECW1\_1\_61)

During her university studies, Snejana’s parents assisted her financially. Nevertheless, she held various student jobs, as there was no public funding scheme to help. After graduation, she worked in a clothing workshop in the position of technical control of packaging for two years. Immediately after, she was on maternity leave for two years, taking her current job after that.

As it had a good reputation, Snejana had wished to work for her current company for some time before she found a job there:

There was no advertisement. I said that I wanted to submit my documents to eventually compete for a job and they told me to leave my CV and all

else that was required and to wait, in case they might call me.... I submitted my documents every year... approximately after the fourth or third time when I submitted my documents, they called to say I could come. (BG1\_ECW1\_1\_83)

The wages offered were above average, with even semi-skilled work paid higher than entrance-level jobs in secondary-level teaching. Moreover, the firm had responded to a local shortage of skilled labour by recruiting female talent, providing women with access to traditionally male blue-collar jobs.

Snejana operated a milling machine run by central programming (RCP). She had held this position since she was appointed. When entering the firm, she passed a course of theoretical training: '... the engineers, the head of the workshop also, the people in higher positions than us, were reading something like lectures to us, in order to familiarize us with the measuring equipment, the kinds of materials, the kinds of instruments' (BG1\_ECW1\_1\_96). This was followed by on-the-job training: 'For two months I was with another person on a machine, after that they let me work independently with a machine' (BG1\_ECW1\_1\_109). Later, Snejana started work as a trainer at the company's learning centre, supporting the practical training of newly appointed workers, in addition to working in the milling machine unit.

For her daily tasks, Snejana received information from the engineers on a memory stick, which she attached to the machine; she also had to write small programs herself, which broke up the otherwise highly routinised work. About 23 people worked in the milling machine unit, 17 of whom worked on RCP machines; the rest used a universal milling machine. When problems arise, the workers turn to the person in charge of the unit; if he cannot decide what is to be done, the case is referred to the head of the workshop or the chief engineer. Snejana's position required teamwork:

We always work as a team with the engineers, with the person responsible for our unit. We make the decisions together in order to achieve the best possible result... From the highest level, from the engineer in chief, he tells

us how to start, he distributes the things and after that, gradually, stage by stage, we come to what I am supposed to do. (BG1\_ECW1\_1\_129)

Snejana found the working atmosphere in the company friendly:

The team is very united, we are all approximately the same age, we—on RCP are [young people], while on the universal milling machines, there older employees very often work... Personally, I am very pleased to have been put in that place. Some [colleagues] who you feel to be close friends, you see after work too. (BG1\_ECW1\_1\_146)

She felt part of the company and had developed a feeling of organisational membership.

Snejana found her role as a trainer in the company's learning centre challenging:

it is harder to be a trainer than a trainee. Because everybody has some ideas of their own, because you do not only need to know things here technologically but to understand what the machine will do at every moment. The programme and the machine—the similarity, to grasp the connection between the two and you must observe everything very carefully, especially when you start something new for the first time. Something new, when it is the first item after setting the machine, everything should be observed very carefully. (BG1\_ECW1\_1\_216)

Snejana liked the company very much. Although educationally mismatched, she seemed to have found a place where she could apply herself and use her potential, quickly growing into the more demanding role offered in the evolving internal training centre. In the absence of a formalised career pattern, Snejana could hope to make progress based on her own specific contributions and become less constrained by the routinised nature of the work on one particular machine. This bright outlook drove her learning behaviour at work and helped her overcome the limited inspiration provided.

Snejana had grown up in a small town; her mother graduated from a mathematics high school; her father was an electrician. Going to university was her own choice and represented upward educational mobility for

Snejana. Her childhood dream was to be a mathematics teacher. She found that she used mathematics extensively in her job: she found satisfaction in training new employees in the company, which enabled her to adopt a teacher's role alongside her semi-skilled work. Outside work, however, Snejana had little time to attend further education beyond taking driving lessons at her own expense.

In terms of adult development, Snejana had mastered well all five markers of adulthood: finishing initial education, finding a job (with a living wage), leaving the parental home, entering into a civil marriage (nearly 12 years before the interview) and parenting two children. She had divorced her husband when her second child reached kindergarten age and, at the time of the interview, lived independently with her children in a home of her own, for which she was still paying instalments. The steady income from her job allowed her to live unsupported after the divorce. Overall, her life structure seemed quite stretched between responsibility as a mother (without a partner) and gainful work.

Snejana's current job was a *stronghold* in her life structure. Thanks to it she could live independently and take care of her children. The *price* which she paid was no time for leisure activities and no space for personal development activities such as continuing and further education.

### **Rich Day-to-Day Learning in Insecure Employment: Nesrin in Austrian Adult Learning<sup>4</sup>**

In our third example, rich opportunities for day-to-day workplace learning were eagerly used despite high levels of job insecurity and comparatively low pay.

Nesrin (30–34) has been working as a teacher in adult basic education in a major provider organisation in Vienna for 14 months at the time of the first interview (see Chap. 13 for details on AT1). She had been born in Vienna as the third child of immigrant parents from Turkey. After compulsory schooling, she attended a three-year business VET school in Vienna but dropped out in the final year and started work in accounting.

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<sup>4</sup> Edited version of the original learning biography vignette written by Eva Steinheimer for Enliven (2020b).

She did not enjoy it and, after some brief jobs, settled down in a travel agency, where she enjoyed herself with a range of interesting tasks. However, her employer went bankrupt during Nesrin's first maternity leave; she got another job in a hotel, which she also liked. When the hotel ran into economic problems, she was made redundant, and during the following phase, she could find only short-time or marginal employment. After her second child was born, she could not find a job in tourism that provided working hours compatible with childcare; she therefore stayed at home but engaged in a range of further education classes in order not to lose skills (e.g. business English classes) and to enhance her employment prospects (e.g. office administrator adult apprenticeship).

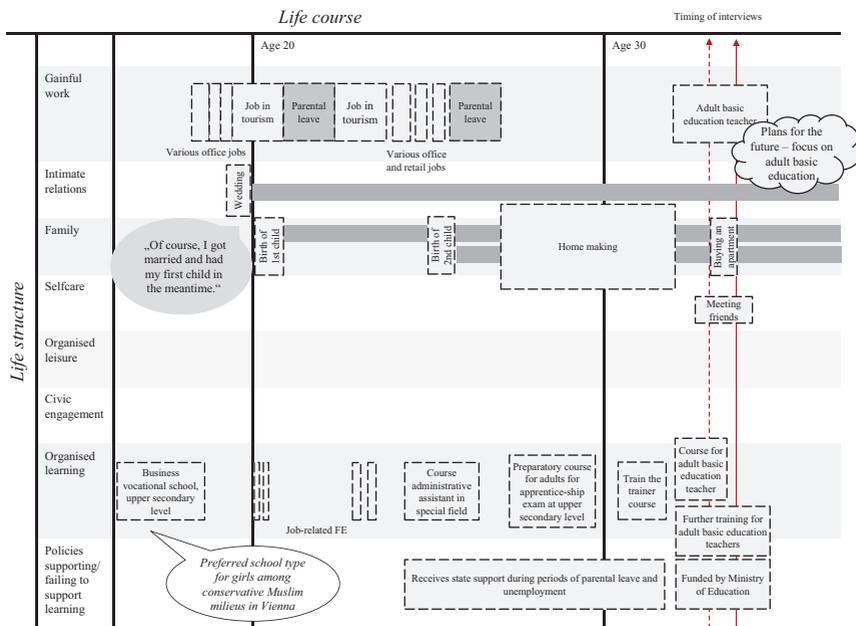
Nesrin was desperately searching for a new job when a friend suggested training to become a tutor in German as a second language. Nesrin was convinced she did not have the necessary qualifications to enter the programme:

There I was, and I remember the first day: everyone introduces themselves, everyone tells us where they work and what kind of training and great things they do. Well, then it was my turn (laughs) and I said: I have not gone to university, I do not even know if I'm right in this class (laughs). (AT1\_ECW4\_1\_131)

As it turned out, despite her unusual background, she overcame all doubts and succeeded very well in the training (Fig. 15.3):

you have to do a presentation right away and there is immediately this nervousness and this shame and this fear to take centre stage—you have to get rid of that ... I have apparently made it and I constantly received so much positive feedback, ... Yes, I am glad that I didn't run away, because it got very close to me getting up and saying: I'm sorry, but I'm wrong here now. (AT1\_ECW4\_1\_137)

When she applied for an internship, Nesrin was immediately offered a position as an adult basic education teacher—a recent surge in funding had created a shortage in teachers in the field. When starting her job, she lacked the required credentials, but she acquired them via weekend



**Fig. 15.3** Learning Biography Vignette: Nesrin, a teacher of adult basic education in an Austrian adult education centre. (Source: Enliven, 2020b, p. 92)

courses during her first year in the job. At the time of the first interview, Nesrin taught 18 hours a week, plus another course of the same type as a substitute teacher for a second provider under the same funding scheme. At the time of the second interview, her weekly working hours had increased to 29.

Nesrin's first class meant jumping in at the deep end. She was asked to take over a course after another teacher had left mid-term. The course was for migrant women with childcare obligations but limited German. Courses were held in local primary schools. Childcare for small children was provided free during classroom hours. This meant Nesrin worked mainly on her own and had limited contact with other adult educators.

She described a steady ongoing learning process in her day-to-day work. At the start, doing practically everything for the first time, she often needed to improvise. 'So, I really had a tough time, muddling through all these challenges at once, there I had my learning by doing.

Nothing, no educational programme, had prepared me for that' (AT1\_ECW4\_1\_903). She needed to overinvest in preparation during this crucial early phase.

Nesrin's students were mainly refugees from Syria and Afghanistan and responding to traumatic experiences turned into a particular field of individual learning. She needed to adapt her plans for a lesson to make space for students' immediate concerns:

Something unforeseen, let's see ...—Sometimes, when I am entering the classroom, I find one of my participants in tears. So, you simply cannot ignore her and continue as if nothing has happened. So, we stick together and we weep and mourn together ..., you know, there are really moving issues at play. (AT1\_ECW4\_1\_766)

She began to anticipate the need for exchange by reserving 30 minutes, out of 3 hours' teaching, for any topic of this kind.

Nesrin also helped her students with administrative tasks, appointments with officials, and the like, in her free time, and long after they finished their courses. She explained her commitment as the outpouring of her personality as a *born care giver*. Although the course participants' demands on Nesrin in her spare time were burdensome, she found confirmation in being needed:

It would be much better for me, something of a relief, if I could stop that, if I didn't take everything so seriously; ...—but that is, that is simply in my nature. That was already the case long before I started teaching, that I—I take after my mother. (AT1\_ECW4\_1\_659)

Although she had never envisaged herself as a trainer, Nesrin enjoyed her new role. She knew from scratch that she had a great deal to learn in order to live up to what the job required, but felt excited by its challenges:

Somehow, I have ended up here—turned out it has been a great thing that I have ended up here—today, I would like to do nothing else, I am looking forward to working here until I retire, no joke, or even longer. (AT1\_ECW4\_2\_1057)

Nesrin's strong identification with her occupational role, and with her employer, energised her day-to-day workplace learning and helped her to live up to the job's high demands in her early months.

Nesrin always strived for pleasure and meaning in a job. Many of her customer-facing roles and communicative tasks, such as working in a hostel with young casual guests in her early 20s, had provided these, enabling her to connect in personal ways. She always felt limited in her career options due to her interrupted education but took the initiative to improve her qualifications by completing the adult apprenticeship programme. Unfortunately, she then realised that her career options were limited by her obligations as a mother of two. This phase of uncertainty, during which she lacked a clear perspective, lasted for several years and resulted in a level of desperation, until a friend's advice led to the chain of events and eventually—as described above—to her current job.

In retrospect, Nesrin accepted all these struggles as necessary: 'And I just believe in kismet, right? Apparently, I had to wait for a reason, you know? ... I had hard times to go through, but if it, if that was the reason, then it is good as it is' (AT1\_ECW4\_2\_1190). Despite the uncertainty of continuous employment, Nesrin was passionate about her new job and enmeshed herself fully in day-to-day learning, taking on any challenges offered.

Nesrin's life structure was characterised by tensions between accepting the expectations of her conservative Muslim immigrant milieu and her own desires. She grew up in Vienna with three siblings. Her parents grew up in the same village in Turkey and migrated to Austria independently as adolescents, finally marrying. Nesrin's father was a blue-collar worker; her mother worked as a housekeeper in a public care facility. Nesrin's choice of education in a particular type of business VET school at the age of 15 is very common for girls in parts of Vienna's Turkish community, and she felt it *natural* to get married and have a child around the age of 20. Although Nesrin could have been content with fulfilling the role of being a mother and wife, perhaps with some part-time work, she strived for more, making use of the training offered by the Austrian public employment service during a longer period of unemployment.

While Nesrin could count on the support of female members of her extended family, due to shift work at unsocial hours, her husband was

hardly present during weekdays. All in all, Nesrin had to meet both her family's and her job's requirements mainly alone. Nevertheless, she found her position mainly a long sought-after enrichment, rather than a burden:

I don't want to change anything; I want everything to stay as it is. It should continue the same way. Even when I really work a lot giving three courses, I also have to do a lot at home, but I always make my arrangements, ..., that I neither neglect the kids, nor myself, nor, I don't know—of course it happens, yes—sometimes I forget appointments [laughs]. (AT1\_ECW4\_2\_334)

## Discussion and Conclusions

The interviews with early career workers confirm that workplaces offering rich learning opportunities motivate these workers to enmesh themselves in workplace learning. In rich learning environments, these workers often engage fully in informal learning to develop their skills and work towards membership of their organisation and/or their occupations and professions. However, even when their workplaces are not learning-conducive, many early career workers report ways of learning at work.

In organisations dominated by restrictive learning opportunities, such as the retail examples in this project, cases stand out where interviewees held management trainee positions offering good learning opportunities per se, and their individual narratives were of commitment and will to develop. Against an overall expectation of 'boring' or monotonous retail jobs, burdensome for an individual's personal development, some interviewees shared a different experience where simple jobs fitted quite well into their overall life structure for a period, for example, when bridging a gap until a new phase of education began, or merely acting as a temporary solution in an otherwise challenging life situation.

In retail, the research also revealed exceptional narratives of how interviewees succeeded in overcoming obstacles to learning that arose from the design of their workplaces—making learning happen against all odds. In adverse conditions, they were highly active in developing themselves and their professional identities. One way they described of making their

tasks more comprehensive, and thus giving themselves new learning opportunities, was by making targeted demands on their superiors. Other interviewees described how they sought and used every informal opportunity in their daily work to achieve the same levels of skills as more experienced colleagues appeared to have. Such unexpected high levels of agency in restricted environments are often linked to overqualification in the current job, with young adults—for differing reasons—considering the job a 'good enough' solution for the moment. Though 'stuck' in a learning-restrictive work environment, they remain agentic, embracing all learning opportunities, sometimes making use of learning habits acquired earlier.

Clearly defined development pathways, commonly described as promoting learning, were observed in the machinery sector. Gaining full membership of one of the Basque co-operatives, which has predetermined stages of development, proved to be a strong motivator for individual development and agency. This was supported by other environmental factors that promote learning, such as responsibility for problem-solving, non-routine activities and the organisation's provision of extensive training opportunities. In the Bulgarian metals sector, a pattern observed was that individuals' learning benefits from changes—sometimes only small—in work tasks, such as moving from a simple to a more advanced machine, or taking on additional work as an in-house trainer (allowing partial time away from routinised to more demanding work tasks).

Among the interviewees from the adult education sector, especially those working as teachers or trainers, descriptions of highly learning-conducive workplaces dominated—as we anticipated would be common in teaching professions. In the first years of their careers as teachers, individuals reported that they adapted to the need for high levels of day-to-day learning 'to survive'. Teaching requires commitment. Many interviewees added that they expected that growing experience would ease their day-to-day work pressures: entering the field was a transitional phase. For self-employed trainers, the early career phase involves establishing themselves in the field and attaining job security and a stable income. During this phase, temporary privations in other areas of life may be accepted as a necessary cost.

Despite the participants' youth, Enliven research interviews resulted in narratives of varied life paths and rich past experiences in all areas of life. A considerable proportion of young adults look back on non-linear education and career pathways, which may include interrupted, resumed and planned training as well as experience of work in different industries and jobs, both in their country of origin and abroad.

Different patterns could be distinguished in the interplay of learning at the workplace and in other areas of life. Not all of these are strongly linked to particular features of the sectors under consideration: characteristics of the life structure, such as having children or not, have a significant influence on all other parts of life. Cases where a high level of learning at work coincides with lively activities in other areas stand in contrast with cases where learning across all areas of life is possible only to a limited extent. Many of our interviewees fell into the first category, and a few into the second. By moving beyond descriptions of the current life situation to a view spanning the life course, it becomes clear that when few learning opportunities are reported at a particular point in time, a longer view may reveal other dynamics.

Cases in which high levels of activity in one area of life compensate for a standstill or obstacles in other areas were found in all three sectors. Again, constellations tend to recalibrate over time. People who interrupted their education and currently earn their living in a routine retail job, for example, described this as a transitional situation: it reduced speed and pressure in several areas of their lives, while they forged or implemented new educational plans. Such a job might be an important step towards gaining independence from one's parents and thus freedom in choosing one's next career steps.

Demanding life situations can increase one's engagement in gainful work. An ongoing crisis or imbalance in another part of life may call for stabilising at least one part of the life structure—for example, when a close relative suffers from severe illness. But there are also cases where life events force individuals to concentrate their agency on solving those problems and to put their learning ambitions in gainful work 'on hold'. We observed this in cases of divorce or childcare obligations: the resulting life changes claimed an interviewee's full attention.

The examples above have shown that if we consider the interactions of an individual's agency in workplace learning in isolation from their context, the level of agency in workplace learning cannot be adequately explained. By applying Levinson's (1980) life structure framework, our research shows how different areas of life add to and/or limit an individual's learning opportunities and their agency in learning. Gainful work is an integral part of an individual's life structure and always interacts with activities and events in other parts of life: intimate relations, family, self-care, organised leisure and civic engagement.

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# Part IV

## Conclusion



# 16

## Adult Education, Learning Citizens, and the Lessons of Enliven

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Adult learners are human. In most countries, and notably across Europe, they are also citizens. They have rights under international and national law. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, specifies ‘the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives’, to participate in ‘periodic and

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genuine elections ... by universal and equal suffrage', 'to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment', 'to form and to join trade unions', 'to rest and leisure', 'to education ... directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms', and 'freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement' (United Nations, 1948, Arts. 21, 23, 24, 26, 27). Though some of these rights also apply to children, many are achieved or expanded during the transition to adulthood.

We seldom, if ever, referred to international human rights law as a building block for the Enliven research. In retrospect, however, it seems a key normative foundation. Adults are entitled to live fulfilling lives and to shape the government and culture of their societies. They are entitled to a rich education, partly because it contributes to their full human development and also because it enables them to play an active part in society and government. We have taken a similar view of adults as learners: they are entitled to develop as human beings and to play an active and creative part in shaping society; one function of education is to support their doing so. We have found ourselves reaching back to educationists and social theorists who have taken a similarly broad view. Dewey, Tawney, and Freire inhabited a similar axiological space to the authors of Universal Declaration.

It was partly in this light that we embraced theories of bounded agency. Their analytical value is matched by their recognition of adults, and adult learners, as active and creative. They sit comfortably alongside contemporary trends in the theorisation of learning as active, situated, and social (e.g. Brown et al., 1989; Illeris, 2007; Jarvis, 2009; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Mezirow, 1991). At the same time, they recognise the role of institutions in structurally constraining agency.

Social structures and institutions can be seen as the natural outcomes of human interaction—every society has them—but how they are organised in any society reflects, and usually reproduces, its systems and distribution of power. European societies today are organised, albeit in varying ways, with broadly democratic (or 'liberal democratic') political structures, broadly capitalist (or 'free market') economies, and civil societies

broadly accepting of such personal and collective rights as freedom of expression, religious observance, dissent, and organisation. (International organisations such as the European Union and the Council of Europe endorse these forms of social organisation.) These broad categorisations, of course, gloss over wide variation, which whole disciplines—political science, political sociology, and others—are devoted to exploring and explaining. A common feature of their political and economic structures, however, is hierarchy. Those who manage businesses organise employees to generate income and profit for their owners. Politically, our rulers are elected, and elections (and sometimes other laws) make them ‘accountable’ to the people. But once elected, rulers are expected to govern, and this involves organising society and its institutions to ‘deliver’ what, in their view, the people want.

Asking what citizens ‘*look like* when viewed from the vantage point of the state’, Poggi reflects on the paradox that, ‘citizens are in the first place, from the state’s standpoint, its “subjects”’:

It is often said that one of the most critical aspects of political modernisation is constituted by the fact that rulers ceased to treat individuals as *subjects* (*suditti*, *Untertane[n]*) and learned to treat them as *citizens*. Yet ... the subject-ness of individuals persists ... For the state is essentially ... a set of arrangements and practices whereby one part of a divided society exercises domination over the other part, whether or not the individual components of the population are vested with the attributes of citizenship. (Poggi, 2003, pp. 39–40; italics in original.)

Even as citizens, therefore, adults are not only agents; they are also objects of policy. Those who govern, even benignly, must organise, control, and use citizens. Democratic accountability requires that rulers rule, and in modern states, this typically requires delivering services—from defence and policing to health and welfare. However much we repudiate the implications of viewing people as ‘human resources’—and in many respects, this perspective has been pernicious (Bowles & Gintis, 1975; Brown et al., 2020)—citizens are a resource for the state, just as employees are for businesses.

This throws light on—though it does not entirely explain—a key tension. Those in government and in international quasi-governmental organisations, such as the European Commission, are expected to ‘deliver’. They owe this to the citizens who have—if often at some distance—appointed them. In order to ‘deliver’, however, they must engage these citizens. For instance, in delivering adult education, rulers must engage them as professionals (to teach and so forth) and persuade them to be learners. This implies exercising a degree of control, or at least influence; services and provision must be planned and managed. At the same time, and in contrast, if adults are to learn well—and if they are to learn *as citizens*, and indeed as human beings—they must be able to shape their learning in meaningful ways: what they learn, why they learn, how they learn, and so forth. Similarly, if professionals are to organise and teach well, they must also be allowed a degree of autonomy.

Educational policy—and adult education policy in particular—must negotiate this tension. Yet another tension underlies educational policy: the aims of education. What is (adult) education for? Though many answers are possible, the principal tensions have been between (adult) education for production and productivity, for social purposes (such as community and national cohesion, and democratic government), and for human growth and (in a non-financial sense) enrichment. Periodically, claims for the primacy of one or another are made; in the age of neoliberal globalisation, education for work and production has been at a premium (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

Underlying this view of the education’s purposes being chiefly economic—not perhaps in logic, but certainly in policy and practice—has been the theory of human capital (Becker, 1964; Brown et al., 2020; Mincer, 1974; Schultz, 1961). ‘Economic rationality’ implies that investors seek to maximise the return on their capital, and other things being equal, the longer capital remains invested, the greater will be the aggregate return. The implication was to invest in education for children and young adults: one has more years to reap the benefits of what one learns at the age of 10 or 20 than at 50 or 60. Such thinking remains influential although—as Freire was to point out in criticising what he called, not by accident, the ‘banking’ model of education—it also makes invalid and damaging assumptions about the passive nature of learning and the

transmissibility of knowledge (Freire, 1972). Nevertheless, it clearly plays a role in the EU's emphasis on young adults as the main target of lifelong learning.

Common-sense is a great persuader. A quarter century ago, the European Commission enrolled it, declaring 'the demise of the major ideological disputes on the objectives of education'. Debates on 'the organization of education and training systems' and on 'content and training methods' had 'come to an end'. 'Everyone' was 'convinced': the 'crucial problem of employment in a permanently changing economy compels the education and training system to change' (Commission of the European Communities, 1995, p. 23). Claims about 'the end of ideology' (Bell, 1962) (or of 'history' (Fukuyama, 1992)) often prove hubristic, but the Commission was not alone. Something of a consensus developed internationally in the early 1990s that a 'new vocationalism' would happily marry education's 'inescapable occupational purposes' with its 'political and moral' aims (Grubb, 1996, p. 546).

We now know this marriage—neither equal nor harmonious—would prove unable to resolve fundamental tensions in the relationship. Governments—as predicted (Boshier, 1998)—have pressed education systems to deliver work-related skills, paying little more than lip-service to wider aims.<sup>1</sup> As we argued in Chap. 1, this strategy has remained impervious to challenge in 'policy communities'. 'Groupthink' (Janis, 1982) rules: as with First World War generals, defeat bespeaks lack of effort in implementation—typically by subordinates—or inadequate technology. Radical re-evaluation is unthinkable. Hence the popularity of 'evidence-based policy', 'implementation science', 'deliverology', and similar panaceas (Auld & Morris, 2016; Barber et al., 2011a, b; Nilsen &

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<sup>1</sup> The EU's framing of a right to education in its efforts to generate European human rights law is instructive. In contrast to the UN's Universal Declaration assertion of a human right 'to education ... directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms', the EU's language is blander, while its elaborations perhaps provide space for political, bureaucratic, and legal interpretation and limitation. 'Everyone has the right to education and to have access to vocational and continuing training', according to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (adopted in 2000, and incorporated in the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon) (European Union, 2000, Art. 14); the European Pillar of Social Rights runs thus: 'Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market' (European Union, 2017, p. 12).

Birken, 2020; Saltelli & Giampietro, 2017; Schleicher, 2018). Hence also the lust for new artificial intelligence technologies (Federighi, 2013). The solutions cannot be wrong.

## The Adult Education Europe Needs

One central finding of Enliven is that the problems persist: these panaceas have not worked and will not do so. Europe—and we suspect the message is applicable more widely—must revivify its education for adults. Though our focus has been on young adults, this is true for adults of all ages. It means reimagining adult education in all its richness, rather than slimming down provision to the (imagined or perceived) needs of one particular element of human life—work and earning a living—, or on one particular age-group—the young. It means organising adult education so that learners—citizens—are central in shaping what they learn and how they study. It means acknowledging the different levels at which adult education policies are developed and implemented—European, national, community, institutional—and the tension-laden interactions between them. It means that even when scarce resources must be targeted on specific social groups—and given the inequities of adult learning participation, and of European societies in general, this seems inevitable in the short term—those groups should not be told what they need, but empowered to play an active part, individually and collectively, in designing it. It also means embracing the importance of informal adult learning, recognising how large a part working life plays in this, and finding ways of enabling people at work to develop the full range of their capabilities in learning-rich workplaces.

Such a reimagining of education would involve seeking solutions to the challenges of today—and, insofar as we can predict them, of the future. But being ‘future-oriented’ does not mean jettisoning the lessons of experience. There is much to be harvested from the collective wisdom of European adult educational experience (Holford, 2017). (And we mention Europe here only because our research has focussed on Europe: the same could be said of most nations and societies.) This is not to discount the value of current social research—indeed, we advocate it—but

rather to say that we understand contemporary developments better when we view them with knowledge of their past: fortunately, knowledge of, and a sense of, adult education's history—present in the Enliven team throughout—was enriched by a deeply experienced advisory group.

This revivification of adult education is needed for the challenges we live with today: climate crisis; migration by refugees and others seeking better lives; disease and pandemic; poverty and inequality, between and within nations; war; faltering systems of governance and the growing authoritarian and populist threat to democracy; ageing populations, decaying pensions, and inter-generational tensions; growing insecurity of employment and incomes; artificial intelligence and its implications for human work and incomes. And the future will, of course, throw up new challenges and others, itemised perhaps on 'risk assessments' (global pandemics come to mind) but barely considered.

One of the virtues of adult education, properly so-called, is that it widens and deepens informed discussion of social problems. While we may think human societies are always likely to fall short of ideal kinds of 'communicative rationality' (Habermas, 1984, 1987; Rasmussen, 2018), there remains vast potential for an enriching of the deliberative capacity of the European public sphere and its ability to generate informed and intelligent consensus around strategies for human survival and flourishing.

## Lessons of Enliven

The range of explorations conducted by Enliven researchers has been extensive—the chapters above provide space to discuss only a few—but here we try to distil some essential core messages. This will necessarily be synoptic, sidelining important nuance and leaving much unsaid. Nevertheless, we attempt to give some sense of what our research contributes both to policy and practice on the one hand, and to scientific understanding of our field on the other.

First of all, we have argued for the importance of lifelong learning for all aspects of adults' lives and the poverty of giving precedence to its economic and instrumental purposes. For adults, perhaps even more than for children, education has vast transformative power. To the privileged,

this has long been a commonplace: children, as young adults, are shepherded to colleges, universities, and even ‘finishing schools’; indeed, much of ‘classic’ work on the nature of university education is based on this assumption (Ash, 2006; Holford, 2014; Humboldt, 1809/1990; Newman, 1910). But education can be transformational for people of all backgrounds, and throughout life. We have seen its power to transform the lives of ‘vulnerable’ young adults—though we have also seen that this transformative power comes when the young people involved have agency in their learning. With support from education, they can change their lives and reshape their environments. This provides, we suggest, a reliable basis for challenging those for whom empowerment—even when well-intentioned—is inevitably ‘a strategy for regulating the subjectivities of the “empowered” ... toward an appropriate end’ (Cruikshank, 1999, p. 69). This view, influenced by Foucault (Edwards, 2002; Rose, 1999a, b), and particularly influential under neo-liberalism, sees rule as having become at the same time ‘milder and more humane’ yet ‘more penetrating and compelling’ (Poggi, 2003, p. 40). Even the most active citizens are seen as voluntarily incarcerated, albeit often in comfortable cells to whose design they have contributed (Holford, 2007). We repudiate this thinking, arguing that agency is important—even if constrained: listening to the voices of young adults, especially those deemed ‘vulnerable’, shows that empowerment is a participatory process and that adult education can expand their agency, enabling them to take some control not only over their environment, but also over how they develop as individuals and realise their potential.

Second, we are critical of the current fashion for framing the provision of education and training for adults in the language of ‘markets’. This was prominent in the European Commission’s Call for the research which we undertook; we aped it in our proposal, and in some of our writing, if only to avoid being regarded as eccentric in today’s policy communities. We regard it, however, as dangerous. It tends to reduce policy discussion of what education for the public good might involve to situations of ‘market failure’, expiates ‘policy-makers’ when their efforts come to naught, and plays to corporate capital’s self-serving hubris about technological pseudo-solutions. In the neoliberal world view, markets make adult education responsive to the needs of ordinary people. Rational human beings, faced

with the need to prosper in free markets, will ‘naturally’ demand education and training relevant to finding a job or to improving their career opportunities. Those who wish to study for other purposes—or to investigate other more abstruse subjects—will do so only when they have met these more fundamental needs. (Popular psychological theory, in particular Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, is also prayed in aid of this logic.) It is a short step from this to labelling non-vocational adult education as a mere ‘leisure’ activity, contributing nothing to the public good and unworthy of state support. This is not to argue that the provision of adult education does not involve markets: only that the existence of a market implies nothing about how it works, who benefits from it, or what the public good requires. By and large, adult education markets, in Europe as elsewhere, serve best the better-educated and the more affluent. This ‘Matthew effect’ is well-known and long-established (Blossfeld et al., 2014; Boeren, 2016; Walberg & Tsai, 1983): ‘older adults participate ... at much lower rates, as do adults with low levels of education, low levels of functional literacy, low levels of socio-economic background ..., and also adults who are foreign-born and/or whose native tongue is foreign’ (Desjardins, 2017, p. 190). Enliven research reached similar conclusions, yet uncovered important nuances. Adults with low levels of education seldom see participation in education, even as adults, as ways of improving their life or occupational situation; those with caring responsibilities are less likely to take part in education; there is a close relationship between how complex adults’ jobs or work tasks are and how much they are involved in non-formal education (Cabus et al., 2018). Those taking part in programmes targeted at the most excluded often have ‘cumulative vulnerabilities’, such as addictions, experiences of bullying at school, anxiety, depression, living in areas of low deprivation, and disabilities. At the same time, well-funded programmes using both group and individualised activities (such as counselling, guidance, and placements) can increase participants’ self-confidence and pride in learning, and widen networks, even among the most disadvantaged (Boeren et al., 2019).

Third, we advocate—and take—a critical perspective on the dominant policies and modes of policy-making, in lifelong learning. Policies are made in, and shaped by, their social and ideological environments. By and large, they are made by well-intentioned people, doing their best,

often in difficult circumstances: amid crises, with inadequate and conflicting information, under pressure from politicians, professionals, pressure groups, public, and media. Identifying a good policy (and perhaps still more justifying it to these competing audiences and implementing it well) is hard: a common ‘solution’ is to resort to experts, to legitimise a policy on grounds of its technical superiority. Allocation of tasks ‘to functionaries who have specialized training and who, by constant practice increase their expertise’ was, of course, for Weber (1978, p. 975), a principal merit of bureaucracy. To what extent this makes judgements more ‘rational’ has been endlessly debated; what matters is that, by and large, expertise seems to raise decision-making to a plane above the political. Strategies to ‘depoliticise’ political decisions are, of course, particularly attractive to international organisations, such as the European Commission (Louis & Maertens, 2021), which must navigate the divergent politics of national governments and peoples, without recourse to popular mandate.

A recent incarnation of ‘expertise’ has been ‘evidence-based policy’—strongly encouraged by the European Commission (Pellegrini & Vivianet, 2020). This is ‘a mantra’ (Pautz, 2020) but hardly an unproblematic solution to the challenge of making good policy. As Cairney (2016, p. 27) argues, there is ‘just too much evidence out there for anyone to consider’. The volume of data available to policy-makers today is enormous. Policy-makers have ‘too many problems to pay attention to, too many solutions to consider, and too many choices to make, based on more information that they can process’. And data demand more data: every statistic leads to questioning, to challenge, and to counter-challenge. Policy-makers therefore make ‘a selective use, adopting one specific criterion of efficiency and effectiveness or basing their decision on a particular piece of advice’ (Pabst, 2021, p. 88). It legitimates, partly because it de-politicises. The ‘field of policy-relevant knowledge’, as Colebatch notes, is ‘crowded and rivalrous’, and as with other claims to expert knowledge, being evidence-based ‘is invoked to demonstrate that action has been taken in an appropriate manner: it is part of the performance, not the determinant of the action’ (2018, p. 370). Evidence ‘risks being subordinate to ideology or interest after all’ (Pabst, 2021, p. 88).

We have shown that to develop an Intelligent Decision Support System (IDSS), the nature of the data available to European lifelong learning policy communities would need to be much improved. But we have also shown that an IDSS must be designed for a defined purpose, to address a specific policy issue: when the purpose changes—and in the real world, the problems societies face do change, sometimes radically and unpredictably—new types of data and new technologies of analysis are called for. Thus in our work to develop an IDSS around the needs of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEETs), we found inadequacies in the evaluative data available: addressing these weaknesses would require investment, not least of bureaucratic and professional effort, time, and expertise. But having done so, fundamental difficulties would remain, as others are also recognising. The ‘replication problem’ means ‘a much-tested solution in one context with specific variables does not translate into a policy programme in another context with different demographics or socio-economic factors’ (Pabst, 2021, p. 88). A ‘tyranny of metrics’ (Muller, 2018) gives power to ‘detached researchers and policy-makers at the expense of frontline workers and users’: an ‘over-reliance on data and metrics that are disconnected from the everyday experience of workers and citizens whose needs and interests cannot always be measured or managed’ (Pabst, 2021, p. 88).

When priorities and public values change, mechanisms which may once have ‘worked’ become dysfunctional—as famously with ‘payment by results’ in the schools of Victorian England (Jabbar, 2013; Midgley, 2016; Simon, 1965), when, over a couple of decades, the priority for education shifted from ‘basic literacy and numeracy ... to strengthen[ing] moral character and patriotism’ (Midgley, 2016, p. 697). We have seen evidence of significant shifts in European policy understandings of key terms over the last quarter century. So far as young adults are concerned, for instance, transition to the labour market has displaced personal and civic development (see Chap. 3)—with the notion of ‘vulnerability’ emerging as a particular concern. We may question whether this is wise, but such shifts throw considerable doubt on vaunting optimism that artificial intelligence could ‘foster policies ... which deliver the desired results’ (Federighi, 2013, p. 89).

There is, moreover, the question of ethics. As a recent critique of ‘evidence-based policy’ comments, policies ‘concerned with enhancing social justice or welfare require qualitative and other forms of evidence’ and ‘involve philosophical reasoning or ethical judgement’:

Different concepts of justice underpin what we value individually and as groups, and they shape the way public policy decides between competing interests. Evidence-based policy either implicitly assumes a particular conception of justice focused on rights or utility, or else it is silent on these core questions. (Pabst, 2021, p. 89)

To take just one example—among many—from the Enliven research, we have seen (Chap. 5) that a recent EU policy document represents low-skilled young people as a problem but treats the labour market and employers as an exogenous force with needs that must be fulfilled. Pabst argues that ‘normative theories and concepts are needed to join up decision-making and improve public policy’ (2021, p. 89); we agree.

We do not, of course, dispute that policy must be based on evidence. Our argument is that the evidence base should be deeper and more informed by voices from across European society. The complexities of governance in the European Union present particular problems for the development and implementation of lifelong learning policies. The ‘actors’ in European public policy formation and implementation are innumerable, varied, and located at levels from the international (European), through national and regional, to local communities. At each level, they act within and through a range of institutions; these also vary between (and often within) member states. These present massive challenges of co-ordination, and of a policy’s achieving anything approaching uniform application. Even in policy implementation, institutions and actors are not neutral transmission belts: they respond, adapt, and challenge in ways that may be both functional and dysfunctional to the policy aims. (The problems of ‘parking and creaming’, discussed in Chap. 4, are a case in point.) Democratic societies and democratic institutions, however, rely on challenge and opposition: that is the base—by no means undisputed—of their claim to technical (as opposed to

normative) superiority over authoritarian systems of government. What matters is that discussion and disagreement are well-informed.

Such thinking may have contributed to the long-forgotten white paper on *European Governance* (Commission of the European Communities, 2001); it may have played into early optimism around the Open Method of Co-ordination (Hingel, 2001) and the democratic nature of a European 'educational space' (Lawn, 2006; Nóvoa & Lawn, 2002). It certainly played a part in discussions within the Enliven team as to whom we should imagine the 'end-users' of the IDSS to be: crudely, bureaucrats, capitalists, or citizens? The very widespread use, almost universally uncritically, of the term 'policy-makers'—an elite of which 'we, the people' are not part—represents an unconscious acceptance that the citizens can never hope genuinely to shape the policies to which their lives are subject. No adult educator can accept this proposition, however: the essence of adult education is the construction of an 'educated and participating democracy' (Williams, 1961).

Fourth, we have paid special attention to inequalities in participation in adult education and have argued for the need to listen to the voices of those most excluded. Evidence of the need for a more educated democracy is to be found, of course, in the rise of authoritarian and 'populist' political movements and leaders. These currently threaten human rights and freedoms, the stability and effectiveness of parliamentary governance, and the 'rule of law', in Europe as across the globe. They have also destabilised the entire European project: 'Brexit' is only the most substantial of a continuing series of challenges. A key contributor to this is intensifying inequality (Arnorsson & Zoega, 2018; Engler & Weisstanner, 2020; Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Piketty, 2014; Solt, 2012), in which pervasive new technologies are a powerful factor. The Enliven research has not only given voice to the excluded but pointed to how adult education can be strengthened to address some of its effects, particularly on young adults. One of the key features of adult education almost everywhere is the tendency for opportunities to be taken up disproportionately by the already well-educated (or, what is often effectively the same, the already relatively affluent). In Chaps. 4, 5, 6, and 7, and throughout Part III, we have deepened understanding of the nature and causes of these inequalities, exploring the determinants at individual, institutional, and system levels.

We have given particular attention to dimensions such as gender and workplace technologies. In Chap. 7, we showed how different kinds of inquiry are needed to explore the complexities of how adult education interacts with empowerment for individuals and groups, and how the capability approach can contribute to this. The finding that adult education has a greater empowerment effect for learners with low educational levels than among those with medium and higher educational levels is remarkably important. In Chap. 4, we have also pointed to some of the ways these problems might be overcome: specifically, and in line with our thinking about the importance of agency, through engaging adult learners in shaping the programmes intended to help them.

Fifth, we emphasise the overwhelming importance of work, workplaces, and labour markets in adults' learning. Our approach is novel. We stress—our focus particularly in Part III—not so much that education and training are important for skills and efficiency at work and for career success, but that work is central to adults' learning. Most learning at work is informal. Paid work brings income and social status—high, middling, or low. It contributes powerfully to adults' identities, friendships, social networks, and social capital. Without it, they are not only poorer financially (though welfare—or inherited wealth—may ameliorate this); they are also typically diminished in other ways. One of these is what and how much they learn, because so much learning takes place in and around employment.

We need, therefore, to discuss workplace learning not simply—as is the norm—in terms of the provision of education and training for working people to develop skills and knowledge for improved performance. Adults learn *at* work, not just *for* work; and while some of what they learn at work will help them at work, much will also help them in other aspects of their lives. Learning in one domain of life 'spills over' into others (Holford & van der Veen, 2006, p. 76). For young adults, participation in communities of practice means they adopt and contribute to standards of professionalism. They gain 'organisational citizenship' and, in doing so, also take on some responsibility for the nature of the organisation itself. They are confronted with problems on a daily base; they have to choose whether to take the 'line of the least resistance' or to stand up for what they think right or necessary. They become members of a trade or

profession, perhaps of a trade union or professional association, and thereby develop specific kinds of knowledge; they become aware of policies that help or harm their field of work.

If we think of learning at work as involving making right or wrong choices, developing and defending norms of professionalism, speaking up, we see that learning for production and citizenship are not separate, but symbiotically related. The workplace is a key space where we act as citizens, and where we learn to do so. This is profoundly important for young adults, because how their work is organised shapes what they learn about citizenship. Some will learn how effective ‘speaking up’ can be—and how to do so effectively; others, finding it pointless, even risky, may learn the virtues of silence. ‘Exit’ may seem necessary for their personal survival or growth. They may translate what they learn into other areas of their lives; or—denied learning they find meaningful at work—they may seek compensation in other places. None of this detracts from our argument that richer and broader adult education provision across society is essential to personal growth, and to democracy and civil society: rather, given the realities of social exclusion and inequality in work and in adult learning, it makes that argument more urgent.

How organisations are structured, and what their cultures are like, shape the learning opportunities their employees have. That workplace learning environments can be ‘expansive’ or ‘restrictive’ is well established (Felstead et al., 2009; Fuller et al., 2004; Fuller & Unwin, 2003), though studied chiefly for its impact on learning *for* work and production. If jobs are narrowly defined, workers’ opportunities to contribute to innovation are limited; they may be seen as barriers to change, in need of tighter regulation and control. Many organisations (even those genuinely concerned to encourage employee learning) seem unaware of how much this matters—and of their capacity to show ‘agency’, making decisions in the interests of their staff. In an effective ‘learning society’ (Commission of the European Communities, 1995), employers will structure their organisations to offer expansive informal—as well as formal and non-formal—learning opportunities. Neither they nor policy-makers should be mesmerised by the ‘innovation imaginary’: it is not only high-technology, creative, innovative products and production that can be organised to offer rich learning opportunities to workers. And

public policy needs to find ways of ensuring employers offer rich learning opportunities for all workers.

We have been able to reach these conclusions—and to draw them together—through our underpinning methodology. This has been both complex and, we believe, innovative. It has used mixed methods, bringing together both qualitative and quantitative data from documentary sources, from semi-structured interviews, and from large international datasets such as the Adult Learning Survey and the European Social Survey. It has combined organisational and institutional case studies with innovative methodologies such as the policy trail and provided new insights into the complex ways in which European lifelong learning policy is formed, implemented, and plays out in the lives of young adults.

We conclude, then, with a renewed assertion of the importance of a rich and broad education throughout the lives of adults, young, and not-so-young. This is essential if they are to flourish as individuals. It involves recognising that working life can be a source of empowering knowledge—though also that, far too often, it limits or diminishes people's potential. Creating structures that support such rich and broad lifelong education is fundamental to building strong European democracies and vibrant economies, to countering social exclusion, and to embedding informed, intelligent decision-making and creativity among the peoples of the continent.

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# Appendix 1: A Note on the Enliven Project

The Enliven project was active between October 2016 and September 2019. It was supported by the European Commission (through the Research Executive Agency) under Grant Agreement 693989. The partners institutions were: the University of Nottingham, UK; the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium; the University of Deusto, Spain; the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences' Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge; the Slovak Academy of Sciences' Centre of Social and Psychological Sciences (Institute of Forecasting); the University of Edinburgh, UK; 3s Research & Consulting, Vienna, Austria; Tallinn University, Estonia; the University of Verona, Italy; and the University of Melbourne, Australia. We also acknowledge, with thanks, generous contributions made by research colleagues at Aarhus and Aalborg universities in Denmark. The University of Nottingham team included members from both the School of Education (responsible, *inter alia*, for overall project co-ordination) and the School of Computer Science.

The project's aims were to:

- Map and critically assess key elements of programmes implemented at EU, national and regional levels to support access to and participation in adult learning among excluded population groups and those at risk of social exclusion, assess how these have addressed disadvantage, inequality, and social exclusion, helped overcome barriers to participation, and in what ways participation in education and training benefits the social and economic inclusion of population groups suffering from exclusion and cumulative disadvantage;
- Assess the impact of 'system characteristics' (of initial and adult education, the labour market, the economy, and social protection) on aggregate participation rates (overall, and in various segments of adult education markets), and on the distribution of participation (with special reference to disadvantaged young adults and using gender-sensitive approaches);
- Assess the role of lifelong learning in developing a productive, efficient, and competitive economy through investigating what learning potential and innovation ability exists within workplaces, what organisational models favour innovation ability and innovative oriented training, and how effective learning actions are;
- Identify and map the nature and availability of data about adult and lifelong learning, and integrate these with new research findings from across the ENLIVEN project and, using data mining, establish a knowledge base for the development of an Intelligent Decision Support System to support policy making;
- Design and implement an IDSS, and test how this could adapt to new knowledge and learn from restoring users' experience interactively.

The project's work was organised in a series of 'work packages'. Three of these explored policies and programmes, using mainly qualitative methods; one used statistical methods to examine the determinants of adult participation in learning, drawing on large scale data-sets obtained from Eurostat; two looked at the relationship between organisational structure, quality of work, and young workers' learning in workplaces, using detailed organisational case studies; and one used case studies to

explore the role of social movement activism in young workers' learning and institutional change. Finally, two concerned themselves with knowledge discovery for, and development of, an Intelligent Decision Support System to support policy making, using case-based reasoning techniques.

These disparate elements were overseen by a management board, comprising the research team leader from each of the partner institutions. Far more important at the level of daily practice, however, were periodic meetings of the entire team in person (roughly every nine months) and more frequent *ad hoc* meetings of the groups engaged on specific work packages. These achieved a level of effective interaction and allowed for the exchange of ideas and perspectives as well as discussion of research application and of problems encountered. In addition, Dr Sharon Clancy, Senior Research Officer with the University of Nottingham co-ordination team, regularly met individually with each partner institution's team leader. These meetings were particularly effective in alerting the co-ordinator to emerging and potential issues, findings, and problems.

Behind the 'front-line' research work were various mechanisms designed to ensure that our work was relevant to, and to a degree shaped by, 'end-users' of various kinds. Particularly important for this were 'youth panels', one in each participating country, and consisting of young adults recruited through different youth organisations to provide a 'critical voice'; and an 'advisory board' involving leading figures in the worlds of adult learning policy and research in Europe and North America.

The project's research plans were submitted for approval through the research ethics procedures, and in accordance with regulations and guidelines, in the participating countries. This was particularly important as several of the work packages involved observation of, and interviews with, young adults. As there were differences in rules and procedures across the various participating countries, this was bureaucratically complex and time-consuming, but all required approvals were secured.

Data collected for the project were deposited in the UK Data Archive (<https://www.data-archive.ac.uk/>). Material that could be fully anonymised is available on open access; where participants or organisations might be identified (e.g. in interview recordings and in some transcripts), access is restricted in line with our ethical policy and the Data Archive's guidelines.

# Appendix 2: Key Features of Enterprises Studied in Research on Learning Organisations

## Adult Education Sector (Austria, Italy, Slovakia, and the United Kingdom)

### Austria: AT1

The adult education provider AT1 was founded more than 130 years ago and is one of the most traditional organisations in the field of general adult education in Austria. In the pioneer phase between 1887 and 1910, four associations promoting adult education were founded in Vienna, addressing different target groups (working class/bourgeois participants). After the First World War, a period of consolidation started with numerous new adult education associations emerging, and this also took place in the other federal states of Austria. After 1945, a fresh start was made. Since the early 1990s, local centres of the organisation have been among the pioneer providers of adult basic education. The case study pertains to a central unit responsible for adult basic education, founded in 2012 in response to a new large-scale funding programme, organising the related activity across the whole city. In 2018, the unit employed close to one hundred adult basic education teachers and provided more than 200 courses.

## Austria: AT2

AT2 is an adult education provider, located in the centre of a regional capital in Austria. It was founded in 1987 and is a well-established organisation in the regional field of adult education today and a pioneer in the field of adult basic education in Austria. The organisation has its origins in social movement organisations in the field of human rights and the self-organisation of unemployed (or precariously employed) graduates from universities in the field of education and similar disciplines. It started as a small organisation with fewer than ten employees in the 1990s, mainly providing German language courses for migrants, and evolved into a professional, continuously growing organisation with about 200 employees, offering diverse programmes for education, training, and labour market integration for adults. The organisation defines itself as an intercultural and independent non-profit organisation. It develops projects for disadvantaged target groups, mainly migrants and refugees, (long-term) unemployed people, and individuals with low basic skills. Its philosophy aims for equal opportunities in society and the labour market, alongside equity and inclusion and human rights, and anti-discrimination towards migrants and refugees.

## Italy: IT1

IT1 manages the University of the Third Age and Available Time (UTETD) (founded in 1979) across a province. UTETD aims at helping, through training, cultural and social promotion and social participation, the establishment of stronger links with the local community and environment for all adults aged over 35 (although the learners' average age is around 65). The particularity of this case study at national level lies in the high number of participants, the model of diffusion within the territory (it is organised in 78 locations) and in the circumstance that all the teachers are paid. The organisation is characterised by offering services built with a view to social innovation for citizens, professionals, private social institutions and organisations, as well as providing the province (in particular its Social Policy Department) with consultancy and evaluation of social policies.

## Italy: IT2

IT2 is a training organization active across a whole regional territory. It is linked to the Confederation of Italian Cooperatives (Confcooperative)—the main organisation, by number of companies (19,000), persons employed (528,000) and turnover (€66 billion), which represents, assists, and protects the cooperative movement and Italian social enterprises. More than 3.3 million members are represented by Confcooperative. Founded in 1919, Confcooperative is inspired by the social doctrine of the Church (Art. 1 of the Statute). Its aims are the promotion, organisation, development, coordination, and regulation of cooperative and mutual organisations and social enterprises. It is present throughout the country with 22 regional unions, 37 provincial, 11 interprovincial. It also has an office in Brussels; this deals mainly with political lobbying activities, organisation of training/information initiatives, communication of current EU issues, and support to European planning.

## Slovakia: SK1

SK1 is a small company, serving mainly company clients, and specialising in soft skills training, coaching, outdoor training, team building, various assessments, consultation, and applied research. Established in the 1990s, it now has three offices across Slovakia, 12 permanent employees, mostly trainers, and about 10 external trainers. Roles and responsibilities are loosely defined; employees are encouraged to participate in decision making and to strengthen their intrinsic motivation and engagement. Trainers are responsible for all non-routine tasks occurring during classes and for class preparation, including support activities. It prefers trainers to cover a full portfolio of activities and to be flexible on performing other tasks. Early Career Workers (ECWs) are introduced by a procedure of job-shadowing and participating in training delivery as co-trainers. Given its small size and flat hierarchy, no formal career pathways are outlined. It has a top-down and semi-restrictive approach to innovation. The organisation provides external training opportunities for its employees only exceptionally, emphasising specifically developed internal training sessions for trainers during their early years of professional practice.

## Slovakia: SK2

SK2 offers services for all levels of company management through education and training activities, diagnostic, analytical, and advisory services, as well as the development and creation of support materials and tools for education and training. Established in the early 1990s, and headquartered in a regional town in central Slovakia, several of its external partners operate throughout the country. It has a small core of four full-time employees but also employs about 150 trainers, experts and co-workers. It has a strong preference for professionally trained people. Labour turnover is considered low. New experts are hired when additional demands are articulated by customers and/or to provide new teaching areas. The process of teaching and managing the courses is standardised: trainers are hired to cover specific areas, and new staff are typically hired when new areas of training arise. Trainers enjoy discretion in how to deliver their courses but have no involvement in course organisation; teaching and other tasks are kept strictly separate. Trainers are responsible for all non-routine tasks occurring during classes; class preparation is supported by technical staff; procedures and routines are in place. Early career workers undergo an induction period. SK2's goal is to innovate continuously; this includes new forms of delivery such as blended learning. However, the owner selects and engages employees for innovation activities.

## United Kingdom: UK1

UK1 is a general Further Education (FE) college in a medium-sized town in the East Midlands of England. FE Colleges provide technical and professional education and training for young people, adults, and employers. They prepare students primarily for work, with a view to helping them develop their career opportunities, whilst also playing a role in strengthening the local, regional, and national economy. Until 1993, Further Education colleges were under the aegis of local education authorities (LEAs). Following the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, FE colleges were 'incorporated' given full financial 'independence', and removed from LEA control. With approximately 600 employees, UK1 shares many features of Mintzberg's Professional Organisation type, with certified teachers at its productive core, a comparatively small management structure, and an extended support staff specialising in various functions. Until 2017, it was one of the largest FE colleges in the country; since then, a series of financial problems, culminating in the long-term principal's departure, it has lost over 200 staff.

## United Kingdom: UK2

UK2 is an Institution for Adult Learning (IAL), one of four adult residential colleges remaining at the time of the research. All are independently constituted charities, offering short and long-term residential courses, both non-vocational and skills-based. Their residential nature makes them now unique in British further and adult education. They are situated in buildings of historic importance—former stately homes or ‘listed’ buildings. Some have been in operation since late nineteenth or early twentieth century; they have long and experimental histories, many developing in the early and mid-twentieth century in response to social and political shifts which brought growing demands for emancipatory education for working people. The colleges have a strong ethos of social justice and supporting ‘second chance’ learners. UK2 is relatively small, with only 45 staff. Although in existence since 1909, most of the previous staff team left after 2016, when the current principal came into post. It is therefore organisationally ‘young’ and evolving; and it is by necessity responsive to trends and adept at responding flexibly to policy and demographic shifts.

## Machinery/Metals Sector (Bulgaria and Spain)

### Spain: ES1

ES1, founded in the 1950s, is a cooperative enterprise located in a town in the Basque Country. This company belongs to a group within the Basque machine tool sector, manufacturing grinding machines, lathes, and band saws. Employed members formally own the firm and are consulted on important management decisions. It has about 450 employees. Today the company has a turnover of €135 million, exports more than 90% of its production, and has a presence in 12 countries. Half of the workforce is highly qualified; 29% is dedicated to research activities. Reflecting the cooperative’s goal to provide life-long employment to its employed co-owners, job turnover is very low. The job positions are flexible; there are no descriptions or narrow definitions of the jobs in the contracts. New entrants have a probationary period of four years before moving to a permanent position and being allowed to apply for full membership. Innovation is at the heart of the organisation’s economic strategy, with practically every project requiring further innovation activities to be implemented, and practically all employees taking part in innovation activities as part of their project work.

## Spain: ES2

ES2 is a cooperative enterprise in the machine tool sector with 221 employees and a turnover of €55 million. Founded in 1962, it is part of the machine tool division of one of the most important European holding companies. It has a mandatory (para-) professional qualification structure; most recognised workers teach others, acting as mentors. There is no detailed division of work, but employees' occupations are differentiated. Two types of employees are perceived: those with more routine tasks and more direct contact with machines; and others with less defined tasks. With little strongly routine work, workers learn on a day-to-day basis. Career pathways usually involve an initial period of one year on a temporary contract; after this, they become partners, but on a two-year contract. At the beginning of their fourth year, they normally become indefinite partners. Workers in the probationary period have periodic supervision and are given feedback to improve: 95% become permanent. ES2 selects expert workers to mentor and train new staff and prepare manuals. There are also courses and other training activities for employees. Internal training is particularly emphasised; the company invests in CVT courses and services and pays course fees. The total cost of assessors, examiners, and external trainers to support internal courses was €94,300 in 2016; 140 employees participated in a total of 4147 hours of training in paid work time. Technical and language training are supported, as well as courses focussed on improving work skills.

## Bulgaria: BG1

BG1 is a medium-sized private for-profit company, specialising in producing small series metal details for larger European companies (mainly metal products, with some mechatronics). Founded in the early 1990s by three engineers and situated in a town in South-Western Bulgaria, it has about 200 employees and is expanding. The company experienced difficulties during its first decade, but in 1998 invested in second-hand CNC (Computerized Numerical Control) technology and, with gradual technological modernisation, became more competitive. Its business strategy involves diversifying its clientele. Manufacturing sector employees' educational levels are not high: while formal vocational qualification is considered important, many new recruits have no relevant qualification or prior experience and are trained on site. BG1 has narrowly defined jobs with limited job ladders. Production employees specialise on specific machines; programming very simple operations and adjusting machines is seen as innovation. The recruitment process

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is not formalised: both advertising and word of mouth are used. Career pathways are limited. New employees are attached to experienced workers for about six months; after this, there is no formal examination, but new employees' work is monitored by management. Many staff experience no career development; some move to more complex machines; few climb to become a line or shift manager. No formalised HRD is in place for ECWs. Key HRM decisions are taken by the owners. For a long time, the company emphasised learning on-the-job: with no formal knowledge management system, experienced workers and first-tier managers transmitted knowledge to newcomers. However, the workplace learning model recently became more formalised, combining theory- and practice-orientated training, led by internal and external trainers (depending on skills available in the company). At first, formal training was voluntary and held partly during working time and partly during free time; in total, training amounted to about 80 hours. A training centre is the first step towards developing a specific training culture. Training is not connected with systematic evaluation of learning needs; there are no mechanisms for its validation; but it is taken into account in career development and wage formation.

## Bulgaria: BG2

BG2, a subsidiary of a multinational that is one of the global leaders in its field, specialises in production of metal hydraulic cylinders. Its forerunner, a state-owned company founded in the early 1970s, was privatised after 1989 via a privatisation fund. In 2003, BG2 was sold to a foreign investor. It is situated in a village in South-Eastern Bulgaria and had (in 2018) more than 700 employees. Since 2003, it has experienced continuous growth in production, turn-over and personnel. BG2 is now one of the world's largest hydraulic cylinder manufacturers. There is no preference for vocationally or professionally trained workers. The company's philosophy is that a person does not need a specific education for a new job, even in management—what is needed is to show potential for the role. Labour turnover is relatively small because the company is one of the few in the sector in the area and offers better conditions than other firms in the manufacturing sector. BG2 has a systematic conception of the core competences and training required for each job. Management aims to train employees to adjust the machines and undertake some elementary programming. Work tasks for employees are distributed by foremen before a shift starts. Most employees work a three shift system, though in some sections there are only two. Some

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recruitment is by spontaneous application, but recruitment agencies are also used. Career development pathways provide numerous examples of vertical or horizontal mobility. Newly recruits have a six-month probation and then, depending on performance, move to permanent contracts. The most frequent career move is from worker to master. One of BG2's biggest innovations is the transfer of its headquarters' organisational and learning culture (focusing on organisation, leadership and soft skills) to local areas. Local HRM has considerable autonomy. Over the years, learning practices have changed from more informal and on-the-job training, formalising training practices for newly hired workers, opening a modern training centre in 2017, and engaging in training and dual apprenticeships (BG2 is a pioneer in establishing dual apprenticeships in Bulgaria). There is also a Fellowship Program for high school students, mainly in technical specialisms. The new on-site training centre caters for both employees (technically orientated sessions, soft skills, managerial and leadership competencies) and school pupils. It also offers language training.

## Retail Sector (Belgium, Denmark, Estonia)

### Belgium: BE1

BE1 is a major privately owned, for-profit, supermarket in the retail sector (grocery subsector). In 2018, it had about 10,000 employees, with sites all over Belgium; the chain has a dominant market share. It started as a wholesaler in the 1950s, expanding to retail in the 1960s. For a career in management, a higher education qualification is mandatory. For store employees, hiring favours competences over degrees; this limits the status of occupational qualifications in work organisation. Employees have detailed role descriptions with defined competences and requirements but are encouraged to be as autonomous as possible. Sales clerks have to be multi-skilled and to execute all the different tasks in across the divisions in a store but have no management responsibilities. Much training takes place in the first six months. Afterward training opportunities often happen on a learning-by-doing basis. Employees also have access to an online learning platform from which to choose different training modules; job rotation in other stores is also possible.

## Belgium: BE2

BE2 is a well-established large supermarket chain in Belgium's grocery sub-sector. The site studied was founded in the 1980s and is located in a medium-sized city in Flanders. The company employs about 75 employees locally; overall, the chain has a large market share. Store managers are responsible for HRM issues; for instance, they hire store clerks at locally. Vocational qualifications are not a requirement for new store clerks, but good basic skills are required. The store often hires young people who tried but failed higher education or immigrants whose qualifications are not recognised in Belgium. People with higher qualifications are not excluded, although over-qualification is seen as bringing a higher risk of leaving the company.

## Denmark: DK1

DK1 is a privately owned, for-profit, major hypermarket and part of a chain with sites all over Denmark, primarily in larger cities. Established in 1970, the chain is dominant in the country's retail sector, claiming to be its most profitable major company (€227 million profit on a turnover of €7.9 billion in 2018). The group employed 50,500 staff in 2018 (approximately 27,500 full-time equivalents). With about 650 employees (full- and part-time) in total and 28,800 square meters, DK1 is the second largest hypermarket in Denmark. It employs both unskilled and skilled workers of all ages; workers have mainly low qualifications. The age structure fluctuates, but on average 70% are below the age of 25, 25% are aged 26-54, and 5% more than 55. The firm conforms to occupational training standards for young employees, but—alongside standardised occupational profiles—prefers its own neo-Tayloristic principles in the organisation of work. For early career workers, career pathways follow separate tracks: some preparing for management positions and/or long-term employment; others with few options for development or long-term employment. The company has a fully developed HRD and training section and runs its own centralised learning and training facility. However, the emphasis is on informal learning, resulting in low formal and non-formal training activity for early career workers, apart from formal apprenticeships.

## Estonia: EE1

EE1 is an Estonian subsidiary of a Scandinavian cooperative retail chain. It holds a strong and established position in the Estonian retail industry, having operated in the Estonian market for about 20 years. It is situated mainly in Tallinn (the capital) but operates also elsewhere; it has 800 employees (approx.), 72% of whom have been with EE1 more than 2 years, and only 5% are under 25 years old and have less experience. HRM is a separate unit at the supermarket's head office and has sole responsibility for hiring and educating new employees. There is no preference for vocationally or professionally trained staff; vocational education is perceived as out-of-date, so new employees are regarded as novices without any experience ('blank sheets') who must learn their skills in-house and with on-the-job training. This may be peculiar to EE1, which—a newcomer to Estonia and perceived as applying more innovative and fairer practices across its operations, especially when compared with new entrepreneurs—became a preferred target for professional staff. With few staff with the right mix of skills available, previous experience, and qualifications have no importance in hiring—the right attitudes and values are deemed essential instead.

## Estonia: EE2

EE2 is one of the oldest and largest retail groups in Estonia, having been in business for over a century. It is a consumer cooperative, with nearly 80,000 client-owners. It belongs to an international network of cooperative enterprises, each a quasi-autonomous entity with a regional site. The largest food retailer across the country with 350 shops, EE2 has approximately 4,800 employees. Formally, hiring personnel is the prerogative of the Human Resources department, but *de facto* store managers choose whom to hire or promote. Employees' average age is reported as 55 years, partly owing to the company's long history and partly to a sense of social responsibility to the local community stemming from the cooperative nature of the enterprise. Vocational qualifications play some role with new hires, but seniority rather than qualifications or levels of skill determines pay and career advancement opportunities. New employees work independently but under the supervision of a superior or mentor, with whom they occasionally consult. Since EE2 is older than EE1, surviving through the Soviet era, the change in business practices has been incremental; some of the staff have remained with EE2 over time.

# Appendix 3: Members of the Enliven Research and Administrative Team and Advisory Board

## Research and Administrative Team

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**University of Melbourne:** Shelley Gillis, Gosia Klatt, John Polese.

**University of Verona:** Federica Corvaglia, Marcella Milana, Gabriella Monaco, Francesca Rapanà, Sandra Vatrella.

**Others:** Ulrik Brandt (Aarhus University), Anne Larson (Aarhus University), Palle Rasmussen (Aalborg University).

## Enliven Advisory Board

Richard Desjardins, Gina Ebner, Philippe Pochet, Kjell Rubenson, Sir Alan Tuckett, Carlos Vargas Tamez.

## Appendix 4: Enliven Research Reports and Policy Briefs

The reports and policy briefs listed below can be accessed on both the Enliven website (<https://h2020enliven.org/>) and the European Commission's Cordis website (<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/693989>).

### Research Reports

- D. 1.1. Concepcion Maiztegui-Oñate, Triin Roosalu, Alvaro Moro, Marti Taru, Elena Tuparevska, Rosa Santibáñez, & Josu Solabarrieta (2019). *Report on utilisation of lifelong learning policies and funding schemes promoting social and economic inclusion of vulnerable groups in EU and Australia*. Deusto: University of Deusto. (195 pp.)
- D. 1.2 Concepción Maiztegui-Oñate, Alvaro Moro, Josu Solabarrieta, Triin Roosalu, Marti Taru, & Rosa Santibáñez (2020). *Report on successful educational programmes (based on national case studies)*. Deusto: University of Deusto. (139 pp.)
- D. 2.1 Ellen Boeren, Susan Whittaker, & Sheila Riddell (2017) *Provision of seven types of education for (disadvantaged) adults in ten countries:*

- overview and cross-country comparison*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh. (344 pp.)
- D. 3.3 Anne Larson, Marcella Milana, Gosia Klatt, Miroslava Klemptova, Heidi Knipprath, Palle Rasmussen, Ivana Studena, Marti Taru, & Sandra Vatrella (2019). *Report on the use of PIAAC in informing policy in selected countries*. Verona: University of Verona. (160 pp.)
- D. 4.1 Sofie Cabus, Petya Ilieva-Trichkova, & Miroslav Štefánik (2018) *Analytical report of the associations between system characteristics and lifelong learning participation with particular concern for disadvantaged groups and youth at risk of exclusion*. Leuven: KU Leuven. (85 pp.)
- D. 4.2 Sofie Cabus, Petya Ilieva-Trichkova, & Miroslav Štefánik (2019) *Report on the Associations between System Characteristics and Participation in Learning Activities based on Work Status, Educational Levels, Goal and Field of Learning Activity*. Leuven: KU Leuven. (53 pp.)
- D. 5.1 Maite Aurrekoetxea-Casaus, Ulrik Brandi, Sharon Clancy, Jolien De Norre, Kathleen De Rick, Fernando Díez Ruiz, Iciar Elexpuru-Albizuri, Ana Isabel Estevez Gutierrez, Denisa Fedakova, Günter Hefler, Alesia Khadatovich, Vassil Kirov, Heidi Knipprath, Francesca Rapanà, Maaris Raudsepp, Triin Roosalu, Josu Solabarrieta Eizaguirre, Eva Steinheimer, Ivana Studena, Lourdes Villardón Gallego, Gabriel Weibl, Janine Wulz, & Gabriela Yordanova (2020). *Cross-sector and cross-country comparative report on organisational structuration of early careers*. Vienna: 3s. (187 pp.)
- D. 6.1 Maite Aurrekoetxea-Casaus, Ulrik Brandi, Sharon Clancy, Jolien De Norre, Kathleen De Rick, Fernando Díez Ruiz, Iciar Elexpuru-Albizuri, Ana Isabel Estevez Gutierrez, Denisa Fedakova, Günter Hefler, Alesia Khadatovich, Vassil Kirov, Heidi Knipprath, Francesca Rapanà, Maaris Raudsepp, Triin Roosalu, Josu Solabarrieta Eizaguirre, Eva Steinheimer, Ivana Studena, Lourdes Villardón Gallego, Gabriel Weibl, Janine Wulz, & Gabriela Yordanova. *Agency in workplace learning of young adults in intersection with their evolving life structure*. Vienna: 3s. (149 pp.)
- D. 7.1 Günter Hefler, Eva Steinheimer, & Janine Wulz (2017) *Literature review on initiatives to improve early career conditions across EU member states*. Vienna: 3s. (64 pp.)

- D. 7.2 Maite Aurrekoetxea Casaus, Edurne Bartolome Peral, Ivana Studená, Günter Hefler, Eva Steinheimer, & Janine Wulz (2019). *Comparative report on organisational case studies in recently founded, youth-led social movement organisations (SMO) in WP7 in three countries (ES, SK, AT). Including three country reports*. Vienna: 3s. (95 pp.)
- D. 8.1 Rong Qu, Claire Palmer, Jason Atkin, Bob John, Sharon Clancy, & Ellen Boeren (2020) *Knowledge base of cases represented in unified formats, and measured by similarity measures for each type of participating country*. Nottingham: University of Nottingham. (52 pp.)
- D. 8.2 Jérémie Clos & Claire Palmer (2020) *Data Mining in the ENLIVEN Project*. Nottingham: University of Nottingham. (46 pp.)
- D. 9.1 Jérémie Clos (2019) *The Architecture of the ENLIVEN Intelligent Decision Support System*. Nottingham: University of Nottingham. (28 pp.)

*Note: D. refers to the report's number as a 'deliverable' under the project's contract with the European Commission; deliverables which were not research reports are not listed above.*

## Policy Briefs

1. Sofie Cabus, Petya Ilieva-Trichkova & Miroslav Štefánik (2020) *Barriers to adult participation in lifelong learning in a European policy context*. Leuven: KU Leuven.
2. Sofie Cabus (2020) *Good access to adult education and training accelerates economic growth*. Leuven: KU Leuven.
3. Rong Qu & Claire Palmer (2020) *Decision support for policy makers: Building an intelligent system with coherent knowledge of diverse lifelong learning interventions in EU countries*. Nottingham: University of Nottingham.
4. Concepción Maiztegui-Oñate, Triin Rosalu, Rosa Santibáñez, Alvaro Moro (2020) *The construction of target groups in lifelong learning policies*.
5. Ellen Boeren (2020) *Adult education for adults with cumulative disadvantages: insights for policy-makers*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh.

6. Marcella Milana (2020) *How PIAAC data influences public debates in six EU member states through the national press*. Verona: University of Verona.
7. Günter Hefler & Eva Steinheimer (2020) *Bringing the organisation back in: 'Organisational agency' in workplace learning*. Vienna: 3s.
8. Günter Hefler & Eva Steinheimer (2020) *Early career workers' agency in workplace learning*. Vienna: 3s.
9. Günter Hefler, Eva Steinheimer & Janine Wulz (2020) *Learning in the struggle: Social movement organisations fighting for improved employment conditions*. Vienna: 3s.
10. Rong Qu (2020) *Decision support for policy makers: An intelligent system with coherent knowledge of diverse lifelong learning interventions in EU countries*. Nottingham: University of Nottingham.
11. John Holford & Sharon Clancy (2020) *Adult Education, Inequality, Exclusion, & the Potential of Artificial Intelligence: Policy messages for the UK*. Nottingham: University of Nottingham.
12. Sofie Cabus (2020) *Over de Invloed van de Veranderende Arbeidsmarkt door Digitalisering op Onderwijs en Training van Volwassenen*. Leuven: KU Leuven.
13. Concepción Maiztegui, Itziar Elexpuru, Lourdes Villardón, Alvaro Moro (2020) *Educacion de adultos: politicas y programas*. Bilbao: University of Deusto.
14. Пепка Бояджиева, Петя Илиева-Тричкова, Румяна Стоилова, Васил Киров, Габриела Йорданова, Диана Ненкова (2020) *Образование на възрастни, насочено към хора от уязвими групи в България: предизвикателства и възможности*. Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge.
15. Alan Mackie, Ellen Boeren, & Sheila Riddell (2020) *Post-School Education for Marginalised Young People: Evidence from Scotland*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh.
16. Günter Hefler, Eva Steinheimer & Janine Wulz (2020) *Erwachsene in der Berufsbildung – Ansätze eines Systems des „Lernens im Erwachsenenalter“*. Vienna: 3s.

17. Marcella Milana, Francesca Rapanà (2020) *Giovani adulti e vulnerabilità: necessità di una presa in carico globale*. Verona: University of Verona.
18. Ivana Studená (2020) *Prekážky, príležitosti, individualizované opatrenia a nástroje pre zvyšovanie možností zvyšovania zručností*. Bratislava: Slovak Academy of Sciences, Centre of Social and Psychological Sciences.
19. Triin Roosalu (2020) *Edendades elukestvat õpet ärksama ja kaasavama Euroopa heaks: rahvusvahelise uurimisprojekti tulemusi*. Tallinn: Tallinn University.

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<sup>1</sup>Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

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