Work Package 2

Framework for the Analyses of Learning Outcomes in Europe

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Report with Sites Selection

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Executive summary

The European funded research project *Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe. A Multi-Level Analysis of (Under-)Achievement in the Life Course* (CLEAR) is focusing the factors that affect the quality of learning outcomes across European regions. CLEAR perceives learning outcomes as a result of manifold intersecting factors and people and seeks to study them in a mixed-method, multi-level research study based on empirical and comparative analyses, as well as innovative participatory strategies. The study is conducted in eight EU-member countries and their regional and local contexts. We have selected the regions and local research sites after carefully considering the available quantitative data on economic, educational, and socio-structural conditions and collecting contextual information to validate the selection.

The *Report with Sites Selection* (Report) presents the selection of research sites, their analysis and validation according to the project's core objectives and research questions. In the Report, we have:

- provided National Reports for every country, characterising educational and socio-structural conditions on country, NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 levels (see Annex 1);
- selected 16 NUTS 2 regions and 16 NUTS 3 research sites, two of each for every participating country (see Table 1 and Figure 1);
- analysed and compared the coverage (population, area, density), structural conditions and performance of NUTS 2 regions;
- analysed and compared NUTS 3 research sites, with a particular focus on their local specifications, social, demographic and educational challenges, as well as groups in vulnerable positions;
- related the conceptual design of the study to the selection of the research sites and considered the overlapping and mismatches between them.

Based on the results of the analyses, we came to the following conclusions:

- *First*, the selected NUTS 2 regions uncovered wide within-country and cross-country differences in terms of educational, economic and socio-structural performance.
- *Second*, the selected NUTS 3 research sites provide us appropriate conditions to study the life and learning environments of young people with diverse backgrounds and disadvantages.
- *Third*, the analyses of the selected sites have pointed out to the scarcity of local quantitative data and missing and/or limited information on the impact of spaces and social backgrounds on the quality of learning outcomes.
- *Fourth*, the selected sites enhance our chances to reach groups in vulnerable positions, such as young people with migrant background, refugees, ethnic minorities, disadvantaged genders, youth in remote regions etc.

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1. Introduction

The project *Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe. A Multi-Level Analysis of (Under-)Achievement in the Life Course* (CLEAR) is committed to better understanding the factors that affect the quality of learning outcomes across Europe's regions. To examine the quality of learning outcomes, CLEAR problematises the process of their construction, which results from manifold intersecting institutional arrangements, spatial and socio-economic determinants, discursive and socio-cultural influences, as well as individual experiences, dispositions, cognitive and psycho-emotional abilities. Designed as a multi-level, mixed-method study, CLEAR aims to examine the combination of multiple factors by means of quantitative and institutional analyses, expert surveys at national and regional levels and qualitative analyses and innovative participatory strategies at local level, with a special attention to groups in vulnerable positions. The study is conducted using data at national, regional and local levels. For the empirical part of the project, we have selected regions at NUTS 2 and local sites at NUTS 3 levels. The selection of regions and analysis of their contextual information is presented in the following *Report on Sites Selection* (Report).

The Report stems from a collaborative work of national Partners, who developed National Reports (see Annex 1) and WP2 Core Team, who compared and analysed them. As a result, the Report frames the upcoming analyses of learning outcomes by defining the places, contexts, actors and settings, which enter the interplay of the construction of learning outcomes. After completing the National Reports, the WP2 Core Team has juxtaposed and compared them, synthetising the contents and preliminary results relevant for the validation of the selection. The analysis of the National Reports included a comparison of the NUTS 2 regions and NUTS 3 research sites.

At NUTS 2 level, we have looked at the differences between the regions considering their core geographical indicators (area, population, population density), economic, educational and socio-structural indicators, as well as their regional specificities. At NUTS 3 level, we have similarly analysed the local research sites, especially their structural composition (urban/rural sites, coastal/remote sites etc.) which frames the educational provision and challenges. The comparisons within and across the regions and countries helped us to validate the selection of sites and assess their relevance in national and European context, especially given the situation of young people in vulnerable positions.

The Report is structured as follows:

In the *first* part, we describe the rationale for the selection of research sites and discuss the availability and quality of the applied data sources.

In the *second* part, we provide the final overview of the selected sites, illustrating the scope and outreach of the CLEAR research project in the context of European Union.

In the *third* part, we present the results of the synthesis and analysis of National Reports at NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 levels. In the conclusion, we prove how the sites selected correspond with the project's objectives, core research questions, and participatory strategies and give an outlook on how the Report supports the subsequent empirical and analytical parts of the project.

2. Selection procedure and data availability

In this section, we describe the procedure that guided the selection of research sites as well as the data sources, which were used to support and validate the selection.

2.1 Rationale for the selection of research sites

The CLEAR research project is conducted in eight EU-member countries. For the empirical part of the project, we have to limit the range of places, where we can conduct qualitative interviews with policy stakeholders, practitioners and young people, policy assessment and expert surveys. More so, as we apply theoretical approaches requiring a careful consideration of spaces, social identity backgrounds and local opportunity structures (Life Course approach, Spatial Justice, Intersectionality), we have to further specify our selection on the local NUTS 3 level. This will also help us in planning the Innovation Forums, which build an integral part of our participatory actions. Against this background, we have developed a rationale that supported National Partners in selecting the region and collecting contextual information for the subsequent validation of the selection.

The research sites have been selected at two levels – NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 level. At NUTS 2 level, the selection was supported by a chosen set of indicators in three core domains, where the factors affecting the quality of learning outcomes can be assessed: education, economy, and the existing regional opportunity structures.

Regarding education, the indicators that have guided the selection were the current data on *Early School Leavers* and on the *Low Educational Attainment* (Eurostat, 2023a; 2023b). With regard to economy, we have focused on the *Regional Gross Domestic Product* and on the *Youth Employment Rate* (Eurostat, 2023d; 2023c). Finally, the composite indicators portraying the current situation of young people and their existing opportunity structures were the *At-Risk-of-Poverty-or-Social-Exclusion Rate* as well as the *Youth Labour Market Integration Index* (Eurostat, 2023e; Scandurra et al., 2021). Every National Partner was provided with the current data and a list of regions at NUTS 2 level ranked from the best performing to the worst performing region. The regions were rated and coloured from green to red based on the ranking. With the ranked list of the regions, the Partners were asked to apply the following rationale in their selection procedure:

- based on the provided ranking and departing from the average performance, create two clusters of rather *well-performing* and rather *poor-performing* regions;
- select one region from both clusters and prove it on data availability (e.g., density of educational provision, possibility to reach out local experts, practitioners, young people etc.);

- consider your existing research and policy networks in the regions selected;
- estimate the feasibility (costs, personnel, distance etc.) to conduct empirical research in the regions selected.

Through the iterative process of considering the various regions, National Partners have selected two regions at NUTS 2 level, which best correspond with the project's objectives. In the second step, the National Partners were asked to select research sites at NUTS 3 level, in which the qualitative part of the project will take place.

For the selection of research sites at NUTS 3 level, the rationale was following:

- consider thriving and declining research sites in terms of educational, economic or structural indicators (if data is available);
- take into account spatial (urban/rural), intersectional (concentration of populations in vulnerable positions) or other factors affecting the quality of learning outcomes;
- prove the accessibility of the local experts, practitioners, and young people, especially those in vulnerable positions;
- estimate the feasibility of the national team to conduct the empirical fieldwork at the selected site.

As the result of the selection, the National Partners have produced National Reports (see Annex 1), which included the core characteristics of the country's educational and socio-structural conditions, and a subsequent description of the selected NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 research sites.

2.2 Data sources

The selection of research sites was supported by verified data sources. For this case, EUROSTAT data was the main source of comparable data within the EU, especially when considering territorial and longitudinal data. The European Union has established a common classification of territorial units for statistics, known as NUTS[1], in order to facilitate the collection, development and publication of harmonised regional statistics in the EU. This hierarchical system is also used for socioeconomic analyses of the regions and the framing of interventions in EU cohesion policy (notably, regions eligible for support from cohesion policy and from the Youth Employment Initiative are defined at NUTS 2 level).

The NUTS classification is a hierarchical system for dividing up the economic territory of the EU and the UK for the purpose of collection, development and harmonisation of European regional statistics regarding several areas, including the ones that are most interesting for the CLEAR project: education, labour market, economic development and production, social and material conditions, demographic trends. The classification subdivides each member state into three levels: NUTS 1, NUTS 2 and NUTS 3. The second

[1] NUTS – Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics, from the French **N**omenclature des **u**nités **t**erritoriales **s**tatistiques

and third levels are subdivisions of the first and second levels. Within the national states (indicated as NUTS 0), the following units have been identified:

- NUTS 1: major socio-economic regions
- NUTS 2: basic regions for the application of regional policies
- NUTS 3: small regions for specific diagnoses

The NUTS classification is based on three main principles:

1) Population thresholds, as minimum and maximum population thresholds for the size of the NUTS regions are defined.
2) Administrative divisions, as the NUTS classification generally mirrors the territorial administrative division of the Member States. This supports the availability of data and the implementation capacity of policy.
3) Amendments, the NUTS classification can be amended, but generally not more frequently than every three years, based on changes of the territorial structure in Member States.

The current NUTS 2021 classification is valid from 1 January 2021 and lists (excluding UK) 92 regions at NUTS 1, 242 regions at NUTS 2 and 1166 regions at NUTS 3 level.

National figures alone cannot reveal the complex picture of what is happening at a more detailed level within the European Union. In this respect, statistical information at a subnational level is an important tool for highlighting specific regional and territorial aspects. A further advantage of NUTS 2 data is comparability across all EU regions and the existence of yearly time series. The amount of information available decreases from the country level (NUTS 0), to the NUTS 1 and 2 levels, to the NUTS 3 level. In CLEAR, we use NUTS 2 as the main level of aggregation for data collection and analysis: this level combines data availability from EU surveys and other territorial accounts (for instance economic, demographic); correspondence with administrative units in most EU countries; significance for distribution of EU funding and policy provision. Conversely, NUTS 1 information relate to very vast macro regions, with strong internal diversity; while information at NUTS 3 level is often scattered and not very detailed.

The main disadvantages associated with the use of NUTS 2 aggregates are the following:

- NUTS 2 regions may not bear administrative responsibilities for the provision of policies associated with youth and learning outcomes in certain EU countries (e.g., in Finland or Bulgaria);
- NUTS 2 regions may comprise rather large areas with significant internal differences regarding labour market performance and learning outcomes (e.g., in Finland);
- Some countries may use their own indicators, that do not completely overlap with the European ones aggregated at NUTS 2 level;
- NUTS 2 data provide limited intersectional information on specific subgroups, diversity and multiculturality issues, due to difficulties in sampling and data collection procedures for such specific themes.

These limitations notwithstanding, the NUTS 2 level data currently represent the main source of information for EU wide comparative, territorial and longitudinal analysis, with highly relevant policy implications, which is why CLEAR is relying especially on this data source.

3. Overview of selected sites

In this section, we provide an overview of the selected sites (see Table 1). The table contains the information on selected sites at NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 levels, with their respective classification as provided by Eurostat (Eurostat, 2023f). The last column contains the project's code, with which we refer to the selected site in our project.

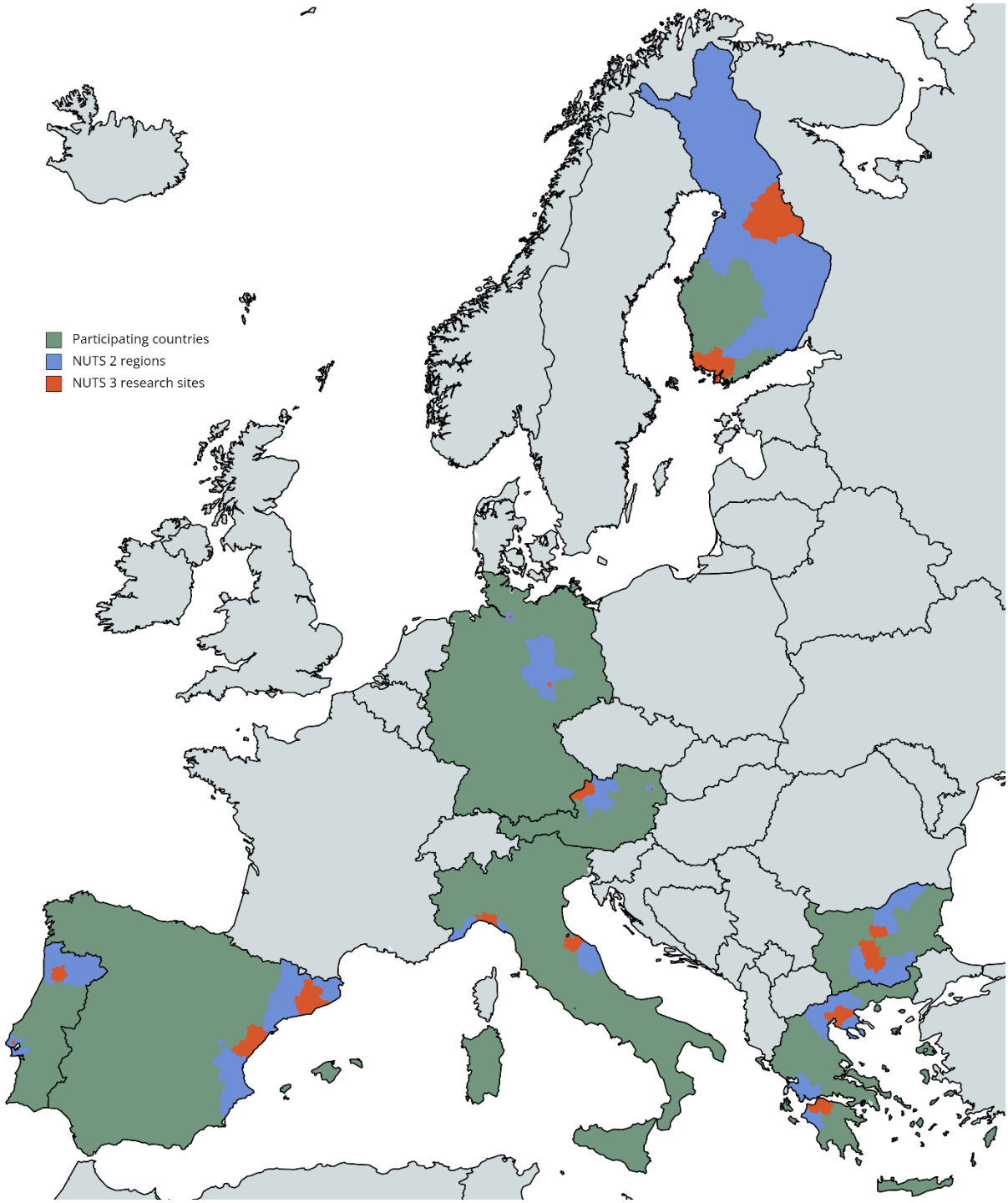
Table 1 – Selected sites at NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 levels

Country	NUTS 2		NUTS 3		Project Code
	Region	Classification	Region/District	Classification	
Austria	Vienna	AT13	Favoriten	AT130	AT-V-F
	Upper Austria	AT31	Linz-Wels	AT312	AT-U-L
Bulgaria	North Central	BG32	Gabrovo	BG322	BG-N-G
	South Central	BG42	Plovdiv	BG421	BG-S-P
Finland	Etelä-Suomi	FI1C	Southwest Finland	FI1C1	FI-E-S
	Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi	FI1D	Kainuu	FI1D8	FI-P-K
Germany	Hamburg	DE60	Hamburg-Mitte	DE600	DE-H-H
	Saxony-Anhalt	DEE0	Halle (Saale)	DEE02	DE-S-H
Greece	Kentriki Makedonia	EL52	Thessaloniki	EL522	EL-K-T
	Dytiki Ellada	EL63	Achaia	EL632	EL-D-A
Italy	Liguria	ITC3	Genoa	ITC33	IT-L-G
	Marche	ITI3	Pesaro-Urbino	ITI31	IT-M-P
Portugal	Norte	PT11	Tâmega e Sousa	PT11C	PT-N-T
	Área Metropolitana de Lisboa	PT17	Amadora	PT170	PT-L-A
Spain	Catalonia	ES51	Barcelona	ES511	ES-C-B
	Valencian Community	ES52	Castelló	ES522	ES-V-C

Source: WP2 Core Team

At NUTS 3 level, a sub-selection was not possible in every participating country. Vienna, Hamburg and Lisbon are considered both NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 regions. In this case, the Partners have looked at potential districts and/or boroughs, which could be examined in the same quality as other NUTS 3 regions. The table is visualised in the following figure (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Map of the selected research sites in CLEAR



Source: MapChart, 2023 (own visualisation)[2]

In the figure, we have highlighted the participating countries and their regions at NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 levels. The three levels are contrasted using different colours: green for the national level, blue for NUTS 2 level and orange for NUTS 3 level. The figure shows the spatial dispersion of the regions within and across the countries, but it also demonstrates

[2] Azores and Madeira (Portugal) are not displayed, but included in the Portuguese National Report. Finland has only four NUTS 2 regions, one of which covers nearly 70% of the country.

the regional coverage at the European level. In CLEAR, we seek to account not only for country-specific differences at the regional level (NUTS 2), but also at local level (NUTS 3) to select regions with diverse social, economic, and labour market situation. In some cases, the selected regions are geographically distant, while in other cases they share the border, yet face different structural challenges. With regard to learning outcomes, the spatial dispersion of the selected sites helps us to better understand the complexity and estimate the impact of local/regional opportunity structures on the academic (under-)achievement, which is difficult to accomplish by using only quantitative data from national/international surveys. Finally, the heterogeneity of local research sites at NUTS 3 level (in terms of population, area, opportunity structures) enables us to reach various groups of young people in vulnerable positions, which is crucial for researching the link between social inequality and learning outcomes and supporting the development of high-precision policies targeting young people in their life courses.

4. Summary of results and outlook

In this section, we provide the results of the analysis of National Reports on sites selection. The results are organised in three sub-sections. In the *first* subsection, we analyse the selected NUTS 2 regions and compare their regional characteristics, structural conditions and vulnerable parts of population. We take also a closer look at core educational, economic and socio-structural indicators to further elaborate the cross-country and cross-regional differences. In the *second* sub-section, we compare the selected NUTS 3 regions and analyse the underlying factors framing the opportunity structures of young people. In the *third* sub-section, we summarise the results of the comparisons, relate them to the overall design of the project and give an outlook on the next steps to be taken.

4.1 Comparisons at NUTS 2 level

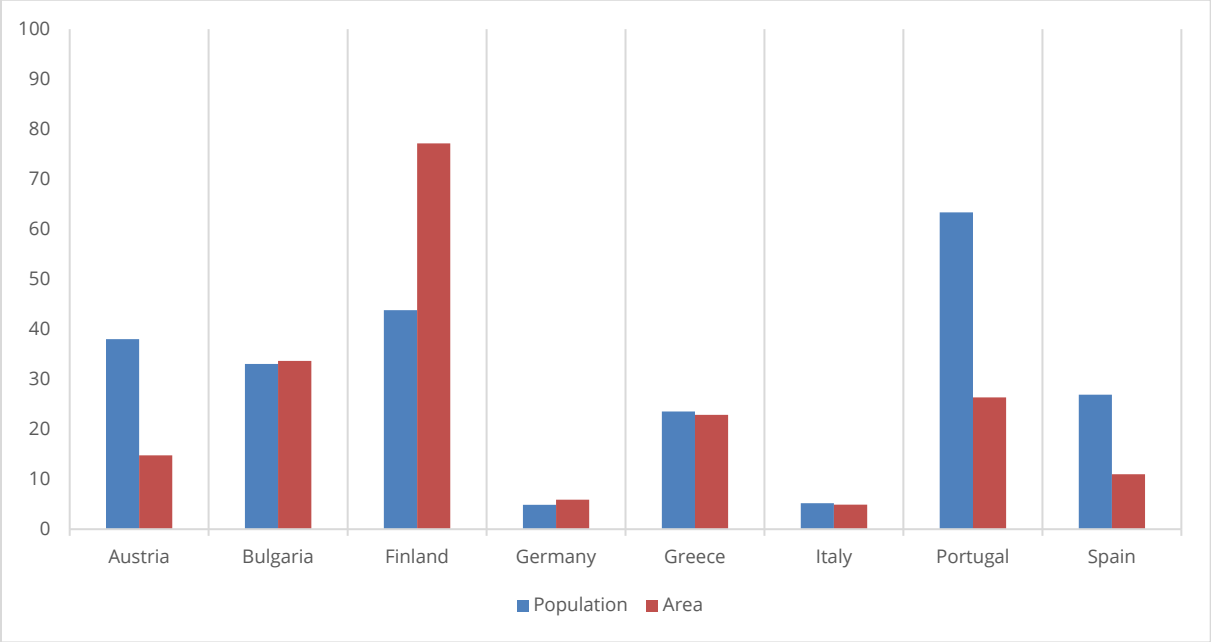
Coverage

The CLEAR research project is conducted in eight EU member countries. In sum, the countries account for almost 52% of the European Union's population (2023) and cover more than 45% of its area. The selection of countries includes various geographic regions (Northern Europe, Central Europe, Southern Europe, South-West Europe, South-East Europe) with diverse structural profiles and educational demands at NUTS 2 level.

The selected NUTS 2 regions vary both in size of area and population. The following figure (see Figure 2) shows the share of NUTS 2 regions on the countries' population and area.

With regard to population (blue colour), the highest share of population is living in NUTS 2 regions of Portugal (almost 60%), followed by Finland and Austria (around 40%). The lowest share of population is in Germany and Italy (around 5%). However, in absolute numbers, the size of population living in the selected areas is comparable, especially between Finland and Austria on the one hand, and Italy and Germany on the other hand. On average, the population in the selected NUTS 2 regions accounts for nearly 30% of the total population of national countries.

Figure 2 – Share of NUTS 2 regions in the participating countries (%)



Source: Own calculation based on data from national statistical agencies.[3]

Regarding the size of area (red colour), the largest share of NUTS 2 regions can be observed in Finland, covering nearly 80% of the country. This can be partly explained by the administrative division of Finland having four NUTS 2 regions for the whole country. In other cases, the selected regions cover large areas of the countries (e.g., Bulgaria, Greece and Portugal) ranging between 20 and 30%. As it is the case with population, a rather smaller spatial coverage can be observed in Italy and Germany (around 5%). Nevertheless, in absolute numbers, the differences in area are not overwhelming.

When comparing NUTS 2 regions alone, new details appear. The following figure (see Figure 3) details the proportions of population and area in absolute numbers. While there are few regions with large accumulation of population (blue colour), such as Catalonia with nearly 8 million inhabitants, the population of the majority of regions (10 out of 16) ranges between 1 and 2 million inhabitants. The most populated regions are located in the coastal parts of Spain and Portugal. Similar to population, the area (red colour) of the majority of NUTS 2 regions (11 out of 16) ranges between 10 000 and 35 000 km^2, with the Finnish region Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi being the only exception. The size of metropolitan areas (Área Metropolitana de Lisboa, Hamburg and Vienna) is far smaller, yet, in terms of population, equally comparable with other regions.

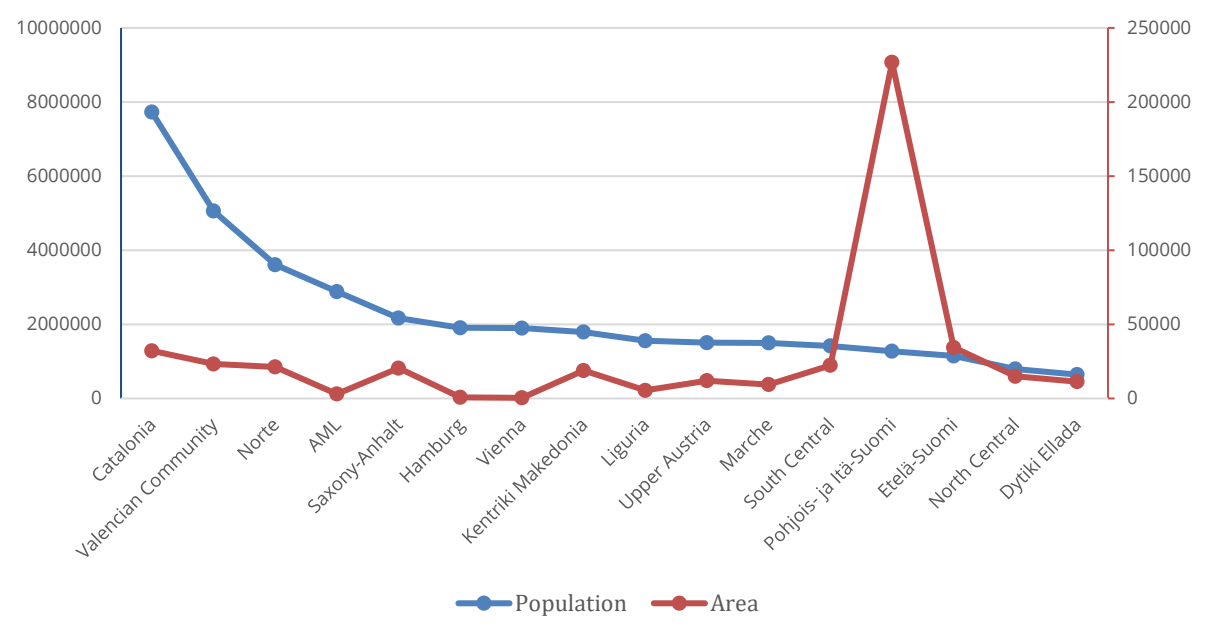
Structural conditions

The selected regions have diverse economic and socio-cultural structures, which leads to different educational demands and challenges.

[3] The years of population census vary among the countries' NUTS 2 regions: Austria (2018 – Vienna, 2022 – Upper Austria), Bulgaria (2018), Finland and Spain (2020), Germany, Greece, Italy and Portugal (2021).

If we look at the *spatial composition* of the selected sites, most of the regions (9 out of 16) have large seaside areas, with important transport hubs and seaports (e.g., Hamburg, Lisbon, Barcelona, Thessaloniki). Others are located in mainland, with dominating rural areas (e.g., Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi, Gabrovo, Saxony-Anhalt), larger urban centres (Porto, Plovdiv, Linz) or greater functional regions (e.g., Halle (Saale), Vienna agglomeration).

Figure 3 – Population and area of selected NUTS 2 regions



Source: WP2 Core Team. Note: AML = Área Metropolitana de Lisboa

With regard to *economic structure*, some regions are mostly industry-oriented (e.g., Upper Austria, Saxony-Anhalt, Etelä-Suomi) or service-based (especially the agglomerations around the capital cities of Vienna and Lisbon), while others depend more on incomes from tourism (e.g., Valencian Community and Catalonia in Spain, Kentriki Makedonia and Dytiki Ellada in Greece) or agriculture (e.g., North Central and South Central regions in Bulgaria).

In terms of *demographic* structure, differences can be observed too. While some regions experience a growing aging index (e.g., Liguria in Italy or Norte in Portugal), others are challenged by emigration of the younger population from rural areas to urban centres or other countries (e.g., Saxony-Anhalt in Germany, Kentriki Makedonia in Greece, North Central region in Bulgaria, Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi in Finland). On the other hand, some regions experience increasing emigrant population (e.g., Área Metropolitana de Lisboa in Portugal, Catalonia in Spain or Vienna in Austria), with significant share of minorities more prone to occupy vulnerable positions, as is the case of Roma minority (South Central, Kentriki Makedonia), refugees, currently also from Ukraine (e.g., Austria, Germany) or population with migrant background (Hamburg, Área Metropolitana de Lisboa, Vienna).

Vulnerable populations

Among other dimensions potentially intersecting in producing conditions of vulnerability for young people, the most present one is the migrant background. In relation to it, a variety of challenges are raised in terms of:

- capacity of the educational system to attract migrant youths, keep them engaged and reduce early school leaving (Austria, Bulgaria)
- improvement of their learning performances (Finland, Germany)
- ability of the educational system to contribute to supporting their general well-being (Finland)

Few peculiarities emerge at the national level. In Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal, the condition of vulnerability is not explicitly related to migrant origins, as it overlaps more generally with the condition of being unemployed and/or inactive, which refers to a more heterogenous range of social profiles, mainly to socio-economic inequalities. In cases of Austria, Finland and Spain, the gender dimension is considered a factor of potential further disadvantage of young people.

A within-country comparison of NUTS 2 regions points out to further differences between the more and the less prosperous portions of population:

- in Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Portugal, the contrast between the two selected sites is based on the performance of young people in education and/or in the labour market, with well-performing areas such Upper Austria, Hamburg, Kentriki Makedonia, Marche and Área Metropolitana de Lisboa, and bad-performing regions such as Vienna, Saxony-Anhalt, Dytiki Ellada, Liguria and Norte;
- in Bulgaria and Finland, the contrast is considered in terms of different opportunity structures accessible by young people. In this sense, the South Central region in Bulgaria and Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi in Finland generate less opportunity structures accessible by youth than the contrasting regions North Central (Bulgaria) and Etelä-Suomi (Finland).
- In Spain, the contrast is between urban and sub-urban sites, which have different economic dynamics and various portions of population living in poor conditions.

Performance indicators

In our analysis, we have further applied six composite indicators to compare the educational, economic and structural situation in the selected NUTS 2 regions.

Education

In order to better assess the *educational* situation in the selected regions, we have ranked the regions according to two indicators: *Early School Leavers* and *Low Educational Attainment*. Both indicators are provided by Eurostat for the year 2021, during which the effects of anti-pandemic measures (e.g., school closure) hardly hit the population of young people. By Early School Leavers we refer to young people aged 18-24 years (both sexes),

who have left formal education or training before acquiring any certified qualification. The number of Early School Leavers (see Table 2) points to large differences between the regions.

Table 2 – Early School Leavers (2021)

Rank	Code	Country	NUTS 2 Region	Rate
1.	EL52	Greece	Kentriki Makedonia	1,7
2.	PT11	Portugal	Norte	4,1
3.	PT17	Portugal	Área Metropolitana de Lisboa	5,9
4.	AT31	Austria	Upper Austria	6,5
5.	EL63	Greece	Dytiki Ellada	6,9
6.	ITI3	Italy	Marche	7,9
7.	FI1D	Finland	Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi	8,8
8.	BG32	Bulgaria	North Central	9,9
9.	AT13	Austria	Vienna	9,9
10.	DE60	Germany	Hamburg	11
11.	FI1C	Finland	Etelä-Suomi	11,4
12.	BG42	Bulgaria	South Central	12,1
13.	ES52	Spain	Valencian Community	12,8
14.	ITC3	Italy	Liguria	12,9
15.	ES51	Spain	Catalonia	14,8
16.	DEE0	Germany	Saxony-Anhalt	18,4

EU average

Source: Eurostat, 2023a

The rate of early school leavers in the selected regions is ranging between 1,7% (Kentriki Makedonia) and 18,4% (Saxony-Anhalt), which is 10 times higher. If we take into account the EU average of 9,7% (wide line), out of eight participating countries, six have at least one selected region below the EU average. Only Greece and Portugal have both regions above the EU average. Overall, there are regional differences in every country, with none of the participating countries, independently of its economic performance, having both regions with high numbers of early school leavers. Quite the contrary, the table highlights the fact that within-country, regional disparities persist to have greater impact on the quality of learning outcomes than solely national differences.

The next indicator describes Low Educational Attainment (see Table 3), which includes the category of 25-34 years old people with less than primary, primary and lower secondary education (both sexes). The range between the regions is significant, stretching from 4,5% (Kentriki Makedonia) to 30,5% (Valencian Community), which is almost seven times higher. If we relate this to the EU average of 14,8% (wide line), five out of eight participating countries have at least one selected region below the EU average. Three countries, Finland, Greece and Austria, have all selected regions above the EU average, while Italy

and Spain have both selected regions below EU average. Germany, Portugal and Bulgaria have one region below and one region above the EU average.

Table 3 – Low Educational Attainment (2021)

Rank	Code	Country	NUTS 2 Region	Rate
1.	EL52	Greece	Kentriki Makedonia	4,5
2.	FI1D	Finland	Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi	7,4
3.	FI1C	Finland	Etelä-Suomi	9,9
4.	AT31	Austria	Upper Austria	10,2
5.	EL63	Greece	Dytiki Ellada	13
6.	PT17	Portugal	Área Metropolitana de Lisboa	14
7.	AT13	Austria	Vienna	14
8.	DE60	Germany	Hamburg	14,1
9.	BG32	Bulgaria	North Central	14,4
10.	DEE0	Germany	Saxony-Anhalt	15,5
11.	PT11	Portugal	Norte	16,1
12.	ITI3	Italy	Marche	18,9
13.	BG42	Bulgaria	South Central	21,5
14.	ITC3	Italy	Liguria	21,9
15.	ES51	Spain	Catalonia	25,1
16.	ES52	Spain	Valencian Community	30,5

EU average

Source: Eurostat, 2023b

When juxtaposing the regions according to both educational indicators, we can see that Greece scores high in both indicators, while Spain, on the opposite, reports very low scores. If we look at within-country differences, the regions of Portugal have low percentage of early school leavers, yet, at the same time, more people with low educational attainment, which is especially the case of Norte (similar tendency can be also observed in Marche, Italy). This means that even though an overwhelming majority of young people completes the education by reaching a certain qualification level, nonetheless, a large portion of them has low educational attainment, which reduces their potential employability and narrows down their life choices. In Finland, both regions have high scores in low educational attainment, meaning that majority of young Finns has at least a higher secondary education. Yet, they also have high scores of early school leavers, especially in Etelä-Suomi. This indicates a division between the higher educated and more qualified young people on the one hand, and more disadvantaged groups, at least in terms of educational qualification, on the other hand. Finally, the German regions have scored with comparably high numbers of Early School Leavers (Saxony-Anhalt has the worst score), and high numbers of young people with low educational attainment (Saxony-Anhalt scoring low again). In this case, the connections between demographic (cross-region migration) and socio-structural (industry-based economy) factors frame the

opportunity structures of young people and possibly intensify their vulnerable positions in terms of (spatial) accessibility of and access to diverse educational provision.

Economy & Labour Market

To assess the *economic performance* of the regions selected, we have considered two indicators: the *Youth Employment Rate* and *Regional Gross Domestic Product*. Again, the indicators are provided for the pandemic year 2021.

When considering the youth employment rate (see Table 4), which includes young people aged 15-24 years (both sexes), there are several differences between the selected regions.

Table 4 – Youth Employment Rate (2021)

Rank	Code	Country	NUTS 2 Region	Rate
1.	AT31	Austria	Upper Austria	56,7
2.	DE60	Germany	Hamburg	48,1
3.	DEE0	Germany	Saxony-Anhalt	44,3
4.	FI1D	Finland	Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi	44
5.	FI1C	Finland	Etelä-Suomi	43,1
6.	AT13	Austria	Vienna	39,1
7.	ES51	Spain	Catalonia	27
8.	PT11	Portugal	Norte	24,2
9.	PT17	Portugal	Área Metropolitana de Lisboa	21
10.	ITI3	Italy	Marche	20,7
11.	ES52	Spain	Valencian Community	20,5
12.	ITC3	Italy	Liguria	17,5
13.	BG42	Bulgaria	South Central	17,1
14.	BG32	Bulgaria	North Central	15,9
15.	EL63	Greece	Dytiki Ellada	14,6
16.	EL52	Greece	Kentriki Makedonia	9,1

EU average

Source: Eurostat, 2023c

The Youth Employment Rate is ranging between 56,7% in Upper Austria to 9,1% in Kentriki Makedonia, which is more than six times higher. In the EU, the average is 32,7% (wide line). Only three countries are above the EU average, namely Austria, Germany and Finland. On the other hand, Greece and Bulgaria have very low employment rates. Especially the region Kentriki Makedonia, which scored first in the educational indicators, has the lowest employment rate among young Europeans. In general, the regions in Southern and South-East Europe report high unemployment rates among young adults – the difference between Vienna (last of the selected regions above the EU average) and Catalonia (first of the regions below the EU average) is more than 12%. Apart from structural specificities of regional/local labour market, the low employment rates among young people can be also interpreted as an effect of the COVID-19 pandemics, which has

reduced job opportunities in tourism, hospitality and transport, which are branches employing seasonal workers and mainly young workforce.

We have further considered the economic performance of regions by looking at the Regional Gross Domestic Product calculated per capita and applying Purchasing Power Standard (PPS) (see Table 5).

Table 5 – Regional Gross Domestic Product (2021)

Rank	Code	Country	NUTS 2 Region	Rate
1.	DE60	Germany	Hamburg	61.900
2.	AT13	Austria	Vienna	46.500
3.	AT31	Austria	Upper Austria	40.900
4.	ITC3	Italy	Liguria	32.800
5.	FI1C	Finland	Etelä-Suomi	32.300
6.	ES51	Spain	Catalonia	31.700
7.	PT17	Portugal	Área Metropolitana de Lisboa	31.100
8.	FI1D	Finland	Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi	30.800
9.	ITI3	Italy	Marche	29.200
10.	DEE0	Germany	Saxony-Anhalt	28.000
11.	ES52	Spain	Valencian Community	23.600
12.	PT11	Portugal	Norte	21.200
13.	EL52	Greece	Kentriki Makedonia	16.300
14.	EL63	Greece	Dytiki Ellada	15.400
15.	BG32	Bulgaria	North Central	12.800
16.	BG42	Bulgaria	South Central	12.300

EU average

Source: Eurostat, 2023d

The ranked regions are ranging between €61.900 (Hamburg) and €12.300 (South Central), where the difference between the best and the worst performing regions is more than five times higher. The EU average is €32.400. Of the selected regions, only Austria has both regions above the EU average, Germany and Italy have one region, respectively. All other countries and regions are below the EU average, which demonstrates not only a comparably low economic performance of the selected regions, but it also shows that most of population in the regions has limited financial means to invest in activities connected with education (e.g., job re-qualification). There are also particular within-country differences. In Germany, for example, the difference between Hamburg and Saxony-Anhalt is nearly €30.000, which is by far the greatest distinction among all regions. When comparing the countries, there are very low incomes reported for Bulgaria and Greece, where the majority of regions is not even reaching the half of the EU average. More so, if counted together, the regions' total number is still lower than the one of Hamburg. The stark economic contrasts between the selected regions underscore the

importance to explore the interplay of various factors (economic, educational, social) in affecting the quality of learning outcomes.

The comparison of economic indicators has revealed several regional and country characteristics. Austria has high scores in both indicators, while Germany and Finland report high rates of youth employment. Further on, the city regions (especially Vienna and Hamburg) have much higher rates of Gross Domestic Product than regions with both urban and rural areas. Interestingly, there are also considerable differences in income rates within the countries. Besides Germany, with great contrast between Hamburg and Saxony-Anhalt, also Spain and Portugal report difference in economic performance (€10.000 between the regions). As there are only few regions above the EU average (six in the first indicator and four in the second indicator), the absolute majority of the selected regions is struggling with employment rates of young people and their effectiveness in the labour market.

Social structures

With the set of two indicators – *At-Risk-of-Poverty-or-Social-Exclusion Rate* (AROPE) and *Youth Labour Market Integration Index* (YLMI) – we have sought to compare and analyse the *social structures* in the selected NUTS 2 regions.

AROPE, the first indicator, is related to persons who are either at risk of poverty, or severely materially and socially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity. It is reported for the year 2020, where the COVID-19 pandemics has not yet fully developed its negative impact. As the table shows, (see Table 6), the selected regions range between 11,6% (Upper Austria) and 43,1% (Dytiki Ellada), while the score of the first rated region being nearly four times higher than the last one. In the EU, the average rate is 20,76%, of which only six out of 16 regions have scored better. From the countries, only Finland has both regions above the EU average, while Greece and Bulgaria report very low scores.

There are few paradoxes and divisions to be noticed. On the one hand, there is great within-country division in Austria, where Vienna reports almost three times poorer scores than Upper Austria. Similarly, although less contrasting, is the tendency also in Portugal. Here, the capital city of Lisbon reports better scores than Norte, which is contrary to the case in Austria. This comparison highlights spatial factors (rural vs. urban sites), which have different impact in different settings. On the other hand, a paradox composition can be observed in Germany, where Saxony-Anhalt has surprisingly scored better than Hamburg. The metropolitan areas of Vienna and Hamburg offer better economic opportunities and report higher incomes, yet they struggle to level up the differences between various groups of population.

The index of youth labour market integration (YLMI) describes the composition of several rates. It takes into account 1) the rate of unemployed and NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) young people, 2) the rate of employed young people with upper

secondary and high education, and 3) the dynamics of transition from education to labour market (slow/fast; difficult/smooth). The data for this indicators stem from the year 2018, i.e., before the COVID-19 pandemics.

Table 6 – At-Risk-of-Poverty-or-Social-Exclusion Rate (2020)

Rank	Code	Country	NUTS 2 Region	Rate
1.	AT31	Austria	Upper Austria	11,6
2.	PT17	Portugal	Área Metropolitana de Lisboa	14,6
3.	FI1C	Finland	Etelä-Suomi	16,3
4.	ITI3	Italy	Marche	18,3
5.	DEE0	Germany	Saxony-Anhalt	18,6
6.	FI1D	Finland	Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi	19,3
7.	ITC3	Italy	Liguria	21,2
8.	PT11	Portugal	Norte	22,0
9.	ES51	Spain	Catalonia	22,8
10.	DE60	Germany	Hamburg	23,7
11.	AT13	Austria	Vienna	27,5
12.	ES52	Spain	Valencian Community	29,3
13.	EL52	Greece	Kentriki Makedonia	31,5
14.	BG32	Bulgaria	North Central	34,6
15.	BG42	Bulgaria	South Central	37,5
16.	EL63	Greece	Dytiki Ellada	43,1

EU average

Source: Eurostat, 2023e

According to the table (see Table 7), the range between the best performing regions (Upper Austria) and worst performing region (Dytiki Ellada) is nearly three times higher. When including the EU average (wide line), only six regions have better scores, including both German and Portugal regions. The regions of Germany and Portugal, but also of Greece, have similar, consistent scores, which cannot be reported for any other indicator. In Austria, the region of Upper Austria has scored at the top, while the region of Vienna is considerably lower. The same accounts for Bulgaria and Finland. Generally, the better performing regions in every country have better scores than the worst performing regions. In this regard, the YLMI index mirrors the previous rankings and the National Reports, where the national regions have been ranked according to the listed indicators and clustered in two groups of rather well performing and rather bad performing regions.

Considering both indicators together, in which 10 out of 16 regions scored below the EU average, few conclusions could be made. *First*, young people in the majority of regions experience constraints in their transition from school to the labour market. *Second*, especially Greek and Bulgarian regions, but also city agglomerations of Vienna and Hamburg, struggle to fully integrate young people living in poor social conditions. *Third*, coastal regions (Dytiki Ellada and Kentriki Makedonia (Greece), Liguria and Marche (Italy),

Valencian Community (Spain)) and remote rural regions (South Central in Bulgaria and Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi in Finland) generate less labour market opportunities for young people with various levels of qualifications.

Table 7 – Youth Labour Market Integration Index (2018)

Rank	Code	Country	NUTS 2 Region	Rate
1.	AT31	Austria	Upper Austria	0,8949
2.	DE60	Germany	Hamburg	0,8769
3.	DEE0	Germany	Saxony-Anhalt	0,8558
4.	PT11	Portugal	Norte	0,8101
5.	PT17	Portugal	Área Metropolitana de Lisboa	0,8010
6.	FI1C	Finland	Etelä-Suomi	0,7527
7.	BG32	Bulgaria	North Central	0,7330
8.	AT13	Austria	Vienna	0,7273
9.	ES51	Spain	Catalonia	0,7216
10.	FI1D	Finland	Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi	0,7003
11.	ES52	Spain	Valencian Community	0,6866
12.	ITI3	Italy	Marche	0,6663
13.	BG42	Bulgaria	South Central	0,6554
14.	ITC3	Italy	Liguria	0,5394
15.	EL52	Greece	Kentriki Makedonia	0,4381
16.	EL63	Greece	Dytiki Ellada	0,3737

EU average

Source: Scandurra et al., 2021

Summary

The comparison of the selected sites at NUTS 2 level has underscored the relevance of spatiality in the regional/local scope of analysis. The analysed regional data show great disparities not only between countries, but also within countries, with regions scoring above or below the European average independently of the country's performance. We are aware that the selected regions present a sample of the country and that a different combination of regions may yield different results. Nonetheless, the spatial coverage of the selected regions (30% of the national populations and 25% of the countries' areas) demonstrates the project's wide scope and great potential to inform national/regional policymaking.

Further, the diversity of economic, demographic, spatial and labour market structures and dynamics of the regions selected enables us to enter the interplay of factors affecting the construction of learning outcomes from various angles and focal points. While in some cases, the quality of learning outcomes depends more on more or less flexible structural conditions, in other contexts institutional provision plays a dominant role. All these factors

affect the decisions and frame the opportunities of young people, policy makers and policy practitioners at the regional level.

In addition, as the comparison of regions shows, the focus on populations in vulnerable positions has several implications for the fieldwork. On the one hand, more attention has to be paid to young people with migrant background, while carefully considering gender dimension as a relevant variable concerning learning outcomes. On the other hand, the impact of spatiality of the regions selected, both within and across the countries, has been largely neglected in the data sets, which we seek to improve and complement.

Finally, as the analysis of the three sets of indicators revealed, the cross-regional differences offer a promising starting point for the empirical fieldwork. On the one side, we observe large regional disparities (also within countries), which create disproportionate distribution of resources, opportunities and accessibility. On the other hand, every region has its own particular challenges, which frame the young people's life choices. Interestingly, no country can report positive scores in all indicators, although, at a country level, distinction between more progressing and more stagnating countries can be made. Against this background, we have continued the selection and sorted out local research sites, in which we aim to study the local interactions involved in the construction of learning outcomes.

4.2 Comparisons at NUTS 3 level

Local characteristics

At NUTS 3 level, we have selected one research site for every region, i.e., 16 research sites in total. If we look at the local characteristics in terms of population size and the size of area, few differences appear.

With regard to population, our selection contains few densely populated coastal regions, with population ranging from about one million (Genoa in Italy and Thessaloniki in Greece) to almost six million (Barcelona) people, but also sparsely populated regions (Kainuu in Finland) and Gabrovo in Bulgaria), as well as small cities or city districts (Hamburg-Mitte and Halle (Saale) in Germany, Favoriten in Austria and Amadora in Portugal). In the later cases, the population is much lower, yet it is also concentrated in smaller areas, with Kainuu (Finland) being the only exception.

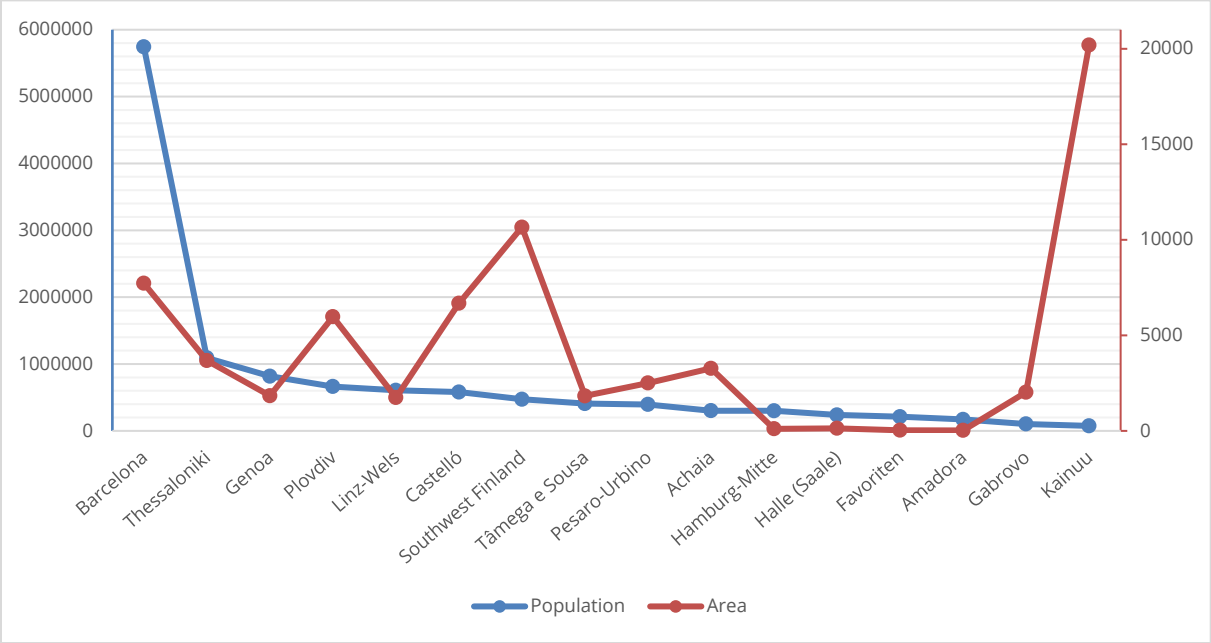
Regarding the spatial division, the two Finnish regions have by far the greatest size of area, making together almost the size of all other selected NUTS 3 regions. On the other hand, the city districts (Hamburg-Mitte, Favoriten, Amadora) and towns (Halle (Saale)) have a much smaller area integrated into larger urban centres or functional urban areas. We have illustrated the juxtaposition of selected sites in the following figure (see Figure 4).

The selected sites are listed at the bottom of the figure, while the indicators of population and area (km^2) are placed on the left and right side of the chart respectively. The figure shows that the absolute majority of the sites has a population lower than 1 million people.

Only the metropolitan region of Barcelona exceeds this number. With regard to area, the differences are more significant, yet the vast majority has a total size of area lower than 7 000 km^2.

In terms of population density, the city districts of Lisbon (Amadora) and Vienna (Favoriten) with around 7000 people/km^2, dominate the list. Contrary to this, in Kainuu, Southwest-Finland and Gabrovo (Bulgaria), the density of population is below 50 people/km^2, with Kainuu having only 4 people living per square kilometre. When clustered, we can differentiate between five less populated (below 100 people/km^2), seven medium-sized (between 100 and 1000 people/km^2) and four large (above 1000 people/km^2) research sites.

Figure 4 – Population and area of selected NUTS 3 research sites



Source: WP2 Core Team

We can further distinguish several *urban* sites, with one large central city serving as the nodal point (Thessaloniki, Genoa, Hamburg, Vienna, Lisbon, Barcelona, Plovdiv). Apart from that, few sites have a rather mixed *urban-rural* profile, with several comparable cities or middle towns building one compact functional region (Castelló in Spain, Linz-Wels in Austria, Pesaro in Italy, Southwest Finland). Finally, we have also selected sites, which are located in more remote, *rural* areas, scarce of educational and working opportunities (Tâmega e Sousa in Portugal, Gabrovo in Bulgaria, Kainuu in Finland and Achaia in Greece).

Economic and labour market structures

The comparison of the selected NUTS 3 research sites has revealed interesting economic and labour market structures.

Among the selected sites are city districts, or boroughs, which are not defined as statistical units by Eurostat, yet fulfil the role of research sites for more precise exploration and intervention. Among the city districts, Favoriten in Vienna, and the borough of Hamburg-Mitte report high numbers of foreign-born population (with migrant background) coupled with high unemployment rates and low levels of attained tertiary education. The situation in Amadora (Lisbon) is comparable, yet the employment rates are comparably not high. The combination of these economic, demographic and educational factors intensifies the social inequalities in cities and presents a major educational challenge. Other cities like Genoa or Thessaloniki also report high youth unemployment, yet without significant rates of foreign-born population.

In terms of economic structure, there are sites which have a typical industrial structure going back to 20th and 19th centuries, which requires low-skilled labour force (Genoa, Gabrovo). Those sites, however, experience low flexibility of the labour market, often depending on heavy industry or mining, and an ongoing economic stagnation. Other sites depend more heavily on tourism or seasonal works (Castelló, Achaia, Kainuu), have low economic performance and generate less job opportunities due to inflexible structure of economy (e.g., dependence on one economic sector).

In our selection of sites, we have identified strong economic centres build around major cities (Vienna, Hamburg, Thessaloniki, Barcelona, Lisbon, Turku, Plovdiv), which can attract foreign investments, create educational and research opportunities, and develop a broad range of possible job positions. Some prosperous cities, however, experience an unequal division of wealth and opportunities (e.g., Barcelona, Genoa, Hamburg, Vienna, Lisbon), which are built on historical path dependencies (occupying certain city zones by more wealthier portions of population) or are due to inherent logic of the cities (university city, port city etc.).

Demographic development and vulnerable populations

With regard to demography, some of the selected sites are struggling with out-migration (Genoa, Gabrovo, Kainuu), while others experience an influx of national and foreign-born population (Lisbon, Barcelona). Genoa is also struggling with aging population, which creates increasing demands on young adults as caretakers and bearers of economic prosperity.

The selected sites report having various groups in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged positions. Besides young people with migrant background (Hamburg, Vienna, Lisbon), there are also ethnic minorities (e.g., Roma minority in Plovdiv and Gabrovo (Bulgaria), colonial descendants in Lisbon (Portugal)), which are more likely to experience exclusion and constraints in their access to quality education. In Pesaro, women are becoming an increasingly vulnerable group, not least due to the postponed maternity during the COVID-19 pandemics and the subsequent pressure to make up for the *lost* time (similar tendencies observable in other sites, too).

Local educational challenges

In terms of education, the selected sites can be clustered according to the density of educational provision. On the one hand, large metropolitan agglomerations serve as educational and research centres with multiple options and services (Turku in Southwest Finland, Plovdiv, Thessaloniki). On the other hand, some sites offer scarce educational opportunities (Gabrovo, Kainuu, Achaia), with few choices and large distances from home to school.

The educational demands also depend on the structure of local economy. In some sites with several industries and large number of companies present (Linz-Wels in Austria), apprenticeship education is required more than tertiary education. In other contexts, large portions of foreign-born population (Favoriten, Hamburg-Mitte, Amadora) increase the demand to align the national/regional educational standards with the specific profiles of migrants or refugees. Finally, in more remote regions (Kainuu, Gabrovo), the density of educational provision is rather small and the main challenge is to attract young people to stay there and develop meaningful life projects with only a few opportunities.

Summary

Since the quantitative data at NUTS 3 level is not available in all contexts and not to the same extent, the comparison was largely built on the contextual information delivered in the National Reports. As the comparison highlights, the contrasts in population and area are much lower than in NUTS 2 regions, which enables us to assess the impact of spaces in distributing and structuring local educational and training opportunities of young people more accurately.

Further on, the local sites produce various economic and labour market structures that frame the opportunities of young people and narrow or widen their educational and life choices. While in some cases, the high educational density is coupled with flexible labour market, in other cases the choices are limited and the labour market often depends on state-supported creation of job opportunities.

Finally, the more we focus on the local level, the more complex the situation of young people in vulnerable positions appears. Whereas large cities experience influx of foreign-born population, more remote regions struggle with out-migration and aging population. All these factors impact the subjective meanings that young people ascribe to their life courses and learning goals. This also strengthens the relevance of intersectional approach and spatial justice in analysing the quality of learning outcomes, as both of them take into account multiple factors leading to social exclusion and economic deprivation.

4.3 Conclusion

We conclude the analysis of the National Reports with few synthetising remarks.

First, the national selection of research sites at NUTS 2 level has been successful in uncovering wide within-country and cross-country disparities based on economic,

educational, and socio-structural indicators. In terms of population and area, the regions include well-performing economic sites on the one hand and rural, more economically struggling sites on the other hand, which enables us to study the complexity of national contexts. As the initial analysis has shown, the quality of learning outcomes can reach comparable levels independently of economic prosperity or social contexts of the regions and even economically wealthier regions cannot automatically guarantee high levels of learning outcomes for all groups of population. This observation supports the choice of our theoretical perspectives (Intersectionality, Spatial Justice), which help us to untangle the interplay of social and spatial factors involved in the construction of learning outcomes in their regional settings.

Second, the selection of NUTS 3 research sites has confirmed the regional disparities, yet, at the same time, reduced the differences between the selected sites. It has further specified groups in vulnerable positions, which we aim to reach during qualitative analyses and participatory actions. Since the local structural and institutional settings play a key role in framing the levels of vulnerability, it is important to understand their composition and effects they have on young people's life courses. In this regard, the local contextual information can be best assessed using the theoretical perspective of Life Course Research, which directs our attention to the local opportunity structures and their interplay with young people's life courses.

Third, the selection of research sites has unveiled the scarcity of local quantitative data. Either the same data sets were not available at all levels and in all regions, or the sets were outdated and not informative for the purpose of this project. The initial analyses based on contextual information have showed that spatial and intersectional factors exercise great impact on the understanding, measurement and interpretation of learning outcomes. Against this background, the CLEAR research project is ambitious in marking the missing and statistically invisible factors that, to a large extent, determine the quality of learning outcomes and the capacity of young people to use their full potential.

Fourth, the selection was based on research criteria (availability of data, local experts, density of policies and educational provision) and criteria of feasibility (existing policy and research network, working distance, costs and personnel needed), which was particularly important for reaching out groups in vulnerable positions, which is a central focus of the project. The decision was made only after carefully ganging the chances to reach those groups.

In previous reports, we have specified our core research questions from three conceptual and theoretical perspectives. In following, we will relate these research questions to the findings of the initial analyses of the sites selected.

- From the *Life Course Research* perspective, the core question is to understand what factors are involved in the construction of learning outcomes and how their interplay shapes the expectations on learning outcomes. In this regard, a central focus is placed on the extent to which young people are involved in the construction

of learning outcomes as active agents. Given the findings of the analyses, we can conclude that the selection was successful in identifying various types of local sites, which gives us the opportunity to observe and examine the interplay of different sets of factors in constructing learning outcomes. In addition, the selected sites are home to a variety of disadvantaged groups (people with migrant background, youth in remote regions, ethnic minorities, disadvantaged genders, etc.), which we seek to hear and listen to in our qualitative studies.

- From the perspective of *Intersectionality*, the task is to assess how the local/regional opportunity structures of young people look like and how they affect young people in vulnerable positions, also taking into account the spatial and social inequalities they are embedded in. In this respect, our selection has identified diverse local/regional settings, which produce various opportunity structures accessible to a different degree by different parts of population. This is vital in assessing the design and implementation of youth and educational policies, especially their ability to account for spatial and intersectional determinants in the policymaking.
- From the perspective of *Spatial Justice* approach, we ask what is the impact of spatial distribution of educational sites on the quality of learning outcomes and to what extent do spaces affect academic (under-)achievement. The selection of sites offers us a starting point for problematising the distribution of educational opportunities and its impact on the quality of learning outcomes. So far, the spatial justice has been largely omitted in the design of educational policies and will be part of our expert surveys.

With regard to the project's core research questions, we can conclude that the selection is promising in successfully developing the project. The conceptual design of the study is ambitious in filling the missing gaps in research and policy, particularly with regard to intersectional and spatial impacts on the quality of learning outcomes. To a large extent, the selected sites enable us to conduct the planned research, yet, we are also aware of and seek to broaden the limits of information they can provide us.

The Report is part of the project's Work Package 2 (WP2), which aims to elaborate a sound and applicable framework for the analysis of learning outcomes and academic (under-)achievement. After providing an initial strategy for the research analysis, including a glossary with key terms and concepts (D2.1 *Research Strategy Paper and Glossary*), and establishing the conceptual design of the study (D2.2 *State-of-the-Art Report*), the following Report (D2.3 *Report on Sites Selection*) finalises the analytical framework by selecting and validating the research sites for the empirical part of the study. With the Report, we have reached the project's second milestone – *Sites selected and validated*. The milestone marks the completion of the conceptual and strategic documents and the start of the collection, processing and analysis of empirical data.

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Annex 1 – National Reports

The Annex contains National Reports on the selection of empirical research sites. Every National Report has three parts: in the first part, the report offers a brief characteristic of the country's political and administrative structure, its educational challenges and current discourse on learning outcomes; in the second part, it describes the rationale for the selection of two regions at NUTS 2 level, with a subsequent description of each region; in the last part, it identifies the research sites at NUTS 3 level and offers a brief characteristic of them.

Austria

Austria is typified as a Continental educational system characterized by an emphasis on labour market integration and relatively pronounced social inequalities in learning outcomes (see Lassnigg, 2020). Structurally, it is based on primary school for all children (four grades, ages 6-10), followed by lower secondary school (four grades, ages 10-14), a dual system and a school-based VET system in upper secondary education (three to five grades, ages 14-18). Since Austria has implemented compulsory education or training until the age of 18, the Austrian youth has either to remain in education or transit into professional training (German: *Lehre*) until it reaches the age of 18 years.

In terms of its political organisation, Austria has implemented Boards of Education as "a new administrative authority for the whole school sector, which merges the administrative duties of the Federal Government (responsible for federal schools) and the federal states (responsible for compulsory schooling)", providing a joint authority of both federal government and federal states (Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, 2023). They execute the entire school legislation and employment law as well as staff representation rights for federally and state-employed teachers and other educational staff (ibid.). Its structure, headed by respective regional Directors of Education is based on a functional division into an Executive Committee and a Pedagogical Service (ibid.). Further, it has four statutory levels of management – Head of the Board of Education, areas, departments, and services (ibid.).

Current educational challenges revolve around the education of students with a migrant background and the exacerbation of social inequalities through measures aimed at mitigating COVID-19. Among the former, German Language Support Classes (GLSC) have been scrutinized for their rash implementation and their lack of scientific justification (Erling et al., 2022) as well as the segregationist idea behind them (Flubacher, 2021). As far as young people inside and outside the Austrian educational system are concerned, the measures taken against the COVID-19 pandemics were particularly challenging. Austria reacted with comparatively long school closures – more than 80 days for upper secondary education and more than 40 days for primary education (OECD, 2021, pp. 7-9). Overall, the public health crisis and measures to mitigate it have likely exacerbated

prevalent socioeconomic inequalities within the Austrian educational system (Lindner et al., 2023; Weber et al., 2022a, 2022b).

NUTS 2 – Vienna & Upper Austria

For our ranking of potential case study regions at NUTS 2 level in Austria, we considered six core indicators based on EUROSTAT data and the Youth Labour Market Integration Index (YLMI) (see Cefalo & Scandurra, 2021; Cefalo et al., 2020; Scandurra et al., 2021). All indicators were assessed through their latest available regional scores. The six core indicators addressed were:

- Early leavers from education or training, aged 18 to 24
- Low educational attainment (ISCED 0-2) among young adults aged 25 to 34
- The rate of young adults aged 15 to 29 neither in employment, nor in education, nor in training (NEET)
- The youth employment rate among people aged 15 to 24
- The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, in Purchasing Power Standard (PPS)
- The At-risk-of-poverty-or-social exclusion rate (AROPE)

For every one of the six core indicators, we ranked the regions according to their performance on the respective indicator. The first rank was either the best-performing or the worst-performing region depending on the indicator (high NEET rates were considered *bad*, a high GDP was considered *good*). We have then calculated the average rank of each region across all six core indicators (see Table 8). The results for Austria were the following, from green (= best performing) to red (= worst performing):

Table 8 – Average rank of NUTS 2 regions in Austria

Code	Region at NUTS 2 level	Rate
AT31	**Oberösterreich**	2.83
AT32	**Salzburg**	3.67
AT22	**Steiermark**	4.17
AT33	**Tirol**	4.17
AT12	**Niederösterreich**	4.33
AT21	**Kärnten**	5.00
AT34	**Vorarlberg**	6.00
AT11	**Burgenland (AT)**	7.00
AT13	**Wien**	7.50

Source: Austrian National Team

The worst performing region is Vienna, while the best performing region is Upper Austria. Looking at the YLMI, Vienna remains the worst performing region, while Salzburg is the best performing region – however, only slightly better than Upper Austria (0.5% better). Given our experience with Vienna and Upper Austria stemming from our research, we

see merit in sticking to those two regions. We already have a track record with key stakeholders in both regions, we know the regions well and can thus avoid potential research implementation risk as much as possible. Moreover, Vienna, as a city region, proves to be an interesting case in comparison to Upper Austria. Additionally, their educational landscapes differ quite drastically, as Vienna has a noticeable disparity in educational attainment between a relatively high share of lowly and a high share of highly educated young adults, while Upper Austria has a keen focus on training/apprenticeships. This aligns with a service-based labour market in Vienna, which had the highest regional share of persons working in the third sector in 2022 (84.2%; own calculations based on data from Statistik Austria STATcube, 2023)[4], and a more pronounced industry-based labour market in Upper Austria where 33.9% worked in the secondary sector in 2022 – second only to Vorarlberg which had 38.1% (own calculations based on data from Statistik Austria STATcube, 2023)[5].

Politically, the two regions are quite different. Vienna has a longstanding social democratic tradition while Upper Austria has a longstanding conservative tradition when it comes to their respective forms of government. Demographically, as of 2022, Vienna has a markedly higher share of residents with a migrant background than Upper Austria (49.7% in Vienna over 22.2% in Upper Austria) (Statistik Austria, 2023a; own calculations). In 2022, young adults (aged 15 to 34 years) made up 28.0% of Vienna's total population and 23.8% of Upper Austria's total population, respectively (based on data from Statistik Austria STATcube, 2023). Of those young adults, 41.2% were foreign-born in Vienna and 20.5% were foreign-born in Upper Austria (ibid.; own calculations). Economically, Vienna outperformed Upper Austria with a GDP per capita (PPS) of €46,500 over €40,900 in 2021. Socio-economically, the latest available At-Risk-Of-Poverty-Or-Social-Exclusion Rate (AROPE) paints a markedly different picture. In 2018, Vienna had the highest rate at an alarming 27.5%, while Upper Austria had the lowest regional rate at 11.6%. Considering that AROPE is higher for Austrian households with children than it is for households without children (Statistik Austria, 2023b), the rate facing children in Vienna is likely to be even higher than the average rate of 27.5%. This is an important consideration given that the Austrian educational system produces comparatively high social reproduction in learning outcomes (Lassnigg, 2015). If we look at the overall share of early leavers and the share of NEETs to assess regional challenges in education, we find that Vienna faces higher rates in both aspects[6] and thus probably bigger challenges than Upper Austria. However, the differences between men and women in 2021 potentially reveal interesting post-COVID developments. Among early leavers, Upper Austria had basically no gender difference (0.5 percentage points to the disadvantage of men), but Vienna had a quite substantial difference (4.1 percentage points to the disadvantage of men). The NEET

4 The share was calculated with the sum of the three broad economic sectors as total (i.e., reference).

5 The share was calculated with the sum of the three broad economic sectors as total (i.e., reference).

6 In 2021, 12.2% over 8.5% in the overall NEET rate and 9.9% over 6.5% in the share of early leavers.

rates, on the other hand, reveal a different pattern. Here, Vienna had basically no gender difference (0.5 percentage points to the disadvantage of women) while Upper Austria had a stark gender difference of 4.8% to the disadvantage of women. Regarding school-to-work transition, Upper Austria exhibits higher employment rates for young adults of low (61.6% over 43.5% in 2021), middle (87.3% over 74.4% in 2021), and high educational attainment (90.2% over 85.4% in 2021), as well as for the short-term labour market integration of young adults in general (86.0% over 74.3% 1 to 3 years after completing education or training). Nevertheless, Vienna showed a more egalitarian short-term labour market integration than Upper Austria (0.10 percentage points to the disadvantage of women in Vienna over 4.2 percentage points to the disadvantage of women in Upper Austria). All these observations serve to further justify our selection of the two regions and they hint at a potentially fruitful contrast between the both.

Besides the previous connections from the YOUNG_ADULLLT project, our policy networks have expanded – more so in Vienna than in Upper Austria – throughout other transnational projects focussing on refugee integration (Social Innovation for Refugees – SIforREF) and participatory budgeting for climate-related matters (Municipalist Neighbourhood Experiments – MUNEX). Travel distance is another crucial factor in selecting Upper Austria and Vienna. Our department is situated centrally in Vienna and larger Upper Austrian localities can be reached by train or car within less than three hours, meaning we can – for example – travel to Upper Austria to conduct interviews and travel back home on the same day. In terms of personnel, there might be challenges considering that two core team members do not have German as their native tongue (Italian and Hungarian), which could potentially lead to a different form of interaction in interviews – particularly with Upper Austrians speaking in dialect. As far as the travel costs are concerned, the latter requires train tickets or car fuel.[7] The train tickets to Upper Austria might be a strain on the budget. A ticket to Linz and back would currently cost 76.80€ (own research).

NUTS 3 – Favoriten & Linz-Wels

For Vienna, the selection of a site proves relatively straightforward as the city of Vienna is both a NUTS2 and a NUTS3 region. However, its 10th district, Favoriten, is particularly relevant given the concentration of its population in potentially vulnerable positions. It has the biggest population of all Viennese districts at 212,255 inhabitants in 2022 (Stadt Wien, 2022a), the fourth highest share of foreign-born population in 2022 at 44.6% (ibid.), the highest unemployment density[8] at 156.9 in 2021 (Stadt Wien, 2022b), the third lowest net annual income in 2020 at 20,811 (Stadt Wien, 2022c), the second lowest share of persons with a university degree at 14.7% in 2020 as well as the highest share of persons with compulsory education as highest educational attainment with 32.5% in 2020 (Stadt

7 Some rural localities in Upper Austria might be more accessible by car than by train.

8 Annual average of registered unemployed persons aged 15-64 per 1,000 inhabitants.

Wien, 2022d). Moreover, as a big district it has many schools (https://www.meinbezirk.at/favoriten/c-lokales/alle-schulen-im-10-bezirk_a2903549) and offers many stakeholders who might be engaged for the project's purposes. The Vienna *Volkshochschule* (*adult education center*) in Favoriten offers basic education for youths and adults (https://www.vhs.at/de/info/basisbildung). Furthermore, *BIZ 10* (*BerufsInfoZentrum 10, job info center 10*) offers further educational/training, job, and career advice (https://www.ams.at/arbeitsuchende/aus-und-weiterbildung/berufsinformationen/biz---berufsinfozentren#wien). Additionally, the *Berufsförderungsinstitut (BFI) Wien* (*Career Development Institute*) in Favoriten offers similar services (https://www.bfi.wien/service/standorte/gudrunstrasse/). Finally, Favoriten is currently constructing a *Bildungscampus* (*education campus*) for up to 1,375 children with a kindergarten, an all-day school, four vocational classes, and music school (https://www.wien.gv.at/stadtentwicklung/architektur/oeffentliche-bauten/schulbauten/bc-innerfavoriten.html). This is just to show that Favoriten is an important location within our research site, which has some internal heterogeneity between its 23 districts. The general focus will still lie on Vienna as a whole.

The selection of a site in Upper Austria proves more difficult, also from a practical standpoint. The Western districts of Upper Austria would require long commutes to interviews. These commutes would take several hours, leading to either long working days or the necessity to stay on site for a night. Geographically, this leaves us with two favorable NUTS3 sites – from a practical perspective. Steyr-Kirchdorf and Linz-Wels. Both are interesting options that are characterised by a specific industrial giant – Voest in Linz-Wels and Steyr in Steyr-Kirchdorf. The latter region has far less inhabitants than Linz-Wels (156,593 versus 606,295 in 2021; based on data from Land Oberösterreich, 2022a). Their respective shares of persons with foreign origin[9] are just as different as their population size – 25.9% in Linz-Wels and 15.7% in Steyr-Kirchdorf in 2021 (ibid.). Steyr-Kirchdorf has a higher share of persons with apprenticeships as their highest level of educational attainment at 30.2% in 2020 (based on data from Land Oberösterreich, 2022b). Linz-Wels' share was at 27.5% (based on data from, Land Oberösterreich 2022b). Both are high compared to Vienna, where Floridsdorf had the highest share at 28.8% in 2020 (Stadt Wien, 2022d). Similarly, their unemployment density is significantly below Viennese values. Linz-Wels had an unemployment density of 33.6, Steyr-Kirchdorf had 29.0 (own calculation, based on Land Oberösterreich, 2022c) which is high compared to Upper Austrian NUTS3 regions, but extremely low compared to Viennese districts. For Linz-Wels, there are many potential stakeholders and programs of relevance. Among them, we can find *KICK*, job orientation program for youths and young adults (https://www.vsg.or.at/angebote/berufsorientierung-kick/), *AQUA (Arbeitsnahe Qualifizierung)*, a qualification program for unemployed persons headed by the Austrian

[9] Persons with foreign origin are those that are either of foreign nationality or foreign-born when they have Austrian nationality (see Land Oberösterreich, 2023c).

Public Employment Service (AMS; https://www.ams.at/arbeitsuchende/arbeiten-in-oesterreich-und-der-eu/ukraine/ukraine-informationen-eng), or *Berufsausbildungsassistenz (vocational training assistance) by the Austrian Network for Vocational Assistance* (NEBA; https://www.neba.at/neba-leistungen/berufsausbildungsassistenz/bas-anbieterinnen/item/jugend-am-werk-gmbh-4020-cdo391). For Steyr-Kirchdorf, we could engage with Jugend am Werk /BBRZ Österreich Steyr (Youth at Work) who accompany youths and young adults in all of Upper Austria in their transition into the labour market (https://arbeitplus.at/unternehmen/jugend-am-werk-bbrz-oesterreich-steyr/). Other potential stakeholders are listed in Upper Austria's *Youthmap* (https://sozialplattform.at/soziallandkarte.html?search=category&key=cat_300&services=41&keyword).

We select Linz-Wels as our preferred research site because we already have stakeholder contacts in the Linz area from previous projects, it provides a better urban-rural contrast than Steyr-Kirchdorf, and its markedly bigger population size allows for a more nuanced analysis of policies and institutions. The major differences between Linz-Wels and Vienna lie in the aforementioned educational structures where Vienna exhibits a polarization between lowly and highly educated people, while Linz-Wels, as well as Upper Austria in general, focusses on apprenticeships (as well as tertiary education) given its more pronounced industrial economic makeup. Moreover, Vienna has a more diverse population than Linz-Wels, which leads to different educational requirements.

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Bulgaria

In 2023, the main contextual factors that are expected to influence the learning outcomes from the educational policy and young people's subjective activity in Bulgaria are the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemics, the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the energy crisis, the high inflation and political instability in the country resulting in five parliamentary elections held in two years. Unlike other divisive issues in the public life in the country, education is widely considered as having a growing importance but also a declining performance in present-day Bulgarian society. Undoubtedly, the education system in the country is accumulating problems both within and outside the educational domain. Official and informal media alike draw a gruesome picture of low and declining educational outcomes starting with early education and care (age 0-7 years), proceeding with the low PISA scores of Bulgarian students from 8 years up to the obligatory age of 16 years, and the unsatisfactory results of university education in terms of its academic quality and meeting the skills requirements of the labour market and finishing with the low rate of involvement in lifelong learning. Similar are the conclusions of foreign experts presented in EU and OECD reports (EC, 2021; OECD, 2022). The Ministry of Education and Science of Republic Bulgaria is trying to create a more positive image of the social effect of their education policy by designing new policy documents (strategies and programmes) as well as by frequent postings of *news* on the ministerial website – short pieces presenting new projects and initiatives for the innovation in the educational system.

Acknowledging the path dependency in the social development of Bulgaria from the communist past to the country's present of EU membership, we have to point at the change in the opportunity structures for youth transitions in the past half century – from the strict state/party control in the 1970s and 1980s of the 20th century during the one-party regime to the de-standardised, prolonged, and precarious trajectories after the regime change in 1989 under the conditions of a market economy and multi-party democracy (Kovacheva, 2001; Mitev et al., 2019). Today, Bulgaria's youth policy relies on two main documents: the Law on Youth (2012) and the National Youth Strategy (2021–2030). Both documents are strongly influenced by the EU policies (Kovacheva, 2020) while the policies suffer from a lack of coordination between the various sectors with a continuing top-down design and implementation (Taneva & Elenkova, 2020; Kovacheva & Hristozova, 2022). Available overviews of the policies targeting youth in Bulgaria (Jeliazkova et al., 2018; Angelova & Boyadjieva, 2020) highlight the trend towards a heavy reliance on employment policies at the expense of educational, lifelong learning and welfare services.

At present, the education system in Bulgaria is comprehensive, offering free education to all, setting the obligatory age at 16, which coincides with the legal age for the start of employment. In the first decades of the 21st century, studies register a trend towards a greater student selection and segmentation between elite and mass institutions at the

level of secondary education (Lavrentsova & Valkov, 2019; Imdorf et al., 2022). The groups in most vulnerable situations are young people with ethnic minority origin, those living in rural municipalities and youth with special needs. Various studies attest to numerous instances of overt and covert discrimination towards Roma youth in the country (Atanasov et al., 2021). The share of education expenditure in Bulgaria's state budget is below the EU average, being at 3.8% of the GDP (MF, 2022), and the share of support for private providers is rising, which further exacerbates the social inequalities among children with unequal family resources. Vocational education remains unpopular and students from such establishments have a much higher non-completion rate than those from general schools (Milenkova & Kovacheva, 2020). CEDEFOP (2018, p. 57) observes that the main challenges in front of Bulgaria's vocational education are reducing early leaving from education and training; expanding dual VET provision and professionalisation of teachers and trainers. Official statistical data of Eurostat indicate that the rate of early school leavers in the past 10 years before the COVID-19 pandemic fluctuates between 12.4% and 13.9%, but has fallen to 10,5% in 2022 (Eurostat, 2023a). The rate is still higher than the average for the EU (9.9%) and is expected to rise with the current economic difficulties. Since the regime change in 1989, the number of students in tertiary education has been gradually expanding to reach 33.8% in 2022 (Eurostat, 2023b). However, the university education shares the flaws of the country's vocational schools, leaning towards a more theoretical orientation and lacking a focus on the skills required by employers (Boyadjieva et al., 2010).

There are considerable regional differences in the access to quality education in Bulgaria (Stoilova, 2010; Jeleva, 2021; Imdorf et al., 2022). In many regions, young people's choice of higher education is very limited due to the lack of such institutions or the long distance to the nearest ones (Stefanova, 2014). Education-to-work transitions of young people are strongly influenced by the degree of urbanisation, the level of economic growth and labour market development in the regions. The dynamic of rising regional inequalities is gaining speed in the past ten years influenced by the economic policies in Bulgaria, including the ways of distribution of European funds among regions and the regional fiscal policies (Nenov, 2023).

NUTS 2 – North Central & South Central

In July 2000, the territory of the country was divided into six statistical regions (NUTS 2) following requirements of the Eurostat (see Figure 5). The borders of the regions were designated with the main purpose of statistical reporting, which, in turn, is also a basis for accessing the structural funds of the European regional policy. The administrative-territorial units at NUTS 3 level are the 28 sub-regions (*oblasti* = districts). On the lowest level are 264 municipalities consisting of 5,302 towns and villages (*naseleni mesta* = settlements).

Figure 5 – Territorial division of Bulgaria into NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 regions

Source: Dimitrov et al., 2017, p. 106

Up to now, the division of the territory into 6 NUTS 2 regions has had little economic, political, and social meaning for the living conditions of young people. The territorial orientation of the educational, economic and social policies in the country usually covers the territory of one NUTS 3 district, and the meaningful unit shaping the structure of opportunities and constraints for young people's education-to-work transitions is the locality, that is the municipality (usually a town and the nearby villages). For example, the South Western region (BG41) ranks the 1st along different economic and educational indicators, but there are significant differences hidden behind the general rank of the region. Access to education and employment varies considerably between the capital city of Sofia, the other cities and the smaller towns and villages in this NUTS 2 region. Thus, the GDP of the district including the capital Sofia was 51,281 million Bulgarian Leva in 2020, while the same indicator for the other four NUTS 3 regions varied between 3,134 million in Blagoevgrad to 1,120 in Pernik (IME, 2022a).

Nevertheless, in order to choose two regions for our fieldwork, we have paid a special attention to the available Eurostat data for the six regions for development. There we see a clear contrast between the South Western region (BG41), which comes the first on five of the indicators, and the North Western region (BG31), which comes the last on three indicators and close to that on the rest. We have left the two outliers aside and focused instead on the remaining four regions. Their scores on the relevant indicators are not radically different, although their rankings vary from one indicator to the next. For the purpose of site selection, we find the composite index of youth labour market integration (YLMI) (Cefalo et al., 2020; Scandurra, 2021; Cefalo et al., 2021) most relevant. YLMI arranges the four regions in the following way:

Table 9 – Youth Labour Market Integration Index of the six NUTS 2 regions in Bulgaria

Youth Labour Market Integration (YLMI)		GEO (Labels)	2018
		EU27 average	n.a.
BG41	Yugozapaden	0,8761	1
BG32	Severen tsentralen	0,7330	2
BG34	Yugoiztochen	0,7099	3
BG33	Severoiztochen	0,6859	4
BG42	Yuzhen tsentralen	0,6554	5
BG31	Severozapaden	0,5976	6

Source: Own elaboration based on Scandurra et al., 2021

The table (see Table 9) confirms our previous observation. When we exclude the two outliers – the South Western region (BG41) and the North Western region (BG31) –, the remaining four regions do not differ significantly. The North Central region (BG32) and South Eastern region (BG34) form the group of the rather well-performing regions and North Eastern (BG33) and South Central (BG42) might be referred to as the rather bad-performing regions.

For our empirical research, we selected two regions – one from each of the two groups: North Central region (BG32) as rather well performing, and South Central (BG42) as rather bad performing. In addition to the rankings, our rationale for choosing those regions was based on the education, research and policy networks of our team and the higher feasibility to conduct fieldwork in the selected regions. In what follows, we briefly describe their core political, demographic, socio-economic and educational characteristics.

North Central region

The region is situated in the central part of Northern Bulgaria bordering the Danube to the North and the Balkan Mountains to the South. The region covers 13.5% of the territory of the country and has 11.6% of the population. The average population density in the region is lower than the average of the country. Similarly, it has a lower degree of urbanization than the country's average. The big cities are Veliko Turnovo, Rousse and Gabrovo. The region ranks second in the country on the main indicators related to education with only 9.9% of early school leavers and 14.4% of people with low education attainment. The Institute for the Market Economy (IME, 2022b, p. 22) points at the region's lowest NEET rate in 2021 but explains it with the region's lowest density of the population and the highest rate of population aging. The educational advantages are lost in terms of the rate of youth employment which stands at 15.9%, the last but one lowest rate in the country. Similarly, the region takes the second lowest rate in the country of Regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita (Purchasing Power Standard=PPS) of €12,800 and is on the third lowest place on the indicator At-Risk-of-Poverty-or-Social-Exclusion Rate with 34.16% (Eurostat, 2023c). The economic activity of the population and the

general employment rate are lower than the average of the country (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, 2023a). The main sectors of the regional economy are services with 58%, followed by industry with 32% and agriculture with 9%. The region is on the 5th place out of the 6 NUTS 2 regions in the share of attracted foreign investment. The greatest policy challenge is to find ways to support the young people stay and work in the region and combat the trend of declining population due to emigration and a negative natural population growth of the last 30 years. The North Central region shares the trend with most of the NUTS 2 regions in Northern Bulgaria, which have lost 20 to 25% of their population in the past ten years (IME, 2022a).

South Central region

The region covers 20% of the territory of Bulgaria and hosts 20% of its population. Its population density coincides with the average for the country. The region shares the trend of population decline with the North Central region, as well as a lower degree of urbanisation than the average for the country. The 2021 census revealed a demographic picture of populations decline in all NUTS 3 regions in Bulgaria, including the capital Sofia (NSI, 2023). The big cities in the South Central region are Plovdiv, Haskovo, Smolyan, Kurdzali and Pazardzik. The region fares worse than the North Central region on educational indicators, having a higher share of early school leavers (12.9%) and of persons with low educational attainment (21.5%) (Eurostat, 2023d). However, it ranks the second among the six regions in the youth employment rate. The South Central region has the lowest rate of Regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita of €12.300, but has an average rate of At-Risk-of-Poverty-or-Social-Exclusion of 37.5% (Eurostat, 2023c).

The economic activity of the population and the general employment rate are higher than those in the North Central region but still lower than the average of the country (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, 2023b). The main sectors of the regional economy are services with 54%, followed by industry with 38% and agriculture with 8%. The region is on the 4th place out of the 6 NUTS 2 regions in the share of foreign investment. The greatest challenge in the region is the highly unequal distribution of educational and economic opportunities within the region with the mountainous towns and villages lagging far behind those in the Thracian valley. Thus, the GDP in Plovdiv NUTS 3 region of 9,765 million Bulgarian Leva is 8 times higher than that of Smolyan and 5.6 times higher than that of Kurdzali (two of the other cities in the region situated in the Rhodopi Mountains). As a result, there is a strong trend of internal migration from the mountains to the districts of Plovdiv, Pazardzik and Haskovo (IME, 2022a). The region has one of the highest number of NEETs, which is due to two main factors:

> the significantly larger share of young people from Roma ethnic origin and with primary education, which presupposes a more difficult integration in the labour market; and the favourable labour market situation due to a higher economic growth, quality of higher education and standard of living in the South Central region, especially in the regional centre

of Plovdiv, which attract a large number of young people from the whole country, which in turn creates significant imbalances (IME, 2022b, p. 23).

While the supposed *more difficult integration* of Roma youth is a debatable statement without pointing at the factors triggering this trend, it is worth examining the combination of economic growth and educational decline that data attributes to the Plovdiv district.

NUTS 3 – Plovdiv & Gabrovo

Looking deeper in the education and working conditions for young people in the two NUTS 2 regions, we have selected two sites at NUTS 3 level, one from each of them. These are the Plovdiv administrative district in the South-Central region and the Gabrovo administrative district in the North Central region. The first district is economically a rather thriving district with Plovdiv being a university city attracting a lot of young people from the whole district and beyond, as well as a lot of foreign investment in the so-called Trakya Economic Zone surrounding the city of Plovdiv. The district of Gabrovo may be defined as an economically declining district with one major foreign employer and a high exodus of young people. The gross domestic product in the Gabrovo district is 6.2 times lower than that in the Plovdiv district. In this respect, the two selected sites follow the traditional territorial divide in Bulgaria between the developed Southern and the underdeveloped Northern regions (IME, 2022a). While all Bulgarian districts lost population between the two censuses, Plovdiv is the third district after the city of Sofia and the Sofia district with the lowest negative population growth (-7.6%) while Gabrovo is on the 24th place out of 28 districts (-19.8%). When we compare the results from the external state evaluation of academic achievement at the end of high school (12th grade) Plovdiv is on the fourth place and Gabrovo on the eighth place. Still, the two regions are not fully contrasting and have a lot of similarities, particularly in the structure of their economies. The data in the following descriptions are from the National Statistical Institute (NSI, regional level data).

Plovdiv administrative district

The Plovdiv district has a population of 662,907 people and a territory of 5,973 square km. In their regional profiles, IME gives the district the best score in population development, best in infrastructural development and ecological protection, an average economic growth, economic activity and education. The district's economy is dominated by the services bringing 60% of the total, while industry and agriculture form 36% and 4% respectively. In 2021, the district was on the third place after the districts of Sofia and Bourgas in concentration of foreign capital in the country and these are the only three municipalities with over a billion euros of foreign investments (Nikolov, 2022). Despite the registered economic growth, the rate of poverty in Plovdiv district in 2021 was 26,8% – still higher than the average for the country (22,1%). The economic activity rate of the population is 68.5% (the country average is 72,0%). The unemployment rate however is at 3,3%, which is lower than the 5,3% average for the country. A challenge to the labour

market integration continues to be the workforce education. Its level continues to rise but is slightly lower than the average for the country. The share of university graduates in the district is 26.0% in comparison with the 29.6% in the country and the share of people with primary and lower education in the district is 19.2% compared to 16.6% in the country.

The centre of the district is the city of Plovdiv, which hosts 8 universities that attract young people from all over the district and the Southern part of the country and hence, the coefficient of demographic replacement (the ratio of population between 15–19-year-olds and 60–64-year-olds) is somewhat higher than the average in the country - 69.8% to 69.4% respectively. The mechanical growth rate of the population is 6%. A relatively large part of the population lives in cities and the degree of urbanisation is 75.1%, higher than the 73.1% in the country.

Gabrovo administrative district

The Gabrovo district has a population of 103,404 people and a territory of 2,023 square km. Its economy has a high share of industry. The rate of employment in 2022 is 67,3% which slightly lower than the average for the country and the unemployment rate is 7,2% which is significantly higher than the country's average of 5.3%. The poverty rate is relatively low - 12,3% compared to 22,1% for the country. The workforce in the district has a low share of early school leavers and of people with a low education attainment and a high share of people with high school diplomas corresponding to the industrial profile of the regional economy. Gabrovo is one of the districts with the most unfavourable demographic situation. It is one of the first districts in population aging. The city has a record low natural population growth of -22,1‰ and the mechanical growth rate is also negative –0,8‰. The degree of urbanisation is high but the density of the population is low. The centre of the district is the city of Gabrovo situated on the Northern slopes of the Balkan Mountains. It has been a leader in the creation of the country's industry with its machine building factories by the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century but is now moving to much lower ranks. Similarly, a century ago, it had some of the best high schools in the country but now lacks any higher educational institutions, the nearest being in the regional centre - the city of Veliko Turnovo.

The selected districts display divergent trends in their education and economic development and will be of interest for our research. Our study can throw light on several discrepancies such as the two districts changing ranks in the rates of unemployment and poverty and the ranks of academic achievement (when the achievement is measured by the rate of early school leaving and scores on the external state examination). The difference between booming and declining sites become clearer when we focus on the municipality of Plovdiv and the surrounding Trakya Economic Zone as the first site and on the district of Gabrovo, as the second site. The first site registers high economic growth, high employment rate and eight universities; the second one has a low economic growth, low rate of youth employment and high out-migration rate. Although the

transport links between the two districts are not very good and require crossing the Balkan Mountains, they are accessible by car and are situated not very far away from each other in the central part of the country. The feasibility of conducting empirical fieldwork is high as the national team relies on the good contacts with the university colleagues in Veliko Turnovo – the city situated in a neighbouring district to Gabrovo.

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Finland

In Finland, state administration consists of central, regional and local state administration. In the Government Programme, the Finnish Government defines the strategic priorities and objectives (also related to education and employment) that it intends to follow during its term. The main national actors in the field of Finnish education policy are the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) and the Finnish National Board of Education (EDUFI). MoEC is the highest authority in the field of education policy and it is responsible for all publicly funded education in Finland. EDUFI is the national development agency, whose tasks include implementing national education policies, preparing the national core curricula and requirements for qualifications, developing education and teaching staff, and providing services for the education sector and administrative services.

In terms of policy planning and implementation hierarchy, regions (at the NUTS 3 level) can be placed between national and municipality-level government authorities. The regions are governed by regional councils, which are responsible for general regional policy planning as well as policy programmes within the region. Local and national government authorities must take the regional councils' plans and programmes into account in their own operation. Programme-based regional policy can also be implemented in cooperation with industry, enterprises, civic organisations, and the third sector. Actions are planned with the special characteristics of the region in mind.

According to EDUFI (2019), the main objective of Finnish education policies is to offer all citizens equal opportunities to receive education. In Finland, most education is publicly funded, there are no tuition fees at any educational level. Raising the age of compulsory education to 18 years and extending compulsory education to upper secondary education became effective in 2021. Financial aid, such as study grants and loans, can be awarded for full-time study after compulsory education. Furthermore, there are no dead-end tracks in the system preventing progression to tertiary education. However, since the recession in the beginning of the 1990s and the financial crisis in 2010s, there have been considerable budget cuts in the welfare state, shifting the emphasis to a more selective and market-oriented direction, with education strongly affected. Centralised steering, especially of education, was drastically reduced in the 1990s, while the decentralisation, deregulation, and decision-making powers of local administration were increased. (Berisha et al., 2017.) Due to these changes, the role of regional level planning and implementation of educational policies has increased in Finland over the course of the past few decades.

The main educational challenges in Finland are predicted decline in the educational level of the population in the future, increasing learning and educational differences in terms of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background, as well as overall weakening of life opportunities among young people in disadvantaged and vulnerable positions. The transition from education to working life has evolved into a more prolonged, de-

standardised, unstable, and precarious life phase also in Finland. A recent study (Lorentzen et al., 2018) showed that nearly 10% of Finnish young people follow an *exclusion trajectory* in school-to-work transitions, which is characterised by a short spell of education that leads to NEET status either directly or via unstable workforce affiliation.

Thus, although the majority of young people make the transition to adulthood comparatively successfully in Finland, there are also many who struggle as they face either exclusion from employment or low pay and job inequalities associated with insecure youth labour markets (Harkko, 2018). While, on a general level, the objective increase in the level of job uncertainty has not been drastic in Finland in the last few decades, the labour market risks have increased considerably among the population. It has been estimated that 10–30% of young people are facing a serious risk of social exclusion even in more economically affluent regions (Rinne et al., 2018; Tikkanen et al., 2018.) Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has had detrimental impacts on various aspects of the wellbeing and increased existing inequalities among them (e.g., Hietanen-Peltola et al., 2022).

Regarding the most urgent issues in education, the Programme of Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government (2019) states that regional, socio-economic, and gender disparities as well as the correlation between the level of parental education and the performance of children have all become more noticeable in learning and educational achievement in Finland. The programme highlights also other issues, such as that there is a marked gender segregation of education and work, that the educational achievement and skills of first- and second-generation immigrants, people with disabilities, and other groups in a vulnerable position lag behind those of the rest of the population, and that problems with children's and young people's ability to cope and mental health have increased to an alarming extent.

NUTS 2 – Etelä-Suomi & Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi

Finland consists of five NUTS 2 regions and 19 NUTS 3 regions. In the table (see Table 10), the selected performance indicators of the Finnish NUTS 2 regions are presented and ranked.

Based on the indicators presented above, Helsinki-Uusimaa and Etelä-Suomi can be clustered together as rather well-performing regions, and Länsi-Suomi and Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi as rather bad-performing regions (although the difference between Etelä- and Länsi-Suomi is not very distinct on all the selected indicators, i.e., their GDP and NEET rates are very close to each other). In general, the NUTS 2 regions in Finland are internally very heterogenous as they consist of large vastly differing areas; thus, their information value is very low.

For the CLEAR project, we select ***Etelä-Suomi*** and ***Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi*** as our two contrasting NUTS 2 regions. Both of these regions have good data availability, and the UTU team has existing collaboration contacts and networks in both of these regions,

which significantly improves the feasibility of conducting empirical research in these regions. Whereas the UTU team is located in the Etelä-Suomi region, the distance from Turku to the selected site in Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi region (see the next section) is over 600 kilometres, but the cost of travel and accommodation is not foreseen to be an issue. Thus, carrying out research in both of these regions will be feasible.

Table 10 – Ranking of the Finnish NUTS2 regions (excluding Åland)

NUTS 2 Region	Youth labour market integration		At-risk-of-poverty-or-social-exclusion		GDP		NEETs	
	Rate	Rank	Rate	Rank	Rate	Rank	Rate	Rank
Helsinki-Uusimaa (capital region)	0,721	2	11,50	1	46 400	1	7,0	1
Etelä-Suomi (southern Finland)	0,753	1	16,30	2	32 300	3	10,0	3
Länsi-Suomi (western Finland)	0,668	4	18,00[10]	3	32 600	2	9,9	2
Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi (northern and eastern Finland)	0,700	3	19,30	4	30 800	4	11,3	4

Source: Indicators provided by WP3 Core Team

Etelä-Suomi consists of five NUTS 3 regions (Varsinais-Suomi [Southwest Finland], Kanta-Häme [Tavastia Proper], Päijät-Häme [Päijänne Tavastia], Kymenlaakso [Region of Kymenlaakso], and Etelä-Karjala [South Karelia]); thus, spanning over a large area from the western archipelago all the way to the Russian border in the east. Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi, in turn, consists of seven NUTS 3 regions (Kainuu [Region of Kainuu], Etelä-Savo [Southern Savonia], Pohjois-Savo [Northern Savonia], Pohjois-Karjala [North Karelia], Keski-Pohjanmaa [Central Ostrobothnia], Pohjois-Pohjanmaa [North Ostrobothnia], and Lappi [Lapland]) covering over half of the acreage of mainland Finland (the distance from the most southern part of Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi to its most northern part is nearly 1200 kilometres). Therefore, as the Finnish NUTS 2 regions comprise drastically differing areas, it is very difficult to define common challenges (aside from challenges that apply to the whole country) and regional specificities. This was also illustrated in the different rankings (see Table 4). Given the described limitations, the ranking, however, supports the classification of Etelä-Suomi as a well-performing area in the Finnish context concerning indicators that are crucial for CLEAR project, youth labour market integration and at risk of poverty or social exclusion rate. Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi, in turn, is the worst performing region in 3 out of 4 selected indicators.

[10] Including Åland.

Because the Finnish NUTS 2 regions do not have easily recognised regional specificities, in this document we focus on describing the core political, demographic, socio-economic, and educational characteristic of the NUTS 3 regions, where regional specificities and thus the differences between the regions are easier to recognize.

NUTS 3 – Southwest Finland & Kainuu

For the research sites, we have selected the NUTS 3 regions ***Southwest Finland*** (from NUTS 2 region Etelä-Suomi) and ***Kainuu*** (from NUTS 2 region Pohjois- ja Itä-Suomi). The selection of the sites is based on the following aspects: differences in regional opportunity structures, accessibility of the local experts and young people, the feasibility to conduct the fieldwork in both sites. Additionally, we provide key data of selected sites to highlight the socio-economic and demographic differences of selected regions.

The NUTS 3 regions differ from each other in terms of both socio-demographic features and the educational and labour market opportunities available for young people. The most important differences between the regions are presented in more detail in the next table (see Table 11).

Southwest Finland consists of 27 municipalities, two of which have a Swedish-speaking majority. It is located by the coast of the Archipelago Sea and it is known for its unique archipelago comprising over 20,000 islands. Its central location as a gateway to the West makes it an important international actor in the Baltic Sea area. Southwest Finland mainly encompasses urban and marine areas and has a population of around 473,000 inhabitants, which makes it the third largest region in Finland. The capital city of the region is Turku, which, with a total population of around 197,000 inhabitants, is the fifth biggest city in Finland. Turku is surrounded by smaller towns, some of which are rather wealthy and from which many people commute daily to Turku for work or study.

For centuries, Southwest Finland was the centre of Finland, and Turku, the oldest city in Finland, was the nation's capital. Today, Southwest Finland is the second largest economic area in Finland with strong links to the Stockholm business area. The main industries of the region are marine industry and metal construction, which, together with the research and development in biosciences and food industry, form the base of the economic life of the region. However, over the past few decades, the traditional industries have been complemented by the service sector, one example of which is the increase in tourism.

Southwest Finland is a strong educational region. There are two universities in Turku, the University of Turku (Finnish), and Åbo Akademi University (Swedish). Additionally, there are four universities of applied sciences in the region: Turku University of Applied Sciences, Novia University of Applied Sciences, Diaconia University of Applied Sciences, and HUMAK University of Applied Sciences. Every year about 9,500 new students enrol in the universities, universities of applied sciences, and vocational institutions of Southwest Finland.

Table 11 – Key data of Finland and selected NUTS 3 regions

Indicator	Finland	Southwest Finland	Kainuu
Population in 2022 (change % from 2021)	5 563 970 (+0.3)	485 567 (+0.4)	70 521 (−1.0)
Number of municipalities (2023)	309	27	8
Capital city (inhabitants, 2022)	Helsinki (658 864)	Turku (198 143)	Kajaani (36 283)
Acreage (km^2)	302,347 (mainland)	10,663	20,197
Population density (per km^2)[1]	18,3	45,5	3,5
% of under 15-year-olds	15,1	14,3	13,4
% of over 64-year-olds	23,3	24,1	30,4
Regional GDP (2020; index with the whole country at 100)[1]	100	92,9	81,1
Dependency ratio	62,3	62,3	77,7
Population % with foreign background	9,1	9,1	4,2
Unemployment % in 2021 (2018)[11]	9,4 (9,0)	8,8 (8,7)	9,9 (10,8)
Youth unemployment % in 2021 (2018)[12]	11,3 (11,4)	10,0 (9,8)	13,9 (15,1)
Population % with post-compulsory education[13]	74,6	74,7	74,2
Population % with higher education[14]	33,0	32,4	25,9

Source: Statistics Finland, 2023

Kainuu, being a much smaller region than Southwest Finland, consists of eight municipalities, which are primarily rural. The region is located in northern Finland, and it borders the regions of Northern Ostrobothnia, North Karelia and Northern Savonia in Finland and the Republic of Karelia in Russia. While Southwest Finland is culturally affected by the West, particularly Sweden, Kainuu is culturally closer to the East. The population of Kainuu is around 75,000, which makes it the second smallest region in mainland Finland. The capital city of the region is Kajaani, which is the only municipality

11 18–64-year-olds in the workforce

12 18–24-year-olds

13 Percentage of the population of 15-year and older with post-compulsory education degrees in 2021

14 Percentage of the population of 15-year-old and older with higher education degrees in 2021

of the region that can be described as mainly urban. However, with its 38,000 inhabitants, Kajaani is notably small for a capital city of a region.

Compared to Southwest Finland, there are much fewer post-compulsory educational opportunities in Kainuu. In the region, there are no universities and only one university of applied sciences, which is located in Kajaani, the capital city of the region. While Southwest Finland, Turku in particular, is a rather attractive city for youth and young adults to live in due to versatile educational opportunities, the young people living in Kainuu are, in many cases, forced to leave their home towns due to the scarcity of educational opportunities in the region. The same goes with employment opportunities for young people and young adults. While economic structure of Southwest Finland is diverse, in Kainuu employment opportunities are limited to a few key areas.

As already briefly described above, there are several socio-economic and demographic factors that make Southwest Finland and Kainuu a good pair of contrasting cases of comparison for the purposes of the CLEAR project. While Kainuu is larger in terms of acreage, it is much more sparsely populated than Southwest Finland. In Kainuu, the population growth rate is negative and the dependency ratio is much higher than in Southwest Finland or in the whole country on average. Southwest Finland, in turn, is a wealthier region with a growing population and more versatile life opportunities available for young people. It is also a more multi-cultural region than Kainuu, where the share of immigrants is much lower than in Finland on average. The educational level of citizens is higher in Southwest Finland than in Kainuu, where, in turn, the overall unemployment rate, as well as the share of unemployed youth of all the unemployed people, is higher than in Southwest Finland.

The members of a Finnish national CLEAR team have good knowledge of the context as well as already existing contacts to local experts working with young people and young adults in both selected sites which makes it easier to conduct fieldwork in both regions despite their relatively long distance from each other.

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Germany

Germany is a federal state with three levels of administrative apparatus – federal, *Land* (state), and local. The federal authorities have exclusive responsibility in areas such as defence, foreign policy or immigration. The German *Länder* have a sovereign jurisdiction on the public housing, police (excluding federal police), the press, education and others. The local municipalities manage their own affairs and implement matters of national state administration. In total, Germany is composed of 16 Länder, of which 13 are territorial *Länder* and 3 city-*Länder*, including Berlin, Bremen and Hamburg. As statistical units, Germany is divided into 16 NUTS 1 regions (corresponding with German Länder), 38 NUTS 2 regions (government regions), and 401 NUTS 3 regions (districts or municipalities). The administrative division also impacts the responsibilities in education and training.

The federal state, represented by the *Federal Ministry of Education and Research* (*Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung*), coordinates the consultations on educational matters between German *Länder*, who have the sovereign right on educational provision. One of the most important governmental bodies is the *Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs* (*Kultusministerkonferenz*), which is the oldest conference of ministers of education of German *Länder* and an instrument for coordination and development of education in Germany. The Standing Conference seeks to overcome the *Länder's* differences in education systems, evaluation procedures, and qualification standards. The Conference was among the first to react on the results of international educational comparisons (PISA, PIAAC, TIMSS), in which German pupils scored against the expectations below the OECD average (the so-called *PISA-Shock*). The Conference's reaction was to successively introduce overall educational standards to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and to lay down a set of competencies pupils and students on different school levels had to meet. This marks the start of the German discourse on learning outcomes.

Given the current reports, education in Germany faces several challenges. *First*, people with so-called *migrant background*, which made 28,7°% of the population in Germany in 2022 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023)[15], face higher social and financial risks than the rest of the population and are more likely to leave the education system without a professional qualification or a tertiary education degree (Maaz et al., 2022). *Second*, the number of early school leavers aged 18-24 years has reached 11,8°% in 2021, exceeding the EU's average (European Commission, 2022, p. 3). With regard to tertiary education, of the most disadvantaged pupils, only 13,9°% are expected to complete tertiary education compared to average 43,4°% in the EU (ibid., p. 4). *Third*, there are remarkable regional and educational disparities, especially between people with low formal educational

[15] The category of people with so-called *migrant background* is used in a wider sense, including citizens born in Germany, where at least one of the parents has not obtained German citizenship by birth.

attainment and the highly qualified portions of population. This affects especially young men and those living in rural and remote regions and was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemics, during which the percentage of young adults not in employment, education or training (NEET) increased to 9,7% in 2021 (OECD, 2022, p. 11).

With regard to learning outcomes, the German discourse is dominated by the focus on skills and competencies, which are mostly understood in terms of professional or job competencies (German: *fachliche Handlungskompetenz*). Another aspect is the relation between learning outcomes and job qualifications. Generally, education is meant to (re-)qualify people to enhance their employability and enable career shifts from one sector to another (German: *Quereinsteiger*). Finally, the discourse on learning outcomes also thematises the wider purpose and meaning of education for developing democratic societies and strengthening the civic freedoms and participation, encouraging adult and lifelong learning. In this respect, learning outcomes and academic (under)achievement are related to educational (in)equality and educational (in)justice, which encompass a wide range of relations and root causes, including family structure, social developments, labour market, and economic dynamics.

NUTS 2 – Hamburg & Saxony-Anhalt

The current trends in education in Germany have also guided the selection of research sites for the empirical part of the CLEAR research project. The *rationale* for the selection has been guided by the following criteria:

- *First*, we looked at statistical data indicating the *economic* (Regional Gross Domestic Product, Youth Unemployment Rate: see Eurostat, 2023d; 2023c) and *educational* (Early School Leavers, Low Educational Attainment: see Eurostat, 2023a; 2023b) situation of young people, as well as their regional *opportunity structures* (At-Risk-of-Poverty-or-Social-Exclusion Rate, Youth Labour Market Integration Index: see Eurostat, 2023e; Scandurra, Cefalo & Kazepov, 2021). Based on the rankings, we created two pools of regions divided by their average performances. Within the two pools, we have considered the regions with low performance and those performing better, excluding from the selection the best performing regions (marked in dark green). The only exception was the Gross Domestic Product, where one of the selected regions was ranked first (this was the case of Hamburg, which, although economically powerful, reports poor learning outcomes).
- *Second*, in our selection, we have taken into account the historical differences between the new and the old German *Länder* and sought to select one region from both. By new and old Länder we refer to the German reunification of the *old* German *Länder* of the Federal Republic of Germany with the re-established *new Länder* of the former German Democratic Republic on 3 October 1990. Although the convergence of both systems, including the coordination of education, has been widely successful, the structural differences, such as the specific economic and

industrial dependencies and the de-population of particular regions, continue to impact the opportunity structures of young people.

- *Third*, another criterion for the selection were the existing policy and research networks. In both regions, the German Team has looked for existing and potential connections with academics, policy experts and policy practitioners.
- *Fourth*, we have considered the density of educational provision in the regions, such as the number of schools, training centres, non-formal educational sites and others. We have paid a special attention to the concentration of groups of young people in vulnerable positions.
- *Fifth*, we have also estimated our ability to conduct the planned research in both possible areas. The accessibility of and the distance to both research sites, as much as the subsequent time and financial costs were therefore affecting the selection.

Based on the listed criteria, the choice of the NUTS 2 regions has been made in favour of **Hamburg** and **Saxony-Anhalt**. The regions selected have varying degrees of educational and economic performance, with Hamburg scoring better than Saxony-Anhalt in all parameters with the exception of the *At-Risk-of-Poverty-or-Social-Exclusion Rate*. The rather unexpected reversal of the region's rates indicates a need to understand the structures that lead to higher risk of exposure to poverty or social inclusion in Hamburg, which traditionally scores at the top of economic indicators. Belonging to both old (Hamburg) and new (Saxony-Anhalt) *Länder*, the regions have dense educational and data provision at NUTS 3 level. In terms of feasibility to conduct the research, both regions are well accessible via public transport from Münster (WWU) and Bonn (DIE).

In following, we will provide a brief characteristic of the regions with a focus on their socio-economic and educational specificities, before we describe the selection of research sites at NUTS 3 level.

Hamburg

The Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg is one of the Germany's three city-*Länder* with a total population of 1,89 million inhabitants. After the capital Berlin, it is the second largest city in Germany. Hamburg presents an important economic, political and cultural centre with one of the Europe's largest ports. It is a significant commercial and logistical location, with the seat of international companies like Airbus, Beiersdorf, Lufthansa or Unilever, but also important educational and science hub, hosting, for example, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.

Hamburg has seven administrative units, or boroughs, including Hamburg-Mitte, Altona, Eimsbüttel, Hamburg-Nord, Wandsbek, Bergedorf, and Harburg. The boroughs have different history and structure. While Hamburg-Mitte represents the historical origin of the city and includes the greater part of the city port, Wandsbek, Harburg and Altona have previously been independent cities and only later included to the city of Hamburg. In contrast, Eimsbüttel and Hamburg-Nord have been created as artificial administrative

units and become new parts of Hamburg. Finally, Bergedorf presents a rather rural or sub-urban area of the city with the lowest density of population.

With regard to the education system, Hamburg has a total of 414 schools, of which 224 are elementary schools, 85 district schools, 74 gymnasiums, and 31 special schools (Behörde für Schule und Berufsausbildung, 2023a). There are further 54 state and private vocational schools (Hamburger Institut für Berufliche Bildung, 2023), over 20 universities and higher education institutes (Metropolregion Hamburg, 2023), and 3 schools of adult education (Behörde für Schule und Berufsausbildung, 2023b).

In terms of learning outcomes, Hamburg has reportedly had poor learning performances first recorded in 2011. According to the latest *Länder* comparison provided by *The Institute for Educational Quality Improvement* (*Institut zur Qualitätsentwicklung im Bildungswesen*) in 2021, the scores of the fourth-grade pupils in reading and mathematics are slightly declining compared to the German mean score (see Table 12). When compared to other *Länder*, Hamburg's ranking position has improved over the last years, yet the impact of social background on learning outcomes remains significant.

Table 12 – Competences in Reading and Mathematics (Hamburg and Germany)

Year	Reading		Mathematics	
	Hamburg	Germany	Hamburg	Germany
2011	478	500	470	500
2016	487	493	469	483
2021	479	471	462	462

Source: Schneider & Witig, 2022, p. 87 (reading); Sachse & Schumann, 2022, p. 98 (mathematics)

Both the struggle to enhance the quality of learning outcomes and the dense educational infrastructure of Hamburg make it an ideal region for the empirical part of the project with promising results to be yielded. More so, as it presents a rather puzzling case, with strong economic dynamics, yet poor learning outcomes.

Saxony-Anhalt

The *Land* Saxony-Anhalt is located in the western part of eastern Germany and has a total population of 2,17 million inhabitants. As part of the former German Democratic Republic, the *Land* Saxony-Anhalt has inherited socialist economic model and transformed to modern market economy over the last 30 years. Ever since, the it has become a vital economic, industrial and tourist region. Today, however, it has a very low density of population and struggles with de-population of both urban and rural areas. Especially young women, but also increasingly young men, are leaving the *Land* in search of better job and life opportunities (Völkl, 2021, pp. 580-581).

Saxony-Anhalt is divided into 11 rural and 3 urban districts. The rural districts cover almost the entire area of the Land (93°%), but inhabit only 75°% of the population as of

2021 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2022). The rural districts include Altmarkkreis Salzwedel, Anhalt-Bitterfeld, Börde, Burgenlandkreis, Harz, Jerichower Land, Mansfeld-Südharz, Saalekreis, Salzlandkreis, Stendal, and Wittenberg. The cities of Dessau-Roßlau, Halle (Saale), and Magdeburg, the capital of the region, belong to the urban districts and are the political, economic and educational centres of the *Land*.

In 2019, the *Land* of Saxony-Anhalt has had 871 schools, of which 501 were elementary schools, 128 secondary schools and 82 gymnasiums (Ministerium für Bildung des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt, 2020). There are further 280 vocational schools, 15 schools for continuing education (German: *Volkshochschulen*), 15 schools of adult education (Erwachsenenbildung in Sachsen Anhalt, 2023) and 11 universities and higher education institutes (Landesportal Sachsen-Anhalt, 2023).

With regard to learning outcomes, the Saxony-Anhalt is experiencing a continuous decrease of learning performances. As the table shows (see Table 13), both in reading and mathematics the numbers have fallen down over the last decade. Although they remain at the same level as the German average, other indicators, such as Early School Leaving, remain considerably high. Apart from that, the main challenges of the *Land* are the teacher shortage, as well as the digital transformation of education system.

Table 13 – Competences in Reading and Mathematics (Saxony-Anhalt and Germany)

Year	Reading		Mathematics	
	Saxony-Anhalt	Germany	Saxony-Anhalt	Germany
2011	511	500	517	500
2016	497	493	496	483
2021	476	471	476	462

Source: Schneider & Witig, 2022, p. 87; Sachse & Schumann, 2022, p. 98.

The *Land* Saxony-Anhalt gives us a great opportunity to explore in more detail the impact of spatial factors on learning outcomes. It has a comparable size of population as Hamburg but faces the same challenges differently (in terms of labour provision, economic dynamics, social and family structures), which make it an ideal counterpart to the city-*Land* Hamburg.

NUTS 3 – Hamburg-Mitte & Halle (Saale)

Regarding the selection of research sites at NUTS 3 level, we have considered the administrative division of each region (while Hamburg is statistically both a NUTS 2 *and* a NUTS 3 unit, Saxony-Anhalt has 13 NUTS 3 units), but also the availability of data on educational provision and socio-economic structure. After careful consideration, we have decided in favour of **Hamburg-Mitte** and **Halle (Saale)**.

Hamburg-Mitte

Hamburg-Mitte is the central part of Hamburg with 300 277 inhabitants (2021), which makes 15,7°% of the city's population (Statistisches Amt für Hamburg und Schleswig-Holstein, 2021, p. 1). According to the regional education map, Hamburg-Mitte has large portions of young people with migrant background, which, in the category of 10-15 years old, account for up to 75°% of all pupils. As stated previously, this subgroup is more prone to experience multiple disadvantages (language barriers, social exclusion, racism etc.), which affect the quality of and expectations on learning outcomes. Among the city boroughs, Hamburg-Mitte has the highest rate of young people leaving school without a qualification or certificate, amounting to more than 10°% in 2022 (Regionaler Bildungsatlas, 2023). With respect to tertiary education, Hamburg-Mitte reports low levels of highly qualified people, i.e., those with tertiary leaving certificates. In 2019, this group made 23°% of the borough's population, which is far less than best performing borough Hamburg-Nord with 38,3°% (Statistisches Amt für Hamburg und Schleswig-Holstein, 2022). For the reasons mentioned, the borough Hamburg-Mitte has been selected out of the seven Hamburg's boroughs as an ideal research site for the qualitative empirical research.

Halle (Saale)

Halle (Saale) is one of the three urban districts (German: *kreisfreie Stadt*) and the largest city of Saxony-Anhalt with a total population of 238 061 inhabitants (2021), almost 10°% of the region's population (Statistisches Landesamt Sachsen-Anhalt, 2023). Halle (Saale) has one of the highest rates of young people leaving school without a qualification or certificate, which amounted to almost 13°% in the school year 2021/2022 (Statistisches Landesamt Sachsen-Anhalt, 2022, p. 24). In order to locate the groups of young people in vulnerable positions, we have considered the number of unemployed young people aged 15 to 25 years. Again, Halle (Saale) and the neighbouring Saalekreis have one of the highest unemployment rates, which reached 9,8°% in 2022 (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, 2023a). Finally, another indicator that helped us to estimate the regional opportunity structures of young people were the household debts, which indicate the readiness to invest extra financial means in education. According to this indicator, Halle (Saale) has by far the highest household debts, two-times higher than the average number for the whole region (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, 2023b). Against this background, we have selected the Haale (Saale) district as the ideal research site to inquire into the process of constructing learning outcomes, especially given the poor situation of young people in vulnerable positions.

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Greece

Formal education is regulated nationally and includes the systems of general and vocational education, basic vocational training and higher education. Specifically, the standard education system includes secondary education, Second Chance Schools (SCS), post-secondary vocational education and training (level 3), post-secondary vocational training (level 5) and higher education. The turning point in Greek Adult Education happened in 1986 with important changes in non-formal education. During the 1980s, the General Secretariat for Popular Education offered adult education training programmes focusing culture citizenship education and social economy entrepreneurship, but also courses for disabled people. As a result, non-formal adult education activities increased considerably the number of Popular Education Centres. During the decade from 2000 to 2010, adult education in Greece was very much influenced by EU guidelines for lifelong learning. The introduction of Second Chance Schools in 2000 clearly contributed to this influence.

Since 2010, adult education is based on continuing vocational training and general adult education and is governed by the Secretariat General for Vocational Education and Training, Life Long Learning and Youth/Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. General adult education refers to all adult education activities that aim at non-vocational dimensions, such as personal development, leisure time, parents' education, cultural education and citizenship. General adult education organisations include Centres of Vocational Training, Lifelong Learning Centres (KDVM), Parent Schools, Adult Education Centres and Second Chance Schools.

A key priority for Adult Education in Greece today is the persisting low percentage of adults participating in education. Raising participation rates, therefore, is a major policy concern. Greece has one of the lowest participation rates in lifelong learning, which was 3.5% in 2021 (Eurostat, 2021a) and this essentially calls for policy incentives that will both motivate and allow adults of all ages and backgrounds to participate, but at the same time requires outreach and guidance policies that will target social groups that find themselves in more vulnerable positions and have limited or no access to lifelong learning provision (Zarifis, 2016, p. 10).

Another challenge is the inclusion of social groups in vulnerable positions[16] (Law 4019/2011) and particularly the unemployed youth (aged 15-29 years), where the current unemployment rate in 2022 reached 10,6% (Eurostat, 2022). The high numbers of young unemployed in Greece together with the ineffective austerity measures of the last decade and the reduction of the social welfare state create complex issues that are extremely

[16] The Greek law distinguishes two categories of vulnerable social groups, that being a) the *specific vulnerable groups* (individuals with disabilities, addicted individuals, prisoners, etc.) and b) the *special population groups* (unemployed youth, long-term unemployed, single parents, immigrants etc.) (Law No. 4019/2011).

hard to solve. Economic crisis is directly linked with unemployment rates not only amongst the *traditionally* vulnerable groups (i.e., low educational qualifications and low skills), but also amongst the highly qualified and skilled workers (Drydakis, 2015).

Educational attainment levels in Greece have increased considerably since 2008 and early school leaving rates are among the lowest in international comparison. However, high participation does not consistently translate into quality outcomes: Greek performance in PISA 2018 and PIAAC 2015, was below the respective OECD averages. Several system-level practices may favour equity, such as low-grade repetition and limited ability grouping. Performance gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students, as well as those related to immigrant status, were similar to the OECD averages in PISA 2018.

The NEET category in Greece is a rather newly found and unknown term for those in socially vulnerable positions. The majority of the Greek population has never heard of the term NEET, as the phenomenon is not considered a priority by the political elites of the country. Hence, the definition and characteristics of this category remain unknown to the Greek society. Moreover, it is very common that the NEET population is often confused with the total number of unemployed young people, while the (sometimes) underlying assumption that NEETs are a homogeneous entity is arguably inaccurate[17] (Papadakis, 2011).

In addition, the governance and funding arrangements of the Greek education system are highly centralised and the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs is responsible for every level of education, from the pre-primary to adult education. In terms of governance, the Greek school network is complex, with high numbers of small schools and remote areas, low birth rates, challenging socio-economic conditions and migration to big cities and other countries, have led to mergers and consolidation to increase system efficiency (Zarifis, 2016).

Last but not least, a lingering problem is a serious brain drain, depleting Greece's human resources for research and innovation (INE/GSEE, 2021). In the period of time between 2008 and 2015, about 427,000 skilled employees or professionals holding at least one university degree have left the country to seek employment abroad, mostly in other European countries or elsewhere (e.g., United Kingdom, United States). The outflow of younger researchers (PhDs and post-doctoral researchers) continues even today, as job opportunities and salaries offered abroad are attractive, compared to those offered in Greece (Efstratoglou & Paidousi, 2020).

Greece has the second lowest share of Early School Leavers (3,8%) for 2020 among EU member states (Eurostat, 2020). Regarding the NEETs, in 2019, 19.1% of Greek youth belonged to this category. Greece has a high youth unemployment rate (15-24 years) in

[17] The Greek family, acting as a protecting and support *umbrella* (unlike other family models of EU member states), diminishes the effect of the phenomenon in Greece. The lack of information on the phenomenon at a political and social levels makes it very difficult to calculate and map the NEETs.

2019, with 35.2% of young people not working (Eurostat, 2019). According to OECD (2022a), between 2000 and 2021, the share of 25–34-year-olds with tertiary attainment in Greece increased, albeit at a slower pace than on average across OECD countries, by 20 percentage points (from 24% in 2000 to 44% in 2021). 44% of 25–34-year-olds had a tertiary qualification in 2021 compared to 47% on average across OECD countries. The share of women among general upper secondary graduates is 53% (OECD average 55%). Men make up 63% of all vocational upper secondary graduates, above the OECD average (55%). The share of part-time students at the tertiary level in Greece is 1%, below the OECD average (22%). Compared to 2013, it has decreased by 7 percentage points. In 2019, Greece spent 3.7% of its GDP (€5,992) per full-time equivalent student on primary to tertiary educational institutions compared to €11,990 on average across OECD countries. Education funding reached €4,192 per student at the tertiary level, 39% of which corresponds to expenditure for research and development (R&D). Moreover, the percentage of 25–64-year-olds who attained a bachelor's or equivalent tertiary education degree is one of the highest among countries with available data (25.2 %, rank 8/44, 2021). The level of short-cycle tertiary attainment among 25–34-year-olds is one of the lowest among OECD and partner countries with available data. (0.2 %, rank 31/33, 2021). The share of 25–34-year-olds who attained a bachelor's or equivalent tertiary education degree is one of the highest among countries with available data (33.5 %, rank 7/43, 2021) (OECD, 2022b).

This is the general framework, against which we have sought to choose those NUTS 2 regions, which would enable us to enter this complex picture from various angles.

NUTS 2 – Kentriki Makedonia & Dytiki Ellada

Regarding the regions at NUTS 2 level and based on the relevant indicators, the following tables (see Tables 14 and 15) present (in a nutshell) the high and low performing regions in Greece:

Table 14 – High and low performing regions in Greece (1)

Region clusters		Early School Leavers	Low Educational Attainment	NEETs	Youth Employment
Cluster 1 **(assumed) high performers**	↑	Kentriki Makedonia	Kentriki Makedonia	Attiki	Voreio Aigaio
		Attiki	Ipeiros	Ipeiros	Attiki
		Thessalia	Attiki	Kriti	Dytiki Ellada
		Kriti	Thessalia	Kentriki Makedonia	Thessalia
		Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki	Voreio Aigaio	Dytiki Makedonia	Ionia Nisia
		Dytiki Ellada	Dytiki Makedonia	Thessalia	Sterea Ellada

Region clusters		Early School Leavers	Low Educational Attainment	NEETs	Youth Employment
Cluster 2 **(assumed) low performers**	↓	Dytiki Makedonia	Sterea Ellada	Peloponnisos	Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki
		Notio Aigaio	Peloponnisos	Notio Aigaio	Notio Aigaio
		Peloponnisos	Notio Aigaio	Dytiki Ellada	Kriti
		Ipeiros	Ionia Nisia	Ionia Nisia	Peloponnisos
		Sterea Ellada	Dytiki Ellada	Voreio Aigaio	Dytiki Makedonia
		Ionia Nisia	Kriti	Sterea Ellada	Kentriki Makedonia
		Voreio Aigaio	Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki	Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki	Ipeiros

Source: Own elaboration based on WP3 Core Team data (Eurostat, 2021a-f)

Table 15 – High and low performing regions in Greece (2)

Region clusters		Regional GDP per capita	AROPE	YLMI	Selection based on mean rank
Cluster 1 **(assumed) high performers**	↑	Attiki	Ionia Nisia	Notio Aigaio	**Attiki**
		Sterea Ellada	Attiki	Kriti	**Thessalia**
		Notio Aigaio	Kriti	Attiki	**Kentriki Makedonia**
		Ionia Nisia	Thessalia	Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki	**Kriti**
		Peloponnisos	Sterea Ellada	Peloponnisos	**Ionia Nisia**
		Dytiki Makedonia	Ipeiros	Kentriki Makedonia	**Notio Aigaio**
Cluster 2 **(assumed) low performers**	↓	Kriti	Notio Aigaio	Thessalia	**Sterea Ellada**
		Kentriki Makedonia	Kentriki Makedonia	Ionia Nisia	**Ipeiros**
		Thessalia	Voreio Aigaio	Voreio Aigaio	**Dytiki Makedonia**
		Dytiki Ellada	Peloponnisos	Sterea Ellada	**Peloponnisos**
		Ipeiros	Dytiki Makedonia	Dytiki Ellada	**Voreio Aigaio**
		Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki	Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki	Ipeiros	**Dytiki Ellada**
		Voreio Aigaio	Dytiki Ellada	Dytiki Makedonia	**Anatoliki Makedonia, Thraki**

Source: Own elaboration based on WP3 Core Team data (Eurostat, 2021a-f)

Two NUTS 2 regions that fit best for the empirical analysis are Kentriki Makedonia (EL52) and Dytiki Ellada (EL63). In following, we will describe the regions in order to underscore the rationale for our selection.

Kentriki Makedonia

The region is situated in northern Greece and is the largest in size in the country (18 811 km^2). Based on data from the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT, 2022) with a population of almost 1.8 million, it is the second most populous region in Greece. It has shrunk by 90,039 people between 2011 and 2021, experiencing a population loss of 4.8%. In 2021, the GDP per capita of the region was €16,300 (well below the EU average of €32,400). It has however, the lowest low educational attainment in Greece (4,5% in 2021) and the lowest early school leavers rate (1,70% in 2021). The rate of NEETs in the region is 4,5 points over the EU average (17,6% in 2021), and the second lowest employment rate in the EU (9,1% in 2021). The AROPE rate is much higher than the EU average (31,5%) and one of the highest in Greece and the EU (see Eurostat, 2021c). Last but not least the Youth Labour Market Integration index is 0,4381 (low integration) (Cefalo & Scandurra, 2021; Eurostat, 2021a-f).

The region has developed various initiatives through the years to raise employment rates among young adults, but also for integrating Roma population in education and the labour market. More recently the region of Kentriki Makedonia, within the framework of the NSRF Operational Program 2014-2020, implements the project: *Regional Mechanism for diagnosing the needs of the labor market*, with the aim of establishing and operating a regional mechanism complementary to the existing corresponding national structure, which will collect elements that are often not available at a national level. The *National Labor Market Needs Diagnosis Mechanism* consists of two pillars. The first pillar concerns data on employment, unemployment and entrepreneurship, and the second pillar concerns analyzes these data by the Ministry of Labour. The mechanism includes a network of agencies and organizations with the main purpose of collecting and processing primary and secondary data regarding the needs of the labor market.

The Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTh) is a partner in the development of this mechanism and also operates as a network coordinator for all higher education institutions in the region (3 in total) due to its size. It also coordinates a network of 938 secondary and vocational schools (314 of which are in Thessaloniki area alone), in which AUTh students go for practical training. The region also runs its own centre for lifelong learning with many local branches and programmes. In addition, the research team has access to all regional databases and keeps a network with all regional chambers and trade unions. Other networks in which the research team is also participating include the *National Mechanism of Labour Market Diagnosis*, which provides relevant data on skills and competences in all professions and occupations.

Furthermore, AUTh has developed a network of links with other organizations at local, regional and national level. Through these links, the university preserves its significant role in the economic development as well as the cultural and research advancement of the country. The linkages between AUTh and these organizations are realized through cooperation agreements and 72 memoranda of understanding. In addition, collaborations have also been established at faculty or school level. AUTh has developed a network of links with other organizations at local, regional and national level. AUTh is also an active partner in the following partnerships and actions: 1. Region of Central Macedonia (RCM): participation in the preparation of the RIS3 strategy, cooperation in the establishment and operation of the Agro-Food Partnership of RCM 2. Municipality of Thessaloniki (participation in the Development Partnership *Culture - Development - Employment*, participation in a project aiming at the development of local employment, collaboration in pre-incubator establishment for entrepreneurship development). AUTh collaborates with associations and enterprises focusing on research and development related to innovative products and services and employment promotion. In this respect, conducting empirical research is completely feasibly in terms of both costs and personnel. Last but not least, the selection of the Region of Kentriki Makedonia is also justified by the fact that all NUTS 3 regions are easily accessible from Thessaloniki, where the research team is based.

Dytiki Ellada

The second region comprises the western part of continental Greece and the north-western part of the Peloponnese peninsula. It occupies an area of 11,336 km^2 and its population is 643,349 inhabitants. The capital of the Western Greece is Patras, the third largest city in the country with a population of about 280,000 inhabitants. According to ELSTAT (The region has shrunk by 36,447 people between 2011 and 2021, experiencing a population loss of 5.4%. In 2021, the GDP per capita of the Region was €15,400 (well below the EU average of €32,400) (Eurostat, 2021f). It has however, a low educational attainment (13% in 2021) and low early school leavers rate (6,9% in 2021). The rate of NEETs in the region is 8,3 points over the EU average (21,4% in 2021), and a low youth employment rate in (14,6% in 2021) (Eurostat, 2021d). The AROPE rate is one of the highest in the EU (43,1%). Last but not least the Youth Labour Market Integration index is 0,3737 (low integration) (Eurostat, 2021a-f).

AUTh has developed scientific co-operation with the *Regional Development Fund of Region of Western Greece* (RDF-RWG) which is a special service of the regional authority. The development of innovation is a cornerstone of the region's strategy for enhancing the economic well-being of its citizens. A necessary condition for this is the close and open cooperation between the public sector, companies and the academic community. In this endeavour, the RDF-RWG is a strategic development tool and a bridge connecting the public and private sectors of the region, which will continue to expand. It has developed a comprehensive platform for recording the regional entrepreneurship and innovation

ecosystem. In addition, the region developed its own Business Support Mechanism as an innovative action of entrepreneurship and economic development. The purpose of the Mechanism is the development of the companies of the regional units of Aetolia-Acarnania, Achaea and Elis. Main goals are the improvement of their operation, helping them to access new markets, as well as the provision of specialized consulting support services to enhance their competitiveness and improve their outward-looking orientation. The Business Support Mechanism has offices in all three Regional Units of the Region of Western Greece. The offices are located in the cities of Patras, Agrinio and Pyrgos.

Conducting empirical research in this region is completely feasibly in terms of both costs and personnel. AUTh has a long-standing co-operation with the University of Patra that will also provide access to all the VET schools and training centres as well as lifelong learning centres in the region. Last but not least, the selection of the region is also justified by the fact that all NUTS 3 regions are accessible from Thessaloniki.

NUTS 3 – Thessaloniki & Achaia

Some data is available on NUTS 3 level, but it refers to years before 2010. More recent data on NUTS 3 (2020-2022) refers to unemployment rates and GDP per capita only.

Thessaloniki

According to the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT), the unemployment in 2022 was 14,3%. GDP per capita was €13,091 in 2020 (ELSTAT, 2022). In addition, for the ages 15-19 years, NEETs are a very small part of the total number of people in this age group (1%), while on the contrary, the part of NEETs who are out of the labour force is significantly larger, which is 6% of the total persons between 15 and 19 years of age (Eurostat, 2021e). Therefore, in this age group, the most important problem is the withdrawal from education for a significant part of the population.

Secondly, the very high rate of unemployment, which leads to discouragement of young people of these ages from participating in the labour market, can also be considered as a cause. For the ages 20-24 years, the problem has different characteristics. The largest proportion of NEETs are now those who have entered the labour force but are unemployed. Therefore, the difficulties in the labour market set the tone in this case.

According to ELSTAT (2022), there is still a significant proportion (7%) of people who are not participating in the labour force. For the 25–29-year-olds, the situation worsens in terms of the examined criteria. Although a large proportion of this age group participates in the educational process, there is also a significant portion of NEETs (29%) of which the largest proportion is unemployed (19%) and the smallest is out of the labour force (10%) (see Eurostat, 2021e). This sets a severe challenge for this particular site.

Achaia

For Achaia, the available statistical figures are similar as in Thessaloniki. While the unemployment rate in 2022 was 15,3%, the GDP per capita in 2020 was €12,370 (see Eurostat, 2021f). No further relevant data was available for Achaia at the time this report was written, but low income and high unemployment in this site suggest that the situation is very similar to Thessaloniki.

Overall, the AUTh team has access in databases from which relevant data will be extracted, and it also has connection with local experts, practitioners, employers and local policy makers, as well as access to educational institutions (higher, vocational, adult). Both sites are easily accessible with low cost for the team members, and are therefore qualified by AUTh team for the field research.

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Italy

Italy is a very heterogeneous country from economic, demographic and social points of view (OECD, 2022a, 2002b). It has the main characteristics of the Mediterranean welfare model with heavy reliance on the familistic production of welfare, poor and fragmented social services, and the weight of passive labour market policies, notwithstanding the recent reinforcement of activation policies. The welfare system is considered to be a conservative-corporatist system (Esping-Andersen, 1992), based on three main pillars: health care, social care, and pensions. At the national level, very different socio-economic situations exist, varying from region to region, not only considering the well-known strong economic north-south divide of the country, but also within the same region. Italy is currently facing a number of challenges, including a struggling economy and strong socio-economic inequalities. Due to COVID-19 pandemic, Ukraine war, economic crisis, inflation at 8.3% and stagnant wages (ISTAT, 2023), different forms of vulnerability are increasing, worsening the pre-existing conditions of people who were already in vulnerable positions, especially youth.

The (mostly) centralized[18] national system of education is widespread in all areas of education, but differs in quality, equity and profitability of education according to place-specific socio-economic conditions and institutional capacities. Compulsory education lasts ten years (up to 16), including the whole first cycle (ISCED 1-2: primary school 6-11 years old, and lower secondary school (11-14 years old) and the first two years of the second cycle (ISCED 3). The Italian education system is based on the choice between two school tracks at ages 14 and 15: upper general education (licei) and technical and vocational institutes. The regional vocational training system (IeFP) offers three and four-year courses organised by accredited training agencies or by upper secondary schools. Post-compulsory education (tertiary education) is divided into Higher Technological Institutes (ITS), University, and tertiary non-academic higher education courses.

Early leaving from education and training (ELET) remains a significant challenge for the Italian education system. Its rate summed up to 12% in the 18-24 age group (2021) and was well above the EU average of 9.7% (European Commission, 2022). The ELET rate is particularly high in the south and among the foreign-born population.

School education in Italy produces mixed results in terms of *basic skills proficiency*, with significant differences between regions and types of schools. According to the 2018 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the percentage of low performers among 15-year-olds in Italy is close to the EU average in reading and maths, but higher in science. There are significant geographical variations (students in the north of the country scoring well above the EU average in reading, and students in the south

[18] By law No. 59/1997, schools got the administrative and didactic autonomy under the management of the principle. They cannot deliberate for the workforce employment, that is engaged directly by the State.

and islands significantly below) and disparities according to type of school: students in upper general education (licei) obtain a much higher score than those in technical and vocational institutes. Differences between regions and schools are also reflected in the distribution of top- and low-performing students (OECD, 2019). Students' performances are very sensitive to family background, social origin, and domestic environment since the ESCS index appears to be firmly associated to and inversely correlated with educational performance scores. The lower the ESCS index, the lower the scores in reading, mathematics and science. This evidence confirms the intergenerational transmission of educational poverty in Italy (Salmieri et al., 2022).

The proportion of young adults *with tertiary educational qualification* remains below the EU average for both Italian- and foreign-born young people. In 2021, 28.3% of 25–34-year-old had a tertiary educational qualification, well below both the EU average of 41.2% and the EU-level target of 45% by 2030 (European Commission, 2021). In 2022, about a fifth of Italian 15–29-year-olds (19%) were *not in education, employment or training* (NEET), well above the EU average of 11.7% (Eurostat, 2022). High rates of ELET and NEET are strictly related to *youth unemployment*: in 2021 its rate among 15-24 years old in Italy is 29.7%. It is the highest youth unemployment rate in the EU (16.6% European mean) (Eurostat, 2021a). The *youth employment rate* is 18.3%, well above the EU average of 32.7% (Eurostat, 2021a). The latest reforms at national level[19] aim to ensure all young people the possibility to achieve basic skills, improving their matching with the labour market needs, to combat school drop-out and to reduce social inequalities, strengthening educational development among disadvantaged children. Nevertheless, their actual impact is at the moment very limited, not able to reverse long-lasting trends, according to available data. The description of the current education situation in Italy has framed our selection of NUTS 2 for the empirical part of the CLEAR research project.

NUTS 2 – Liguria & Marche

During the selection process, we have defined the *well-performing* and rather *bad-performing* regions starting from the first ten positions and the latter ten positions ranked among Italian regions according to their average socio-economic performance by using the indicators delivered by WP3 Core Team. Out of this procedure, we have selected the regions Liguria and Marche.

[19] In the framework of its National Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP), the government is investing in reducing and preventing early school leaving, financing projects involving schools selected according to indicators on drop-out and socio-economic context, and reforming guidance measures in the transition from lower to upper secondary school as well as enhancing students participation in work-based learning and traineeships, through so called *Pathways projects for transversal skills and orientation* (Italian acronym: PCTO), formerly *Alternanza Scuola Lavoro* - that is mandatory in Italy for students of the last three years of upper secondary schools. Among others, we can add reforms on the vocational education system (the National programme for new skills adopted), on non-academic tertiary education (ITS courses), and on adult learning (the National programme for the *guarantee of employability of workers*) (European Commission, 2022).

Liguria

Among the cluster of *bad-performing* regions, we choose the Liguria region, in North-Western Italy. Indeed, considering the ranking and the average performances, Liguria places at the 15th position among the 21 Italian regions in the overall mean of all of the indicators (scoring a value of 12,00 in a value range of a 4,67, best, to 20,33, worst), and placing mostly at middle-lower positions in all the proposed indicators. Although located near to leading economic areas, the region ranks in the 14th positions regarding both Early Leavers and Low Educational Attainment indicators (Eurostat, 2021b; 2021c), in the 12th position regarding the NEET rate (Eurostat, 2021d), in the 11th position regarding the Youth Employment Rate (Eurostat, 2021e), in the 9th position regarding GDP per capita (Eurostat, 2021f), and in the 12th, position regarding At-Risk-of-Poverty-or-Social-Exclusion Rate (Eurostat, 2020). Among the Northern regions, Liguria is the first to describe lower-level positions in the ranking of the indicators, overpassing only the Southern regions, including Basilicata, Sardegna, Puglia, Calabria, Campania and Sicilia, historically lesser developed from the socioeconomic perspective, especially in relation to students' educational attainments and levels of competence of young and adult population. Moreover, the difficult situation of young people in Liguria is confirmed by the Youth Labor Market Integration index (Scandurra et al., 2021): in 2018 Liguria ranks 12th among the 21 Italian regions, still positioning itself nearby the national average (0.5) but showing itself as the lowest score of the North-West regions.

Such aspects can be clearly observed in Genoa, the capital city of the region, once a leading site of Italian industrial development and the main port of the Mediterranean, that since the end of the last century has faced both a productive and demographic decline in front of the critical shift to a post-modern and globalized economy. The UNIGE research team located in Genoa has good knowledge and expertise of the Liguria region, thanks to several previous activities conducted developing multidisciplinary international, national and local research. Specifically, the Department of Educational Sciences (DISFOR) promotes research and educational activities in the areas of education and training in a wide-ranging epistemological framework focused on the study of the individuals and of society. Among the research projects recently conducted is the EU-funded project YOUNG_ADULLLT (Horizon 2020, 2016-2019), the Liguria region has been chosen as one of the functional regions for the empirical research. Together with the UNIGE and DISFOR long-time research experiences on the regional and local levels, there is a good possibility to reach out to a wide range of key stakeholders, from local experts, decision-makers, educational staff, educational administrators, representatives of the labour market, practitioners to young people. The headquarters of DISFOR is in Genoa, the capital city of Liguria Region, so the feasibility to conduct empirical research in the selected region (in terms of costs, personnel, distance etc.) is estimated more than good.

Liguria has 1.6 million residents, half of whom live in Genoa, placing as the fourth most densely populated in Italy (over 290 persons per square kilometre). Liguria ranked as the

oldest region of the country considering the Aging Index (Statista, 2023): in 2023, there were 271.3 elderly people for every 100 young individuals (average age 49.5 years versus the national average age equal to 46.4). The labour force is concentrated in the age groups of 35-64 years old, not only due to the increased rate of older people but also to the delayed access to the labour market by young people missing adequate opportunities. Indeed, Liguria shows a low rate of youth employment (17.5 versus 18.3 national average scores, Eurostat, 2021e) and in recent years has also described a decrease in the percentage of youth engagement in higher education (ISTAT, 2022). A limited amount of young people in a rapidly ageing context, with fewer opportunities and a greater part of the population at risk of social exclusion, contributes also to lower levels of subjective well-being and lower expectations for the future (Palumbo et al., 2017).

The Liguria region has traditionally had a more centralised design of social policies, in which the main stakeholders manage the whole process of policy delivery (from design to implementation). Even if in the past 20 years some reforms of labour policies have been implemented, the regional governance mode is characterised by distance from a quasi-market environment, as well as by weakness of labour supply. The regional context is characterized by the increase in the ELET rate (ISTAT, 2022) setting a critical aspect among the priorities in the operational program stressing the need of raising the skill levels of young people in order to promote schooling and lifelong learning rates to reduce the number of NEET.

The region is still known for its high-quality shipbuilding, specialising in cruises and yachts. Nowadays, the port of Genoa is the busiest in Italy, especially regarding container traffic and its nodal position with logistic corridors in trans-European and Mediterranean routes. In short, Liguria is depicted as a context characterised by a *static* labour market, a significant skills mismatch and a higher level of youth unemployment.

Marche

From the group of *better-performing* regions, we have selected the Marche region. It ranks sixth in the national average with a score of 7.33, just behind Emilia Romagna, one of the best-performing regions in the Northeast, and ahead of Lombardy, the most economically prosperous region in the North. Together with the northern regions, Marche has a low NEET rate (it ranks 4th nationally). In addition, there are few ELETs: the region ranks second nationally in terms of this indicator. The youth employment rate, at 20.7%, is below the EU average, but very close to the rate of the more economically developed regions of the North (e.g., Piemonte = 21.2%; Lombardy 21.6%). For the other indicators, the region is in the middle (low educational level = 9th, regional GDP per capita = 12th, poverty risk due to school exclusion = 10th).

Marche is located in the central part of Italy on the Adriatic coast and has 1,498,236 inhabitants (ISTAT, 2020). The population has been decreasing for years (-2.81% since 2011), mainly due to low birth rates (Bazzoli & Qadrelli 2020). The index of aging

population is lower than in the Liguria region, placing Marche in the middle among the Italian regions (Statista, 2023). The percentage of the population of foreign origin in the total population is 8.7% (ISTAT, 2020).

The Marche economy is characterized by a leading industrial sector (mainly mechanics, manufacturing of clothing and footwear, and furniture). The tertiary sector is less developed compared to the national average. Together with the other central and north-eastern regions, Marche has been characterized by a socio-economic model of development based on small and middle sizes companies, low levels of capital investment, social cohesion and trusting relationships in the community, where entrepreneurs were often former peasants or manual workers living in the area. This peripheral industrial model, different from the one based on large sizes companies, such as that of the north-western regions, has been defined *Third Italy* (Bagnasco, 1977). It has guaranteed over the years a good level of economic well-being, low levels of social conflict, and a degree of collaborative relationships among political forces, institutions and civil society organizations. The 2008 economic crisis has had a severe impact on Marche: from 2007 to 2017 its GDP decreased by 10 percentage points (Giombiniet al., 2018). The 2016 and 2017 earthquakes contributed to a further slowdown of regional economic growth, especially in the provinces of Macerata and Ancona. Due to the region's characteristic production structure, which consists of small companies, the research and innovation sector is not well developed, which has an impact on the demand for highly specialized labour. The region is currently characterised by a socioeconomic divide between the north and south and between the coastal and interior areas, with the southern and interior areas having lower levels of socioeconomic well-being. However, in 2021, after the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the region's GDP increased by 6.8%, slightly higher than the national level (6.6%). Industrial production, as well as the tertiary sector, have grown and so has the employment rate, in line with national trends (Banca d'Italia, 2023).

The Department of Economy, Society and Politics (DESP) at the University of Urbino has carried out research at the regional level on many topics: the condition of youth and families, migration and social policies for vulnerable people, and many others. Over the years, UNIURB research team has built connections and trusting relationships with many local stakeholders. The knowledge of the regional context and the network of relationships assist to reach the project's objectives to access local experts and young people and interpret research findings.

NUTS 3 – Genoa & Pesaro

At NUTS 3 level, we have further localised municipalities, in which we seek to conduct qualitative interviews with local experts, practitioners and young people.

Genoa

In Liguria, we will focus on the main urban area of the region, which is Genoa, the capital city of Liguria, with a population of 558.681 people (ISTAT, 2023). The main local characteristic reflects a significant ageing of the population combined with a progressive demographic shrinkage, essentially due to the prolonged socioeconomic decline that started since the 1980s when the town reached its population and productive peak.

In 1970s, Genoa was one of the vertices of the so-called *industrial triangle* of Turin-Genoa-Milan, but the town encountered a progressive deindustrialization in the ending decades of the last century. The local system still maintains a high level of tertiary education, but the labour market is unable to absorb all those who have higher degrees due to prevalence of intermediate and low-skilled jobs. Occupational growth is therefore mainly thanks to the strong development of the services sector, with a specific focus related to trade, tourism, port and other tertiary activities, especially in public services and the third sector.

Therefore, Genoa can be described as a static ex-industrial area with a non-dynamic social fabric (especially in terms of relation with the labour market and entrepreneurship), often reaching higher rates of youth unemployment, which reflects one of the main stereotypical representations of Genoa as *the most Southern Town of Northern Italy,* not only in a geographical sense, but especially referring to aspects of *stagnation*, which metaphorically make the Genoa closer to some deprived areas of the Southern area rather than to the main cities of the Northern area.

Indeed, since the studies of Luciano Cavalli (1965) to more recent contributions (Palumbo et al., 2008; Poli & Tringali, 2018), Genoa is considered a *divided town*, underlining the historic cultural and political separation between the working-class suburbs of the neighbourhoods of the Western and Northern part of the town, with respect to the traditional upper-class residential districts on the hills of the centre and in the eastern areas. According to such spatial, socioeconomic and cultural classification, we have selected two different neighbourhoods within Genoa, each one reflecting different structural conditions, i.e., a traditional working-class neighbourhood (e.g., the Sampierdarena neighbourhood) and an upper bourgeois residential quarter (e.g., the city centre), assuming such implicit contextual differences as predictors for unequal individual developments among the younger population, especially in terms of different impacts of educational and social policies considering the very different social, cultural, economic, and political backgrounds.

Pesaro

Based on its research experience and knowledge of the Marche region, we have selected Pesaro as the ideal research site. Pesaro, located in the north of the region, is the main town of the province of Pesaro-Urbino. It is a medium-sized town (about 95,000 inhabitants) on the Adriatic coast. The industrial sector (mainly furniture and mechanics)

is well-developed; tourism also contributes to the economic well-being of the area. Services and infrastructures are well spread, and their quality is recognised at the regional level.

In the Pesaro province population has grown to a considerable degree in the period between 2002 and 2008 (6,8%); from 2008 to 2014 population grew again but at a slower rate (2,2%); after 2014 there is a decrease in residents, currently estimated around – 1% (Tuttitalia, 2023). This trend is explained by considering the economic crisis's effects that impacted the job market demand and the reduction of births (Bazzoli & Quadrelli, 2020). As a consequence, the population in the central age-groups is shrinking (from 65,7 in 2003 to 62,9 in 2021) while the aging index is growing (from 163,2 to 195,4 in the same period) (Tuttitalia, 2023).

Pesaro is one of the towns that has benefited most from the *Third Italy* development model over the years. Even now, after the negative consequences of the several crises that impacted the region, it is the area with the highest occupational rate: 50,6% compared to 48% at the regional level (ISTAT, 2021). This positive trend concerns also young people whose labour force participation rate (15-29 years old) in 2021 is higher than the regional average (37.4% versus 35.3%).

Concerning education and the transition to the labour market, in 2021, the indicator for young people (15-29 years) who do not work or do not study (NEET) is positive and is lower by 8 points compared to the national value (15,6% vs. 23,3%) and by 2 points compared to the regional one (17,9%). As regards the level of education, the percentage of residents of the province with at least a ISCED 3 qualification is equal to 65% in line with the regional figure (65.4%) and better than the national figure (62.9%). The situation regarding the percentage of the population with a degree or other tertiary qualifications is different, in the age group 25-39 years the value recorded (24,9%) is lower than both the regional data (30,9%) and national (28,3%); this can be explained by the high number of companies in the area offering jobs, but not necessarily high-skilled ones.

The scores obtained in the national standardized tests of alphabetic (187.4) and numerical competence (193.8) of the students in the second year of upper secondary school, show skill levels slightly lower than or equal to the regional average, but higher than the national average by 1.4 and 3.1 points, respectively. Graduates in STEM disciplines in the provincial territory reach a value of 16.9 per thousand, lower than the regional one, of 18.2, but higher than the value of 16.1 for Italy. Finally, only 5% of residents between 25 and 64 attended life-long training compared to 6,2% at the regional level and 7,2% at the national one (Provincia di Pesaro e Urbino, 2021).

Data show a situation where young people's continuous training and tertiary education are discouraged by the local labour market based mainly on low-skilled jobs in the tertiary and industrial sectors. The relatively high level of young people's participation in the labour market is also highly dependent on the conjunctural nature of local economic

growth in a context of greater global uncertainty. In this context, vulnerable groups are represented mainly by women, who show a lower labour market participation rate and often experience problems with balancing work and family responsibilities and a mismatch between their educational skills and the low-skill character of their jobs (Farina & Taralli, 2018). Also, young people with a migrant background, and more broadly those who cannot rely on a wide family network, are more at risk of educational poverty.[20]

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Portugal

Administratively, Portugal is divided into 18 districts and two autonomous regions, Azores and Madeira. The autonomous regions have a special status and have their own regional government. In terms of education, the Portuguese educational system is divided into pre-school, basic, secondary and tertiary education.[21] The educational provision is either public, private or government-dependent private.[22] The Portuguese education system has centralizing characteristics, with the Ministry of Education responsible for defining a common curriculum and adopting a regulatory role. However, in 2018, a change was introduced in the Portuguese educational paradigm through an outcome-based approach, targeting basic and secondary education. This involved the definition of learning outcomes encompassing essential learning, for basic education subjects, and the students' profile at the end of compulsory education. A more recent change (2022) is the introduction of efforts to municipalize some features of the educational system. Thus, a process of political, administrative and pedagogical transfer from the central administration to the local administration (to municipalities and to basic and secondary schools) is underway.

Portugal also has initiatives to promote *lifelong learning* and reinforce *adult qualifications*, such as the Adult Education and Training courses with 44.123 adults enrolled in 2021 (POCH, 2021), or the Centers for Qualification and Vocational Education with 39.855 adults enrolled in 2023 (ANQEP, 2023). In the latter case, we want to highlight the introduced processes of recognition, validation and certification of competencies as part of measuring learning outcomes.

The data show an improvement in the education system coverage, with the schooling rate reaching 92.7% in pre-school; 97.2% in the 1st cycle; 90.8% in the 2nd cycle; 91.5% in the 3rd cycle and 83.8% in upper secondary education (DGEEC et al., 2021). It should be noted that in upper secondary education, in 2020/2021, vocational education courses accounted for more than half of the educational and training provision (Miguéns, 2022).

With regard to higher education, the higher education system is organized in a binary system that integrates universities (125) and polytechnics (163) and is provided in public (187) and private (101) institutions (Miguéns, 2022). The higher education attainment rate between the ages of 30 and 34 years reached 43% in 2022 (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2023), continuing the upward trend of recent years, and remaining above the European target of 40% stated in the Europe 2020 Strategy (European Comission, 2020). Admission to higher education is done through national exams taken at the end of secondary education. For those who do not hold an upper secondary education

21 Home-schooling and individual tutoring are also possible in Portugal for families who choose education that does not go through formal settings, but are nonetheless required to follow the national curriculum.

22 Private schools that benefit from public funding in order to guarantee an educational offer where the public network is insufficient.

certificate and are above 23 years, admission to higher education can be done through *Maiores de 23*, which is a programme launched in 2005. The candidates must prove their ability to attend higher education by taking specially designed tests carried out by the higher education institutions. In 2005, with the implementation of the Bologna process, the *European Credit Transfer System* (ECTS) was introduced in study cycles and mobility mechanisms.

Higher education adopted a new three-cycle structure, leading to the academic degrees of bachelor, master, and doctor. This structure was introduced in 2006 and fully implemented in Portugal starting from the academic year 2009/2010. The *Professional Higher Technical Courses* (CTeSP), created in 2014, are a higher education study cycle that does not lead to an academic degree. In the 2020/2021 academic year, there were about 17,856 students enrolled (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2023).

Portugal has been making a relevant effort in improving school indicators. This can be attributed to three factors: a) the diversification of the secondary education offer, particularly vocational education (since 2005); b) the increase of compulsory education to 12 years of schooling years (since 2009); and c) the introduction of compensatory programmes such as the *Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária* (TEIP) (since 2006), which aim at mitigating the impact of school and social exclusion and enhance the school performance in disadvantaged socio-economic contexts, or the *Plano 21|23 Escola+*, which aims to recover the students' learning affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, several issues and challenges deserve attention. One is the vulnerability of young people in the transition to the labour market, particularly of those with lower qualifications (Alves, 2008). According to the data, the youth unemployment rate in Portugal in 2022 was 19.9%, which is higher than the European Union average (13%), and the NEET was 11.0% (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2023). Additionally, there is difficulty in entering the labour market, and a lack of job stability and security, with precarious and poorly paid work contracts (Sagnier & Morell, 2021). Another problem consists in the grade inflation that occurs mainly in private secondary schools and penalizes the most socioeconomically vulnerable students in access to higher education (Nata et al., 2014; Neves et al., 2016). A next challenge is related to the inability of the TEIP programme to increase the academic performance of its secondary school students and bridge their gap relative to those of non-TEIP public secondary schools (Ferraz et al., 2019; Abrantes, 2022). Finally, there is a high percentage of students from socioeconomically vulnerable backgrounds in vocational education and training courses, which have a very low probability of leading to higher education.

Against this background, we have sought to select those regions, which offer us the best entry points for the study of the complex situations of young people and their learning performances.

NUTS 2 – Norte & Área Metropolitana de Lisboa

Portugal is divided into 7 NUTS 2 regions: Norte, Centro, Área Metropolitana de Lisboa (AML), Alentejo, Algarve, Região Autónoma dos Açores and Região Autónoma da Madeira. We have divided them into two clusters of rather well and rather bad performing regions according to indicators provided by WP3 Core Team. Out of the comparison, the best performing regions are AML, Norte, Centro and Alentejo, while the worst performing regions are Algarve, Região Autónoma da Madeira and Região Autónoma dos Açores. Overall, the AML was the best performer and the Região Autónoma dos Açores has the worst performance. For the further analyses, we have selected the regions Norte and AML. The two Portuguese teams in the CLEAR project are from the University of Porto and the University of Lisbon, located in the Norte region and in the AML region, respectively. Porto is approximately 600 km away from the Algarve, and Lisbon approximately 300 km. As for the Regiões Autónomas da Madeira e Açores, which are archipelagos in the Atlantic Ocean, conducting research there would require travel by plane and large accommodation expenses. Therefore, distance and accommodation costs, as well as the need for a network of contacts to facilitate the qualitative part of the research, have led us to select the AML region and Norte region for the empirical analyses.

The University of Lisbon (in the AML) and the University of Porto (in Norte) have excellent networks which facilitate contacts with local experts and professionals working in relevant areas for the CLEAR project. These are crucial to locate and involve young people living in situations of multiple vulnerabilities, according to the dynamics underlying the participatory methodologies adopted by CLEAR. We emphasize that, in AML, the existence of a single transport pass (40€/month) that allows unlimited travel on all public transports, regardless of the operator or type of transportation (bus, subway, boat or train), will reduce transport costs and facilitate travelling. Similarly, the sub-region Área Metropolitana do Porto (Norte region) has a single transport pass for 40€/month for metro and bus. The set of limitations and potentialities described here support the choice of the Norte and AML regions, as preferred locations for conducting our research. The section continues with the description of both regions, although the Área Metropolitana de Lisboa will be described in more depth due to larger data sets available.

Norte

The Norte region has a territorial extension corresponding to 21285,86 km^2 and a population density of 168,6 inhabitants/km^2 (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2023). Norte is the most populous region in Portugal, with about 3.6 million inhabitants and the third in terms of territorial extension, concentrate 33% of the Portuguese students enrolled in higher education and 29% of the Portuguese industrial activity. Regarding Ageing Index, Norte presents a value of 185.0.

The Norte region has a vast territory and most of it is countryside/rural. However, the sub-region Área Metropolitana do Porto occupying only 2040 km^2 (9,6%) of the Norte region's is one of the major urban centres in Portugal.

Concerning educational provision density, Norte region had 98 higher education institutions (48 public and 50 private) in the 2020/2021 academic year, and 2662 non-higher education institutions (1885 public and 777 private) (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2023).

Área Metropolitana de Lisboa

The AML has a territorial extension of 3015,24 km^2 and a population density of 951,7 inhabitants/km^2 (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2023). AML ranks second with 2.9 million inhabitants and 5th in terms of area extension, covering the country's capital and 17 other surrounding municipalities, concentrate 38% of the Portuguese students enrolled in higher education and 30% of the Portuguese industrial activity. Regarding Ageing Index, AML presents a value of 149.8 (Ibidem).

The AML is essentially a seaside/urban region. Although the AML corresponds only to 3% of the Portuguese continental territory, it is home to 51% of foreign residents in the country. The AML is an increasingly important destination for technology and innovation, with a significant number of companies with a high degree of technology and research and development. The region is also home to 382,504 companies (29% of the total number of companies in the country) employing around 1,482,870 people (35.1% of the country) (Anuário Estatístico de Portugal, 2021).

Concerning educational provision density, AML region had 91 higher education institutions (53 public and 38 private) in the 2020/2021 academic year, and 1885 non-higher education institutions (973 public and 912 private) (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2023)

The education sector in AML is quite advanced, offering a wide variety of educational options for all levels, public and private, from basic to higher education. The region is composed of 91 institutions (31.6% of the country's total), 40 of which corresponded to polytechnic education and 51 to university education. In 2022, 161.149 students were enrolled in higher education in the AML, which corresponds to 13% of the city's population and about 38% of the country's student higher education population (FFMS, 2023).

It is estimated that, in 2022, the number of young people between the ages of 16 and 34 who were not in employment, education or training was 65.000 in the Norte Region and 52.500 in the AML region (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2022).

Analyzing the indicator *disparity in average monthly earnings (between levels of attainment) of the employed population by geographical location* (INE, 2023), we find that educational qualifications explain a difference of 42,8% in average monthly earnings in the AML

region, while in the Norte they explain 33,9%. Although both regions are well positioned, it is in two sub-regions of the Norte region that we find the smallest difference in average monthly earnings taking into consideration the different qualification levels (at the national level): Tâmega e Sousa (21.8%) and Alto Tâmega (23.3%), contrasting these values with the sub-region Área Metropolitana do Porto (37.2%), and reinforcing the asymmetries experienced within the Norte region.

The AML faces several significant social challenges. One of the most pressing issues is the scarcity of affordable housing. Housing prices are among the highest in Portugal, with an average price of 2.728€ per m^2 in the first quarter of 2021 (Rodrigues, 2023). It is estimated that the region needs to build about 12.000 new homes per year to meet demand, but construction rates have been well below this value in recent years (ibid.) Economic inequality is another major social challenge facing the AML. The region, which concentrates about 27% of the country's active population and employed population, had an unemployment rate of 8.8% in 2022, amounting to about 107,400 people (30% of the national percentage) (PORDATA, 2023; Anuário Estatístico de Portugal, 2021).

Education in AML has a great diversity of educational institutions. According to data from the General Directorate of Education, in 2021 the AML education institutional offer was distributed as follows: 1398 pre-school (585 public); 879 1st cycle; 299 in 2nd cycle (181 public); 345 in 3rd cycle (238 public) and 232 in Secondary Education (128 public) (PORDATA, 2023). The AML concentrates 55 training centres, which is about 39% of Centros Qualifica existing in the country (DGERT, 2019).

AML is also the region with the highest percentage of post-secondary education - Technological Specialization Courses (CET[23]) - in Portugal. The largest number of offers are for the Specialist Technician in Network Management and Computer Systems and in the area of Hospitality, Cookery and Pastry (Miguéns, 2022).

In addition, AML faces great inequalities, with a Gini coefficient above the national average (0.493 against the national average of 0.481) (Diogo, et al., 2021); the concentration of 51% of the foreign population residing in the country and the existence of neighbourhoods with serious challenges related to poverty, social exclusion and discrimination. These facts make the region a particularly interesting site for our research by providing a diverse and multicultural backdrop in which we can explore the experiences played by young people living in situations of multiple vulnerabilities (Rodrigues, 2023).

[23] CETs are post-secondary non-tertiary training courses that award a level 5 qualification of the National Qualifications Framework (QNQ) and a technological specialization diploma (DET). They last approximately one year (1200 hours to 1560 hours) and are aimed at qualified insertion into the labour market and/or the pursuit of higher education studies. These courses were created in 2006, under Decree Law No. 88/2006, of May 23, and their implementation, monitoring and evaluation are the responsibility of the Technical Committee for Technological Training.

NUTS 3 – Tâmega e Sousa & Municipality of Amadora

For the empirical fieldwork on NUTS 3 level, we have selected the sub-region of Tâmega e Sousa in Norte and the Municipality of Amadora in AML. Since AML is statistically a NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 unit, we have looked at the different municipalities, which can be compared as NUTS 3 locations. In this case, we have selected the municipality of Amadora as the equivalent to NUTS 3 level.

Tâmega e Sousa

The choice of the sub-region Tâmega e Sousa has to do with a set of school and socio-economic indicators that justify its selection. Taking as reference the Regional Development Synthetic Index[24] (INE, 2022), which combines the indicators of competitiveness, cohesion and environmental quality, and also data from the Instituto Nacional de Estatística (2023), the sub-region of Tâmega and Sousa has the following characteristics: 1) it is in the lowest quintile (below 92.2) along with the sub-regions Douro and Alto Tâmega, when the reference value for Portugal is 100. 2) It has low rates of completion of secondary education (84.5%) and higher education (5.6%), on par with the sub-regions Alto Tâmega (80.6%), Terras de Trás-os-Montes (81.3%) and Douro (82.9%) in the case of secondary education, and the sub-regions of Alto Tâmega (4.1%) and Ave (6.3%) in the case of higher education. 3) Although it has a low rate of unemployment for people between 25 and 34 years of age (6.3%) when compared with the average for Norte region (6.7%), it is the Norte sub-region that shows the least disparity in average monthly earnings between levels of attainment (17.9%), when in the Área Metropolitana of Porto it corresponds to 30.5% and the average for the Norte region is 28.7% (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2023).

The sub-region of Tâmega e Sousa is essentially rural/countryside, with 408.674 inhabitants. In terms of higher education institutions, it has 3 (2 private and 1 public), and 603 non-higher education institutions. It is the second sub-region of the Norte with fewer students enrolled in higher education (2.357) and, on the other hand, it is the third sub-region of the Norte with more students enrolled in non-higher education (61.923) (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2023).

Municipality of Amadora

The municipality of Amadora has an urban area of 23.79 km^2, with approximately 171,500 inhabitants in 2021 (INE, 2021). It is the municipality with the highest population density at the national level, despite having the smallest territorial dimension in the Área Metropolitana de Lisboa (AML) (Divisão de Informação Geográfica, 2018a).

[24] The Regional Development Synthetic Index (Índice Sintético de Desenvolvimento Regional) is produced annually by the Portuguese Statistics National Institute and offers information at the NUTS 2 level considering three indicators: competitiveness, cohesion, and environmental quality.

The municipality hosts a significant percentage of foreign population, the concentration of which was raising with the process of independence of the former Portuguese colonies in the mid-1970s due to low housing costs, accessibility (roads and railways), proximity to the city of Lisbon, and more recently, informal support and reception networks (Divisão de Informação Geográfica, 2018a). As a result of these factors, in 2021, Amadora had the highest percentage of the population with foreign nationality in the AML (20.2%), mostly of African origin, with Cape Verdean descendants predominating (FFMS, 2022).

In 2021, there were 16,278 companies headquartered in the municipality, generating 55,738 jobs, which represents about 6.4% of the companies and 5% of the employment in the AML. The sectors that contribute the most to the business volume are wholesale and retail trade, repair of cars and motorcycles (41%), followed by manufacturing industries (19%). In the secondary sector, the production of electrical components and pharmaceutical products stands out, which together contribute to over 70% of the business volume in this pharmaceutical branch at the national level (Divisão de Informação Geográfica, 2018c).

The educational situation in the municipality of Amadora is characterized by a great diversity of educational establishments at all levels of education. According to data from the Directorate-General for Education and Science Statistics of the Ministry of Education (DGEEC/ME-MCTES) for 2021, there are 79 preschool education establishments, of which 31 are public; 45 primary schools (29 public); 17 basic schools (12 public); 18 lower secondary schools (14 public), and 10 upper secondary schools (6 public). The municipality has a Qualification Center that operates with 2 schools in the public network. It also offers post-secondary education through Technological Specialization Courses. In 2022, the municipality of Amadora had 1 higher education institution (FFMS, 2023a).

The municipality has the second highest early school dropout rate in the AML (14.4% compared to 11.1% in the AML and 8.3% as the national average) (FFMS, 2023b). It is the 9th municipality with the highest incidence of crimes at the national level, with an index of 27.2 crimes per 1000 inhabitants of the municipality in 2020 (Município da Amadora, 2021), and it is one of the municipalities with the highest percentages of domestic violence (FFMS, 2021).

The Municipality of Amadora has a territory marked by areas of precarious housing. Due to the absence of a housing policy capable of meeting the needs and the low purchasing power of successive migratory flows, many immigrants ended up settling in the territory through processes of illegal occupation and construction of precarious housing - shantytowns, particularly on vacant land and former military areas of use (Câmara Municipal da Amadora, 2014). The latest census reports 19.7% of overcrowded housing, making housing one of the major challenges faced by the municipality (FFMS, 2022).

Other challenges are related to high levels of domestic violence, and a high number of promotion and protection processes for children and young people under supervision,

which requires strengthening and continuing the work of prevention and network intervention developed in these areas. The workforce's qualification is also a challenge. Despite the decrease in registered unemployment, the low levels of qualification among the working-age population, contribute to high levels of job insecurity and low wages. The existence of degraded and rehousing neighbourhoods, homeless people, the presence of excluded communities in specific territories (e.g., Roma), and pockets of persistent poverty contribute to the existence of population groups in vulnerable and socially excluded situations. The health sector also faces a set of challenges related to the quality of life and well-being throughout the life cycle, as the municipality has a health profile with particular characteristics, marked by a high incidence of diseases whose causes are associated with poverty factors (Núcleo Executivo CLAS da Amadora, 2018).

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Spain

In Spain, the central government issues the framework acts that establish the main requirements of compulsory education, VET, adult education centres and higher education. Regional governments run the system accordingly. Besides deciding on a part of the curriculum, the regional governments are the main authorities in charge of primary, high, vocational and adult schools, as well as higher education.

Since 1990, a series of framework education acts have oscillated between student-centred and back-to-basics approaches. In 2020, a wide-ranging framework act organised compulsory education on the grounds of formative assessment and universal design of learning. This act introduced modular structures in VET, which had to enable students to achieve a clear set of leaning outcomes including technical skills, knowledge of economic sectors, teamwork, occupational safety and health, a stimulating professional identity, entrepreneurship and digital skills. The law also conditioned access to higher education to passing an exam that tested the *academic maturity* and the knowledge of the candidates (Government of Spain, 2020)

The central government also regulates the public employment service, which the regional governments manage in their respective areas. Besides distributing benefits and implementing active labour market policies, traditionally these services have delivered short VET courses (in official terms, vocational training for employment- VTE) and have validated prior learning according to the qualification framework of Spain. Municipalities, chambers of commerce, unions and some private companies are the main providers of VTE.

The 2022 VET Act broadened the official definition of learning outcomes. This act fit the outcomes of both formal and non-formal education in a common gradient, whether learning had taken place in a school, in a programme delivered by the employment service or in the workplace. Thus, grade A indicates partial achievement, B produces a certificate of competence, C produces a professional certificate, D corresponds to a fully-fledged VET programme and D is a course of specialisation. Each level is clearly aligned with the national qualification framework. This set of correspondences is expected to integrate school-based and VTE in a single institutional system (Government of Spain, 2022).

Municipalities are in charge of public (primary and high) schools' buildings as well as of complementary educational services (e.g., after-school programmes, career guidance at the end of compulsory education). Many municipalities also contribute to the public employment service by means of their *local development* agencies, which are normally engaged in VTE. Barcelona is an exception. According to the special legal status of the city, the regional and local governments have established the *Barcelona Education Consortium*. An agreement between the regional and the local governments has made the local development agency, *Barcelona Activa*, responsible for the public employment service in

the city. Early school leaving, the rate of NEET youth and literacy configure the main educational challenges:

- *First*, a high early school leaving is a concern (EUROSTAT, 2022). In fact, after Romania, Spain scores the highest rates of young people who drop out of education and training among the EU member states. The gender gap is significant insofar as young women leave at a similar rate as the EU average, while the percentage of young men is much higher. The rates are also much higher in towns, suburbs and rural areas than in cities. Most of these early leavers are either employed or are searching for a job.
- *Second*, the NEET rate exceeds the EU average in Spain. Male and female youngsters share a similar score above that average, with young people living in towns and suburbs recording a significantly higher score than young people living in cities and rural areas.
- *Third*, the OECD PIAAC recorded that mean literacy and numeracy were lower in Spain than in the OECD average in 2018.

The current educational situation in Spain has also guided us in the selection of research sites for the empirical part of the project. In Spain, CLEAR will conduct research in two research sites at NUTS 2 level – Catalonia and Valencian Community.

NUTS 2 – Catalonia & Valencia Community

In Spain, NUTS2 regions correspond to *autonomous communities*. Regional parliaments are elected every four years. These authorities run education, training and employment services. CLEAR will conduct fieldwork in Catalonia and the Valencian Community. In 2023 the president of the Government of Catalonia was an MP of the Left Republican party who received conditional parliamentary support of the Socialist and the Left groups although only independent members of these parties were ministers of the government. Between 2019 and 2023 the Valencian Community was governed by a coalition of Socialist, Left-wing Valencian Nationalists and the Spanish Left-wing party. A coalition of Spanish Conservative and Nationalist parties will be in office after the regional election in May 2023.

According to the set of CLEAR regional indicators provided by WP3 Core Team, the rank of Catalonia (7.83) is higher than the rank of the Valencian Community (10.83). These average scores are the consequence of significantly disparate socio-economic conditions with relatively similar educational conditions. The rationale of our choice relies on three points:

- *First*, socio-economic conditions are better in Catalonia than in Valencian Community. This region lies in different and more favourable brackets than the Valencian Community regarding youth employment, GDP per capita, and the population at risk of poverty or exclusion.

- *Second*, the share of population with a low educational level is smaller in Catalonia than in the Valencian Community. The proportions of inhabitants who hold an ISCED0-2 degree are 25.1% and 30.5% respectively.
- *Third*, the proportions of early school leavers and NEET youth are nevertheless quite similar. In fact, Catalonia is in a slightly worse position regarding these two indicators.

The UAB team will take advantage of several previous projects to conduct research in Catalonia. Although the Valencian Community posits some challenges, the team can reach the selected sites in one-day trips. At the same time, several policy designs and evaluation reports facilitate desk research in Catalonia. Public documentation will also be instrumental in conducting desk research in the Valencian Community. Catalonia and the Valencian Community are a significant sample in which we can observe how different socio-economic contexts share similarities in educational indicators.

The report draws on public statistics. Although this information allows for some comparative descriptions, inevitably it overlooks certain details on the learning outcomes of young people who are following diverse life courses amid multifarious configurations of intersectional inequalities in significantly different places. The UAB team is currently exploring the available documentation on learning outcomes in the two sites. It has also contacted a few teachers in the Valencian Community for interviews. However, due to several unexpected circumstances, it is not possible to report on this information at the moment. Thus, the report outlines the basic arguments for the final selection of sites but fails to account for the whole relevant information. In addition, it is important to keep in mind that all municipal governments and the regional government of the Valencian Community will change in July 2023 as a result of the local and regional elections that were hold on May 29th.

NUTS 3 – Barcelona & Castelló

We have further selected sites at NUTS 3 level. The first one is the municipality of Barcelona and the second one a selection of bigger towns in the province of Castelló.[25] Each of them is in a different NUTS2 region: Barcelona in Catalonia and Castelló in the Valencian Community. The cities of Barcelona and Castelló de la Plana are the capital cities of these provinces. Provinces are administrative units (and electoral districts) within self-governing regions or *autonomous communities*. In general, while socio-economic data are available at local level (even below NUTS3), educational data are only available at the NUTS 2 level. We can hardly compare educational, socio-economic or innovation indexes for these sites, but geographical features and socio-economic conditions are significantly different. While Barcelona is a big city, in Castelló we will focus on different middle-sized

[25] The report uses the Catalan names. Although Catalan and Spanish write Barcelona in the same way (but pronounce it differently), Castelló is the Catalan name of the province whose name is Castellón in Spanish. The capital city is Castelló de la Plana.

towns. The former configures a more integrated functional area in which underground, bus, tramway and suburban train networks are integrated. Orthogonal bus lines have been designed in order to maximise connections with the other transport services. Local data confirms that the city of Barcelona is more prosperous than the localities of Castelló (INE, 2022). The following table (see Table 16) summarises the socio-economic conditions of (the districts of the municipality of) Barcelona and the main towns of the province of Castelló.

Table 16 – Socio-economic conditions in Barcelona and Castelló

Average income (€)		**Poverty (%)**	
0801901 Barcelona district 01	27.329	0801901 Barcelona district 01	36,9
12027 Benicarló	27.639	12027 Benicarló	31,1
12138 Vinaròs	27.920	12138 Vinaròs	27,0
12009 Almassora	28.727	12032 Borriana/Burriana	24,8
12082 Nules	28.932	0801908 Barcelona district 08	23,8
12032 Borriana	29.310	12009 Almassora	22,5
0801908 Barcelona district 08	30.212	12040 Castelló de la Plana	21,8
12135 Vila-real	31.767	12082 Nules	21,3
12040 Castelló de la Plana	31.914	0801903 Barcelona district 03	20,4
0801903 Barcelona district 03	34.888	12135 Vila-real	20,3
0801907 Barcelona district 07	35.695	08019 Barcelona	17,6
0801909 Barcelona district 09	36.519	0801910 Barcelona district 10	17,0
0801910 Barcelona district 10	37.887	0801907 Barcelona district 07	16,8
12028 Benicàssim	40.376	0801909 Barcelona district 09	16,4
08019 Barcelona	40.424	12028 Benicàssim	15,5
0801906 Barcelona district 06	41.385	0801902 Barcelona district 02	15,2
0801902 Barcelona district 02	43.849	0801906 Barcelona district 06	13,6
0801904 Barcelona district 04	54.260	0801904 Barcelona district 04	10,2
0801905 Barcelona district 05	67.850	0801905 Barcelona district 05	9,5

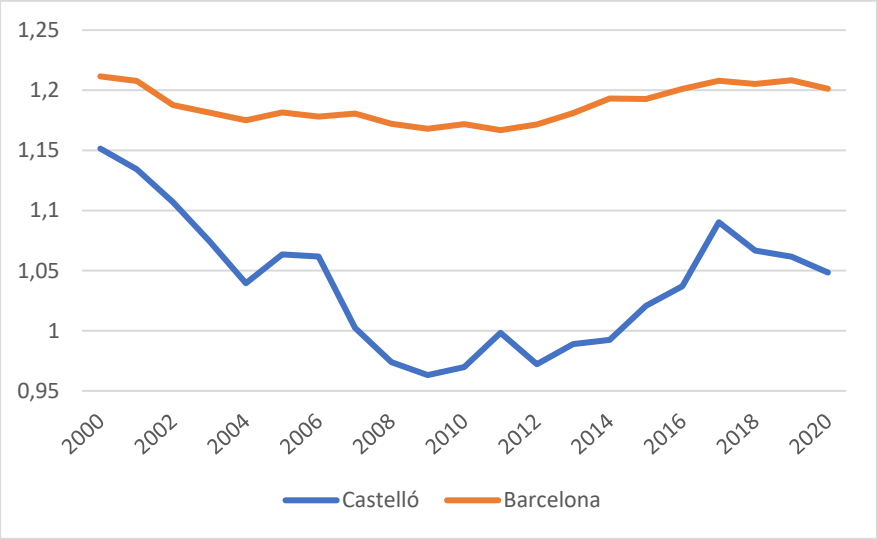
Source: INE, 2022[26]

In general, the former is more affluent, but more unequal. While the highest income and the lowest poverty rates are concentrated in the North-Western districts of Barcelona, the population living in a few districts of Barcelona endures harder deprivation than the population of the main towns of Castelló. Roughly, the worst socio-economic conditions are recorded in the old city of Barcelona (District 1), around Montjuïc hill (District 3) and the North-eastern neighbourhoods (District 8). A further reason for the selection of the sites lies in disparate trends of economic affluence in the provinces of Barcelona and Castelló, since the latter has lagged behind the former between 2000 and 2020. As the figure demonstrates (see Figure 6), the distance between the GDP per capita of the

[26] Poverty index includes population with income below €10.000 per year

province of Barcelona and Spain (which equals 1 in the figure) has remained stable while the distance between the province Castelló and the Spanish average has narrowed down.

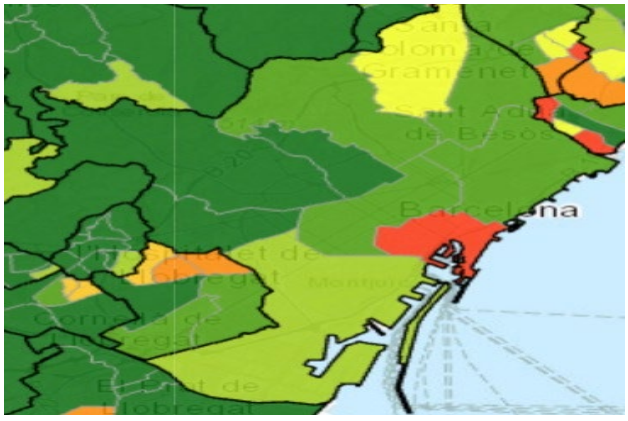
Figure 6 – Gross Domestic Product in Castelló and Barcelona



Source: INE, 2022

To highlight the socio-economic differences, the illustrations (see Figures 7 & 8) describe the incidence of poverty in the districts of Barcelona and the main towns of Castelló.

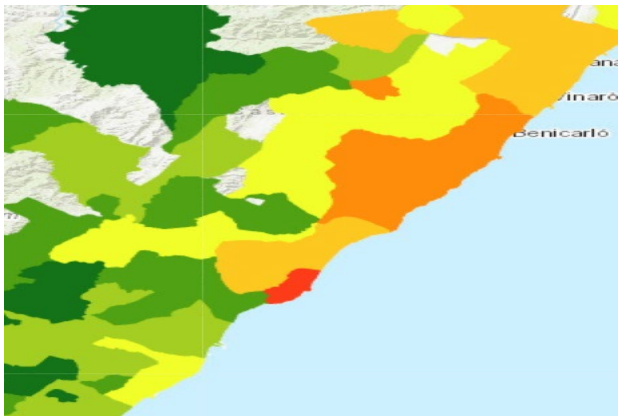
Figure 7 – Incidence of poverty in Barcelona



Legend: Percentage of population with an income per consumption unit below 60% of the median (2020)

- 3,9% - 13,4%
- 13,5% - 16,6%
- 16,7% - 20%
- 20,1% - 23,5%
- 23,6% - 27,8%
- 27,9% - 32,7%
- 32,8% - 56,1%

Figure 8 – Incidence of poverty in Castelló



Source: INE, 2022

While green areas host a smaller population with low income, yellow, brown and red areas concentrate a larger share of population in these circumstances. It is noticeable that green is wider in the former than the latter (INE, 2022). Districts with variable degrees of income poverty (population below 60% of the median income) are noticeable in both sites, thus guaranteeing a sufficient social diversity to capture intersectional effects in further qualitative analyses (INE, 2022).

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